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Preface

The third *African Cities Reader* explores the unholy trinity of land, property and value – the life force of cities everywhere. In an era of late modernity marked by a speculative compulsion that takes on a spectral character as it instigates adventures of city imagineering, deal-making and symbolic reinvestment, the material effects are often displacement, violence, daylight robbery and yet another round of elite seduction. The incessant (re) making of the African city is a game that leaves few untouched or unmoved and literally prepares the ground for the inhabitation of another 400 million urban dwellers over the next two decades.

Land, property and value can only be understood through the passageway of colonial violence and its manifold psychic, cultural, political, economic and spiritual legacies. The very basis of land ownership, property ascription and concomitant valuations remain trapped in an unspoken, and in some ways, unspeakable cultural erasure. Racking through these ruins is essential to break through the normalisation work of contemporary policies, legal frameworks and de facto orders of rule.

That said, the sheer force of necessity of urban majorities across the continent has also produced a wide-ranging set of “anarchic” and unruly practices that may not add up to a grand alternative, but certainly offer intelligence about other imaginaries and the potential of destabilisation and hybridisation. (After all, only 3 per cent of urban dwellers in sub-Saharan Africa earn enough to qualify for a mortgage). The Reader offers a few examples of performative strategies, which seek to tap these energies as a way of gesturing beyond our truncated horizons. It is essential to pay close attention to these efforts because they offer a vantage point from which to take in all the dramatic enterprise afoot to establish “urban fantasies”, tenure security, predictable real estate markets and propertied classes.

Almost every large African city boasts at least one “new town” development ambition, whereby governments are joined by various new world investors to establish alternative urban worlds, typically unmoored from the real city. These “cities” (such as the one in Luanda discussed in the Reader) are the soft landing beacons for international capital. They are endowed with the symbolic capital to prove the efficiency, aspiration, modernity, connectivity and digital smarts of the current crop of African leaders, who are championing Afro-optimism.

Of course, as many contributors in the volume intimate, this wave of city-building is simply an exercise in futility, with profoundly violent consequences for the families and businesses that are removed to make room for the smart city. It is not only those who are directly impacted upon, but also entire cultural systems are put out of joint by the rapacious effects of narrow private property dogmas. One of the surprising themes in this edition is the close and complicated connection between land and death. The dead continue to be haunted by historical land-based displacement because the ancestors do not necessarily partake in urban-based land-use and burial practices, setting off profound familial and communal conflicts; dramas that underscore how important it is to not simply approach land through a futurial lens – potential value that can be realised through appreciation – but rather to understand that past mendacities are running wild to catch up with the future.

It took us much longer than planned to bring this issue into the world. A variety of allied publications (*The Chronic*, *Cityscapes*, *Rogue Urbanism* and *Africa’s Urban Revolution*) and cultural interventions ate time and attention.

*Ntone Edjabe and Edgar Pieterse
Editors*
À Douala, on nomme les carrefours, places, rond-points, rues, de manière improvisoire – improvisée et provisoire – au gré des anecdotes du quartier, des lieux de vies importants ou du type d’activité qui s’y pratique.

Ces noms apparaissent, suivant le même processus un peu mystérieux que celui qui forme les rumeurs, pour se repérer et se déplacer dans une ville dont les noms de rue officiels, pour les rares qui existent, ne sont pas signalés et demeurent inconnus des habitants.

La perception de Douala par ceux qui la vivent se fait donc à travers un nuage de noms évocateurs, mémoire orale de la ville, traces vivantes et quotidiennes de son histoire, qui participent d’un imaginaire collectif...

* Les cartes ont été réalisées à partir de la carte de Douala disponible sur le site cartographique collaboratif Open Street Map (http://www.openstreetmap.org)

1. Mot valise inventé par un habitant de Maputo (Mozambique), et relevé par l’écrivain Mia Couto dans une de ses chroniques pour le journal mozambicain O País.
DÉSIRÉ

Je m’appelle Désiré et ma ville est cosmopolite. Je suis né à la fois à Madagascar et à Dakar, juste à côté de Brazzaville. De ce côté de la ville, nous sommes très africains : nous habitons Lagos, Congo, Sénégalais ou Camp Tchadien. On a bien les originaux de Barcelone, qui ont cherché à se démarquer. Mais à part la passion du football, il faut bien avouer que le quartier n’a pas grand-chose à voir avec la métropole européenne où Eto’o s’est illustré pendant des années ! On a aussi quelques pauvres âmes qui se sont égarées du côté de Babylone... Mais ceux là ne l’emporteront pas au paradis !

Plus loin, là où vivent les riches, c’est Denvers, Santa Barbara ou Doubái, Venise, Saint Tropez, Orly, Johannesburg ou Mbengue City ; on danse à l’Élysée ou au Sénat. On est tous citoyens du monde, hein, comme on dit On ne vient juste pas tous du même monde !

Depuis quelques années, les derniers arrivés chez nous, ce sont les Chinois. Dans l’Est de la ville, ils ont déjà leur hôpital, et à la Douche, leur quartier : toutes les enseignes y sont dans leur langue. Il y a quelques années, on avait même un original, Liu du Kamer, qui chantait du Makossa comme un vrai d’ici ! Ils n’ont quand même peur de rien, les Chinois : les gars là sont venus jusque sur le Marché Central, pour vendre eux-mêmes les soutiens’ qu’ils fabriquent dans leur pays ! 300 Francs seulement ! La concurrence, là, a ruiné les affaires de mes compatriotes…

Jusqu’ici, à New Bell, où se trouve le marché, c’étaient surtout les peuples de mon pays qui étaient représentés : Haoussas, Bassas et Bamilékés. Mais attention, chacun sa zone ! À Nyalla, tout au bout de la ville, là où il n’y a encore pas longtemps, c’était la forêt, ça brasse encore plus large : en plus des Bassas et des Haoussas, on peut croiser une terre d’Étrangers !

Ça donne envie de voir du pays, tout ça. Un jour, moi aussi, je veux être étranger quelque part…

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2. Mbengue : l’occident, la France, l’Europe…
3. Makossa : musique originaire de Douala
4. soutiens = soutiens-gorges
GUY
Je m’appelle Guy, mais vous pouvez m’appeler « papa ». Mes amis disent de moi que je suis un ambianceur de première. La nuit, ne me cherchez plus, je suis du côté de Cité Sic. Si ce n’est pas le Facebook Club, c’est le Dreams. Et si ça se passe du côté de Deïdo, c’est la Camme à Sucre ou le Kirikou ! J’ai écumé toutes les Rues de la Joie de la ville, et le Carrefour Ambiance n’a pour moi aucun secret. Douala Bar, Gabon Bar, Embouteillage Bar, Central Bar, Sous-sol bar, Ancien dépôt Guiness, Paris-Dancing : pas une seule zone de la ville que je n’ai parcourue de nuit, à la recherche de la plus collée-serrée des chaleurs humaines. Quand j’ai une petite faim, je pars tantôt du côté de Tendon⁵, tantôt du côté de Bifaga⁶ !
Les gens disent qu’on boit pour oublier ; moi je bois simplement pour m’amuser. Retrouver les amis et ne se quitter que quand nous avons épuisé de nos poches les dernières pièces, c’est à ça que je passe mes week-ends. Malheureusement, « On est obligé de payer, on n’est pas obligé de boire », comme on dit ici. J’aurais préféré le contraire…

⁵. Tendon : tendon de viande (on en vend dans la zone)
⁶. Bifaga : « poisson fumé » en pidjin (on en vend dans la zone)
Je m’appelle Anastasi et je vous le dis, le Cameroun est difficile. Depuis ma naissance, il me persécute. Cela a commencé dès le premier jour, avec le prénom dont m’ont affublé feu mes parents. Je suis un homme, et j’ai hérité par ma grand-mère d’un prénom de femme, le sien. Trop pressée d’avoir une descendance homonyme, et ne voyant naître des ventres de ses filles et belles-filles que des progénitures masculines, elle menaça avant ma naissance : « celui-là, je vous préviens, que ce soit un garçon ou une fille, il portera mon nom ! » Elle m’a tout de même épargné le « e » final, paix à son âme. Cela a été le premier de mes malheurs, mais finalement le plus petit. De celui là, au moins, je me suis vengé : ma fille s’appelle Renée.

J’ai grandi à Yaoundé, entre Chambre Froid et Carrefour de la Mort, comment pourrais-je être serein ? J’ai fui à 19 ans la nonchalance fonctionnariale de la capitale, dans l’espoir de trouver à Douala un emploi pour financer mes études. J’ai atterri aussitôt à Mille Problèmes ! Je me suis fait dévalisé à Carrefour Tif 7 et j’ai dû donner mon dernier billet à un mange-mille 8 … Je me suis battu fatigué 9 , pour quel résultat ?

Si j’avais eu quelques compétences manuelles, j’aurais pu mieux me débrouiller. Entre le Pont Blanchisseur, le Carrefour Maçons et le Carrefour Menuiserie, j’aurais certainement pu louer mes bras quelque part. Au lieu de cela, je n’ai pas les diplômes suffisants pour aller toquer à la Cité des Enseignants, ni le sens de la hiérarchie assez aigu pour essayer du côté de la Rue Adjutant, du Camp de Police ou de Génie Militaire ! Tout ce qu’il me reste à faire, c’est d’aller noyer ma colère dans un circuit 10 de Nkololun 11 , avec mon meilleur ami, mon frère, Ivan, qui habite à Haute Tension. Assia 12 !
Je m’appelle Gisèle et ma ville est bien-aimée de Dieu. On le trouve partout, de Deux églises à Sacré Coeur, de Jourdain à Rose-Croix, de la Cathédrale au Carrefour Pasteur. Les saints des autres y sont très présents : Saint-Thomas, Saint-Michel, Saint Bruno, Sainte Agnès, Sainte Monique, Saint Luc… On a même un ange, Ange Raphaël. C’est chez lui que j’habite. Comme je ne suis pas ingrate, j’ai appelé mon fils Archange. Ses jambes ne fonctionnent pas bien, mais qui sait, peut-être qu’un jour il lui poussera des ailes ?

Pour se protéger du mal, les habitants de ma ville l’ont placée sous le signe de la sainte trinité : on retrouve le chiffre 3 dans les boutiques, les arbres, les morts, les veuves, les voleurs et même les bordels ! Les anciens de mon village, le père, le fils et le saint-esprit Baham, sont également venus s’installer non loin de chez moi.

Quand je suis malade, je vais à l’Hôpital des Sœurs, c’est plus sûr. Et chaque dimanche à 9h précises, je vais chanter Jésus à l’Église Évangélique du Réveil, avec mon amie Solange : « Il n’y a personne qui soit comme Jésus ! J’ai longtemps cherché… personne ! J’ai fouillé fouillé… personne ! J’ai tourné en rond… personne ! Il n’y a vraiment personne comme lui !»

13. Chanson chrétienne du groupe ivoirien Shekina, également chantée au Cameroun
SAMANTHA
Mes clients m’appellent Samantha et j’ai raté ma vie.

Le rond-point où j’exerce mon activité a été baptisé par la municipalité « Rond-point Nelson Mandela ». Ce nom, symbole de l’espoir d’un continent entier, n’a pas empêché le plus vieux métier du monde de s’y épanouir comme fleur au printemps sous d’autres cieux… Les gens d’ici, plus prosaïques que nos décideurs politiques, appellent ce rond-point « J’ai raté ma vie ».

On ne peut pas dire que la zone soit très fréquentable. La semaine dernière, j’ai vu une jeune fille qui mettait pour la première fois les pieds par ici. Elle avait tellement peur qu’elle ne voulait pas prendre la moto jusqu’à Danger, où elle avait rendez-vous. Elle a demandé à un Monsieur bien habillé qui attendait le taxi : « Le quartier ci est tellement dangereux ? ». Tous les passants se sont mis à rire ! On ne court aucun risque à Danger : il se trouve simplement une centrale électrique sur laquelle est écrit en gros la mention « Danger » et en plus petit « risque d’électrocution ».

D’ailleurs, elle a été la bienvenue, cette centrale, dans le quartier. Il faut dire que de ce côté Village de la ville, on n’a pas toujours eu l’électricité. À l’époque, on pouvait oublier les télévisions, les ventilateurs et les congélateurs ! Ça me fait penser à cette histoire de patron de bar, à qui les habitants du quartier - qui se refusaient, comme tous bons citoyens de cette ville, à boire leur bière à température ambiante - demandaient sans arrêt « Ta bière là, elle est bien glacée ? »… alors qu’il ne risquait pas d’avoir de frigo pour la rafraîchir ! Agacé, il a fini par mettre un gros panneau « Non Glacé » devant sa porte. C’est devenu le nom de la zone. Vu l’ambiance bien chaude qu’il y règne aujourd’hui, il est plutôt adapté !

Je travaille le plus souvent accompagnée de deux collègues. Nos corps ont beau être « moins chers que le poulet », dans le coin la concurrence reste rude. Alors forcément, parfois, on se dispute. Parfois même, la nuit et la Castel14 du Kama Sutra bar aidant, on en vient aux mains. Il y a de cela quelques années, on s’est tellement bien agrippées que nos robes se sont déchirées et qu’on a offert aux passants le spectacle de trois bordelles15 gesticulant à moitié nues sur la chaussée. Au moins, à défaut de réussir nos vies, on aura gagné une postérité dans la mémoire de la ville !

14 Castel : marque de bière
15 Au Cameroun, « bordelle » = prostituée
Je m'appelle Robert et ma ville est noire. Du reste, ma ville n’est pas seule dans ce cas là : tout, autour de moi, est noir. C’est la seule chose que mes yeux peuvent percevoir, le noir. Je me console en pensant que certains prennent ce vide pour une couleur. Et je me plais à en imaginer d’autres, assis devant chez moi, à Carrefour Carnaval, au gré des lieux évoqués par mes congénères : Moulin Rouge, Direction Orange, Maison Blanche, Rose-Croix, Feu Rouge, Maison Verte et Container Rouge sont parmi mes destinations favorites !
CONSTANCE

Je m’appelle Constance, et je mène une douce existence, à la Cité de la Paix, en face de l’Éden, juste après Concorde Hôtel. Depuis maintenant dix ans, je suis infirmière à la Clinique de l’Espérance. J’ai ma propre voiture, avec laquelle j’emmène chaque matin mes enfants au Collège Les Prodiges, après m’être arrêtée acheter mon pain à Belavie.

Ma mari, lui, travaille à Camtel, à côté de Bon-Fils. Il voyage souvent pour Yaoundé, toujours avec Garanti, pour des réunions de travail. J’aimerais qu’il soit plus souvent à la maison, mais il a un bon travail, qui nous assure une vie confortable. Alors je ne me plains pas.

Quand il s’absente, le week-end, je rends visite à ma soeur, du côté de Nkolminta16.

Nous sommes très bien ici. Contrairement à tant de nos compatriotes, nous ne rêvons pas d’ailleurs.

Ne croyez pas que notre vie a toujours été facile : nous ne sommes pas comme ces gens du Marché aux Fleurs, à qui la vie a toujours souri ! Je suis certes née à Vie Tranquille, mais là-bas elle ne l’est pas, je peux vous l’assurer ! Si je n’avais pas rencontré ce professeur de biologie, à l’École Avenir, où je fréquentais17 à l’époque, j’aurais certainement terminé comme mon frère, qui finit l’argent du ménage à Combi Bar18 tous les soirs !

16. Nkolminta : « colline de la joie » en béti
17. Fréquenter, au Cameroun : aller à l’école, suivre des cours
18. Combi : « mon frère » en langage familier
VALÉRIE

Je m’appelle Valérie, et mon kwat’ est du Tonnerre ! Sûr que l’ambiance y est explosive…

Les gens de la haute évitent d’y poser les yeux. D’ailleurs, on raconte que le nom de la zone, Bépanda, viendrait du bassa « bibanda », « lieu, village abandonné ». De nos jours il serait plutôt surpeuplé ! Ce n’est pas un hasard si toutes les histoires d’ici ont à voir avec des règlements de comptes entre voisins…

L’une des plus célèbres est celle du carrefour Double-Balle, juste derrière chez moi. Il se trouve à côté de la maison d’un ancien militaire, qui était plutôt du genre procédurier. Il s’énervait de ce que son terrain était traversé chaque jour par des dizaines de personnes, qui coupaient par là pour accéder à la route. Il a commencé par s’en prendre à tout le voisinage, argumentant que son jardin n’était pas un mapane, et avertissant que les prochains qui passeraient par là seraient punis. Puis il a élevé un mur pour bloquer l’accès à la propriété. Mais les gens d’ici ont la tête dure : certains ont tout simplement commencé à sauter par-dessus le mur, pour prendre leur chemin habituel ! Le militaire, qui a senti le Foléré lui monter dans l’œil, a pris son vieux fusil de chasse à double-balles, et a tiré sur l’un de ces imprudents, qui est mort sur le coup.

Ce n’est pas la seule vengeance à avoir marqué le quartier : le carrefour où je prends le taxi chaque matin, Tonnerre, doit son nom à l’histoire d’un homme foudroyé là. On raconte que le malheureux avait volé l’un de ses voisins. Certaines versions affirment qu’il lui avait pris sa chèvre, d’autres assurent que c’était plutôt… sa femme. Quoi qu’il en soit, pour se venger, l’homme lésé n’a pas employé les petits moyens : il lui a carrément envoyé la foudre ! Il faut croire qu’il visait très bien, puisque seul le coupable a été touché, alors qu’il se trouvait au milieu d’une foule de gens.

On n’a pas que les disputes entre voisins, dans le quartier, non. On a aussi les querelles de couples ! Ça crie, ça se bagarre Mais aucune ne sera entrée dans l’histoire comme celle du jour où un mari a tant battu sa femme qu’il l’a poursuivie jusque dans la rue, où elle s’est retrouvée sans caleçon, devant les voisins ahuris ! La pauvre femme a dû en mourir de honte…

Comme on rit de ces histoires aujourd’hui ! On ne peut pourtant pas dire que les choses se soient arrangées. Si c’était le cas, je ne me serais pas réveillée ce matin avec sur mon chemin, au pied de la boutique Chez Papa voltigeur, réparateur en parapluies, le cadavre d’un bandit, lynché par la foule durant la nuit. C’est devenu tellement banal, qu’on n’a même pas pris le temps de renommer l’endroit « justice populaire ».

19. kwat’ : quartier
20. mapane : petit chemin, raccourci, chemin de traverse
21. avoir du Foléré dans l’œil : être très énervé (le Foléré est une boisson sucrée de couleur rouge-violette, appelée Bissap en Afrique de l’Ouest)
22. caleçon = culotte
YVETTE
Je m’appelle Yvette, et mon rêve à moi, c’est de pouvoir porter des talons hauts sans systématiquement les enfoncer dans 5 cm de boue. De Sobinan23 à Bépanda Voirie24 et de Décharge Isacam à Ndobo25, sans oublier l’inénarrable Jong Mabi26, tout n’est que saleté dans cette ville !

J’ai grandi en face du Marché aux Chèvres, puis mes parents ont déménagé au Poulailler. J’avais déjà 23 ans, et j’ai refusé de les suivre : j’ai préféré m’installer à Bonadibong, Rue des Pavés, dans l’espoir d’une amélioration de mon confort de vie. Mais je rêvais : ici, c’est « sous les pavés, la boue » !

Tu parles d’une urbanisation. Dans quelle autre métropole de 3 millions d’âmes peut-on entendre parler de « Feu Rouge », « Rond-Point », « Panneau Stop » ou « Carrefour des Immeubles », et savoir très exactement quel unique lieu de toute la ville est évoqué ?

23. Sobinan : « territoire des ordures », en bassa
24. Voirie : « décharge, poubelle » en langage populaire
25. Ndobo : « boue, marécage » en duala
ARAMIS

Je m’appelle Aramis et ce sont mes jambes qui me transportent à travers la ville. Il faut dire que depuis chez moi, PK9²⁷, à neuf kilomètres du centre administratif de Bonanjo, où je suis gardien de nuit, c’est deux taxis²⁸ pour arriver au travail. Mon salaire passerait entièrement en transports, si je me permettais de les utiliser. Alors, je vais à pied. Ce n’est pas grave, je suis jeune, j’ai la force. Et puis, cela me laisse le temps d’observer la ville autour de moi. De m’arrêter manger un bout au restaurant Ça sort Comme ça Sort, d’où je ne sors pas toujours en bon état ; de me signer devant le Ministère de la Résurrection du Christ ; de faire parfois un petit détour par Chez le Banquier du Pape, pour boire un jus, les jours de saison sèche. Avant d’arriver à Ndokoti, je passe devant une boutique de « vente de lap-toks » qui ne m’inspire pas vraiment confiance. En direction de Camp Yabassi, ce sont des « produits exotériques », que propose une enseigne. Je passe ensuite par Ancien Collège des Travaillers, Ancien Dalip, Ancien cinéma le Wouri… pour arriver à Ancien Palais. Ce qui fait beaucoup de vestiges pour une ville aussi jeune !

²⁷. PK9 = Point Kilomètre 9
²⁸. Deux taxis : signifie qu’on doit faire le trajet en deux fois, dans deux taxis différents. Ce qui revient à payer deux fois le prix d’un taxi « normal », soit deux fois 200 Francs CFA.
Je m'appelle Simon ou Henri, comme vous préférez. J’habite une ville pleine de contradictions.
On a un Grand Hangar, mais un Petit Marché. Un Grand Moulin, mais un Petit Pays. Un Grand Canyon, mais un Petit Wouri. Un Grand Baobab… et juste en face, un Petit Baobab !
La ville n’en finit pas de finir, tout en continuant de continuer. Par exemple, je peux y compter au moins huit Fins Goudron, quatre Terminus et un Dernier Poteau. Pourtant, rien ne s’arrête !
Mon quartier, Bessengue, qui veut dire « ceux du fond, ceux qui habitent derrière » en duala, se situe en plein centre ville. Yong Yong s’est fait rattraper par l’urbanisation, Forêt-Bar est sur l’un des plus gros axes de la ville, et à Safari, les seuls animaux que vous verrez sont des humains ! Vous pouvez toujours chercher les singes du Bois des Singes, le manioc de Kassalafam, les machettes de Ngui-Kwade et les champs de Ngwélé… Quant à la Nouvelle Route de Bonabéri et aux quartiers de Ngonsua et Nkongondo, je peux vous dire qu’ils n’ont rien de bien neuf !

29. Yong Yong : « éloigné, derrière le village » en bassa
30. Kassalafam : déformation de Kassava Farm, « champ de manioc »
31. Ngui-Kwade : « la force des machettes »
32. Ngwélé : « champ » en duala
33. Ngonsua : « nouveau territoire » en meddumba (langue du Ndé, Ouest du Cameroun)
34. Nkongondo : « nouveau territoire » en bassa
CLOVIS

Je m’appelle Clovis et je suis taximan. Pour moi les noms n’ont pas de saveur, ils ont un prix. Depuis École Publique, par exemple, c’est 200 Francs pour Makepe, Ndokoti, Bonanjo ou Akwa. 300 Francs pour Logpom ou Bonamoussadi. Pour Camtel, je te prends pour 150, d’accord, mais j’espère qu’il y a la monnaie. Va plutôt en face, pour Rond-Point. Tu n’as qu’une pièce ? prends alors la moto ! Qui t’as dit que je suis bend-skin ? Tu veux aller à Ndogbong et tu ne veux pas proposer ? Attends alors ! Chers clients, combien de fois faudra-t-il vous redire d’aviser en cas de billet ?

Je suis un très bon chauffeur. De Bonabéri à Yassa, je mets au défi quiconque de trouver un lieu que je ne connais pas ! Par centaines, je les ai dans la tête, les noms que cette ville a inventés : Terre des hommes, Deido Plage, New Style, Nylon, Peuple, Cité des Palmiers, Photo Golden, 4 étages, La Cachette des Copains, Soudanaise, Centre Equestre, Borne 10, Espoir, Pamplemousse, Source du Quartier, Château, Petit Paris, Bijou, Equipe du dimanche, Entrée Billes, Sable, Marché aux Oignons, Afrique du Sud, Jardin, Conquête, Gloria, Quartier Chirac, Montée Banane, Domino, Bon-Coeur, An 2000, Parc des Princes… Je suis chez moi partout !

Quand je passe à Akwa Nord, devant Ne jamais Rater le Dernier Métro, ça me fait sourire. Ici, au moins, pas de risque de rater le dernier taxi !

35. une pièce = 100 Francs CFA (prix de base d’un trajet en moto-taxi)
36. bend-skins : nom des motos-taxis au Cameroun. Vient d’une danse de l’Ouest, dont les mouvements de corps penchés en avant donnent à la silhouette la même forme que celle qu’ont les conducteurs de moto.
37. proposer : proposer au taximan un prix supérieur au prix de base (200 Francs), quand on va un peu plus loin qu’une distance normale.
NOUAKCHOTT IS THE CAPITAL CITY OF MAURITANIA, created ex nihilo in 1960 in the middle of sand dunes. No physical obstacle to urban sprawl – Nouakchott is home to more than two million inhabitants – nor to speculation. Until recently one of those “ordinary cities” considered “off the map” (Robinson, 2002), Nouakchott did not attract significant global capital because it was located in the Sahara desert, at the margins of the world. But, recently the situation has changed.

As David Harvey (2001) observes, capitalism is always looking for new “spatial fix” in order to resolve the tendencies of its inner crisis. Capitalist expansion is now affecting urban areas in peripheral regions of the world, and especially in Africa. Peripheries are now the new frontiers of urban expansion. In this unlimited conquest, even the Sahara becomes an interesting space wherein to invest and Nouakchott is no exception.
In order to grasp the rapid evolution of Nouakchott’s landscapes, we choose to use kite aerial photography. This method is very simple, economic and ecologically sound. A swivel camera is attached to a kite. The camera is radio controlled from the ground. Oblique and vertical shots can be taken. The shots are quite precise, thanks to the video control. It is a catchy and participative tool, and the photos are easy to share with other stakeholders and citizens – fostering new collaborations and partnerships for urban and landscape governance. The kite aerial method is particularly useful to study cities dealing with issues of urban sprawl. It compensates for the lack of mapping up-to-date data (Bosselut et al, 2009) and allows a birds-eye view of speculation processes in real-time, and emergent town-planning forms on the fringes of the cities. In the case of Nouakchott, it highlights the strong urban contrasts in the capital city of one of the poorest countries in the world.

A wind of change has been blowing through Nouakchott since its integration into the club of petro-countries in 2006 (Choplin, 2009; Choplin, Franck, 2010). In the race to competitiveness with modern cities, Mauritanian stakeholders attract foreigner capital by offering access to cheap urban land coupled with limited and lax regulatory policies that promote private investment. In 2005, legislation was passed officially recognising the property developer profession in Mauritania. Since then, local companies offer investment opportunities and engage in land and real estate speculation. This strategy explains why the historical colonial buildings in downtown Nouakchott have been destroyed to make way for a new central business district. Following “the Phoenix effect”, skyscrapers must be erected. On the fringes, new buildings are also rising from the ground.

A successful Mauritanian company promoting investment in real estate is FCI. It attempts to follow Islamic financial principles, extremely popular within the Arabian Peninsula, and promotes an Islamic quarter in the suburbs of Nouakchott. The future quarter, called Sukuk (the Arabic equivalent of the term for a bond, title or financial certificate), forecasts 50 villas, 60 allotments, and a central plot of 4,650 m2 to become a central business district. The naming of this suburb connotes the diffusion of Islamic financial principles largely guided by those of the Middle East. The sukuk investment funds are structured in compliance with Islamic law (Ould Bah, 2011). The sale of sukuk is primarily directed at Islamic investors as Shari’a law prohibits them from investing in conventional debt securities. The sukuk example demonstrates that international dynamics can converge with national interests. Though Sukuk is obviously a speculative project, it is not identified as such because it is congruent with Islamic values. It can be seen as a halal speculation.

The capital city has become the showcase of internationalisation, a tool for attracting flows of capital. Following this speculative land tenure dynamic, a new town called Ribat al Bahr is under construction. Covering an area of 650 hectares, Ribat al-Bahr is a prestige project that when completed will boast residential villas, hotels and a financial centre, schools, shopping malls and a landscaped sea front. The developers, Mauritania Investment Group, are backed by Emerati funders (http://www.ribatalbahr.mr/index.php). Another company, the Qatari Diar Real Estate Company is also promoting a luxury resort 20km north of the capital.

On the margins of the Arab and Muslim world, Mauritania offers a strategic geopolitical location for Gulf actors to exert their influence. Moreover, the Gulf cities have become symbols of capitalist success and economic richness, especially in the Arab world, but also in Africa (Barthel, 2010). Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Doha increasingly epitomise global urban transformations and new modern development patterns, beyond the urban model of the West. Websites show videos and futuristic images endorsing international standards and marketing tools. But, for the great majority of Mauritians, the urban modernisation and development are more symbolic than real. The main prestige projects are precisely that, “projects”. This infers that until now they remain only in announcement form. The Ribat al-Bahr project resembles an empty showroom. Five years after the Sukuk project’s inception, only seven houses have been built. The Qatari project seems also to be on hold (it has disappeared from the Diar website). Gazing upon these
kite aerial photos, one might venture to ask to whom exactly is this city destined? For whom are these extravagant spaces provided? Why do the government and private investors want to beautify the cityscape when for the majority of Mauritania’s inhabitants everyday life is hampered by chronic poverty and social and political unrest?

Currently, the World Bank is promoting a huge slum-upgrading programme, linked to the Millennium Development Goal of “Cities Without Slums”. One of the priorities was to upgrade the oldest and biggest slum located in the centre of Nouakchott. In principle, the 50,000 inhabitants are given titles of to the land they live on. The rationale of the programme is to legalise urban informal areas, or to convert squatter lands, considered as “dead capital” into a real estate asset. Obviously, this programme fits neatly into the neoliberal ideology of land tenure inspired by Hernando de Soto (2000): poor people are poor because they live in informal areas; so, if they receive property title, they will have a start-up capital and enter the modern market economy. But the privatisation of land exposes people to the risk of being dispossessed by richer investors and evicted. In part, dispossession is already occurring. Only the richest slum dwellers, or those with patronage networks, can get the property title to the land they were living on. The poorest and most marginalised people of the slum have been resettled 15kms south of the capital, in a dusty location with no facilities. There, they have been given title, but they now ironically call their new quarter, “Sans fiche, sans photo” (“Without documents, without photos”), a metaphor for their continuing dispossession.

References
High Class Shanty Town

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LANQUETIN
*translated by Karen Press

IN OUAKAM, ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF DAKAR, I spend a month in 2012 photographing the district, an immense stretch of land around the African Renaissance statue. A process of gentrification is devouring the area between the airport, the sea and a traditional fishing village, Lébous, built in what was once a baobab forest at the water’s edge, a labyrinth of alleys and buildings, the oldest of which are small wooden fishermen’s cottages. The new districts surround the village; the Leopold Sedar Senghor International Airport has been relocated elsewhere and a large access road furrows the hills that are still half-bare.

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High Class Shanty Town
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LANQUETIN
High Class Shanty Town
JEAN-CHRISTOPHE LANQUETIN
I walk around this site, where development has largely come to a standstill. People are living here: they don’t get lost in the streets; their steps are regular and everyday; their gait businesslike; they have a purpose; they’re active and in a hurry; the cars drive fast, hooting; the market functions and the shops are open in the midst of the bare brick structures with empty window frames; people are playing football on the big patch of ground that is vacant in anticipation.

The new structures have the precarious feel of shacks – rough grey stacks of cement and bricks, visibly fragile. They seem to have just been dumped on the ground, supported by planks and struts that are themselves propped on bricks until the concrete has set and the workers return. Sometimes a structure collapses and kills – too much sand in the concrete, the pillars and walls too thin or not properly squared off. The buildings are skeletons open to the sky, the vegetation invades them and the bricks crumble. They’re waiting for the plaster, paint, tiles. I pass along the streets between big featureless blocks, their walls black, grey or white. Interior or exterior, there’s little difference, I walk through the big post office – the biggest in the country, I am told. It has no roof. Yet, every place is earmarked and has a name.

“High-class shanty town,” is how theorist Abdoumalig Simone describes it.

The incomplete villas are cheaply decorated in a modern style that comes from everywhere and nowhere. Near the airport, villas with Roman-style façades; cream and ochre are lined up identically in their hundreds behind high walls; elsewhere, there are rows of chicken-coop-type structures, red or yellow, filled with functional apartments and king-size beds. In one street, a slab of paving is covered with tiles, a palm tree is set in a small square of earth and a single lamp post adorns the spot. The car is parked in front, someone is on the upstairs balcony. I frame it tightly – image of a “town”.

It’s not so much the collage of styles that is strange – the imaginaries of other places and people are what create towns – it’s the repetitive character: mechanical, industrial, planned, commonplace. Tabula rasa. In the old quarter, the newer buildings often have a singular quality, an organic feel. These are the same bricks, but not the same town.

The streets of dust and sand into which the taxis and horse-drawn carts sink, wind among the piles of bricks and the uprooted remains, which rise up again. Large stones and tree branches become scaffolding. The low-level vegetation is bushy, a grid emerges from it, the electricity boxes await. A few baobab trees, perhaps one thousand years old, survive. Out of guilt? Their massive presence in the middle of the site makes one think of a skeleton struggling to stay upright.

In the fog, the martial statue, built by the Koreans, floats, a silhouette without scale, clearly gigantic, yet minuscule. It tells the story of a man and a woman, a child in their arms, their bodies leaning in an invisible direction, which is in fact the Statue of Liberty. The phantom town at their feet may dream of a bourgeois middle class family life, cobbled together out of multiple imaginaries; this rival one dreams of the other side of the ocean, but also of African imaginary, of which I struggle to find in this spectral town.

Every day I walk through the “street” that winds between ancient village and new quarter. The old village, centred on its labyrinth of lanes and its will to continue to exist, turns its back on the new town. Facing it, the new quarter is a vast empty terrain, a parade ground you cross, a big public square where you play football, where you loiter. Men, horses and goats seem to get lost here. The silhouetted statue is visible everywhere. The square is an immense stretch of refuse and bushes. Only the stadium grandstands, bordered with stones, are spotless. I pass back and forth, sit on a large round stone. In the midst of the refuse is a dead goat. People tell me that in earlier times the square was a baobab forest, “dense and dark”.

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This Sea Shall Be Uprooted

WORDS: JUMOKE VERISSIMO
PHOTOGRAPHS: ADOLPHUS OPARA

On the silk expanse of the waters
Gleaming sparkles of wrinkled greys,
Burdens of stilts and wraps and roofs
We acquire the nudity of nature.

AS YOU DRIVE DOWN THE THIRD MAINLAND BRIDGE into the shrivelled Lagos Island area, you are introduced to the sight of hundreds of stilt homes squatting on water like an illusion come alive. This is how many are welcomed to Makoko, a community whose urbanity is apart from the other areas of Nigeria’s largest metropolis. It is a very noticeable contrast to affluent areas like Victoria Island, Ikoyi and Ajah, where land is worth millions of naira.

A view from the bridge is of the sun’s artistry, cascading over the lagoon, as it sets in its golden allure of rays splashing about to highlight fishermen throwing their nets into the lagoon. This is in the background of floating lumber pushed by bare-chested men, who do not seem concerned with the canoes slipping past. The scenery is unforgettable and has inspired many artists to create, and were it not for the publicised images of Makoko, one would go away with a masked image: a romanticised landscape.

Makoko is a shanty town, perhaps one of the oldest shanties existing in one of the choicest areas of Lagos. Inhabitants can be traced back over 200 years to the early 18th century. Today the area is home to about 85,000 people, although recent census counts are said to be of questionable accuracy. The Baale (local chief) will tell you that more than 400,000 people of different ethnic groups, and from places such as Benin, Togo and the Niger-Delta, live in Makoko.

Years without government intervention have made Makoko ignominious to some and everyday to others: new and old wooden homes receive electricity from spider webs of wires supported by thin bamboo poles or sticks; family canoes on brown waters – some flattened from usage, and some resembling drifting planks – are tied to the wooden homes; women row past in canoes filled with provisions, stop to chat with mates, or fishermen setting out into the deeper waters of the lagoon; screaming and laughing children, sparsely clothed or not at all, splash water on themselves. People will glance at someone with a camera,
but other times they are oblivious – engrossed in their insulated lives. It is in the course of mundane living that some inhabitants have been instrumental in rescuing people who fall from the Third Mainland Bridge when accidents happen. Adolphus Opara, a photographer with whom I would later work on a Makoko project, has been invited several times by the Baale, to take photographs (as a photo-journalist) of such incidents. The Nigerian authorities are still fumbling with the lack of infrastructure and the equipment required for such rescue missions would need the intervention of Julius Berger Nigeria Plc\(^1\), or the deep swimmer/fishermen who are inhabitants of Makoko.

\hspace{1cm} Dreams brought us here and we arrived  
\hspace{1cm} With no enthusiasm for things stirring  
\hspace{1cm} – Currents, currencies – concurrently drift us  
\hspace{1cm} Into adamance, but we learnt before to be.

Over the years, visitors to the locality have increased and the people living in Makoko are now used to being subjected to the scrutiny of different lenses. Many of them were born here, so are amused at the fascination with their lives, while others are angry because in the past there have been those who have used the plight of the inhabitants to obtain all manner of funding from foreign donors, little of which is seen by the community itself.

At first visit, the sightseer is consumed with understanding the people’s unique lifestyle, something which also interests NGOs, television stations and artists. The interest of successive governments, however, is usually revived only when some media attention is focused on the area. Of all past governments in Lagos, that of Governor Raji Fashola has been the most threatening to the community. The governor was elected on a campaign to return Lagos to its old glory. By this, he meant reinventing Lagos, which was becoming infamous for landscapes of garbage, heaped so high that it was easy to mistake it for mountains waiting for climbers. The Public Relations for the Mega City project was launched, and many slums, seen as pollution problems, became focal points. Even notoriously dirty areas like Oshodi\(^2\), which had seemed impossible for previous governments to clear of debris, were spruced up. It was only a little time before Makoko became a target for demolition. An intervention would come, but not as expected.

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1. An established Construction Company in Nigeria  
2. Located in northeast of Lagos State, Nigeria
As always, morning always walks in;
Hidden in the folds of the seas,
Its shadow has a broken neck
For the lagoon slices it in two
As paddles allay fears and calms.

THE CREATION OF THE THIRD MAINLAND BRIDGE during the regime of Nigeria’s former dictator head-of-state, General Ibrahim Babangida in 1990, was meant to link the Lagos Island to the mainland, a purpose it is presently serving. I like to see it as something more: a metaphor for the social stratification of Nigerian society. This was reiterated when I conversed with a friend from work and he expressed, without much thought, how air on the Island (the dub given to Lagos Island) is quite different from that on the mainland: “You no dey feel say everywhere dey cool as you climb Third Mainland Bridge?” he said. Of course, the air here is cooler because of the water, and not because some of the most ridiculously expensive estates in Nigeria are found in this part of town.

Being the commercial hub of the city, Victoria Island is the headquarters of many banks and transnational companies in the city. Hence, traffic is usually hectic. Ikoyi and Banana Island, among others, are highly sought after residential areas, and the rent for a luxury three-bedroom flat in Ikoyi is in the region of US$65,000-$75,000 per annum. The going rate for land alone is as much as N400 million. All these areas are part of the Third Mainland and the social dichotomisation that places Makoko on the border line.

Since the conception of the Lagos Atlantic City, the lifespan of coastal areas appear to be in the hands of investors and their imaginations. The latter project, which was conceived in 2003, is meant to be a solution to the flooding that engulfed Lagos and carted away properties and life. The fear of many Makoko residents is that it is the impending success of the Atlantic City project that is giving government and estate investors ideas for the regeneration of Makoko, in the event the land on which it sits is reclaimed.

The intervention that Makoko always wanted was not one that would lead to displacement. This was apparent in a controversial 2010 BBC documentary, “Welcome to Lagos”, which caught the attention of the government and had it fuming over the poor and biased image of the city that it portrayed. The documentary was described by Wole Soyinka as this “colonialist idea of the noble savage”, and some Nigerians argued it was simply a reminder of the boxed imagery of the black African: “Hey! The monkey speakst?” However, in this case, it was, “Hey! They have zeal too.” There were others, however, who saw it as depicting a reality of the times and something that government should attend to. The exposure of the impoverished life of the Makoko people – who had received little or no government intervention since its inception – was quite different from any they had received in the past. They became the subject of many discussions abroad and at home about Makoko – a place where until recently there was no school, until efforts by a returnee inhabitant to start one. Previously, those who yearned for education attended the school situated some distance away on reclaimed land, which was usually flooded during rainy seasons. Also, the benefits of visits from missionaries and foreigners earned Makoko schools like the Children’s Christian Academy, which is said to have been donated by a couple who came to the water-city some years back.

4. The project is a new city that would be built on land reclaimed from the Atlantic Ocean on Bar Beach, Victoria Island. It would stretch across the coastline. The city would have “waterfront areas, tree-lined streets, efficient transport systems and mixed-use plots that combine residential areas with leisure facilities, offices and shops”. More on the project can be found at http://www.ekoatlantic.com/aboutus/index.htm
5. Watch http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZzy0KycZI0 (Internet link to BBC “This is Lagos’ YouTube Video.)
The debate is still on, and it has encouraged newer efforts from architects such as Kunle Adeyemi, who developed the Floating School using local materials, as part of a project entitled Lagos Water Communities Project. He explains that regenerated buildings would be “catering for issues like the urban flood risks, flexible and multi-use facility for the larger community need ecologically/environmentally friendly and responsible in energy use/building systems.”

In an article on this project, published in the Guardian UK, Jan Thomas Hiemstra, the deputy country director for the UN Development Programme, raised a fundamental question ignored by even the Lagos state government, with its many land reclamation projects: “The big question is what will Lagos look like in 50 years’ time? Will we have a city that integrates water into its design, or will we have a city that tries to keep water out at any cost?”

The relevance of regeneration, reimagining and redevelopment have generated further debate because 48 months after the BBC documentary, on 12 July, 2012 the Governor Fashola issued a 72-hour quit notice to the inhabitants of Makoko – an action that echoed a similar incident that occurred in 1990, under the rule of the military governor of Lagos state, Col. Raji Rasaki. At the time, more than 300,000 inhabitants were displaced and rendered homeless. The promise of resettlement was never met. Instead, the land has become home to many affluent Nigerians. Two decades later, almost to the date, and the residents of Makoko were again over the barrel, accused of “occupying and developing shanties and unwholesome structures on the water front without authority, thereby constituting environmental nuisance, security risks, impediments to economic and gainful utilization of the water front(sic) such as navigation, entertainment, recreation etc.” The inconsiderate reasoning of the letter notwithstanding, the debate on socio-cultural perspectives, historical settlement and issues of political economy of the area, might seem insignificant in the light of a 1972 decree that grants all coastal land to government.

The gist here comes back to intent: it is the proximity of Makoko to its affluent neighbours that has influenced prospective investors to encourage government to displace the inhabitants from the area. Hypothetically, with the rich needing more lands and Lagos getting even more congested, Makoko is is viewed as a monkey wearing a million-dollar diamond – a monumental commercial waste. This view raises even more debate, especially considering that the community of Makoko is a resourceful one, which contributes significantly to the economy of Lagos through viable industries in fishing, sand mining, agriculture, and lumber – most of which have existed for many years – and which generate millions of naira daily. But the government of Fashola is not alone in its zeal to deal with Makoko; a comment on a Youtube video, propagating the continued existence of the city got this response from a certain “getintouchwithfrank”:

“This is a very ignorant message. Venice was not allowed to grow like a tree without "manicure". The demolition will give way for development.... That is what we need, development to enhance people’s living standards and also create avenues for economic growth. Imagine the new Makoko as condos, restaurants, gyms, office towers, bars on the lake, a running path for pedestrians and cyclists, it would not only be beautiful, it would also create jobs that we are desperately in need for!”

Yet, in the wake of Governor’s Fashola’s proposal for a New Lagos, which is anticipated in the many animated videos posted on Youtube, one wonders if there is ever a city that exists without character. Robotising the city would deny Lagos of its uniqueness, as any urban structural planning should take into account the cultural and historical lifestyle of the people.
Although its shoreline habitation is unique, it is important to note that Makoko is not the only modern-day stilt community in West Africa. There is Ganvie, on Lake Nokoué, near Cotonou, in Benin. It has been around for more than 800 years and has a population of only 20,000. The place caters for tourists in its on-water hotels and entertainment centres where visitors can mingle with the inhabitants of the community. Outside Africa, is the famous Palafitos Quarters in Castro, Chile, which is known for its beautifully painted palafitos (as its stilt houses are called). Many of its stilt houses remain a tourist attraction and are largely preserved in the Gamboa district, in a bay called Fiordo de Castro. The vision is that Makoko should become a place, an administrative district, where people can live and relocate to if they desire.

Lagos in its entirety has suffered much from poor governance in the past, and it has suffered as much from some of the accusations it levels on Makoko, such as flooding. Flooding has plagued the city, swallowing even its high-brow areas, such as Victoria Island, which was labelled “most expensive slum” at one time, because of its poor drainage facilities. Climate change, which is a problem across the world, has also impacted upon Lagos – with its densely populated areas and infamous rainy seasons that expose how inadequate its government’s plans are for ensuring the public safety. How ironic that the ultimate sacrifice is therefore to make homeless a community of more than 100,000 that has existed for over 200 years. Kunle Adeyemi, in an interview with Design Pages, said that perhaps the solution to the flooding might actually be in Makoko. This is a statement that is corroborated by Janthomas Hiemstra: “The future of Lagos has to incorporate [water-based] communities; you cannot just think them away.”
After today we shall berth, in a row
Unlike other days our boats floating in semblance
We will haul desires to shores,
Perhaps come back with everywhere on our minds
With power in our loins, we’ll find repose in luck.

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE MAKOKO ENVIRONMENT, and its distinct lifestyle, has made it a place of inspiration for many artists and media practitioners. Evidently, changes come to a place based on commitment. The problems in Makoko are a result of negligence and while it is impossible to disprove the theories of impoverishment, one cannot rule out the fact that this is something that cuts across many areas in Lagos. So when the BBC documentary was shot, it only increased the awareness of a place that had already received attention in the paintings, photographs and writings of many artists, mostly for the ambience which its diversity promotes.

As a child, I followed my father to the National Museum, and we would observe together the old Lagos (Lagos Island areas specifically). The Lagos I was born in is different from my father’s Lagos, and is now more different for those younger than I am. My father’s Lagos was located in the busy cosmopolitan images of Lagos Island – what my father remembers as the main city. The now celebrated areas, such as Lekki and Ajah, were rural areas where people went to fish and farm. The quiet and romantic spots reminiscent of his time and memory are now surrounded by noisy open markets. However, there’s a common, consensus between us – the city expanded and many of these places either gave way to newer structures or were expanded to take in the newer social dynamics. My point? When Makoko is destroyed, and the pictures of its shanties find their way to the museum, will I be telling the stories of a place that was abandoned for being itself, and destroyed without being offered hope to reinvent itself?

My first introduction to Makoko was a mini-documentary on NTA Newsline many years ago. I was a child, and the focus was on those who went to work on the island from this locale. There was not much talk about the state of the place, or any government intervention, for that matter. Fast forward: 2011. I met with Adolphus Opara to collaborate on a photography and poetry project on the area. He was already running a project with Sola Otori, so the documentation they had of the place was a good foreground for me. It offered a new dimension to understanding Makoko and what it stands for: the people and their tradition and that cultural environment, all of which are so easily ignored in today’s Africa of meeting economic development and demands of global relevance. I learnt from this experience that, unlike other slums in Lagos, Makoko is not simply the result of rural migrants finding solace in a constellation of hovel, but also a rural area that has had the dynamics and duties of a city forced upon it, without regard to the very infrastructures that should make it one. Even governance is through a local chief, who is responsible for the well-being of the people.

The lifestyle is constant, as that is all the inhabitants know. Most visitors are amazed by the way the people appear to have accepted their “poverty” – a myopic perspective that fails to consider the fact that there is no other life known or offered to the people. One resident, Monday, once told me that there are people in the place who have never left Makoko proper – not the city of Lagos, but actually the community itself.
Now, this community struggles to cater for its own historical legacy and the influx of people who continually come into it for housing as Lagos expands. In this growth, several years of poor governance and lack of vision have brought minimal, if any, social improvement, simply because the government has failed to recognise the distinctive lifestyle of the people in the area, so the possibility of organic growth remains unfulfilled. Yet the people have cocooned themselves in the limitations of their environment, using the water they live on as their source of survival and discharge. The water, which serves as source of life, becomes also the point of disposing their waste. The result is environmental pollution that now affects the surrounding environment that once ignored them. Today, the only vision is for a 200-year-old settlement to be demolished to accommodate the creation of a new city.

The fundamental position of most people who have been against the demolition of Makoko has been about the displacement of the people in the interest of investors. This is something the government denies. In an interview with the Vanguard Newspaper, Lanre Ogunyemi, the Chairman of the House Committee on Energy, Mineral Resources and Waterfront Infrastructure, noted that:

"Lagos is virtually a megacity and because of the present situation, there is always plan to resettle certain settlements that we think are not in conformity with the expectation of the State. But, there must be better resettlement if people must move. I believe, government will not throw thousands of its people into a daylight penury and poverty without making alternative arrangements for them ... With the way Makoko is, there is no development that can take place there. What government is doing there is not total demolition of Makoko. The only contentious issue revolves around those who built their houses under power-lines. And therefore, there is need to create a safe way to safeguard the lives and properties of the people living in Makoko ... What we want there is the beautification of the waterways which is currently our topmost priority. And the point is that an aesthetic look of Makoko must improve in the interest of the image of Lagos as a megacity. We have Ajegunle slum where government is putting efforts to ensure a better atmosphere. This is not a government that empowers the rich at the detriment of the poor,"
IV

We float in the centre of an ocean
Where dreams travel on waves:
Pitiless paddles bustling for calm,
While eyes hunt for an altitude
In shanty ambitions, as homing hopefuls.

THINGS MIGHT NOT BE AS HOPELESS IN MAKOKO as government implies. Some people are thinking. The Heinrich Boll Stiftung Foundation and Dreams Arts & Design Agency (DADA), in 2012, organised “an open space workshop, aimed at the articulation and development of practical low-cost solutions for flood resilient buildings and environmental design in low income and informal settlement areas to reduce displacement and other negative effects of flooding.” It brought together “creative thinkers, development workers, architects, urban planners, representatives of relevant government agencies and representatives of communities in Lagos affected by flooding to further brainstorm and evolve ideas over a three day period.”

The proceedings of the workshop which were published in Design Pages, a magazine printed by DADA, showed that if indeed the Lagos state government is concerned about Makoko all that is needed is a proper thought process.
My analysis is that similar to other government social infrastructural interventions in Africa, the one in Makoko lacks indigenous presence. Although our colonial experience in the past has been from Europe, our technological dependency in recent times in Africa has made us dependants of Asia. As Adeyemi explained: rather than encourage the gentrification of Makoko, a “single solution that manages to look elegant just through basic problem solving” is feasible. In doing this, he and his team would be encouraging “public intervention which would give Makoko legitimacy”. The advantage of this is that government’s presence would be felt because the social infrastructures would be integrated into the people’s way of life.

That the problem of Lagos waterways would be solved once Makoko is out of the way is an illusion and one that government is in denial about. As for pollution, one can accord significance to Adeyemi’s perspective, that “Makoko is polluted not just because the residents; Makoko itself is a receptacle of the sewer system from land. It is within a drainage channel that just empties itself into the lagoon around Makoko and this adds to the waste generated in Makoko.”

In itself, the issue of pollution all over the world is usually addressed through “cultural orientation”, which is something already being propagated in other parts of the city through The Lagos Waste Management Authority, which educates on conversion to biogas or composting and recycling. Like residents on land, those living on the water can also be taught to dispose of their garbage properly. The people in Makoko want change; they are not asking to live perpetually in the decrepitude that is a life without re-invention. The truth is, it is only if Lagos reinvents Makoko in its plan for the rehabilitation of the city, that its megacity project will be fulfilled.

The planned demolition of Makoko is now on hold after outcry from local and international organisations and individuals. The government has heeded the call, perhaps taking note of the idea that change can indeed come with a little more imagination. The departure from the root might not be total, but – as the Yoruba say when departing: until your return – a reinvention, a welcome back: home.

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Little boys struggle against the tide; learn manhood
Girls slid their hands into their thighs
Compassions for womanhood float with canoes,
The seas splash against wooden piles;
Evening passes. Dawn arrives.
Life goes. Life comes. Home.
Visions for the National Tear-ter of Nigeria
Four conversations and Seven performative pamphlets
WHEN EXPLORING A COMPLEX OBJECT like the National Theatre of Nigeria (NT), one may do so through a variety of registers, approaches or methodologies, such as those developed through Constanze Fischbeck’s and Daniel Kötter’s filmic exploration, or Andreas Müller’s political reading of architectural-social space. In our own approximation to the NT we began by considering how our role as professionals within the field of architecture might be conditioning, and could itself condition the exploration of the theatre. One of the pitfalls in this regard was that the State Theatres project would always be in some way conditioned by our presentation within the project as professional architects – in other words, the project’s actual constituency has a bearing on the way the project is perceived. Presenting ourselves as architects within an art project, we inevitably fall into the role of “consultants”, which we think can be problematic in the context of an exhibition where the core of the work will stand as artistic and our input, if purely displayed in an architectural format, might be interpreted as somehow legitimising the subject matter with a varnish of technical expertise. With this as a starting point we decided to adopt a more performative research position, but without renouncing our condition as architects.

This consideration was also born out of the actual process of thinking about the National Theatre. The building first originated as a monument, a representation of modernity that was imported to impose a presence on the African/world stage: it was originally built to host the 2nd World Black and African festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 1977). The NT was meant to represent the cultural (and therefore socio-political) advancement of Nigeria through modern construction within an important moment of its national history. The building was therefore more of a symbol, or a sign, than a purely technical entity; functionality was considered a secondary issue, in favour of its monumental and symbolic dimension. The inclusion of architect’s sketches on a wall could be interpreted as a similar representation of modernity, where technical legitimisation in the form of functional solutions takes over the more important aspect of the building as a cultural sign. The idea of modernity hinges around functional planning – within which sketching is the archetypical modern act.

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Seven Performative Pamphlets
AYODELE ARIGBABU, HUNTER & GATHERER COLLECTIVE

Original Nigerian Palm Wine
From the sedimentary basin of Lagos, made up of a sequence of clays and sands, with shale and limestone intercalations, a sublime palm wine is born. Rooting in the richness of the 900-million-year-old Nigerian National Red, ventilated by salty winds so rich in humidity, mineral dust, Saharan particulate matter, petroleum hydrocarbon and low-level atmospheric radioactivity from Niger, our silver date palms, oil palmyras and jaggery palm supply a tasty beverage unlike any other.

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At National Theatre Vineyards, you’ll experience the whole palm wine process with all five senses. There are two guided tours available, both taking you from the origins of the African continent, to the making of modern Africa and its many palm wine specialties.

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Please drink responsibly.
Non-alcoholic drinks only for babies.
No climbing on palm trees!

How to drink us
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National Theatre Vineyards
The Original Nigerian Palm Wine

Visitors on the Palm Wine Science Tour will witness the fermentation and knock-out distillation process first-hand in our award-winning underground distillation caverns.

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Have you ever wondered how 15 million people can fit into Lagos? At National Theatre Vineyards, we are capable of filling 1.5 billion Saccharomyces cerevisiae, Lactobacillus plantarum, and Leuconostoc mesenteroides into a single bottle – and fermenting them into a uniquely rich taste.

Enjoy one of our countries greatest exports in a stunning location!

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The National Theatre Experience is a great interactive experience spanning the history of the nation with different periods acted out by heroic and villainous characters of the time. It is a fun family attraction that’s both historical and hysterical.

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Africa’s Best Scare Attraction

scream your head off!

The past awaits you!

National Theatre Scare Attraction

Seven Performative Pamphlets
AYODELE ARIGBABU, HUNTER & GATHERER COLLECTIVE
National Theatre Casino

**Patron’s Welcome**

You are a patron? You are welcome!

Set against the backdrop of the majestic Mother City, on serene beaches that are waiting to be discovered. This is National Theatre Casino Lagos, where the delightful site of southwelling, relaxation and magical entertainment await beneath an antique cumber rout.

National Theatre Casino Lagos offers you a choice of games that is second to none. Distinctly different, quality of service throughout, a genuine narration architecture and our Global Gold Restaurant along with everything you have impressed from the Mother City’s premier institution encourages you.

**Gaming**

The shuffle of cards, the spin of the roulette wheel; and the jangle (jingle) of a dancing S&G hot machine. There is a judgment on the center gaming grate providing facilities of great deal. The game today is: Texas Hold’em, Party Time, and John Major’s voice - recorded with recent goings heard down the week and easy cash prizes to win on all tables, for the weekend is the thrill — and your chance to strike it lucky!

**National Theatre Casino Lagos Legal Proceedings**

When you come up, all jackpots can be paid on. According to Nigeria Law, we will the winners of every worker who has been in the business to exchange chips or tokens. Places will be dispensed in the presence of an independent auditor.

**Practical Information**

National Theatre Casino Lagos is an English Speaking, Dress code and dress down. Gamings available all day. Business hours and holidays. Open daily 24 hours.

**National Theatre Casino Lagos — A Global Player**

National Theatre Casino offers local casinos in Nigeria and abroad. It is a part of a mobile technology upgrade to overlook the venue of the front of its genre.

The highest quality guest experience.

One of the 17 new areas, filled with 40 touch screens.

For additional visual stimulation while you play, nearly 100 flute® Notify Lighting Systems of Munich, Germany has also been installed throughout the National Theatre Casino — part of a mobile, technology upgrade to overlook the venue of the front of its genre.

**Most Valued Guest Programme MVG**

MVG is a VIP passport to a pampered, prestigious world of superior service and final playing Grafico Baccarat® tokens as you pay. Receive outstanding benefits, rental discounts at selected accommodations worldwide, significant savings at MVI Hotels and certain Gold Members. Nigeria has guaranteed下列 rewards including two nights in the 5-star hotel in Lagos, Nigeria, access to private gaming in the Chancery Suite, a private jet, access to the casino floor and much more.

**Showtime!**

Every day of the calendar, crowds are merry at the National Theatre Casino. Bring your guests for an international line-up of top-class performances and gaming promotions. You will be entertained that you may even be the sound of the their live orchestra. (On our main stage) we jump for the seven (7) floors, where you can watch over two, cars, mystery giveaways and much more!
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PATER ANZELM ZELLMeyer

(Former Valley Dean & CEO Deutsche Bank 1972-1996, Uved Forbes Magazine’s World Business Person of the Year 2006)

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EXHORTATION

1 Chronicles 22
Then David said, “The house of the LORD God is to be here, and also the altar of burnt offering for Israel.”
Preparations for the temple
2 So David gave orders to assemble the aliens living in Israel, and from among them he appointed stonecutters to prepare dressed stone for building the house of God. He provided a large amount of iron to make nails for the doors of the gateways and for the fittings, and more bronze than could be weighed. He also provided more cedar logs than could be counted, for the Sidonians and Tyrians had brought large numbers of them to David.
3 David said, “My son Solomon is young and inexperienced, and the house to be built for the LORD should be of great magnificence and fame and splendor in the sight of all the nations. Therefore I will make preparations for it.” So David made extensive preparations before his death.
4 Then he called for his son Solomon and charged him to build a house for the LORD, the God of Israel.
5 David said to Solomon, “My son, I had it in my heart to build a house for the Name of the LORD my God.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

1. Find us on Facebook, join the NCAN virtual community for updates and uplifting messages.
2. You can now title with your debit cards through the POS terminals made available at each service courtesy interswitch. Ask an usher for directions.
3. Special parking and security arrangements are available for your jeeps and SUVs. The church is determined to ensure that what the Lord hath given, the devil shall not take.
4. Have you redeemed your pledge towards the purchase of a new 2,000kVA generator for the cathedral? May your efforts continue to generate you unlimited wealth as you do so.
5. Marriage seminars now hold on Thursdays from 8:00pm. God bless you as you come.
6. NCAN is putting together relief material for our brothers and sisters from the troubled Niger Delta region. God loves cheerful givers.
7. Sign up now for the Financial Intelligence Seminar with our Daddy, Arch Bishop Odoom, holding from the 14th - 18th Dec. Limited seats available, do not miss your opportunity for prosperity.

National Theatre Cathedral - Nigerian Church of All Nations
National Theatre Planetarium

Join us on a breathtaking journey through the cosmos. Discover the destiny of a planet, a nation, and its people. Swim through the song into the breathtaking beauty of the Nigerian night sky. In all weather conditions, Nigeria’s largest planetarium and premier national science education facility will fill your eyes with sparkling stars.

Top Technology
- 14 blue-sky projections create a stunning illusion of the sky
- 3D zone projects take you from the equator to infinity
- 3D laser shows inside a 5000-seat theatre
- Double-wielded roof construction covers both hemispheres
- Simultaneous viewing with robotic observatories
- Full moon-stabilizing

Effective Education
- Special interactive displays and intergalactic games
- Theatre, music and cinema at the service of science
- See yourself from space
- The history of Nigerian space research
- In vitro medical diagnostics
- Tomorrow's interplanetary palm wine plantations

Authentic Evidence
- Live transmissions from distant Nigerian Space Stations
- Stargazing on the building of the National Theatre
- Mineral samples from outer space
- The new space colonialism and what to do about it
- Permanent radio-signal beacon observing extraterrestrial life

A cosmic experience in the heart of Lagos... Connect with outer space!
We thought that a discourse presented in this form could be interpreted as a series of solutions based upon functional issues, but in fact, the reality of the National Theatre is far more complex than issues of accessibility, typology or air conditioning. Its nature is symbolic and performative (the representation of an aspiration and a certain standard), not functional. When approaching the NT as a cultural object, we thought that concentrating on functionality was missing the point, thus we decided to communicate at a cultural level (of which architecture is but one of many elements). We believe cultural programming should precede and inform architectural programming as an intervention, leading to a symbiotic relationship that eventually transforms the building as a sign.

In our pursuit of a more performative approach we considered ways in which the representation of the ideas we have been discussing around the NT could adopt a less functional or technical form. It would be more interesting, we thought, if our engagement was the result of an interaction, or the adoption of a certain performative role, such that the product of our engagement could be a document rather than a finished product or a solution. We discussed using a model of the building as raw material to engage with a series of non-architects, in the quest for collecting non-functional approaches; perhaps a catalogue of myths, historical interpretations, contemporary frustrations and hopeful futures. Other ideas involved introducing a notion of dis-functionality in our discussions to see what came out of the struggle.

Eventually, we began considering the most interesting aspect of the NT as a public building, is the fact that the programming is very static, but as a cultural sign it may be serve a variety of uses that would evidence a diverse set of symbolic dimensions. Rather than tampering with the architecture itself (an easy and seductive approach, yet prescriptive and invasive), we thought it would be interesting to examine representations of the building as it is, but managed in a very different way. Today it is a hollow symbol, but its monumental power and historical disregard for function actually make it an ideal canvas for the self-projection of an entire nation.

The question of identity and self-projection is still very much alive in Nigeria, as we discovered from our conversations in Lagos. There is a tendency to caricature the debate of Nigerian identity with the dichotomy of Mimesis vs. Originality: “We should not copy the West, but discover our own identity.” Given that Nigeria is a young nation state this position is understandable. Yet, culture is born of a diverse set of influences and inputs, whereby the concept of original culture becomes irrelevant. Rather than “Mimesis Vs Originality”, perhaps the question of defining contemporary Nigerian culture (and representing it through symbolic state symbols, such as the NT) should be more an effort of Aggregation: “Mimesis + Originality”, wherein the idea of culture as aggregation involves thinking of identity as layered influences.

We asked ourselves, how could we communicate this cultural layering within representations of the building, of which functionality and the performance of architecture as a discipline are undoubtedly important elements? We could consider the NT as a canvas on which to represent the complexity of national identity itself.

In tourist leaflets, we have adopted a format well suited to the recruitment of an audience to experience the performative essence of a cultural space. In this format, we can display different, opposing, and complimentary layers of national identity – an invitation to explore the diverse ways in which the place/symbol could be re-programmed or managed, perhaps pre-empting a new architectural dimension in the process.

This format gave us the opportunity to engage performatively with the building itself through the performativity of architecture and a multiplicity of voices to provoke diverse visions of the building, not only in terms of function, but also of national values. This type of provocation engages the mind of the audience by assigning them a performative role as cultural tourists.
We set out to exhibit a shelf of A4, folded tourist brochures, each representing a different vision of what the National Theatre could accommodate – different uses, different values and different readings from different audiences. In doing this, we reduced the architecture of the theatre to a symbolic shell. However, by allowing the audience to experience the diversity of the building and what it could do, and perhaps choosing one that best represents them, we brought more possibilities to the building’s iconography.

The making of these leaflets was performative in itself as we were engaging with the NT by staging new forms of use represented in the leaflets through real and fictional images and interviews borne of performative interaction with the building. We produced a total of seven leaflets for the following uses for the National Theatre:

1. Vineyard / Wine Conferencing Centre
2. Performative museum of Nigerian history
3. Casino
4. Mall / Transport hub
5. Elitist private business school
6. Religious building / Convention Centre
7. Planetarium

These categories seek to de-stabilise the building’s image as a national theatre and provoke questions that resonate with Lagos’s contemporary cultural reality. They purposefully walk the line between utopian and dystopian appropriations and distortions of Nigerian culture to engage viewers in the discussion of what national identity is and how it may be imagined, packaged, exploited and consumed.
A SUDDEN BURST OF CONFUSION overwhelmed the belly of the vast hall, yielding a cacophony of cries and shrieks of agony, furiously stampeding feet and then… blackout! In no time, the ambience of the hall which moments ago had been a spot for fun had become a site of anguish. In the aftermath of the pandemonium, nine tiny bodies lay on the ground, while the fumes of sweat and blood ruled the atmosphere. Emergency rescue operation by some of the survivors of the stampede brought the nine prostrate bodies to the open foyer. They were rushed to the nearby hospital – two were confirmed dead, seven other young bodies suffered various degrees of injury and had to stay days in the hospital.

Dateline, May 1992. The film, *Ayammo (Destiny)*, was being screened and the workers at the box office had oversold tickets, as was characteristic of their corrupt operations; the 5000-seater Main Bowl was over-stuffed with eager patrons of the films of the doyen of Nigerian theatre, Hubert Ogunde. During the course of the film, the poorly-maintained and overworked chillers in the hall gave way, leading to a violent disruption that later claimed those two lives.

Again, official greed and avarice have triumphed, leading to death of the young. The indecorous action of the commercial office of the theatre, symptomatic of the general malaise that reigned in the operations of Nigeria’s prime cultural edifice, had inflicted bruises of varying degrees on the bodies and souls of usually enthusiastic patrons of the theatre’s programmes.

The people fled from the site of death; abandoned it to its dark songs and fatalistic destiny.

The tragic incident led to the closure of the Main Bowl of the National Theatre, and the gradual decay of the edifice – a supposedly awesome architectural piece borrowed, perhaps senselessly, from temperate Bulgaria and planted in tropical Lagos. As dysfunctional as it had been since 1975 when it was opened, the theatre played host to the best of Nigeria’s artistic and cultural expressions.

There is a complex web of metaphors and ironies trailing the story of the theatre, and these are tied ostensibly to the depressive narrative of Nigeria itself – a resource-rich nation with little sense of financial discipline and planning decorum. Recall that the theatre was built in the era of recklessness when, according to a senior member of the military junta in power then, “Money is not our problem, but how to spend it.”
Thus, it was possible to peek at the Palace for Culture and Sports in Verna, and just import it – bones, muscles and contradictions notwithstanding. It made sense to install a facility meant for a temperate region, where air-conditioning systems are not necessarily a compulsion, and plant it in a strikingly hot climate, where the energy supply needed to power air-conditioning systems is next to nil; and where maintenance culture is never a favoured tradition.

Indeed, it is understandable why the metaphor of death has hung since that 1992 incident, not just on the 5000-seater Main Bowl, but also on the National Theatre itself. It was as if the incident was a foreboding of the gradual death of the once-flourishing site as a place for communal sharing. In years gone by, the facility – the only one of its type in an art-starved infrastructure such as is Nigeria – had closed in on itself, shutting out patrons and artists who ought to have been consistently nourishing its rumbling belly rumble.

There had indeed been moments, no years, of renewed dreams and vigours, especially in the period 2006 to 2009, when there was a concerted effort to revive the facility by fixing its many leakages and depressions. But the pang of death continued to haunt the soil of the culture empire and the process of rebirth was truncated by politrickians in the public service, who were fuelled by seemingly insatiable greed. Since then, the National Theatre has sunk deeper into distress, moreso under the regime of one who infamously claimed that he was merely a rent-collector deployed to manage (ruin, perhaps) the edifice.

Yet, the trajectory of the National Theatre can and should not be divorced from that of the nation, or the fate of the continent. Here, in this land of forlorn hopes and dreams deferred or denied, rulers are never leaders, are never visionaries, are never planners or considerate of the collective good. Rulership is occult, government is secrecy and the people are stranded at the borders of national wellbeing. Art, which liberates and guarantees access of participation to the citizens, cannot be given free reign to flower – for its flourishing is dangerous to the contentment of the ruling class.

And so, unlike its sibling in Varna, which welcomes its patrons with open arms, the National Theatre and its once-precious Main Bowl, remain inaccessible, sad, depressed, unreachable, untouchable and unimaginable spaces.
“The contemporary art in this country is flowing, but it needs direction.”

A conversation between performance artist, Jelili Atiku and former Director of the National Theatre of Nigeria, Ahmed Yerima

Jelili Atiku: Does this country actually need the National Theatre?

Ahmed Yerima: I think it does. We are culturally rich in terms of content, performance and I think we need that space we can call National Theatre, where we can go to and witness our rich cultural heritage in dances, poetry and songs. As a performing artist, what format do you think this space should take? Must it be limited to drama alone?

JA: Before I answer that, I would like to ask you what you think of theatre as a place.

AY: I think the theatre is a place where we mirror the society; where we bring the culture, feelings and thinking of the people and show it to them. It is a place where we remodel ourselves; where we feel the impulse of the society. It is also a place where we can live as human beings. We were taught in school that the theatre was the place and drama was the script. But the problem we have in Nigeria is that we see the theatre as the building; we refer to the theatre as a building for multipurpose events. I see it as a sacred place, as a place where you perform rituals. And I think that is why we don’t know how to maintain the idea.

JA: I totally agree with you. A theatre must be a place where you feel renewed at every moment you step into the place. There must be part of you that feels you are contributing to the existence of humanity. Now, back to your question. Theatre is a place where we celebrate our cultural heritage in total. We have all we need when it comes to writers, visual artists, musicians, dancers and so on. The only thing that we lack is maintenance. If you were made the curator of the National Theatre, how would you go about that?

AY: The first thing I would research is the contemporary thinking. I would find a way to make art a part of us, because in Nigeria we don’t take art as priority. Also, we need to let the government know the impact of art in the society. Art has really brought this country to limelight, considering the kind of performing artists we have, and the kind of works they come up with, which has exposed the potency of this country. The National Theatre is not supposed to be an object of decoration, but a place where a lot of projects are being carried out. So I would put this place into constant use, bringing in drama, musical performers and the rest of art.

JA: But what if you have these utopian dreams, a beautiful theatre, a whole lot of people showing interest in art, but no financial backup. How would you go about it?
AY: There are so many organisations that are prepared to support culture and art; we need to tap in to them. The support doesn’t have to come from government alone.

JA: I still need you to convince me that this place will come alive and it will be vibrant and it will be like that forever, because all this is not possible without funds. So please convince me how you plan to go about it.

AY: We have a culture which is community-based in Nigeria. For example, if somebody loses a beloved one, the whole community comes together to mourn with him and also sew a uniform, which they call aso-ebi. I believe that this concept can be put into play. The responsibility of this place can be shared. Let the artists come and initiate ideas and explore the possibilities of getting funds for those ideas. Artists don’t like to get involved in political discussions, yet, if they are more involved in they can be part of actually solving the problem.

Lagos is undergoing very fundamental changes, how would you fit this place into those fundamental changes, so that there will be inter-relativity, interaction and participation in the aesthetic joy of the place?

JA: There is no way we can achieve the mega-city without the input of the art. The artist must also be given a chance when it comes to designing a city, therefore, the art must be integrated into the planning of a mega-city. Being the social people that they are, Nigerians need a space where they can relax. The dialogue between the government and the artists must be there, it should not be that the government is operating one side and the artists at the other side.

AY: So how do you now bring these two sets of important people together?

JA: The curriculum of the school system, which is responsible for developing human resources for the society, is obsolete and must be changed. What do you think of the present contemporary art of this country?

AY: The contemporary art in this country is flowing, but it needs direction. What we need for contemporary art to move on is to have a kind of aesthetic flow that is able to identify it for what it is. I am finding a lot of copy, which is killing the originality. Whoever is the curator of theatre art should be able to guide contemporary art, to give it a direction. I’m hoping that a lot of workshops and conferences can be organised around here, so that students who come from different schools and artists with experience can come together and share.

JA: Your generation is a symbol to us. You have shown us the model to follow, which must be reinterpreted in our own contemporary ways.

AY: I am still laying emphasis on originality; the new National Theatre must guide the new artists towards realising themselves. After watching a play or seeing some other work of art, you should be inspired and your true self – your individuality and your creativity – must emerge from that inspiration.

JA: The first thing in art is originality. We really need to guide that, because it is the only way national identity can emerge. My worry is why the National Theatre has not been like that all this while?

AY: This is because Nigerians like big things, but there is no plan for maintenance. The printing press and the National Theatre share one thing in common, which is decay. The National Theatre was built for the wrong purpose, we wanted to show off. Interestingly, no other African country has been able to host FESTAC, because when they look at the taste of the Nigerian fest, they conclude that they cannot afford it. The problem started with the National Theatre after the festival. That is why I said it is important to plan right from the beginning for the sustenance, maintenance, development and program of this beautiful structure. Who we appoint to each post is always problematic also, because we always pick the wrong person. If we continue to see the theatre as just the building, then there is a problem. The management of a place like National Theatre should not be only about money.
JA: How can we create a link between the government and the people? Does art really connect?

AY: Art connects, but the Nigerian people have to stop seeing art as a very simple thing. Many people who are performing, especially in Nollywood, don’t know anything about acting, they are just there and repeating the same thing over and over again. That is why I’m happy that we have institutions and a place like this [the National Theatre], which can also become an avenue for open theatre programs, in which young artists can come and showcase their talents. Young artists needed to be shown how to flow, and allowed to flow. That is my utopian idealistic dream for this place.

JA: You have hit the core point of this matter. I can remember watching a Nollywood film and noticing that the costumes were not portraying the time they were referring to in this film. I asked myself how can people be reeducated to know you are talking about three hundred years ago in your drama, then you should let them feel that really it is 300 years. Now going back to the position of a curator, I would organize a workshop where I can cook ideas and let participants know what the value of an idea is. Also, to let them know how I would research the content I’m bringing forward; how I would bring out the theme, the structures and other components that would make it look convincing. This would involve constant workshops and training and knowing the value of what to put in the society; and bringing facilitators from all over the world since we now live in a global village. This is how we could achieve our aim. Back to the issue of funding. How do we make the government to create this endowment fund?

AY: I remember that when I was in government, they wanted to put in place something called the national council for art and culture. Then I travelled to the US and came across a place they call endowment of the artsbuilding. I found out that this place has about six or eight floors, and each floor hosts a specific art, ranging from traditional music, contemporary music, modern music, folk music, to different kinds of dance. Then I asked myself, is that what they want to give to one department in Nigeria to handle? I travelled back to Nigeria immediately and went to Alhaji Sule, who was at the time the director, and I showed him the all the information on endowments from the US, and they stopped the project. Then new idea came, and they were considering something new to do. If an endowment for the arts is created and there is a fund given to them, everybody will benefit from it. This is the kind of support foreign organisations, such as the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Francaise and the rest of them, have been offering, but governments also need to play their own role too. The artists also need to be aware that the funds are not given to them to take care of their own personal needs, but to improve and promote their art work.

JA: If we have the endowment form and we have a centre that is in charge of it, then they can send out a call for participation, people can send in their projects, they can go through the process and choose the best and showcase it to the people.
“We should take out that word ‘national’ and reconstruct that word ‘theatre’. It could become a play house or an artist city.”

A conversation between Jude Anogwih and Ayodele Arigbabu

Jude Anogwih: I find it interesting how the idea of the National Theatre as an institutional organisation just sits there in a wide open space. It’s a bit embarrassing, but it is also exciting, because if you are to imagine that land mass … imagine that as an artist village, and the kind of activity that would be going on there. The nature of our products, the nature of intellectual context, the creative energy that would really be evolving there. It would be like some sort of a high-tension power space.

Ayodele Arigbabu: Haawww, well, that’s if wishes were horses, as they say, but then, there is an artist village there, isn’t there? On the fringes…

JA: That’s just a bit of the entire land mass, you know? I’m looking at the entire space; so...

AA: So you are looking at scale?

JA: Well, if you may use that term…

AA: Because what you are talking about exists in some form, especially when you are looking at this scale, excluding that activity to a scale that will fit to the size of the National Theatre, not just its physical size, but also the emotional and symbolic image and baggage that the structure carries. So I suppose what you’re looking at is scale, exploding all those activities. But what’s missing, what’s preventing that scale currently, in your opinion?

JA: I’m also looking at another aspect, which is more like reactivation. I know quite a lot exists already, you have the national galleries there, you have the artist village there, the workshop for creating sculpture… you also have the National Theatre, and then you have very relaxing spaces. But I’m looking at how we can reactivate these energies. Currently, they are playing their role in a most minimal way, but how do we get them to bring out the best of what they can offer, within a wider perspective, possibly as an international space for artistic collaboration and intervention. I think my emphasis is more on how to reactivate the space.
AA: Yea, that’s what’s missing, why? Because some of the things that you are suggesting, I agree should be happening there, and some of those things are happening but at a very small scale. I mean there is a National Gallery there, but I don’t know how many people visit that place. You have the artist village and the other cultural things happening around there. So, my question is, if that huge building is there, that land is there, and that intention to have this things happen is still there, and is evidence in the fact that people are still there trying to do this thing, then what we are complaining about is not being done at the right scale? What’s missing, what’s needed for that reactivation? To make it happen at the scale?

JA: Why don’t we look at cross-collaboration of ideas and practice? Maybe we look at some synage that can come out from the National Council for Arts and Culture (NCAC), working collaboratively with the artists’ workshop or working with the National Theatre staff; each person drawing resource and information from the others and possibly seeing how these collaborations can come into some hybrid forms. But let me come back to my earlier word, reactivate. I didn’t say its not active, but more about building up its capacity to maximize the output and possibly make it more vibrant and attractive to people and to draw on the the existing ideas and activities already going on there.

AA: Ok, but let me ask a question, you’ve been in practice for a couple of decades at least?

JA: Definitely!

AA: Of what use has the National Theatre been to your career as an artist, especially in the last 10 years? How central has it been to your practice?

JA: That’s an interesting question. As a kid I remember watching the broadcast of the FESTAC 77 activities in the National Theatre. The dance, the music, it was so amazing and it was one of the things that nourished my intent, my desire to be an artist. And then all through my schooling, we always encountered the National Theatre one way or the other, especially when it cames to African culture and arts. And this was also another amazing time for me, I mean learning about the Ghanaian culture, learning about southern dance and activities from Tanzania, from Morocco, from all over, you know? I think at every moment I am inspired by the physical structure of the National Theatre, the beauty of the landscape and the diversity of interest. Aside from all this, one can have a bottle of beer at the corner with pepper soup and hang out with friends and get some fresh air. So for me there has always been a very interesting inspiration that I draw from this structure, either from its activities or from the physical content of the place, and also within the visual of work within.

AA: So, the National Theatre has provided you with essence of nostalgia: But I have not seen it impacting directly on your career, beyond the services provided in giving you a connection with what happened during FESTAC, that historical concept. It seems that the National Theatre is becoming nothing but a shell, it’s just the building: if its about abe igi (under the tree) where people drink beer, there are lots of spots in Lagos where people drink beer. If it’s about the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), they have space at Freedom Park. Indeed, there are other venues that are taking care of some of these things that might have occurred or been housed within the National Theatre. For me, this makes the NT redundant, a space that has outgrown its use. So why don’t we just advise the government to create a performative event, in which the National Theatre is rigged with explosives , and its blown up, and the explosion is recorded as video art, so that at least the building can be put to some use and is demise becomes a huge event at a monumental scale compare to FESTAC, and then we can clear the debris away and build an estate from that land. And then we can all go to sleep and stop worrying about this terrible building that has not achieved anything for us in the past few decades.

A conversation between Jude Anogwih and Ayodele Arigbabu
JA: You know, I wouldn’t buy that idea of blowing up the National Theatre. I rather buy the idea of reformation. As an artist, and in line with my practice, my work is never finished – after 10, 20 years I could go add some elements, I could take out or totally dismantle the whole piece and rearrange it. So I’m rather looking at the idea of reconstructing the National Theatre. I’m very careful about this word we call structure. I know to somebody like you, an architect, it would mean bringing in new material, taking away or possibly erasing the entire structure and having a better place and then you would have another dimension take form there. For myself, I think its about bringing in certain things that will change the original perspective or the original functions of this building. It’s an amazing building, it's something that should be kept as a symbol of national pride. Now, if it's not meeting our expectations, what do we do? How do we reactivate it, how do we reconstruct it? How do we reposition? You see it’s a very beautiful space in the sense that you can imagine that space being run as a residency space for artists, as a home for artists. Ok, and then we can make more spaces for theatre, for an art school… imagine a whole lot of activities going on there, all building on the history of the structure, building on the original or initial intent of that structure. It was built to unite the Africans culturally, which is still a very utopian idea, because I don’t think there is any need for us to talk about Panafriacnism, when we know we can all grow individually, independently and also meet the expectations of others. So I’m looking at the idea of reconstruction. I wouldn’t blow up the National Theatre; I would only rescale it, give it new functions and take away certain elements, keep others for historical purposes. A place that takes its history from something that happened in the past, from a lesson we might have learnt from the misappropriation and misuse of resources. It could even break ground for intellectual research on corruption, on the misappropriation of funds, on bad governance, on maladministration, and then invite artists to create works on these topics.

AA: Don’t you think you are indulging in wishing for utopia? I mean that in two ways: First there is the economy behind the whole idea of cultural production and managing the cultural space. And if you look at the global scene, funding for culture is not doing very well. If government has not been able to manage power generation, which is very very central to the existence of nation; if government could not run a telephone service and has to rely on private entities to manage these basic …

JA: I'm sorry my friend, if the private sector can reactivate the telecom, what makes you think that the private sector is not interested in reactivating the culture industry, with special emphasis on the National Theatre? Government wants to sell off the structure...

AA: Then let them do it, because I hate the idea of everything depending on the government. But don’t you think if the government sells it to private interest, then you are putting your heart in the hands of capitalists who care all about profits. They might be able to make more profits if they put up malls, and maybe cinemas and just forget about live theatre.

JA: Super scary, but I remember earlier, I made mention of capitalists. I think it doesn’t have to be sold to capitalists, but governments could create a fund or an independent organisation, that requires private influence. The government can also see that these people have all power to make the best use of that space, not really turning it into a money-making environment. I’m not a fan of government selling it to Mr Money Bag. Im not interested in that because I know it’s going to turn into some kind of hotel, into some kind of pure water factory, just because he needs to make his profit. But I am interested in a group of people or minds taking up that structure and running it on behalf of the nation. If they abuse the opportunity, basically we get rid of them and they suffer the consequences of their actions, but they have every power to determine what position or how that space is used.
AA: Yea, but what if they are not able to run it and keep it afloat, in terms of recovering the money used in such a huge facility, and even for creating all this programming that we are talking about, which, you must agree, is hardly ever break even? So, if at the end of the day, they can’t win that war against commerce, then what’s the point if they are just going to do less than what the government could have done. Now the other perspective that I want to talk about in terms of my question about this utopia of the National Theatre that is blossoming with activities... In the first place, is there enough of a national consciousness and zeal in the people to sell it? Is there enough demand for the kind of culture that we produce? That’s the other thing required to support such a huge facility. Is our dream for that space not a bit unrealistic, both economically and in terms of existing demands. Are our dreams not as huge as the dreams of the military government that was flushed with oil money at that point in time they thought the next thing to do was to build a massive structure, which was fine for FESTAC, but immediately after FESTAC, it became too much to handle. So maybe if they had even built the National Theatre in such a way that it could have been scaled down immediately after FESTAC? I think they did that with the aquatic center for the Olympics in London. It was designed so that during the Olympics they have it at the full scales, because of course they were going to have a large turn out of people and after the Olympics, it was designed so that they could take away some part of it, and it would be suitable for the immediate local community after the Olympics, not too big for the community to handle. So I’m just doing a reality check here, I love the National Theatre – just in case people are wondering who is this idiot who is suggesting we blow up such a building. I am emotionally attached to that building, but let’s do a reality check, are we not trying to fit a utopian dream into a space that is not ready, that does not have the capacity to accommodate it?

JA: Let’s go back a little, like you said, how many people are aware of the cultural activities going on in this country? I think with a bit more research, we would find that the cultural industry in this country has generated more funds both local and international over the years than any other sector. The only problem is that most of these are not properly documented. We don’t have the record of number of people who are coming to Nigeria or travelling within to attend cultural activities. And let’s not forget our artists who are moving into the world. How many contacts are being made? What ideas are they bringing back and how are these integrated to sustain their interest and profession? I think a little research would reveal that this country is hungry, people of this country are hungry especially for good things, especially for cultural things. People don’t just want to drive out and listen to music, they want more than music, they want a live performance and they want to sit with the actors and the musicians and the performers and the artists and get an understanding about what sustains them, and why they do what they do.

AA: I’ve been trying to sell theatre tickets for a few years in this town [Lagos], they don’t necessarily get sold out just like that.

JA: I know, the reason is that these days most cultural activities are illusive. It’s only the rich, the people who are well-travelled and enlightened who are considered consumers of culture. But consider an example: we were at Bariga, on the street corner, I remember, in December 2009, and we had a street intervention programme and we had projections and performances, we engaged the the entire street, fish sellers.... everyone stopped at a moment to refresh and enjoy themselves before going back to their homes or work.

AA: Oh yes, but they didn’t pay for it

JA: They never paid for it

AA: Ha! Ha!
JA: Ok, but I am coming to how the resources had to be generated. And it brings me again to the idea of exaggerated things. We exaggerate things in this country, we exaggerate the price, we exaggerate the idea, so much so that we have lost the meaning of cultural exchange: people – artists and community – coming together to produce something that their reciprocal interest can sustain. So I think we really need to reason carefully, you know, so much is bloated in this country which is not good for us, especially in the creative industry. Look at Nollywood! Nollywood is so locked up in the space that they don’t want to collaborate with anyone else, or when they see you coming, they think you are coming to take a whole chunk of the cake or whatever they are enjoying, you understand?

AA: I find that strange, because Nollywood is…

JA: I am putting more emphasis on collaborative ideas, and the flexibility to bring them to fruition. Why don’t we key into basic things like festivals and art fairs and see how we can grow them, move them forward a little. It doesn’t take much, I’m sorry, I’m always optimistic about doing things in the right ways, with the right people and we shouldn’t exaggerate the way we publicise things. These guys pay billions of naira to publicise/advertise on Third Mainland Bridge and then they transfer the cost on you and me. And for Gods sake, if you are over-taxed or if something is overpaid for, you do that once, you wouldn’t want to do it a second time. You lose total interest and then you seek alternative places to get your message across, and you just realise you have to go to that beer parlour under a tree and listen to the sound coming from the speakers… it gives you almost the same feeling as if you were listening to a live performance in any other place. Fela made it very beautiful for everybody, the ordinary man could go to the shrine and watch Fela perform live, have his drinks, interact extensively and go away inspired.

AA: Yeah, but Fela’s shrine still exists in some form, as the shrine run right now by Femi Kuti, it was and is still is providing music. So why then are we looking for the National Theatre if there are already other spaces doing these things?

JA: Maybe we should take out that word “national”, I hate it with passion because that is what causes the confusion in this whole structure.

AA: So when you remove “national”, it becomes theatre

JA: We can also reconstruct that word “theatre”, it could become like a play house or like an artist city.

AA: That is a more interesting idea to me…when you say an artist city, then you are describing Lagos to me, because Lagos is an artist city, because there is a performance every second on the street of Lagos. If you go out there, the conductor on that bus is ready to give you a performance.

JA: There is a difference between a spontaneous and well articulated program, creative program and what happens on the street ok? Lagos is a huge super active eccentric space and it inspires me.

AA: You are going to dangerous ground now because when you are trying to separate the heart of the conductor from the orchestrated heart of the actor… You are going to a dangerous ground.

JA: No, no, I still come back to the idea of linking each form, but careful linking, done with very intelligent and worthy perspective. I can’t just take a bus conductor who needs to shout, demonstrate and do other things to earn a living and then tell him, ‘leave that bus that’s going to Iyana Ipaja, come here, come and shout, demonstrate and earn nothing’. But I can take my crew, get into the bus, tell the bus driver ‘shout, scream, do your business, earn your money and then we do our documentation’, and we also make you happier, you know by promoting what you do and also encourage you. And the next time the bus driver is off duty, he’s going to come see what he did last time with those guys that came with camera in the bus.
AA: Perfect, perfect, you have solved the problem for me, we have deconstructed the idea of National Theatre. We have taken the national and thrown it in the dust bin. We have taken theatre and we have turned it around and it has gone beyond even the idea of a play house and to an artist city, which Lagos actually is. Thank you, so can we now forget about the National Theatre and talk about something else. If the entire city is an art space, and the entire city is designated as such and it’s in the DNA of the city to create and promote art … if that sort of thing continues and it expands, that might also be part of why the National Theatre is not working, because the arts have diffused across the entire city, so is there a need for the National Theatre?

JA: Remember we have already thrown that word away, and we have reconstructed the second, which means there is no need for a National Theatre. Good, look, it could be just a space like every other space, where interest comes into that place, interest chooses to create dimension out of that place, interests choose to replace it or move it around. It’s a free working table – for example, my work as an artist entails making drawing on any surface; those drawing can at a point become sculptural, I call them all out and they become three dimension pieces that can form an installation. But it is still all about working with a space.

AA: Don’t you think its counter-productive to try to graft or force energy into the space?

JA: Look, creativity is the most beautiful thing in life. I think of an idea, I don’t bother myself about the material or medium, because I know, that creative force or idea is going to direct me to the kind of material that will help to bring it out in its best form. It will also direct me to other multiple materials that can also give it multiple dimensions and meanings. So we have to be flexible with this dynamic structure of creativity. You can’t force something into an idea. You can’t force an idea into an individual. You can’t force energy into a space, but you can, with careful insight, observe how that energy migrates into any space or any part of that space. And then when that happens, you see you get excited and you either begin to create dimension out of it, or you begin to articulate it in more defined ways, or you begin to make sketches or scans that might guide you towards redirecting that energy – like channelling a river to where you want it to be more functional. But remember, energy is like a river, it never forgets its root and it will take you back to the source, and that means there is a lucrative practice at all times and you can enjoy moving your idea, situating your idea, interacting with your idea, sharing your idea as a form of collaborative content. And this will give you new inspiration and content. You have created a mark or network of creative channel, and you can’t exhaust it, unless someone somewhere says ‘I don’t want to do this’ or ‘I just want to refresh and build into something like an hybrid form’. This is what I’m looking at. It’s not complex.

AA: So what is our agreement? We have agreed that we don’t need the National Theatre. Also to make the space available to other lucrative energy and see how that guides and protects the space. If we are left with this place, what can you do with it?

JA: This place is hungry for a whole lot of creative activity. I know this place used to be a printing press. So as a writer, I know what this place meant for the work that I do. So, I would bring it back to its original form. There would be all sorts of machines, with designers, and also a small space for the writer, where he can think and receive more inspiration for his work. I would make it an outlet where everyone comes together, learns from one another and inspires one another. We have to find a way of pushing out this creative energy, so it will meet the needs of the people.

AA: It all boils down to capital. The energy is out there, although it might be scattered, with people doing their different things, but if you want to bring that together to form a critical mass, it all boils down to question of capital. I mean the solid cash.

JA: Do you know that if you have a very wonderful idea, there are capitalists out there, who are ready to give you the financial support you need?
AA: But it is things like Big Brother, Project Fame and Idol that get the biggest support these days. Does it mean that no-one has ever come up with a very good theatre idea?

JA: What I’m suggesting is that people need to create more platforms, to think a little bit more, to be positive in their aspirations. I am an addict of positivity; I believe everything can actually work out.

AA: I would like to see a program with a strong emphasis on digital communication in literature, publishing films, visual and video art in the practical and not theoretical sense. Also live performances that rely heavily on digital should not be left out. Just like a festival in UK, called Time Wave, which is all about digital media. People now use digital like never before. By taking the notion of National Theatre beyond something archival, it will make it something like a time capsule. It would really be interesting to have such a festival whereby we showcase our culture as Africans, but stretch out the point that technology is not strange or alien to us. Part of why the country is the way it is, is because we don’t engage sufficiently with the future.

JA: It’s a shame that we don’t go to the schools and universities where we have these young minds. If we could encourage and support these young minds, it would really make a whole lot of difference. We should come together and think about how we can create something like a miniature of what we want in the future.
“We need more contact zones to create a space for critical discussion, and to propagate and exchange a continuous cultural benefit.”

A conversation between Professor Muyiwa Falaiye and Mudi Yahaya

Muyiwa Falaiye: I have been in Lagos all my life; I have experienced the expansion of the city from the time when I was young up ‘till this moment. This modernisation hinders expansion of spaces for arts, for meetings and culture. What is your impression?

Mudi Yahaya: Before one can critique the absence of national heritage, one has to understand the history of the existence of these spaces. There was a big rush after independence to create a western style of development, which came with some forms of elitist consumerism and ways of appropriating western values to the way we live. This also applied to culture. If you remember, the whole process of post-colonisation is a process: of decolonisation and trying to define who we were. In that process, during the 1970s, the commercial value of oil increased and subsequently spawned the construction of the infrastructure of the city.

MF: My worry is our attempt to change our culture in accordance with the western model seems to affect us in more ways than one: our attitude to work and our attitude to creating spaces where we can discuss our traditional culture. There is nothing wrong with accepting a western-model way of development, but when this affects our cultural spaces, what do we do? How do we recreate these spaces that have been lost in the last 40 or 50 years? This is a fundamental problem for me. I don’t know if you agree with me.

MY: I think it’s not about what we lost, but what we gained. The post-colonial identities of all Nigerians are hybrids of what we are and what we can get from the global community. There should be no such thing that a space belongs to one ethnic group. After independence in the 1960s, we were able to constantly redefine who we were, and this also redefines the spaces. The National Theatre, for example, is the symbolic representation of our national identity.

MF: There is this argument that the architecture of the National Theatre has nothing to do with our indigenous culture, that it is a foreign architect imposed on us. I am of the opinion that it is what is happening inside the building that really matters, the architecture is of less importance.
MY: So many things are foreign here. In fact, modern architecture is very foreign to us. Since we still don’t live in mud huts, then the background of the architecture should not really matter at all. How the content and the context affect our culture is very relevant. Identity is a very fluid phenomenon; it is not static, so what worked out in the 1960s, might fail in the 1970s. We have to constantly expand so as to be able to catch up with it. We need to understand that technology brings out new art form, the creative industry is expanding, and as artists, we need to start seeing different things and needs. We are in the age, where a space is defined by the moment. Maybe the questions now should be, why do we have just only one National Theatre? Is the National Theatre in different places? Is Freedom Park one of the new National Theatres?

MF: There is an idea that we need to move the space for the theatre to the centre of the city. Do you think there is any point of departure between the location of the symbolism itself and the culture itself?

MY: I think it is very important that it is located at the centre of the city. The whole notion of the National Theatre is the representation of national identity and national culture. In that case, the theatre is not meant to be elitist, and that is what has become a problem, because the National Theatre was not delivering culture broadly across all sectors. The adaptation of the modern model, and not the location, made the National Theatre elitist. The programs at the National Theatre should not be segregated or exclusive; they should be for all the people, rich or poor.

MF: Who should take responsibility for moving the National Theatre from the periphery to the centre of the city?

MY: The culture belongs to the people, so I think the people should come to own culture. This should not be regulated by the government. Civil society should have a bigger say in who we are and how we define our space and our identity; how we regulate cultural policy; and there should be more participatory and plural voices carving out cultural policy.

MF: I heard that the architecture of National Theatre was very appealing to the military, because it symbolised the cap of the General, and as far as they were concerned, they were not looking at the deeper cultural implication of the architecture. They were more concerned about the grandiose nature of the building and the resemblance to the cap of the General. What has been going on inside seems to be short of expectation, in terms of propagating our culture. How do we now change this, or how do we move what is going on in the physical structure to another place, like Freedom Park?

MY: I think it was incidental that there was a resemblance to the cap. It was the civil servants in the Ministry of Works who issued permits for this kind of work in the 1970s, so I think it was just coincidence. Coming back to the question of how to apply the space, we should remember that such spaces are symbolic not only as repositories of culture, but they should be flexible spaces. They should be spaces that are opened to be re-used, reapplied or re-appropriated. If we say now that the culture is flexible, then the infrastructure and the structure should also be flexible.

MF: We do have a world culture. What do you think can be achieved by creating isolation; by trying to prevent our culture from being diluted or influenced by the foreign culture? I remember that foreign films were at a time premiered at the National Theatre. Foreign musicians were brought in, while local artists were having problems securing space at the theatre. And they think the only way we can prevent this is to create a cocoon around our indigenous culture and prevent foreign culture from having access to our national artistic spaces. Do you think this will not be counterproductive to our cultural development?

MY: If we try to censor foreign influence, do you censor MTV? Do you censor music, do you censor all forms of culture that seeks to propagate change? How do we censor fashion, for example?
MF: Don’t you think that the reaction of our indigenous cultural practitioners stems from the fact that they don’t have enough outlets and spaces? They think they are denied the available space to practice. Now that we think we have enough spaces to exhibit our culture, do you think this idea of wanting to restrict will fall away?

MY: I think the influence of the foreign culture is not the problem, but rather the prevailing influence of the Pentecostal Christianity dominating our spaces. The churches have purchasing power and they dominate all the available spaces, like halls. If a musician wants to perform on a Sunday, he is not competing with a foreign band, but with the church. They try to force a certain form of thinking into a certain space that is counterproductive to the nature of art itself. We need to understand that religion itself is a culture.

MF: I agree with you, that one of the greater challenges to the development of our culture is the role of the church. Sometimes we try to distinguish between the church and our culture. Are there other ways we can separate politics from culture?

MY: I think the first thing is to appreciate the symbiotic nature of the relationship. Marx once said that the super structures, which are ideas, cultural beliefs and world views, affect the sub-culture, which is economics and politics. So there is that fusion, and when we appreciate that they work together, then we realise that every move we make culturally has economic or political consequences. National development has everything to do with cultural production and identity. It helps to understand that the West is not the enemy. It is hypocritical to say our culture is not diluted. After a colonial experience, there is a hybrid identity. Maybe we have done some post-colonial deconstruction in terms of literature. But the difference between post-colonial deconstruction and decolonisation has to be understood.

MF: Which is more fundamental – the physical symbolism of culture or the attitude of the mind? Sometimes we try to make distinctions and we run into all sort of problems. Some people consider culture to be physical, in terms of how you dress, how you behave and so on, but if your attitude is at variance to all this… symbol is a galvanising force to sweep public opinion and people rally around it a lot. It is easy for certain people, who don’t want to get engaged with critical discourse, to identify with symbol. Things like fashion quickly explain identity and aspiration. There is a unity about how cultural production defines a space, an individual and a nation. If our nation is not in a vacuum, then it should understand that we cannot negate others by saying they are foreign. We need more contact zones to create a space for critical discussion, and to propagate and exchange a continuous cultural benefit. This will reduce phobia and suspicion, and it will permit better understanding of other culture and the people. Maybe if other people from the far north of Nigeria had the opportunity to come to the National Theatre to showcase their culture and art work, we might not have the problem we have with the Boko Haram today. If these spaces exist, will they remove the ignorance that makes one culture feels superior to the other? This feeling has brought a whole lot of problems, like discrimination, racism and political issues. Slavery and colonialism are all products of superior-inferior culture relationship. How can this be changed by creating more spaces and the idea that all culture can benefit from one another?

MY: It’s all a problem of vertical class structure. We need to democratise the way the production of culture is dispersed. The creation of elitist spaces that promote censorship in tariff without political subsidy, will create geographical division. The first solution is to see how we can flatten the structure in terms of cultural consumption. The culture should be available to the people; it should not be too special and too elitist, and it should also not be exclusive to only one part. Cultural production should be democratised and be made available to everybody.

MF: There is this call of return to Ibadan as the home of traditional culture. There is a need for these spaces to be returned to Ibadan and Ife, and Oshogbo, so what do we do about Lagos? Why are we insisting that the National Theatre be in Lagos, or that it should be moved from one point of Lagos to the other, when there is this idea that Lagos has never been the best place to host Nigerian culture?
MY: Lagos is the best representation of Nigeria. It is very easy to hear people speaking Igbo and Hausa on the street, and this is not common in places like Ife or Ibadan. In terms of cultural availability and dimension, Lagos has been evolving over the years; it has come to stay.

MF: We all know that Lagos has benefited from its cosmopolitan nature, but that does not mean we have to uproot the indigenous cultures from their original background and bring them to Lagos?

MY: I didn’t say they should be uprooted and brought to Lagos. Opa Oranmiyan and Osun Oshogbo cannot be uprooted and brought to Lagos simply because we want them to benefit from Lagos. There are some places that are supposed to be encouraged to develop. The whole idea is to encourage them to propagate and be more fluid. What do you think would be a utopian cultural space?

MF: I don’t think culture can exist in the utopian mind, there has to be a physical representation of the culture. That is why the location of Freedom Park is very important. It accommodates the physical aspect of art, you can go in there and view the art works and cultural performances. What is your own opinion about it?

MY: My question to you was if money was not the problem, how would you see this space in terms of the architectural design? Would you see it as one space or multi-layered spaces?

MF: It is going to be difficult to get a multiple-layered place because of the nature of Lagos in terms of shortage of land. People consider adobe architecture as traditional and it represents many cultures in Nigeria. You should also consider how you can harmonise foreign architecture. This, however, can be possible only on the outskirts of Lagos, and support from the government for certain infrastructure would also be needed.

MY: I think we should have such spaces that tell stories about who we are, where we come from and also show our aspiration. There should be space for performance art, photography and documentary films.

MF: I also think there should be spaces for visual arts which can tell the history of Nigeria. Stories of plural voices can also be told in one medium, in order to save time and money. No space can accommodate all art media at the same time.

MY: From what I have heard from you, you also agree that there should be more than one space. We started the conversation by experimenting with the idea of one space; if that is not enough, we create more spaces. If people participate in cultural production, there will always be expansion because the people own the space.

MF: Economic needs are always in competition with cultural needs. Sometimes the so called free spaces may not be as free as we think.

MY: If you offer one group the opportunity to speak about the economic, political and cultural benefits of the space, it will sway the opinion in favour of that group over the one that speaks only about the economic benefit.

MF: What role do you think the government can play in all these?

MY: I think the government should deregulate culture and embrace policies that are carved out by practitioners rather than the civil servants. Government should realise that culture belongs to the people and they should give it full support.
MF: As a practitioner in the field, what kind of support do you think government should give?

MY: The government should make available places like this for cultural purposes. So many houses that belong to the federal government are available and unoccupied after the move from Lagos to Abuja. This is a great opportunity.

MF: I think there are some spaces in our universities that could be used for cultural propaganda. Many universities are not responding to this, perhaps because the practitioners are not doing enough to partner with these universities.

MY: I think the challenge is that the superior academia in the university would terrorise this idea, and they would not like to see it as evolving philosophy. Not all artists receive formal education, so the universities seem to be a barrier for them to showcase their talents, and this is a type of an elitist structure, which offers no room for free thinking and ideas. We might not find it easy until we evolve to the stage where a professor believes that he can learn from a mechanic who has no formal educational background. We should move towards creating an open space where both the educated and the non-educated can have free access to it and express themselves openly.

MF: If there is an urgent need for research in line of art in terms of intellectual basis, what would you suggest?

MY: Understanding the role of language is very important in all visual art, I mean in terms of symbolism, and identifiers. It also includes the role we play in African art production and how it affects our relationship with other culture. Africa is a symbolic-based cultural landscape, so there should be more research on symbols and metaphors.

MF: I think our basic assumptions about reality affect our culture. What do we take reality to be? What is our world view about the nature of life, civilisation and man? Our understanding of these things is the art of our basic development. If someone comes to Africa for the first time and looks at us with the western binocular, then he is likely to see a city that is devastated in terms of representation and understanding. We can explain why we do what we do, from the days of slavery to the days of colonialism to the present time, by the symbolism of our artistic works. That is why I said we can have one cultural space that explains the whole gamut of our culture in whatever medium the artists prefer.

MY: But that will make us guilty of what we accuse other people of, putting one culture above the others. There is arrogance in saying other people must speak your language. As long as we want to say there is nothing that exists in our cultural space called art, our art is not in vacuum. It is necessary to accept he fact that there is a universal and global act at stake.
Reluctantly Loud
Interventions in the History of a Land Occupation
KONI BENSON, FAEZA MEYER

In memory of Domitila Barrios de Chungara, who died in 2012 before we could compare notes on intervening in history.¹

“This is the truth, we would go home if we could, we don’t know where home is. I have spoken to Council, to the Anti-Land Invasion Unit: if you want me to go home like you keep saying, please show me and I will go home, because I have no idea where home is.”

“I didn’t choose to become an activist, activism chose me.”

- Faeza Meyer

FAEZA MEYER WAS ONE OF A GROUP of backyard shack dwellers who, in May 2011, occupied land in Tafelsig in the township of Mitchells Plain, Cape Town.² From 5,000 people the group dwindled down to about 30 families who continued to defend their right to erect structures under which to sleep, since they have no where else to go, and the city has literally left them out in the cold – offering them accommodation in a dumping ground miles away from their families and support networks. Over an 18-month period they faced a series of raids and court cases and appeals up to the Constitutional Court level, which ranged from eviction granted, to where the judge actually reprimanded the city and demanded a plan for the homeless, to a final eviction and the joining of a neighbouring occupation in October 2012.

Cape Town is a city where the official waiting list for low-cost housing is more than 450,000 families long and the city delivers about 11,000 units a year and criminalises those who attempt to put up their own structures. The leader of the remaining occupiers, Faeza Meyer, has been keeping a diary of events since May 2011 – on scraps of paper, in notebooks, and in her head. Her diary tracks her journey to direct action and confrontation and the brutal response of the state. It documents the dynamics of a community under stress, captures her own politicisation of being homeless, and speaks to the reality facing an increasing number of people who will reluctantly become activists, confronting, and challenging the status quo, and the law, in attempts to survive.³

³. Youtube link to short WWMP documentary Faeza narrates about the initial occupation http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HGm5yNFgpHw&feature=related
In alliance with Koni Benson, a feminist historian and housing crisis ally, Faeza has been putting her writing and fleshing out raw thoughts onto the computer. Koni has been collecting newspaper articles, photos, flyers, letters and other resources that document this struggle. In the process we have been recording an ongoing conversation documenting Faeza’s reflections of the unfolding events for her both personally and politically, elaborating on many of her diary pages that are blank or in point form. As we talk, we type.

This piece presents edited snapshots from the diary of 545 days on the fields surrounding Kapteinsklip train station, the last stop on the Mitchell’s Plain line. For this chapter, in conversation, we devised a selection and editing strategy to co-produce a history that centralises diary entries, deciding to highlight life and politics of struggles for land and housing, above the chronological details of the unfolding occupation and to exclude the collaboration and conversations between us, which we present in detail elsewhere.

The contributions from the diary include Faeza’s reflections on her experiences, which speak to a reality facing increasing numbers of people everyday: a reality of growing homelessness on what has been called a planet of slums, sub-standard overcrowded sickness-inducing housing crisis, a criminalisation of people erecting shack in open spaces in South Africa, resulting in survival necessitating confronting the law. Living in hand-dug, grave-like trenches on empty fields of an urban township, it’s hard to imagine Kapteinsklip residents as a threat to anyone, but what else explains the response of the state? What justifies Anti-Land Invasion Police Units in post 1994 South Africa?

To Asef Bayat’s proposition of “the quiet encroachment of the ordinary” – individual non-collective survival practices of urban majorities in the Middle East that involve the relentless but “non-movement” direct occupation of resources of the elites to simply get by and that add up to a redefinition of land use, settlement patterns and resource flows in the city, it seems most accurate to describe Faeza as reluctantly and confidently loud. Her diary leads to questions of what is ordinary, what is encroachment, and what is heard or muffled beneath the normalisation of privatising basic shelter and accepting the urbanisation of inequality as inevitable and insurmountable.

We aim to give readers a collage of insights into the experiences of one woman’s story of a journey into the struggle to politicise land and housing in South Africa, but also a sense of the proportion of the housing crisis, the politics of space and footholds, and defensive and offensive attempts to challenge these dynamics. This, we think, speaks to both activists and academics searching for creative alliances, interested in the politics of presentation, and hungry for interventions that challenge the disappointments of democracy in South Africa and internationally.

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Alternatives to Waiting?

13 May 2011

People moved onto the Kapteinsklip field on 13 May 2011. I was on my way to hospital and I came across a meeting of a Backyard Dweller’s Association. They told us about this land invasion that was going to take place. They didn’t use those words, land invasion. They told us we were going to get plots. They gave out numbers, little numbers, with their stamp on it and charged people R10 for registering with them and gave us a plot. They had a book where they put our names and ID numbers, which they said would then secure the plots. They said we will get the plots that Friday, 13 May 2011. When we got there on Friday, we took all our stuff from where we were living – our self-built structure like a wendy house, and myself and my husband and my four kids we moved onto the land and they told us that the plot size was supposed to be 6 x 4 metres. The structures were up, people were starting to move in. People were happy. On our field, Kapteinsklip, there were plus-minus 1,000 people. Swartklip, the field next to us, had about 4,000 people. They were under the impression that they were going to get houses here. That Saturday, the atmosphere was wonderful. A happy environment. Everyone who used to live in backyards, and some homeless, everyone was going to get houses, everyone felt free.

We were living in a self-constructed shack in the backyard of my sister’s mother-in-law’s sister in Tafelsig in Mitchell’s Plain for three months. Before that we were living by my mother in Beacon Valley, also in Mitchell’s Plain, also in the backyard, but it was too full. We had my family of five, my mother, father, my brother and his pregnant girlfriend and my other brother and his wife and children. My whole life I had lived there and there had always been lodgers, as well as our family in those three rooms. That was why we were in the backyard. I’d lived there all my life since I was nine, and the house was too full. I am now 35.

Four months ago, I married Ebrahiem. Before I was married for 10 years. Seven years ago my husband disappeared. He was reported missing. The police say there is rumours that he was murdered in Retreat near the station at a shebeen by a gang. They heard him shout and people say they even saw him dead, but they are afraid to come forward and testify in court. We have never recovered his body. The week after he died, the shebeen people laid cement, but the police say there is not enough evidence.

The people from the housing department said I need to get the info from the detective to say I am in this situation with my four kids. Apparently they were supposed to send me a death certificate after six years, but still once a year I get a letter saying the search is still on. I went to register on the waiting list four years ago, but recently I found out my name is not on the list and they cannot find my details. They say I must start over.

I was supporting everybody; my four kids, my mother, my two brothers and their families. I had two jobs. I did catering, décor – I am very good at that. I used to make beads. I used to paint on bottles that I get and use for the tables and then sell that. I also had a full time job at the crèche, five days a week. On weekends, catering; at night the beading and painting and making little bags, just to support the family. When I got married then my brothers were working and I started my mother with a business, selling boerevors rolls every weekend. That brings in R2,000, then I could move on and do something for myself. I left the job at the crèche because the people at the crèche decided to make it a family business and, unfortunately I was not family. The catering was just when there was work and jobs, it still happened regularly because I believe I have a vision to decorate. I can come into a function and make miracles of nothing. I could decorate this office with just these papers and make it look like a party, with a party atmosphere.

Once we got married we moved into the backyard of my sister’s husband’s aunt. We paid R500 a month, R80 a month for electricity and R100 towards the water every third month if we had. They were very understanding people. It was just one lady with her daughter’s children living there.
The Unexpected

14 May 2011

Sunday morning when we woke up, outside was law enforcement, land invasion (unit), City police, and everybody was afraid. The atmosphere changed. People started to become scared. Everybody was looking for the Backyard Dwellers Association – they were the people who told us everything was going to be ok and we had come with all our possessions. There were a few contracted trucks standing ready. We believe the trucks had convicts from Poolsmoor on the trucks. We know it was convicts because one of the ladies started to cry because her brother was on the truck. He had a 10-year sentence, and he was there to break her house down. The convicts had no choice, they were not even allowed to speak to us.

The Backyard Dwellers Association told us to make a human chain and stand firm, that there was nothing they can do to us. But even with a human chain the law enforcement and the land invasion had shields and they moved us off the field. The people at Kapteinsklip decided not to use violence and move away. They then drove over all our things and broke and damaged everything; structures, crockery. They then had the convicts pick up all our canvas and materials and put it on the trucks, and then they left.

When the police disappeared, so did the Backyard Dwellers Association. People were standing there with no hope – hoping the Association will sort it out because they even pretended to speak to Helen Zille [Premier of the Western Cape Province] on the phone and say that these guys had no right to do what they were doing and that she would sort it out. They left a committee of marshals and the marshals told us we must put tires on the road and the station and they wanted us to burn the road and the station. We refused because we knew what was happening at Swartklip and we didn’t want the same violence, and so we said no. That was the Sunday.

Law enforcement came every day. The Monday. The Tuesday. Most people were left with little bits of plastic to sleep under or sleeping with someone else with what they had left. We started to share accommodation. I think at the time that was the best thing that could happen to us, because it drew us closer. It formed unity. We got to know everyone and their situation – why they were there and why they couldn’t go back. We started to form unity.

Go Home?

17 May 2011

On Tuesday 17 May the sheriff of the court said over a loud speaker that we were there illegally and we were not allowed to be there. They gave us an interdict and five minutes to vacate the land. Once again, they removed whatever we had. People lost their IDs, their papers, their dentures. There was a lot of things people lost while law enforcement and land invasion units removed our structures. That was when we realised that this is illegal, we were not going to get anything. Nobody was going to be able to help us with this. We had been manipulated into the situation we are in now. People started to retreat – the lucky ones who could go back to where they were at. The rest that stayed behind, about 120 people, had nowhere to go. Yes, we all tried to go back, but either there was someone else now living where we were living before, or the people didn’t want us back, or people had no structure to put up in someone’s yard, so they just stayed with us on the field.

When we left where we had been staying, the people there, the owner, also relied on the money we gave them and because we were gone they thought we were not coming back, so they put others there. It was not that they did not want us there, but they have to look at how they’re going to live.

They say even if you live under a trolley with a blanket over top of it, it is a structure. They say anywhere you are living is considered a structure, so they can take it. Interim interdict says that both parties stand apart ‘til the next court date. Our lawyers say they can remove structures, but not us. Are they working towards our death?
Punished for Being Poor?

17 May 2011

I am a person who keeps a personal diary, for my children one day. In the event I am not there, they can read and see what their mother was thinking and feeling. At the end of the day then it doesn’t leave what people say of their mother: they will have proof of what she did and what she did for them. That is why I keep a diary for myself. For the field, I keep a diary — I thought at least Cape Town should know we have been manipulated into this situation and this is what we are going to. I didn’t think it was fair. So somebody had to see the truth, to know the truth. To me, it is not in all these papers I took to the lawyer, and to anyone helping us. This is only the truth on these diary papers and I think everybody deserves to know the truth.

There are people who assume we want to be there, or we want to jump the queue, or we are criminals, or we want to aggravate the councilor to give us houses. There were people who’d say we know exactly what we are doing, or that we are unfit parents putting our children on a field. The truth is that we were manipulated into the situation and to Council or the City or government, this is punishment enough for us. We have been convicted to live on this field. How can you convict us twice? How can you take from people who already don’t have. No one came and asked why are you here? What happened? They didn’t look twice before taking our stuff. If they had known, I am sure this would not have happened.

I didn’t finish matric/high school. I am not educated enough. I don’t know law. I don’t know the everything about everything. Since I have been on the field I have learnt a lot. I learnt that if we were educated enough we would have known this cannot be legal. I have been reading the interim interdict and the law. The PIE [the Prevention of Illegal Eviction Act] clearly states that before you issue an interdict you must know the situation and why people are where they are at. The city never even considered asking us why we are on the land. It was wrong. And rude. They are convicting these people twice. They say there is a waiting list. Waiting list? Waiting on this field. And only now they are paying us attention.

This is the truth, we would go home if we could, but we don’t know where home is. I have spoken to Council, to the Anti-Land Invasion Unit: if you want me to go home like you keep saying, please show me and I will go home, because I have no idea where home is.

Unlearning

26 May 2011

Jumbo was working at Workers World Media and he lived in Tafelsig. He tried to bring unity among the Backyard Dwellers Association and the two camps, Swartklip and Kapteinsklip. He has all the patience in the world. He would come back to us, nightly and stand around the fire. Guys, we need unity. Yes they lied, but we need to see who is dividing us. I met Lenaise and Boeya because of him. At first we thought we should be little, and not cause problems, and wait until they sort us out. Then I realised why are we not inviting people? Why should we be quiet and small? We need to be big and be heard. So we went to Mitchell’s Plain Town Centre and invited people living in little boxes, begging and scarralling to come and live with us. At first they did not want to, because law enforcement is knocking our structures every day, but eventually they are coming.

Jumbo says he is going to the Eastern Cape and wants to introduce us to people like him. He took us to a forum at Community House. I could not understand or concentrate on a word. I was so hungry. Tupac, from Swartklip, took us on the train — he is this big rasta guy with a deep voice, he always looks angry. He was looking at us like you have no idea where you are going and what these people are talking about because they are much more smarter than you and you will have no idea. When I got there it was worse. What is these people talking about? The walls were full of words – neoliberalism and the state and local government and provincial and mayor and labour power and capitalist systems and where all these people fit in. I was sitting there thinking to myself I am never going to be able to know all this words and what they mean.
They refer to us as Animals

21 June 2011

Law enforcement, Metro Police, Anti-Land Invasion Unit. All the above parties was here today. They took our tents, plastics, and canvas. They demolished the underground and took the roof structure. When we asked for names they would not respond – badges were covered with black insulation tape.

Mr. Louw from Law Enforcement told us that Mr. David Norkea gave the order to break the tents our kids were in and removed all our stuff, even though we had no structures standing. According to the interdict, we are not allowed to put up structures, but allowed to be on the land. They traumatised our kids. We have a premature baby with us and a mother who had a cesarean section. Mr Norkea and the driver of the law enforcement bakkie was swearing and threatening to lock us up. Mr Norkea broke the small tent our mother and baby sleeps in. They referred to us as animals. The driver told one of our elders, Mr Frick Meyer, that he is going to remove his uniform and moer him and kick him in his poes. When we reported the situation to what appeared to be the senior officer among them, he reckoned we had no witnesses. Then they left.

Witnesses:
Faeza Meyer
Ebrahiem Fourie
Isgak Abrahams
Bianca Newing
Ricardo Arendse
Frick Meyer

Keep Your Bek

24 June, 2011

Where will we sleep tonight, or should I say, how will we sleep tonight? We have been here for 40 days, only through the grace of god.

9.30am. It is raining. Our structures are all down. We are sitting under a piece of plastic. Our beds and mattresses with blankets are covered with canvasses and more plastic. Law enforcement and land invasion arrives. Once again name tags and badges are covered with insulation tape. We recognise faces, but do not know their names. When we ask for their names, they swear at us. “Keep your bek” is the response we normally get (shut your mouth). They are becoming more aggressive by the day. They now tell us we should leave the field because nobody knows we are here. Our kids are afraid. They left us standing in the rain with no shelter. The driver of the bakkie arrives again swearing and threatening our people as usual. All we know about him is that he is from law enforcement. They take our things once again. I don’t know if what these people are doing is legal. If it is legal, why are their identities hidden?

Officer Loupsher from Law Enforcement is walking around laughing and swearing, instructing more guys to take more of our stuff. Mr Danny Christians from the Dept of Housing shows me a paper from the High Court that I just see but is not given to me. I notice a date on it 17th of the 6th month 2011. He said he is going to return to remove all our belongings including blankets, pots and bedding.

I gave a message to them while they were there, I was speaking to Councilor Anwar Adams on the phone. He said to me that Mr Albert, from Land Invasion, just spoke to him and said that they are not allowed to take our blankets and stuff. When I told them what he had said, they said Mr. Albert had nothing to do with what they are doing, that it is not his business. We are being insulted, sworn at and threatened. Our people are cold and afraid. When and where is this going to end?
The SAPS (South African Police) arrives 10.30pm with Neighborhood Watch. The ladies from the Neighborhood Watch judged us and insulted us, saying we are there on purpose, that we know what we are doing. They had everyone get out of their beds because the police claimed they had a complaint about us selling dagga (marijuana). They never searched for the dagga but they had us get out of our beds and did a move and touch – fingerprinting to check for criminal records. They found no dagga or criminals among us. J
Witness:
Mrs Meyer
Mr. Abrahams
Mr. Skipper
Mr. Jacobs
Mr. Fritz
Mr. Fourie
Mr. Pearce

Baptism

25 June, 2011
Today our premature baby is going to be baptised. We are hoping for a good day. We invited some people who are in the same struggle. People from Swartklip and from backyards.

We were worried because the Imam who was supposed to come did not, but then the Imam who came was the one who married the mother and father who happened to be crossing the field by coincidence and didn’t even know about the baby. That was sent from god. To have a baptism you need water, scissors, sugar. When they pray you cut two strands of the baby’s hair. Put it in the water and pray over it. You put a bit of sugar in the baby’s mouth. The Imam prays in the baby’s ears. Baby was given the name Imaan, which means Faith.

Everyone arrives including Mrs. M from the “Cape Party,” with the Backyard Dwellers Association. Mrs. M is also a community worker, and came with some other sponsors who brought us some soup and party packets for the kids. The SANZAF [South African National Zakah Fund] delivered 50 blankets and promised to bring us food.

Land Invasion (Anti-Land Invasion Unit) and Law Enforcement just drove by. They didn’t remove our things like they normally do. We think it’s because we had too much people visiting us. Kowthor from the Argus arrived and he did our story, the baptism of the baby.

I’m starting to notice that the police only come when it rains.

The same day I met Lenaize, the “spokesperson” for people occupying land across the way at Swartklip. She told me she wants us all to get on board together because after all we are fighting the same battle. She said a Lawyer for Human Rights would like to see us.

We had a very good day. The weather turned out very nice. We had lots of people. We could really see that people cared for us.
Robbed

1 July, 2011
Land Invasion
Law Enforcement
They arrived at 10.30am.
Taking all our wood and plastic, leaving only the small tent.
Once again, no name tags, no response when we asked for names either.

Last night someone from Law Enforcement came around and told us to break down our structures before 7am and he promised nothing will be taken.
Yet today, they still come and take our things.
Our people are being pushed into a corner and not allowed to move freely on the field while they move around us like we are ghosts.
It’s sad when they leave. It feels like we have been robbed once again. 26 days for us to go to court.
That means another 26 days of being robbed.
We have no shelter. No food. No water. And soon, no hope.
They even took the wood we use for fire.
What’s even more depressing is that they threw the holes our people live in closed with sand- not even giving us the opportunity to remove our clothes and our other belongings.

No Shows
2 July, 2011
A tiring day, a lot of stuff to do, so the day's writing is a little short.

No Land Invasion, only Law Enforcement driving past now and then. We got the news that Tupac from Swartklip is severely injured and the other people around him traumatised. They have been threatened with a gun. Lenaise called me to tell me what happened. Apparently four guys whose names are unknown are responsible for the damage/attack.

Today the new Interim Committee was supposed to have a meeting. Instead Nadia from the Backyard Dwellers Association phones me at 12.30 to say the meeting is cancelled. She mentions that four people, no names, had to go to a Janaza (funeral) and that we can't have the meeting without everyone being present.

We went to people we know for some food. Some people that we know, I sent them a sms and asked for a little sugar or little meillie meal. If I don't have air time we need to walk to every house to ask. Not begging, just ask, because we know the people.

I tried to round up the rest of the committee to verify what happened. With no air time, it took me some time to go from point A to Z to get to everyone to find out what is happening on the interim committee - the 10 people. People were either not home, not answering phones. That meeting never happened.

When I got home they showed me a Cape Cobra, still alive in a bottle alive, that was found on the field – a National Geographic hour. They put a mouse in the bottle and with one split second that mouse was dead.

When I come home we have to build our structure again. I sort everyone out and see that everyone's structures are ok, that there are enough plastics for everyone, that all the children are settled. That everyone has eaten. I sit with each house individually if they want to speak to me about problems – like any house, there are always problems.

We sit around the fire at night and listen to each other's sadness. Our family is growing day by day. How can law enforcement and land invasion take from people who has nothing?

Court

27 July, 2011
The 27th, the day everyone has been waiting for. Hoping our lawyer Sheldon would at least get the judge to say we are allowed to put up a structure, but sadly that didn't happen.

It has been 75 days. We survived the rain, cold, wind and daily harassment of the police. Our structures and other possessions have been confiscated and many nights we have been forced to sleep in the open. But our spirit of defiance remains strong and we are determined not to be moved.

At court things broke out of hand. Just like law enforcement other people pushed us into a corner. Our people started to become emotional. Tears were shed and fowl language were used.

I couldn't believe what I was seeing. The people who occupy the land, the ones the court case is actually about, were denied the right to speak in front of the court by the supporters of other organisations. When we marched to the Civic [Centre] after pushing and forcing they let me speak to the Mayor to explain our circumstances on the field. I even gave her the baby to show her the real people affected.

I really hope things are going to change for us. I hope the Mayor's smile was real.

“The Lady Who Made the Speech”
28 July, 2011
Today Mr David Norkea came around. He was looking for the lady who gave the nice speech to the Mayor the day before.

He asked me for names of the people living on the field. I told him we are about 11 families. He was being very nice compared to his normal rude and violent approach.

He asked me not to allow anyone else onto the field, because according to him, that will only cause problems for us. Our people now have hope again.

The Council at least knows we are here now. And maybe the Mayor Patricia DeLille has spoken to them and told them to leave us alone at least until the court case is resolved. Because after all it is inhuman to live under circumstances which we are being forced to live under.

I am happy for everyone, but at the same time I am afraid for them too. I am afraid of how everyone is going to feel and react if things don’t work out the way they expect it to. They have been through so much. And when I see the joy on their faces I wish this day could last forever.

Cape Mental Health

1 August, 2011
Last night Anti-Land Invasion Unit and law enforcement paid us a very unfriendly visit. They took our stuff as usual, but acting much more violent.

My husband and me had an appointment at Cape Mental Health at 8am today. Ebrahiem is at his lowest. He does not have access to his kids. His ex-wife is sending sms’s saying if you want to see them take me to court. You need to support them/me first. He had already been to Cape Mental Health. The social worker made me sick. I am not a psychologist or whatever she is, but I would have treated him better. She said, “don’t you think you need to get yourself a job?” Where? She phoned his ex-wife and after speaking to her over the phone she was a totally different person, like she had made up her mind that he is a bad person. He lashed out. So she said, well if you are going to threaten me I can’t help you anymore. We can always talk and I calmed him down. I could see the pain of not seeing his children. For all the time he was married to her he worked as a carer on night shift. So he was with them all the time. And then he was cut off. That is not easy for him. The social worker gave him a letter to take to the children’s court. They said they would make an arrangement to meet with the ex-wife and one of the lawyers. He kept saying he doesn’t want to take his children through this system because it is not good for them. So we begged her to see the children. She would not agree.

Applying to Picket

23 August, 2011

102 Days.

We went to the meeting at the Civic Centre. Our meeting with SAPS and the City didn’t go so well. They had all kinds of objections as to why we can’t have the picket. They claim it is unfair to SAPS to have to protect us for 24/7 and they didn’t have the resources. Myself and Ebrahiem and Mhlobo, the Chair of the Housing Assembly, attended this meeting. It was like we were not there. We were talking, but their minds were already made up. They claimed that there was never a 24/7 picket. Mhlobo told them about a 24/7 picket that he attended but they didn’t want to listen, they just said come back with a better plan.

Holding it all together
25 August, 2011
I emailed the Mayor to cancel picking up the memorandum. We went to the Civic Centre again to apply for a later date, and then they had a problem with the field we wanted to picket on. They said it was too close to the court. Mr David Norkea was there from Anti-Land Invasion Unit and Barnard Botha was the chair. Steve Haywood of Housing Dept was there and Antoinette, the city’s lawyers, was also there. Also some other reps of Metro Police.

My argument is they give us an application form and we put in the date, time, place and then they change everything so why fill it in? They should just tell us where when etc… They change the date, the time, they even want to change the venue of the picket. So we didn’t accept their suggestion. They said picket from 8am-4pm on some other piece of land because the first land we chose to picket on they said had an interdict and the second one they said was too close to the court.

I went to ILRIG and booked the hall for Saturday and phoned around to mobilise for the community meeting.

I also phoned my mom and my sister-in-law, who is having a baby. And I am concerned about her. She had pain for days and no baby and they kept sending her home so I called to find out if she was ok. She was sent to Mowbray Maternity Hospital.

Drafted a leaflet for Sat meeting at Yellowood Primary. I also called Mr. Sanosi, the principle of the school to set up a meeting for tomorrow.

I was exhausted. I got home to the field and people was complaining that the food was not distributed properly and there were accusations that someone was taking tins of food and selling them. I was so tired, I just couldn’t wait to go and sleep. I could see also that it was putting a lot of strain on Ebraheim and I was really worried about the pressure on him, so I take too much pressure on me so that he doesn’t take too much pressure on himself and I worry he will get sick. All my life I have been the one whose not supposed to get sick. But he gets sick. My parents look to me, so I would not let them down. I can’t get sick.

Court

30 August 2011
The courts were well protected as if we were criminals arriving – they had guns and tape and didn’t want to let people into the court. They called out the names of the people who should be inside – those on the list of people, which I was on. So I could go and listen firsthand to what the judge had to say. At first he seemed sincere and reasonable and saw that there is a real need. But by the end of the day, he proved to us that the system does not work for us.

Judge Nathan Erasmus acknowledged that it was wrong what was done against us and said that if we don’t want to go to Blikkiesdorp the city must look for another relocation area. But in his final judgment, he was so different. Everyone was crying. People from Swartklip were crying with people from Kapteinsklip. He had made us believe that the city was going to engage with us and sort out accommodation. I spoke to Sheldon that day and he said he would be in contact with them and then with us, but then he said Blikkiesdorp or nothing. I wasn’t going to go to Blikkiesdorp, so I am worried. Where will we go to then? There is pressure because some people want to go to Blikkiesdorp and others are saying that this will make the case of those of us staying weaker.

From Eviction to Kuilsriver Riots
29 September 2011
This morning we had to clear the field. Our lawyer, Sheldon, says he has no more resources to represent us. The city offered to move us to Kuilsriver where we were offered space, or thought we were, by someone the newspapers are calling an angel or good Samaritan.

Instead, we found ourselves in Kuilsriver being held hostage by an angry community. We had gone because Ibrahiem Abrahams had come to the field yesterday telling us he has a piece of land for us in Kuilsriver. He said we didn’t need to bring anything, he will put up Wendy Houses. So we moved, and the city moved us as it was eviction day.

When we got there, the community was really angry because four weeks before there was a fire and four children had died and their families, according to the community, were still without anywhere to go. They had been looking for the owner of this piece of land. They were really upset that we got this piece of land when their own community was struggling to get land to live on. It was a traumatising situation.

Donna and another girl from the Trauma Centre went through the whole day with us – they had heard about the eviction and had come to give their support. They came with us from Tafelsig to Kuilsriver. They were very supportive and kept checking will we be ok. The community was so angry, it was like we were held hostage and couldn’t get out by the gates. I had sent an sms to our lawyer, Sheldon, asking about how we can get transport to get out of there. He sent me a message saying that David Nortje who works for Anti-Land Invasion is trying to arrange transport back to Tafelsig for us. I tried to call David Nortje, because his car was now gone. He forwarded me the message he got from the city officials. It said “Hi sir as from our executive director Hans Smit no transport will be provided for the people” (from 0842314618 @17h05).

We eventually called Captain Brikkels from Mitchell’s Plain police station and he said not to worry they will fetch us. We also got Siraj, one of the occupiers, who had a bakkie – so he transported some of our stuff back. I called Mike and he came with two bakkies with his friends. There was a container on the land where we had put our stuff, and we left it there to be safe. Never to be seen again. Ibrahiem Abrahams just said he was so sorry and it wasn’t safe for us to be there and there is nothing he can do.

The Mitchell’s Plain police, SAPS, came with a bus and we put all the women and the children and the men waited for the bakkies. I was one of the last who left. I drove with Mike. The police bus dropped people on Baden Powel Drive and they had to walk through the bushes to come back to Kapteinsklip. Because we had been evicted and we knew we could not go back to the field, we ended up on the side walk.

Sleeping on the Sidewalk
1 October 2011
On the 29th, after Kuilsriver, we put our stuff down in a long line of mattresses on the side-walk back in Tafelsig near the Kapteinsklip train station and just slept there. In the morning some of the community walked past and cried seeing us sleeping there. We were just cold and had put our mattresses and blankets and then our plastics just over us to cover us from the cold. People were discussing where we should go. Some said let’s occupy another piece of land. Some said let’s live in the middle of the road and make some noise. While we were still thinking about it, law enforcement came to us with documents that said if we are not gone in 24 hours, we can be jailed up to five years. So after two nights on the sidewalk we moved onto the land by the railway at Kapteinsklip, just across from where we had been.

Writing as Relief
I write and it’s like when you read a book and you hear the story and you respond – no don’t do that, or don’t give up, or this doesn’t make sense, it is not right, you can’t give up. So I read it like that, like it is not mine, like it is somebody else’s story. So I read it and give advice and say, I wouldn’t do that or that is not worth it. I then think of a good friend, as if it is their story. And I can then say, no my friend go that way instead. And that really helps me a lot – to re-read what I write.

If I am crying and it feels sore, I don’t try and be brave, I just say I don’t like this, or I hate that, or I am sick of this, or I am giving up. Then I put the book down. I go get coffee. I come back and I re-read it like it is my best friend. And I write over top of all of it. It will be ok, or she doesn’t really hate you, or so and so is confused. And it works for me. That best friend in me, helps me. Otherwise long ago I would have give up. I think that is what most of us need – the best friend within. For me, I hear that voice when I read what I wrote and write back to that voice, talk to that voice, with a different perspective.

Hunger, Anger, & Eid

7 Nov 2011

Yesterday we decided we wanted to have Eid on the field. Normally everyone would go to their families and celebrate it there. The minority on the field are Muslim. We decided we wanted to share it with everyone else on the field. So everyone, Christians, Muslims, all put together what we had and I got up at 5am and started to make food with Rushana. We went to Aunty Elizabeth’s house and cooked there. Biriyani and chicken and potato and pudding and Aunty Patricia brought us some cake. We dressed up all the children. All the Christian children were also dressed up and they were confused – is it Christmas? It was nice.

For one day at least there were no fights and no arguments. Everybody was just nice to each other and having fun. I think it was because everyone had something to eat that day. A lot of the time when there are arguments we don’t realise people are hungry. Being hungry can make you hungry, and when your children are hungry, you can be really angry. But that day I saw it. I was sitting trying to figure out what is the difference today than the other days. The difference was that that day everybody had something eat. A lot of times I think people are too shy to ask. Most days the kids all come by me and whenever we eat I make sure the kids all get something to eat. The parents have arguments. I realised what food can do. How a hungry person can react with their stomachs and not their brains. I must make it my duty to make sure everybody has something to eat, no matter how little. I have started to monitor people just to see if they have eaten. I will go around and ask what food they are going to make. I realised a lot of people go without food because they are too shy to say they have no food. I think, when I am not there, children go to sleep without food!

It was a nice day. Everybody was there. Everything was nice.
8 Nov 2011

I went to bed about 9pm last night. Boeta Suleiman and Boeta Ali were the last people to sit by the fire. Our fire is in the middle. All the shacks are built in a circle and whomever cooks has control and can watch the children by the fire. Enid came to ask me for a candle. She plaited her daughter, Stacy’s, hair halfway and then her candle went out and she didn’t have enough light for her to plait the other side. I didn’t have either. I had only a small piece of candle. So she decided they would sleep and do it in the morning.

About 1 o’clock in the morning I woke up to shouts and screaming and banging on the door. Strangely to me if there is anything on that field, I am a light sleeper, I hear any noise or anything that happens. That night I did not hear a thing. There were five people knocking and I didn’t wake up. There was a fire. When I went out, I saw Enid’s shack was on fire. I was so dumbstruck, standing there as everyone was running around. It struck me, they did not have a candle, so how did it happen? Ebrahiem and others were running like crazy and the fire, it looked like it had hands, reaching for the shacks next to it, spreading. The only thing I told Ebrahiem to take was my bag with my papers in it and my Koran. The only two things I grabbed. Then I realised I had no shoes and just a night gown. No pants. So Ebraheim ran back in. The plastic on my shack was melting. I said, don’t worry, leave it, your life is worth much more. People were trying to save stuff and break shacks down. I was standing there, just counting the children. People were talking to me and I was not responding.

This guy with blue jeans and a black hooded top came up to me and asked for a cigarette. I just looked at him. At the time it was all crazy. I thought I don’t know you and why are you here in the middle of the night, but I don’t have time for that now. In the morning, we all thought, this guy doesn’t belong there. When the fire started, he was sitting there on the stairs. If you sit there and a fire starts, you don’t sit and look at the fire, you tell people, get up, get out.

The railway police were there and we asked the security to phone the ambulance and the fire brigade. One of the girls, Enid’s young daughter we call Poppy, her name is Siara, she came out of the shack and her clothes were on fire. I nearly went crazy. They rolled her in the sand and the fire went out. Her father’s arm was burnt. It looked terrible, first degree burns. I could see right to his bone. Eventually the fire brigade and the ambulance arrived and they hosed down the fire and what was strange and even one of the fire brigade guy said, the fire spread and went out and continued in one place. He was struggling to kill that fire. They left and the ambulance was there. Not one of them came and asked are you ok, did anyone get hurt? The ambulance people were standing there laughing and they left. There was no shelter, it was raining and we had to go under pieces of plastic. That broke down a lot of people’s spirit.

In the morning, Stacey, Enid’s daughter, wet her bed and dirtied her pants. She is 10 years old. That is not normal for a 10 year old. That realised our people were traumatised from what happened. Ebrahiem and Boeta Suleiman had tears. During the whole situation I felt I had to be the stronger one. I don’t know if I make everyone feel ok or if I can make them feel ok, but at least I can try. I called Donna from the Trauma Centre and asked them to come out and speak to the people. She came out and she took the names of the children and how many people. Later in the day she sent a message that she got some clothing and wanted to organise a day like a workshop to get everyone there to talk about what happened.

Seeing the Housing Problem instead of Seeing Us as the Problem
13 December, 2011

In the morning everybody was worried about what was going to happen because we finally got the opportunity to put up the structures we had lived in for a little bit more than a month. So we were worried. If we were evicted what would we do? Before we went to court we spoke about it a little bit and decided if we were to be evicted we would go to another piece of land.

The SAPS police bus came to fetch us and escorted us to the court. When we got there I phoned William Fisher, our advocate. He said he would meet us in front of the court. When he got there he was not very enthusiastic. He said that the judge that we are going to have today, she used to be a lawyer for the City. So it was not very likely that she would rule in our favour. He also told us not to worry about it, that we must just relax and see what happens in court throughout the day.

According to us we were back in court because the previous judge didn’t really listen to the case he just wanted to know about the safety of the children and the fence by the railway. So we thought we were there to explain is it safe for the kids. But this judge wanted to know only, is there alternative accommodation for the people? The city’s lawyer said he didn’t have any instructions on that. The judge said go back, take a break, get instructions from the city, and come back after lunch. When we got back after lunch, his response was that there is no other alternative accommodation, that Blikkiesdorp was full and that it was offered to us but we didn’t want it, so he feels we should just be evicted.

The judge said the city cannot run away from their responsibilities. Her exact words: “these are human beings, waiting for houses between 17-30 years and the city must take its responsibility for that.” The Railways advocate was very confusing to me. Most of the time he got up and said something that was in our favour. Saying, it’s safe there for the kids, that they have closed up the holes in the fence, which they did, that we were a safe enough distance from the railway and that the Prasa is not in a hurry to have us removed and that it is entirely up to the city when they can sort us out.

Two weeks ago they cut off the water and closed the toilets. Our advocate mentioned it at court and then the judge said it is inhuman and that he must send Prasa a letter telling them to turn on the water and give us permission to use the toilet again.

The judge previously asked who is Ricado Arendse and is he still on the field? In the court papers there is a problem and it causes divisions on the field because not everybody’s names are on that paper. The judge wanted to know who is representing Ricardo because his name is not on the court papers. William said he is representing the 16 respondents “and others”whose names are not on there. Even that caused division because people’s names were not on the list. Even my name was not on. Because Isgak put only the names of the people he wanted on. I told people not to worry because the document did say “and others”.

We left there and everyone was so relieved. At least they would have a roof over their heads for Christmas and not be homeless. We waited for the bus. I had to send Mr. Jordaan, from the police, to come and get us and eventually he came with the bus and we went back to the field. More than other days people were cold and hungry because it was raining and we were wet but people were satisfied because of the outcome of the court. They were satisfied that we could stay longer.

But I was satisfied because the housing issue had been opened. All this time it has been about us and jumping the queue and invading illegally, but now finally there is a judge that sees it is about housing and the city has no plan. The real problem is them, but they say we are a problem. Even occupiers see themselves as a problem. Now, slowly, the blame is shifting to the city and the housing problem. So for me personally I wanted that problem to be opened up in court. No other judge saw that as a problem – they saw us a problem. Now they see it is not us but the city has a problem. People die waiting on the list. I don’t even think there is a list. Now the city is under pressure. They have no choice but to come up and say what is the plan. According to the city’s advocate there are two different types of housing each with a different plan and both have lists. Is there two lists then? He says there are two plans and you have to wait in the queue. So I am a little bit excited about the next court date because I want to hear what is this plan, because I don’t believe they have a plan.

Racism and Activism
Before occupying I think I was silently, deep down an activist. If my mother had the opportunity to talk to you she would say I should be rich today because I have so many talents, but I give everything away and make other people’s problems my problems. I never get to the limit to say, this is all I can do. I want to help more. I was the problem child. I can’t say, I will wait and let you be hungry today and solve it tomorrow. I won’t sleep. I don’t know where to draw the line. I am 36 years old and when I became an active activist, it felt like me being me, the me I wanted to be the whole time. I could never be that me, because the so called Coloureds have a tradition of how you are supposed to look at things. I have always been the one to be on the outline to say this isn’t right, to look things through. They will agree it is not right, but they say it is the way it is. There was a time I thought I was crazy and the only one looking at the world in this way. Then I found that there is a whole other world out there who looks at things the way I do. It is tradition for us as so-called Coloureds to think and look at things in a certain way and accept things.

I want to put down my history to put words, to show others, I have been through that, and maybe it can help you to get out. Our so-called Coloured people have the same problem, when we are in that oppressed problem, it is so close to home we don’t see it. The problem is we were taught not to care. It doesn’t matter, you are supposed to wait on the waiting list, or live in your mother’s backyard. You are supposed to. The saying we have is “jy moet eerste kruip” – you must crawl first before you get up to walk. Or, “7swaar jare”, which is the seven difficult years in a marriage first. We adapted to that. It’s as if it is ok and you have to go through that. We don’t have to go through all that! I have sat down and removed colour, race, sex, everything to come to an understanding of what a human being is and why things should be done different for males or females or coloured or black or white people. If you strip all that colour and race we are all human being and we should all be living according to the rules of the country. It should apply to all of us. And at the moment it is not applying to all of us. If it doesn’t apply to the people in my community or to the working class, then it doesn’t apply to me yet.

Inheritance

3 January 2012

I went to Mowbray Maternity Hospital to fetch Charney Paulse and her baby because they did not want to give her baby to her. She had let me know the day before that they found dagga in the baby’s system and they would not give the baby to her. She is rasta and says smoking dagga is her religion. So I had to go see the social worker and had a discussion about the responsibility to make sure the mother looks after the baby and if she doesn’t I have to phone the social workers and tell them. My role is to assist and make sure the mother looks after the child, Kyle, properly. She is doing ok. I got to name the baby. Her daughter’s name is Kelly. She is like our daughter. She is withdrawn, been through a lot, at two years old. It doesn’t matter what you offer her, she will not speak. It is like she is on mute when someone tries to have a conversation with her. She sleeps by me. She won’t go with her mother to sleep by a friend. She just wants to stay. She thinks I am her mother. So I named her brother Kyle. Kelly is traumatised but very clever. One time when I was at the Globalisation School, the mother went somewhere and left her with someone. and then that lady thought she was with the mother when the mother got back, but the mother thought she was with that lady. It was not til the next day they saw her by herself under a soaking mattress. The whole night, by herself. She is two! It breaks my heart to think of it.

There is an eight year old on the field now who has never been to school. Eight years old! The mother was on drugs and the father was abusing her. For six months before we got to the field, they were living in the bushes. The father broke both the mothers legs in those bushes and she had to crawl out. So we chased the father away. They left in November, and came back in January. Then he came back. He is one of those guys who appears so nice. Just sitting there chatting. So I asked Ebraheim to build an extension right next to us so she stays there. Then the other day the father, he made her pulled down her pants to check if she had slept with another guy while he had gone to fetch water. Right there, in front of the children.
told him to pack up and leave before I called the cops. All the women on the field said this is not going to happen, you must leave. The men, we excluded from it, because when men argue, it always gets to fights. The mother is now back on drugs. She spent the money she was paid in January, and did drugs with people on the field! And she says she has no money for the kid for school. I gave them the opportunity to live there, and I heard what she went through. The mother was taught to live this way. She is very young. The father was so possessive because he was on drugs. He would bath her, make her lie naked until he dressed her, brushed her hair. The kids are very withdrawn, just going where their mother is, never playing with other children. They know the bushes like the back of their hands. The older child told the police that her mother stole a DVD. I don’t know how it worked, because the mother did not steal it. She was taught to be older and bigger than her mother. She had more freedom than her mother. She is competing with her mother as well. When her father gets there she would cry and run forward, then waiting for the mother to come, then take a few more steps, waiting for the mother, staring at the father, waiting for him to come forward. And she tells the father stories that doesn’t make sense. The mother wanted to take her to school on Monday, but the child put up a performance, and left with the father. Then the father just dropped the child with other people. It was only at night that the people called to say the child was with them, when it was too late to go get the child. Even I was too afraid to go walk the field at night. She really needs help. The things she says when no one is listening. That child is too much of an adult. It is dangerous. She swears at her mother. And walks away like it is ok. The ugliest words. And when the father is there the mother can’t do anything to her. When the father is there she has a little bit of control over her children. She told me the only thing she wants is to have control over her kids. When he is there, he chooses her clothes, she must just lie there. He makes the food. He built them a house with no windows and when she looks out the door he wants to know who she is looking at. Scary. And I think my life is difficult! He doesn’t live there anymore but he visits. We have built her an extension and closed it at the back and made it so that if he wants to get to her he has to come in via us. As long as I am there and can see him I allow him to see the children. He is not a bad person. In a sick way, he takes care of them. In his mind he thinks it is right. Ebrahiem said to him when he was crying when we chased him away that I too was at the same place you are and nothing will come right for you until you stop using drugs. If she is in school then I can go and call social services because the school will know the right way to handle it.

Despondent

10 February 2012

I am in a bad mood today.

I really don’t know anymore. Today is one of those days that inspires me to pack up my bag and leave. For nine... almost 10 long months I have been through so much, but things just seem to get worse. It has gotten to a point for me where I need to make a personal choice. I need to decide what is important and if the struggle is effecting my children. I spoke to Marius, our lawyer, today. He had no good news. In fact, he didn’t even have bad news. Nothing. We have 12 days left before it’s Judgment Day. No one is doing anything about that. The division on the field doesn’t even allow us to do anything. The closer it gets to the eviction the more difficult it is for people on the field to communicate.

I am sitting on my bed with Mervin, a five-year-old boy, whose mother had to go work with a newborn baby. She does domestic work in Tafelsig. Baby was two days old and she went back to work!

Writing is the thing that kept my sanity. I said to Ebrahiem I feel I am slipping into depression. That the children are depressing me. I look at Winston and I can’t look at him. His stepfather killed his mother in front of him when he was nine, and up to today he can’t find his sisters – he was 11 living under a bridge, he had to leave his two sisters so he could go and find work and get money from other people washing windows in Cape Town. They were gone when he came back, they were not where he left them in Knysna. Yet he is active today. Puts up a structure in a few minutes. I look at him. He has no family. Nobody. He will tell people I am his mother. He is plus-minus 2.5. He is still looking for his sisters.

If anything that happens, he looks to me. He is not someone who can communicate and get things...
across properly. I think he is from suffering a complex and low esteem. He won’t look people in the face. But he is a gentleman. Neat and tidy. Clever. Just he didn’t finish his education. People like him in times like that, I don’t want around me. I don’t want to see them. I can’t look at him. Because I think what will happen if we get evicted and go our own separate ways. What will happen to Winston? The writing helped me a lot. Putting my emotions on paper was like talking to someone else. Then I have the opportunity to read it and say, oh this is what is happening to my best friend. That is how I see my diary. And I think, what would I do to fix this for my best friend, for someone else? So I say the writing, my diary, kept me sane and going.

Suicide

12 February, 2012
8.18am: I just woke up. Whitney Houston died this morning, past 4 SA time. 3.55 California time, age 48. Her daughter was not allowed to see her. That was the first thing I heard on the radio. I was not struck at her death, but more struck at the fact that her daughter was not allowed to see her. It put me on the spot where my own daughter, Nadia, is concerned. It makes me think how short time is. Then I wonder if this is worth losing time with her, because every moment with her is precious to me.

10.32am: Suddenly the sadness of being evicted soon and not knowing what’s next, kicks in all over again.

I basically dragged through the day up until 4pm.

4pm: Leon tried to commit suicide again at 4pm. The pressures is getting to some of the people around me.

He took a piece of wire and tied it onto a piece of pole in his structure and put it around his neck. He had locked his door already. One of the other rastas there, Francois, he said he just had a feeling that something wasn’t right with Leon. He looked through a little hole in the structure and he saw Leon standing on the bed with a rope around his neck. So he broke the door down. I could not get up and go to him. I could just not face him. Koni, I felt bad and guilty. But for the place I was emotionally, I could just not handle it. Previously he wanted to cut himself with a blade. I could just not be there with him at the time. Ebrahiem went and spoke to him and got him to change his mind. Leon was crying saying that he doesn’t have anywhere to go. He was explaining how his mother treats him bad. He is 45 years old or something.

9.20pm: I got into bed, listening to the radio. We had no food this morning.

9.33pm: Someone tried to burn Ricardo and Bianca’s place down, my next door neighbour. Someone opened his window and threw in a burning piece of cloth.

I don’t know why. Why would someone do something like that? It is sick. A few weeks ago someone tried to burn my place, and then it was Ricardo. Sitting here now, a few weeks later, putting this down on the computer, I don’t know how I got through that time. There was no food. Ricardo’s fire. Leon’s suicide. There was so much going on in my head and I just could not clear it because one thing after the other was happening to me.

Writing My History is Keeping Me Alive
16 Feb 2012

I feel despondent. My husband almost went to jail for child abuse that he did not commit – he was confronting the man next door who is abusing his kids. Only when they took the kid to the hospital, the Dr saw it was not that the kid was hit across the nose like the father said, it was that the father had stuck four sponges up the kids nose, and the kid told the Dr it was his father who did that. The man is crazy. He walks around with a sim card in his ear, and then puts the sim card down on the table and tells his wife, he can hear everything she says when he is not there, because of the sim card he puts in his ear. He’s on drugs. And my husband almost went to jail because of him! I got so angry with the police. They say talk about abuse, open up, and then when we call them, they don’t come. I have called them on four occasions. Yesterday was the first time they came, and these kids are being abused right there. The man is mad and I am risking my family and the police don’t come.

I don’t want to be a part of this system that we have to live by. I don’t want to turn a blind eye. It is the same system that tells us to speak out. Say something, they say. Stop child abuse! Stop woman abuse! Children must be seen not hurt! Who are we trying to fool? Who are they trying to fool? I saw, I reported, but the system failed again, as usual, because we are poor.

A friend of mine, Rene, even called a social worker. She couldn’t handle seeing what these kids have to go through every day of their lives. The social worker said they would come a month ago, but they didn’t.

I can pack up and live in a small space by my mom, have my kids near me. But what will happen to the kids on the field?

I am slipping into depression. Ebrahiem strangely is now encouraging me instead of the other way round.

The advocate’s secretary said I must go see him at court. I got myself all the way there only to not find him and then the secretary said go find him in the courts in Belville. We have six days left to appeal because the court granted our eviction.

And when I go back home and tell people on the field they make it seem like I am the one who is negative.

What is the use to have a house if my kids will be without a mother or father? It makes me sick and sad and confused. Maybe I just need to sleep. I was up since four something. The rastas were making noise. I was on the road the whole day yesterday. To Cape Town to ILRIG [International Labour and Research Information Group] to Belville, only to sit there and find out the advocate is not coming. Then I had to go all the way home. I was supposed to go to his office this morn but his secretary is telling me he is not there. It is urgent, and yet it won’t happen today.

And I cant go to the field to tell people the reality. They want to hear we are appealing. I can’t keep putting ointment on wounds that I can’t heal. I can’t keep doing that. I can’t tell people things will be ok if it won’t be ok.

They make it so hard for me, but I still want to be there.

I am in the middle of deciding – do I pack up and leave or do I just take the pressure. That sounds selfish. But that is how I feel.

I know I will get through this. But how will I get through it? Who will I consider? My kids, or the other kids on the field? They both need me. My kids are more privileged. They are with my mother. They have food and water and go to school. A so-called normal life. The kids on the field, there is not a hint of normal. Nothing is normal for them. They only hear foul language and people attacking each other and they sometimes have breakfast and sometimes have lunch and sometimes have supper. How can I turn my back on them? I don’t see a way out.

Yesterday I had to just put bread outside the door and lock the door. Because all the kids come to me. And that is not me, to lock them out. Yesterday I just didn’t feel like being there with them. That tells me something about me and what is happening to me. The situation is changing who I am. I wanted to be in a closed environment and not see or speak or hear anyone. I can’t get to a conclusion, about what I really want to do because I see all the weights they all carry. But what is on my side. I wish I could just scoop all the children up and put them somewhere safe until I am sorted out and figure out what I am going to do. The phone rings and I panic – what did I forget?

I have not seen my own kids in two weeks. But I call them and they understand. My daughter is
proud of me, asking how the kids on the field are. My baby is only four years old and every time I see him he cries. Is it worth it for me to lose time with my kids that I will never be able to catch up to, never, it’s gone. It’s just a sad world. I don’t know.

It started off that I was there for the rights of my children. Taking a stand. So that I could get a house for my kids. After it went sour, I realised I had to fight for this or it will never happen. So it was ok to go on, to leave them and fight. I don’t know if it’s becoming too much or if this is where it is supposed to end. It took me 10 years to decide to give up on my marriage. Ten full years to decide I have had enough. I’m not a person to give up. Somehow I need to convince myself that this is enough for now, because I have been through too much. I can feel my body is too much. I sweat. I forget. I don’t sleep or eat. Concentrating on my history and writing, helps. I have my husband there and I can speak to him, but his situation, I can’t put more pressure on him. And he feels what I feel, so I have to keep it to me, because if he feels it he might slip into depression. Writing helps me so much. It’s like a conversation with me about me. Sometimes I come to solutions. My history keeps me alive, thanks to you. It makes me sit down and think, talk, and write. I find it amazing – it’s like I didn’t write the words, they come out, I don’t know what I will write next. Another idea just comes. So when they say write an article for a newspaper, I say no, I can’t write, because I don’t know how I do it. For me it is writing to figure it out. So maybe I must write about how I feel and decide from there. I need to take a stand for me and my family and ask is this what I still need to do or not.

I am finding myself in politics. I don’t know if this is the stage you all go through. I am so emotional at times and I don’t know why. I can’t say it’s about this one thing, this boy or his sister or his brother. Or am I emotional for his mother and father because they have gone through pressures in life. A year or two ago I could have taken something and hit the father. But now I am seeing him as a working class member, and know he wasn’t born like that – nobody is born bad. So I look at them and things around us and feel I am not making a change. It doesn’t feel to me I am making a difference if I can’t make a difference in a child’s life, I don’t know what I am doing anymore. I have been reading Marx and Lenin and I find myself thinking, this is just the beginning of reading this, but the world has become smaller to me – I end up talking politics to my children, my parents, everyone on the field. Every conversation I have ends up explaining why things are the way they are. There is no normal conversation anymore. But who knows what normal is? Maybe there is no normal. I used to be able to just write, but now I am looking for that one word that makes such a difference in a line or a paragraph. I am writing the history now to look back and say I thought this way a year ago, and this is how things change when you become an activist. This is how you think at first, and there are stages you go through. I know what I am going through now is a stage. I wake up in the morning, and I never have enough time. The whole 24 hours in a day is too little. I sit up at night and write. I write it and I try and make sense of it afterwards, so to me I wrote this and then try and make sense of what I just wrote and it does make sense. I have learnt to just write what I feel, however mixed up it feels and then afterwards I make some sense of it.

Raeed’s Birthday

17 February 2012

It was my baby’s birthday, Raeed. Five years old. I knew that his grandmother and his aunts have decided to give him a little party, on the 18th . Before I went there I first phoned him to say Happy Birthday and to tell him I was on my way. I was worried he woke up and his mother wasn’t there on his birthday. I just phoned to tell him not to worry and that I am on my way. I asked him what he wants for his birthday and he says a Play Station III and a Blackberry. That made me smile again. With everything that is happening. It just made me laugh. I could not wait to get to him.

Nine Months Later
An activist academic in India, Jai Sen, is writing a book on new movements, new politics. Is this struggle new, or am I new to this old struggle?

I’m a 35-year-old female who was born and raised in Cape Town, the Mother City of South Africa. I spent the whole of my 35 years here. Yet I knew nothing. As I’m writing this I have come to realise I feel more and more each day that I know nothing about Cape Town and even less about South Africa.

That made me realise that I’ve been in struggle all my life. What’s weird about the situation is that the information I have now has been available to me, but it always felt OK to not know.

Nine months ago I would’ve said I am a Coloured. Five months ago I would’ve said I’m a “so-called Coloured”. Today I feel offended that there is a Colour pasted to my life because I am a human being with red blood running through my veins, like any other person no matter what the colour of my skin.

For nine months I have been trying to build the organisation with the people in the community where I’m from. Because my own perception is that building organisation and uniting with other organisations is the only way to fight any struggle.

It has been a long nine months for me. Building an organisation isn’t as easy as I thought it would be. I’ve seen and learnt a lot and been through even more. Fires, dead bodies, evictions, my human rights violated, and accused of things I would never dream of doing.

Sometimes the way I live, the strength and courage that I have surprises me too. I have always been a people’s person. I have all types of friends. Throughout my life things wasn’t always easy and that would make me question myself as a person. I would always do my best to help anyone, especially when it concerns children or the elderly – they are the joys of this world to me. When things would go wrong no matter how big or small I would always sit back and think what I could’ve done differently or how I could be responsible for the other persons actions.

Like I said before it was always OK for me to not know. Not to know that mine and the future of my children and loved ones are being controlled by a system way bigger than us. Not to know what my Constitutional rights is as a South African citizen. Yet, like I said before it was ok not to know. OK because according to me, I knew what I was suppose to know, and as the saying goes, “life is what you make of it”. Little did I know at that time life was what the system “capitalist” decides to make of it for me.

Finding that out wasn’t easy or safe in my case. Waking up in the middle of the night with my shack on fire while I’m sleeping SCARES the living daylights out of me, but turning around now wouldn’t be giving up anymore, it would mean me selling my soul.

I look around now and it saddens me to think that the majority of the population in my community doesn’t know or just like me before, thinks it’s OK to not know.

For nine months I have bent over backwards to find out more so that firstly, I could know. Then I could let others know. That it’s not OK to not know, and only when you KNOW, life can be what you make of it.

For me there wasn’t much to know about housing. I knew that someday I would want one of my own to raise my children and live the happily-ever-after life. The very picture, the same system who decides whether or not I’m human enough to get what is rightfully mine paints for me as OK.

Like any other respectable citizen I had faith in the system and put myself on the council’s waiting list; happy that I was on a list that would ensure, someday, my children would have their own space, because I was sure I would never be able to buy one. Unfortunately I didn’t have the education that would get me the job I needed to earn enough.

I would dream about getting that perfect job so that I could open up a savings account and save enough to buy the house of my dreams, but that would always just be a dream.

Then the opportunity arrives, the rumours spread that there would be land made available for those who never had a house before. Excitement took over my thoughts. I couldn’t wait to be on my own. To be an owner of a piece of land that I could call home.

Things didn’t work out the way we were told in meetings and the leadership simply did a disappearing act when Anti-Land Invasion Unit and the Law Enforcement stepped in to enforce the laws on us.
That was the moment of truth for me. In all my confusion I decided to find out for myself where I legally stand. Because I was now homeless and lost most of the little I had.

Help came from all over. Everyone was sending me in different directions and that brought on even more confusion.

The first time I was taken to ILRIG I met Michael Blake. If ever I was confused it got even worse. It sounded like the comrades were speaking a language I would never understand.

Michael is a wonderful teacher. He introduced me to new things and new people like Koni, and together with the staff of ILRIG and Worker’s World Media I began to see light at the end of the tunnel. Don’t get me wrong, the light is faint, but at least I see it now.

From what I have learnt and experienced this far, there’s not much new in our immediate struggle, most of what we are going through and experiencing had already happened to others, even worse.

Learning from all the other struggles and comparing it to ours taught me a lot. I could learn from the mistakes others had made. To always put me ahead of where I’m supposed to be.

One thing I think that is different and could help others in struggle is to document the everyday struggle I’m in and maybe someday someone can learn from my experiences and mistakes.

I never thought my diary would be useful to anyone but me, but now that I think about it while I answer the questions, I am seeing what Koni said, that it will be useful for me, but also for movements and people too.

Aching Belly

28 February 2012

I hardly slept. I had stomach cramps again the whole of last night. It was terrible. The pain was unbearable. There was also lots of movement outside on the field during the night and that kept me awake as well. I have to go to a meeting today at 10am at the library at Kilimanjaro, in Tafelsig. I am afraid of walking there. My stomach is so sore and I go to the toilet every few minutes.

When I have to use the toilet every few minutes or hours, I use a bucket and then Ebrahiem goes and empties it and washes it. It makes me so sad and I don’t even want to look at my own stuff. Sitting there on a bucket. And Ebrahiem is so brave. He goes and takes it to the bushes and washes it out and it’s always there for me. He does that even in the middle of the night.

I arrived at the meeting safely.

Baby Corpse in a Pick ‘n Pay bag

11 March 2012, Sunday

7am. I got a very disturbing call from Charney. She was crying over the phone. She told me that the baby doesn’t want to wake up. He is two-and-half-months old. I told her to get dressed and take him to hospital immediately and that I would meet her there. I told Ebrahiem what she had told me and within minutes we were both dressed and on our way out. I phoned Charney on the way there to check if the baby was ok. Unfortunately she said he wasn’t breathing anymore and the ambulance was on its way. So I had to go to the shack in the backyard of the house where she was, just across the field we occupy. Babies name was Kyle and then she changed it to Ishmael when she got involved with a Muslim boyfriend. We took a taxi to MP Town Centre, the Tafelsig taxi was still empty when we got there and we knew it would take time for the taxi to fill up before it would go. We decided not to wait, and to run there. I was so worried, I wanted to get there, we were running all the way there. When we finally arrived, the police was there and there was yellow tape like it was a crime scene in front of her shack door. Ishmail was lying on the bed. When I saw Charney, she broke out crying and I knew then that I would have to be strong for her and carry her.

The police told me not to enter the shack, but I did anyway. I picked him up. He was still a little warm. He was not cold and stiff like a dead body should be, according to me. I lifted up his sweater. He
had a striped blue and red sweater on. He had no kimby (diaper) on. I put my head against his chest, hoping I would hear his heartbeat. But nothing. The only thing I could hear was my own heartbeat, because I was running and my breathing was very loud too. Ebrahiem was sitting on his knees on the bed, looking at Ishmael, and that worried me even more. I now wanted to be strong for him too. He was very attached to the baby.

The police doesn’t even know what it is to take a stethoscope, how can he declare it dead like it is a crime scene and didn’t let the mother in? What more stress can you go through? I just ran and went in, I didn’t listen to the police officer. I went through the tape, lifted his sweater, tried to listen to his chest, but my heart was beating so fast and loud I could not hear anything. Ebrahiem was crying on his knees. I was so angry with the police. Where is the ambulance? What gives the police the right to tape it up and declare the child dead?

Charney told me she had breast-fed him at 4am and he had been fine. When she got up to use the toilet at about 7am, her boyfriend told her there is something wrong with the baby because he just wouldn’t wake up. Normally he would be awake by that time already. She rushed to him and realised that he wasn’t making a joke. She panicked and that is when she sent me a please call and I phoned her back. It was the most traumatic day, I think. It was like I lost one of my own children. She was always depending on me with him. I was so sad. But I had to be strong for everybody. But eventually I felt I couldn’t do it anymore. I phoned Aunty Pat. I was so glad she was coming because there would be someone else also in control of everybody else emotions. I told Charney I was going to get Aunty Pat at the taxi rank. When I saw Aunty Pat I burst out crying, I just could not control it. In that moment I thought it was good for me and that I could go back and be the mother Charney needed me to be. I had never had the responsibility on me to have to bury somebody before.

The mother was crying. She didn’t have an ID. The baby didn’t have a birth certificate. They would not give the child to her. I had to go to the morgue. They didn’t want to give him to me. They did an autopsy. We had to sit in the morgue in Salt River and wait for the doctor for hours to do the autopsy. I had to go to the police and get paperwork. Then the morgue gave the child to me – in a plastic bag! It was a white bag – it may as well have been a Pic’N Pay shopping bag. Cut open from the autopsy. Stitched bloody and messy. Luckily I had a blanket and the mother did not want to keep him, to hold him.

We had no money. Lucky for us, one of the members of the mosque came to Igshaan’s dad (Igshaan is Charney’s boyfriend, but not the father – Leon is the child’s father, he is a rasta and after that he cut his hair and is very different, very changed). Igshaan’s dad is a mechanic, and I spoke to him there immediately – we knew each other because he had previously transported my material to build my shack with his truck. So I spoke to him and said we have a problem now because this child had to be buried and we have no money. He said don’t worry, just bring the child and we will get him buried. That was such a relief because everybody was looking at me for what to do.

I had to be so strong. For the mother. She doesn’t have family. The other child, the baby’s older sister, stays with me. The mother looks at me as a mother. Eventually I did break down. I really did break down. It was a terrible experience.

When we talk about saving someone’s life we think of the police, fireman or a doctor. These are the people who normally saves our lives.

Who saves our lives while we are living?

I couldn’t help but feel that we are partly responsible for Ishmail’s death. He shouldn’t have been living on an open piece of land with no water, electricity or even toilets, vulnerable to all kinds of diseases. Even though Dr’s has said that he died of natural causes they also mentioned a chest infection. Could we have avoided this?

**Benevolence?**
30 April 2012

I want to write up about a woman I call Mrs. M, from the Cape Party. It has caused such divisions on the field with the food she brings. She gave us a lot, she brought plastics when we were really in the rain. But now she is keeping track and lists of what she gives us and when we complain that she brings bread that is green, she causes problems. It is only me and her that has contact with the lawyer, and she wants to tell me that I must work via her. I have been in contact with the sheriff from the first day. We can talk. He is a working class member and doesn’t like what he must do. He gives me tips, this is what you must do or mustn’t do. Mrs. M sends me a message late at night for the number and the email address of the sheriff. I gave her his number, then she tells me that she doesn’t think I should be in contact with the sheriff, that she must be in contact and let me know. I feel bad because she is old and a pensioner already but I had to say, please don’t tell me who I must phone – you call who you want to phone and I will call who I need to call. She is causing problems on the field.

She started an organisation on the field called First People First. I think the Cape Party has this idea that if the people of the Eastern Cape go home, there will be more jobs and more houses. I said, if you want people to leave, you leave. You are also not from the Cape. So if you want them to go, you go. It doesn’t matter if we have people from the Eastern Cape or from China here, we will still have the same problems – it is government and capitalism causing our problems, not people who come here. She’s been spreading stories on the field that ILRIG is getting money for them and not giving it to them. She is really sick. And when I listen to what she has to say, she is screwing people with her politics. When she mentions what she has given us already and says we should be grateful, and that she is old and doesn’t have to do this.

She is also collecting money from the 16 respondents on the courts list, I am not even on that list, and she went to find out how much grant money they each get. So she is taking money from them so that she can save up and buy them Wendy Houses. She is only collecting from the 16, so how much division do you think that is going to cause? I tried to go to their meetings and to respect what they are doing, I thought if I listen and attend then I can sit and listen and explain what is wrong. For example, they started a women-only committee with rules that only women could be on the committee and they even offered that I could stay and be the chair. And they wanted to draw up a constitution in an hour and register the organisation immediately. I was sitting there and I put up my hand and I said there is gender inequality, and there is nothing wrong with the men on this field, and said you can’t have a constitution set up in one day, and it was not even one day it was an hour.

So from then on they were anti-Faeza. But don’t get me wrong, they were anti-Faeza all the time, they just put another point to being anti. Mrs. M is making sure that the organization is running First People First. There is now one male as part of the organization now. It is messed up. They don’t work in the rest of Tafelsig, they make that very clear. They only work on the field, and say they only focus on issues on the field not in the wider community. They want women-only on the committee, and they argue for black (Xhosa) people to go back to the Bantustans. And the field is so full of people now, but for every black person who comes to the field and asks to put up a shack, they will call the cops. They only focus on people on the field, but their chair does not live on the field and their secretary is a white lady (Mrs. M) that lives in Newlands somewhere, in a very nice house. Her son is in the Cape Party. And what is strange is the people on the field were arguing saying they want nothing to do with political parties. In the beginning the PAC, Eisha and Anwaar Adams who is the PAC, offered us help and I didn’t see they had an agenda for helping us because they came all the time and only after the elections did they tell us who they are and where they are from. The same people fighting now were saying we don’t want political parties. Now they are having the Cape Party steer them in directions. Mrs. M got 9,000 rands from Americans for the people on the field. I want nothing to do with it because it makes me feel uncomfortable when I think of Mrs. M and money. I don’t know if people know what they are saying and now they say that they can afford a lawyer to prove I got 150,000 rands from ILRIG, so they have been barking like weak dogs all the time saying they will take me to court and ILRIG to court because they are getting money for the poor and making ourselves rich.

As rude as they are, and as weird as they go on, they will never do it in front of my face. Even we’ll be at court and they will come and ask me to do something. Why would you be so nasty from a distance and then you never do it in my face and you still ask for my advice?

Then the other day when we got to the field, we were threatened again by the people who follow Mrs. M. One woman was jumping up and down, she had a knife in her hand with a rope on it so it wouldn’t fall out
of her hand. Like she was in battle, with a shirt wrapped around her arm. It looked crazy. It was scary because of the children. Cheney and Boeta Ali made a case against them. We then dropped the case even though he hit Charney with an iron bar. He is crazy when he drinks.

Who is at the root of our problems? This group of people is still working class. They live in our community without water, just like us. Yet they allow Mrs. M to take control of us. She even gets letters from the city of Cape Town thanking her for the good job she is doing with us.

We don’t have any information about our legal situation because we have limited access to our lawyer. He chooses to speak to Mrs. M.

I asked Mrs. M for the court documents, which we normally had access to when Sheldon was our lawyer and with Marius in the beginning when Mrs. M was not around. She responded with an sms: “we decided not to give out documents while working on the case. Info gets leaked out, discussed, not good for any court case, and generally not done.” I am really upset. This is the first time I heard that people don’t have access to their own documents. It doesn’t even involve her, yet she has access. I phoned Marius and asked him “are you part of the we?” He said he would call me back, but he never did.

There are talks that we should expose her on Monday among ourselves and the youth. In a way I feel it is about time too. But what I feel and what I know makes it difficult to decide. Things are going to get more dangerous around us if Mrs. M decides to put more pressure on them. And that is exactly what she is going to do. That is exactly what she has been doing all the time. That is why exposing her is not so easy and why I don’t use her real name. But we should eventually, sooner than later, expose her for who she is and what she really represents.

Mrs. M was not happy about articles about us protesting in the papers. She has the city under the idea that she is in control over what is happening at Kapteinsklip. We were at the globalisation school. She came to Boeta Ali very upset about the newspaper. We said that we gave the ward councilor 14 days to respond or we will march to Parliament. She said that if we march to Parliament she will withdraw from the field. That is why there was so much craziness on the field when we got back. When we sat down and listened to people on the field we realised that the city is going to take back the certificate they gave her if she does not have control over the field. She had come to the field a while ago with “good news” – a letter from the city praising her for the good work.

When she comes with bread all the kids must stand there and have their photo taken with her and be grateful because someone is thinking of you. At the beginning I thought she didn’t know and she was old and her head shakes. I think she uses that to look like a victim, and that she is brave to come into the community. I wasn’t even sure at first to tell her the bread was stale. People call her mam. Why can’t people call her by her name – mam and bassie, its gone! So when we protest, it shows that she does not have control and she does not like that. People listen to her and then become upset with us, worrying her support and the food she brings and the bread – which is so green the dogs won’t eat it – I want to take a picture of it. It is green and so hard. And that is what she thinks of us.

She claims she is busy organising water for us. She says we must wait. We have been waiting two years. How much more must we wait and the kids getting sick. Everyone is fighting with each other over water. They brought us six toilets and you cannot even wash your hands. I am scared of those toilets. People are going to get sick. Ricardo took a picture of the toilet-filled to top. There is a hole and they come with a pipe and suck it all out. But even if they come three or five times a week, that one day, everyone else still has to sit on everyone else’s what should I call it. It is unhealthy. And then we fight. She also brings plastics to cover your roof and she has the access to the lawyer, so people listen to her. Mrs. M has a website about the nice things she gives to people, in Blikkiesdorp, Tafelsig. She is manipulating us and have people to fight over R50 we cannot afford. People in the community are asking us for money to pay for their water. We are not really in her heart. We are not at the root of her. She is exploiting us. She is making us fight each other. And people don’t see it. It makes it more difficult. I don’t want to fight them. Politically I am not allowed to fight them. But must I wait ‘til they stab me or someone close to me?

Public Health
31 August 2012

A Terrible Experience at the Day Hospital.

Ebrahiem is sick. He has a headache that prevents him from opening his eyes. I called Michael and asked him to call an ambulance. He called an ambulance and phoned me back saying that they are on their way. The ambulance finally arrives after one hour. The paramedics examine Ebrahiem and ask me a few questions and for his ID. I explain to them that I am really worried about the pain in his head because it is the third severe headache he has had in less than a week. I also told them he suffers from clinical depression.

Bringing him to the day hospital could possibly be my worst mistake. I think this is a dangerous place for people who suffer from depression. There is no respect or compassion for people. A half an hour after we arrived at the hospital I had to go and tell the sister in trauma that Ebrahiem felt a tingling feeling and his mouth was numb. She said to bring him in. He couldn’t walk alone because he was still unable to open his head, the jacket he had put on his head to keep the light away, and was still unable to open his eyes as the light hurt his eyes and that made the pain worse. She told me to put him on the bed and then she examined him herself. Actually I don’t know what examine is supposed to be. She put something on his finger that was attached to a machine and checked his blood pressure. I asked her if she could give him something for the pain. She said only the doctor can prescribe medication and that the doctor will be with him soon. All this while I have to watch my husband cry like a baby. Eventually I couldn’t handle seeing him in pain like this so I attempted to ask one of the doctors myself. She looked up at me and said he has to wait his turn, but meanwhile she was busy doing nothing. How difficult is it to give someone something for pain? She just refused. Then they told me that I was not allowed to be by his side anymore. I had to sit in the waiting room.

I bought a cool drink and I thought he might be thirsty. I asked the sister if I could go and give it to him. He wasn’t on the bed where I left him. I asked the sister. She said he went to the toilet. I went to look and he was sitting on the floor in a ball covering his head in the passage. I helped him up and took him back to his bed. I think about two hours of laying in that bed he called me and said his head is feeling a little bit better. He was hungry. He spoke to the doctor and told the doctor. He has been writing up about how he feels. He told the doctor his head was feeling a little bit better, but that he was cold. The doctor said if your head is better go home! Ebrahiem wanted to see the sister in charge. She was a very nice lady just trying to cover up everything that is wrong in that hospital. She sounded to me like she was trying to keep the peace. Ebrahiem kept saying it is not about keeping the peace it is about what is right and wrong and that even though the medical help is free, they are getting paid to do a job, so why are they just talking to us however they want to. She gave him a form. He said he will fill in the form but wants to make sure that this form goes to the person in charge of the hospital and he did not trust that they would give it to that person. So he filled it in and we are waiting on a response. When they helped him it was about 7pm – he sat without medication and that no one will give him pain tablets until the doctor sees him and that I can go and buy pain tablets if I wanted to give it to him.

There is an old man sitting in a wheelchair next to us. I feel so sorry for him because he has been sitting there alone for the whole day. Ricardo helped him to sit properly because he was sliding out of his wheelchair. It is so sad to see this happening to our people. After 7pm, he spoke for the first time really. He had a R2 and he wanted Ricardo to buy him a packet of sugar and tea because he was very thirsty and wanted tea. He was under the impression he was still at home. I am not sure if he knows he is at hospital. He told me how he had nothing to eat or drink for the whole day. Ricardo went to the Town Centre to buy him some coffee. Amongst ourselves we had about R10. Ricardo asked him first how much sugar and if he wants milk. Immediately after Ricardo left, he responded as if Ricardo is his own son. He was saying ‘nie hy kom nou rig, hy slaan nie meer vir my nie’ (he was saying his grandson is coming right, he is not hitting me anymore). It was so sad that he was there alone and nobody for the whole day since the morning till the evening, when we left, no one was with him. I was not even sure what his name was. He kept saying how proud he was of his grandson who he confuses with Ricardo. He says he doesn’t perform with me anymore. I am so sorry to think someone can hurt a fragile old man in a wheelchair.

There is this 17 year old who doesn’t speak. He has been on the field for two weeks. Yesterday they found him beaten up. And he has no recollection of who hit him. The newspapers asked him what is
his name, he said Wayne Liederman. But then he has 10 other names. He told me his name is Bronwyn. He told Ebrahiem his name is Devin and everybody on the field has a different name for him. He looks traumatised. Like something really bad happened to him. The only thing I know is he said he went to Wynberg Boys, but he has been to a home for naughty boys. I don’t know if any of it is true. He changes his mind. And he never speaks unless people speak to him. I am hoping the article in the Plainsman will get his family to recognise him.

The people from the Health Dept came to the field while we were in hospital. Mr Bell. He came on Thursday. He said he doesn’t care if we are legal or illegal, he will fight for our human rights and we are still entitled to our Constitutional rights of water and toilets. He said he will meet with us the next day. We told him about the court date of Siqalo Informal Settlement on Vanguard Drive and how we are supporting them, so he took my number and said that some of us must stay and he will meet with us with the City the next day. When the ambulance arrived the City had come. This lady from the City, she had been there before to spray numbers on the shacks. She looked at me and said who invited us here? I said there was a guy from the health dept and he said that he will be meeting with us today. She made it very clear that the city is not willing to put water on this land for us or toilets because we have been evicted and it is private property. I am not sure if Mr Vincent Bell pitched that day because I then went to hospital.

Protection?

23 Sept 2012
Hey Kon! Seeing that I don’t have time to write today and maybe for the next few days, I thought I would write to you via email on my phone whenever I can, if that’s ok with you? I think I told you about the couple who is from Zimbabwe. They living with me now in my shack. Their place we helped them to put up isn’t any bigger then a toilet and it leaks like a shower. Koni I am so sad to think their daughter Patina was in that shack for a few nights when it was really raining. Garry and Kattie didn’t even say anything. Are they afraid of us? I don’t think so I always try my best make them feel at home and I know the other people around me try hard too. Garry I know speaks and understands English. But Kattie she looks so young like she could be 20 years old. She only understands a small little of what we speak. I wish I could help them. I just don’t know how. This is going to be a real hectic week for me. Video training, Community House 25th Anniversary and last but by no means the least our protest for service delivery. Time to have lunch.
Mwah

3.23pm
Hi. its been a real hectic day for us. Everyone is busy and learning. Our memorandum has been drafted, checked and now its done. The leaflets are also done and they are busy cutting it right now. Its time to take it into the community.

4.33pm
On our way home. I have such a lot to do now. We going to buy my mom sausage then we heading home. We have leaflets to deliver and posters to put up. I’m have to pack my clothes because I have to be at WWMP at 8 o’clock sharp. The 3-day video training starts tomorrow.

6.59pm
Just when we think things are moving forward the challenges pops up. Everyone is on the edge. I know they tried and we have talked about how much time and energy this is going to take. We knew that we are going to be tired and some of us even angry. On our way home we realised that we didn’t put a date, time or venue on the leaflets. How could we have missed that? How could I have missed that? Now it means each 1 of the 1200 leaflets has to be fixed with a pen. When we got home Neville’s mom told me what had happened to her. The police is here now. Koni I don’t know how much of this I can handle.
Mwah

7.31pm
Reneshia told me that her boyfriend invited friends over to have a tik party. He then ordered her to take of her clothes so that his friends could have sex with her. When she refused his friends left and he started beating her. In the event he hit their newborn baby on his head. There is a mark to prove this. She has more than 1 case against this man and a interdict. What more does she need? Maybe a death certificate. To top it all we had to convince them to take the matter to the police station. Then the system really proved to me that there is no concern for the poor and even less concern if you happen to be a women. They wanted to transport both of them locked up at the back of a police van. After showing them the interdict and letters from social workers. Do they still not know who the victim is? We stopped them immediately and offered to take her and the baby to the police station while the real criminal is in the van. So now we at the police station. Social worker wants to see us now.

8.45pm
Yes she does stay on the field. Can you believe this system? They want to debate if he is supposed to be held or set free. I am so angry! What is there to decide? The man beat his wife because she wouldn’t share her body with his friends to support his bad habit. He then managed to strike the 2 week old baby on his head. If that’s not enough evidence of abuse, then I really don’t know. The social worker gave me the opportunity to speak. She wants to see the interdict. We going to fetch it now.

9.09pm
We couldn’t find the interdict. They now tell her to go and stand in a queue with the baby to make a case against him so that they can actually have a reason to arrest this man. I just want to remove the baby from all this madness. But how?

10.05pm
The 2 police officers with the social worker and another female police officer whose standing behind the counter taking notes while Renecia (this is the correct spelling of her name) is talking eventually decides that he’s not going to be arrested, but he can only be escorted by police to collect his things then they must drop him anywhere. And they did just that.

10.35pm
Renecia looked very alive and to be herself away from her boyfriend happy to be herself and safe. I guess that’s the actual reason why I keep doing what I do.

12.45am
It’s time to go to sleep. This was a very long day. I hope I didn’t forget anything. I set the alarm for 6am.

Contagious Disease
I don’t know if it is me changing. But yesterday I was at my aunt’s birthday. I was very close with her. She was at all my births. It was her 50th birthday. But everyone had to sit there and be careful not to knock over the champagne glasses and sit and wait to queue up to wish happy birthday. Very bourgeois. Not about having fun. All high heels, so uncomfortable and it wasn’t like that when I was little and it was about people and having fun. Not about sitting proper. My uncle gave a speech and it was all about making our children capitalists. I can’t blame him because I used to do that, wanting to be up there and get somewhere in life. Better car. Better than the next person. I don’t want to compete with anyone anymore. I just want to live. I would rather wear my broken tackies and broken pants. And see me for me. Not because my hair looks like a model or I have 10 gold rings. No I don’t want to live like that anymore. I don’t want my kids exposed to that either. I was so happy to get back home to the fire where we would all stand around and share the food we brought back and not have to be quiet and official. Ebrahiem went and knocked on each person’s door when we got back and everyone was happy with food and conversation. That is how I would rather be. It feels right. I fight with the parents on the field. I know it can be changed now. If we have to change it only when they are teenagers it will be harder. I have to change my daughter now – she wants a matric ball with a car that will cost R5,000. Now she says I want to celebrate but not like that. The other kids don’t have me and Ebrahiem as parents and other activists who go to the globalisation school to encourage them and show them the truth about who is who. Everybody wants to be capitalist. It is a scary world. My kids have been in this corrupt system and I taught them some of that too because I didn’t know. I have always been a bit more to the activist side and always considered the black sheep who would want things to happen democratically. But there is no such thing as democracy in poor families because there isn’t enough to share, so our parents tend to keep the equality and freedom of speech away from us because what if I ask for more. Even if my mom thinks I am back chatting then children are oppressed and not allowed to say what they feel. Nadia said you know what mommy, before all of this, I didn’t tell you but I was very angry in a way with you because it looked to me like you don’t have time for us or you choose to spend little time with us when you can because you are unemployed, but now you don’t have to worry about that where I am concerned and I will also tell my brothers because I see you are helping other people and I want to help other people too.

The globalisation gave that to me. To have her there and doing the courses. If you are an activist, there are stages you go through. Now I can see that I was in the stage that Ricado and Bianca are at, where you can’t sleep, all the information is there and it feels like it is too much, I see Bianca is so tired and politically drained. She speaks to everyone who passes, having political talks. I used to listen to myself. That was me. Trying to spread this awareness: I know now, I want everyone else to know. Now I can relax a little because there are people around me who are now taking it on to tell other people. It should be a contagious disease that infects everyone so they can open their eyes. One day I would like to sit down and analyze the wool they pulled over our eyes when I was young and over my mother so we can remove it. It is still there. My mom is a little more radical, but others are still saying shame, I am so sorry you are living on a field and others going to my mom saying you can’t have your daughter living on a field, make space for her. She says she offers me. I can’t now. Not knowing there are people who have gone through the struggle with me, who will still be there.

The youth have inspired me so much. Their protest, things went wrong. There wasn’t participation. Just Siqalo and us and one or two community members. But it was fun. And we finished. They stuck it out. I would have worried no one showing and even the police saying no one is here, why not cancel? They said no, we will do it and go give the memorandum and go and come back. So many youth would have said no, but they stuck through it ‘till the end. When we are done there was a whole conversation and to hear how everyone feel and we sat down and thought what did we do wrong, what must be changed for next time. We took it as a learning experience and I was so proud of them.

Thin Air
18 October 2012

I haven’t written as much as I would have liked to this week. Everything seems to be going wrong all at once. Monday Nadia’s phone got stolen, Tuesday the sheriff let us know we are going to be evicted. I no longer have a phone where I can check my e-mails, the lawyer hasn’t contacted me yet, I had to contact him because I am worried what people will lose and how Mike’s office writing this (during a break from the Housing Assembly meeting, waiting to be interviewed by phone on the Voice of the Cape). The quiet around me makes me think of the seriousness of tomorrow.

What will happen to us? This is what we consider our 3rd eviction. First the City of Cape Town got judge Nathan Erasmus to order our eviction from City owned property. Then because we had NOWHERE TO GO, we lived for a few nights on the side walk in Yellowwood road in Tafelsig right next to the piece of land we got evicted from, there they brought us a letter that stated if we do not move within 24 hours we will be arrested and could be jailed for up to five years. We moved from there with no choice to railway property only to get evicted again. Where will we go? Everyone wants to know. I don’t know. Maybe we will disappear into thin air.

Evicting Ourselves

19 October 2012

There was no doubt in our minds that we were going to be evicted today. The sheriff confirmed it. Mrs.M let me know. And Elizabeth also came to tell us that law enforcement is just a few minutes away. The second group of people didn’t want anything to do with us wasn’t there when it all started. They were told by the lawyer that they had to protest in front of the court, which we couldn’t understand because there was no court date. The night before we had given them papers and koki’s [pens] to make posters. We were in agreement that they would protest at the court since that is what the lawyer told them, and that we would protest on the field. When I asked the sheriff about this court thing he said it would be of no use because there is nobody at court.

They couldn’t have made it to court because it wasn’t long before they were back. To me it felt like at trick by Mrs. M to get people off the field so that the sheriff can do their job. When they came back they appeared as if they were on our side. By then we had already blocked off the road with burning tires and the guys started burning the two toilets we had on our side. Some of the guys from the second group also brought toilets from their side to the front, and blocked the road with us.

The SAPS law enforcement arrived with a truck that would take our stuff, just like the sheriff explained it would happen. Our stuff had already been removed from our shacks so now we were stalling law enforcement so that the second group of people could save some of their stuff.

Everyone was running up and down trying to save some of their valuables. Then one of the SAPS police officers approached us and told us that the eviction wouldn’t take place today, that it would be postponed. When the second group of people who belongs to First People First heard that, they started shouting at us, especially me. They were now walking around with sticks and all kinds of sharp and dangerous objects, making statements like they don’t want us on the field anymore.

Mrs. M made a statement that she had organised with the sheriff to give us a chance to move peacefully. How crazy is that? How can we, after one month and six months of suffering, just move peacefully? What were we fighting for all the time?

Marius the lawyer arrives. I think listening to what he had to say and the way he said it really cut through my heart. Ebrahiem asked him if he is representing everyone on the field like he claimed all this time he was, and he couldn’t answer. Instead the other people around him from First People First, were saying no. His response to Ebrahiem was to keep quiet. I on the other hand just couldn’t accept and keep quiet. First of all I wanted to know and then it looked as if he had not been representing us for a while and everybody knew about it except us. When I asked him “just answer the simple question” he did. He said “no” and excused himself to “speak to his clients”. When I turned around and looked at the people who was here from the start of this occupation, who slept on the sidewalk and underground, who
struggled for so many months, I just broke down and cried. They have been sold out, manipulated by a lawyer, marginalised and excluded from their own struggle. I wanted to be strong for all of them, but I just couldn’t. I was so sad, angry, but more frustrated that Mrs. M and Marius could get away with what they are doing. If there is a god out there, then I hope he sends them both to hell.

The Housing Assembly was there, and Michael, Judy and Koni, and some members of the community. There were housing activists from Zille-raine Heights, Civic Road, Makaza, Siqalo, Delft, Bikiesdorp, Overcome Heights. Vivanne had slept over the night before. She was really supportive. She was there for me emotionally. I don’t know where she got the money, but she bought bread and polony for everyone to eat. At one stage she was crying, she said she just really felt for us. Winston’s shack had been burnt the night before and she was so upset. He was so angry that he burnt his couch saying law enforcement won’t take his stuff. He put it out again. But I don’t think that it went out completely because while we were protesting in the road we saw his shack was on fire. So we had to take it all down, because that would have been worse and caused much more problems for us if it had caught the others on fire.

Everyone around me was telling me how everything was going to be ok. I didn’t think so at the time. For a second I sat down on the side walk and could not move or look up at anyone because I had no answers. I was so angry and wanted to prove to everyone that this is too rotten people. I was not going to move.

The press was all over, trying to get pictures of people being sad. I wanted them to be there so much, but when all the division was there so open to everyone to see, I wanted them to just disappear. But they were there and I had to tell them the truth, that the lawyer was only representing 23 people now. And they write in the paper now as if they were blind and didn’t see that there were much more than 23 people there. In fact, when I read what they wrote in the papers, they mostly just quoted Mrs. M, and it wasn’t even her being evicted and they spent so much time taking us aside and interviewing us and photographing us. That is the reason why we need to write this, so others can see what the press does.

We had to have a meeting, an urgent one, inspired by Judy and Koni and Mike, because I was just going to sit there and didn’t know what was next. When we had the meeting, we asked the press to leave because we didn’t want them there – I think the press thrives on other people’s emotions. I wanted our emotion to be out there. But I was so confused. What was the right thing to do and what was wrong? I just wanted to be alone with the people who have been around me all the time. I wanted to tell them it would be ok, but I couldn’t. I couldn’t even look at them. I can barely remember. I remember I said I know I can’t handle anymore of this. I have tried to be strong for too long. I can’t do this anymore. I can’t put my husband’s life at risk. I can’t live without my children anymore. I can’t handle people swearing at me, throwing in my windows, every second day running around shouting at me, setting my shack on fire. I just couldn’t anymore. I remember Luvuyo saying we can move to Siqalo. At one state I said I can’t, I just won’t let Marius and Mrs. M win this fight.

Then there was some sense talked to me by this old man from Siqalo and Mike and people, telling me how dangerous it is for us there and the violence that will come tonight, and how people die for no reason. Luvuyo said they will find my body there, it really clicked that my children might grow up without a mother if I continue to try and convince people here who the enemy really is. I remember saying I will go to Siqalo, but that I cannot speak for anyone else and they must decide for themselves. Everybody else who was with me said yes, they would go. It felt like I had influence over them and their decision and I was worried whether or not I made the right decision. A month from now will I feel it is my fault that people are in Siqalo. But there was nothing else I could think of to make things better at the time.

The group from Siqalo who was there was just wonderful. They decided that they would not leave until we were all safely transported to Siqalo and that all our stuff was there safely. We couldn’t change their minds. I was really worried they would get hurt and I didn’t want anyone to be hurt on my behalf. They were just so strong. And the people on the field were just swearing things like, “you kaffir” and they were just so brave, and every time they would shout, they would just start singing. The ladies were so inspiring, they came to me and said “don’t worry Sisi, everything will be fine, you are going home now.”

Judy spoke to Stephen, who offered us two trips in the taxi for free. Michael phoned me after saying...
he can organise a truck and he would pay for it. We tried to get a hold of a truck, Simpiwe’s brother had a connection with a truck, but eventually said there was no driver. Luvuyo found a truck and it cost 700 rand for the truck to do trips.

Going Home: The Move to Siqalo

20 October 2012
The way we were transported was so nice. It was half of Tafelsig’s people and half of Siqalo’s people who travelled with each taxi. The people of Siqalo didn’t want to leave us alone. They were really protecting us. I had to fetch Nadia who was at my cousins so she can look after the children at my mothers. Usually on a Friday and Saturday they are with me. Nadia really wanted to be there, but I couldn’t allow her to be there with all the emotions, and the swearing and the fighting. Luvuyo was the last person to stay and he took a taxi. That was for me the most brave thing to do – to stay behind with a bunch of angry people. He could have gone with the second taxi, but he didn’t want to. He went and he bought some food for us. It was just amazing how the people of Siqalo reacted. When I got there after I sorted out my kids and my mother, everybody was there. It was like a different group I met – all smiles. People had collected dry clothes for everybody to change into. There was a shack and coals inside already to heat up and there was food already, first for the kids and then for the adults. There was two shacks for us. One was very tiny and Luvuyo gave me a key and said that is where you will be sleeping. The others were already in bed. Everybody was exhausted. The Mama of the house came to me and hugged me and said don’t worry there are no more rude people here. Her daughter came and said Faeza if you want to you can sleep by me in my bed. The last thing I wanted to do was invade and made anyone uncomfortable. I didn’t sleep fine. I couldn’t get it out of my mind how things had happened and how people with money and resources can just manipulate situations if they want to.

The next morning Luvuyo came to us and relocated all of us into our own shacks. People were so happy and excited. Our neighbours were so welcoming. They collected R5 to make food for us. They just wouldn’t accept no for an answer. I said to Luvuyo you can stop now, we are here and grateful. He said Faeza don’t refuse, it is our culture, and it is not me, it is people of Siqalo who feel that way.

The truck broke down, where it was towed to Samora Machel. On the Sunday it arrived. People got their stuff. But already the people of Siqalo gave us beds and blankets. They did such a lot for us. On Sunday there was a meeting at 2pm. Everybody stood in a wide circle and they started off their meeting by praying. Someone prayed in the middle of the circle and people held hands. Luvuyo started off telling people what happened to us. I couldn’t understand a word but I could see from his body language and he mentioned Tafelsig. Pumla, Mama’s daughter, who is in Grade 11 and a youth member, came to us and started to translate. What was happening was so extraordinary. People put up hands in the meeting and said I have two zincs, and I have four poles, and I have some planks. All kinds of donations. Someone said I have a big piece of yard. One of the Mama’s said I have a place that is finished that people can move into right now. Luvuyo said this one guy has a complete shack for me, they must just earmark a piece of land. And in the meeting they went around and collected money for us. People were not shy. One woman said I don’t want to give a R5, I want to give a R50. Boeta Ali started to cry and go on his knees. Ebrahiem started to cry. I tried not to, but then I was also crying. One of the guys in the meeting, I could feel was negative what he said and Pumla didn’t want to translate and just said he is drunk. I said that we must hear. But later in the meeting he put up his hand and said I have materials for you and welcome to Siqalo.
Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard
A Story About Cape Town’s Tanzanian Stowaways

WORDS: SEAN CHRISTIE
PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID SOUTHWOOD

15 July 2011

Cape Town city gardener Karabo Moshoeshoe’s orders were that the grass embankments around the intersection of Oswald Pirow Street and Hertzog Boulevard were to be cut again, though the routine trim wasn’t supposed to happen for another week. All litter was to be removed.

“I don’t want to see a single chip packet anywhere,” were his overseer’s words.

It had something to do with the new sign the traffic department had put up alongside the highway onramp, and covered with a black sack. The city’s new mayor, Patricia De Lille, would be coming down to the intersection to make a speech, apparently, so a tent for the VIPs was being erected by the cork oaks alongside the onramp. Nothing like this had happened in the eight years that Moshoshoe had been tending the area. It was not a nice area, in his opinion. The room in the concrete substructure of the highway onramp, in which he kept his clothes and his tools, was an especially ugly place. There were always people sleeping around it on flattened cardboard boxes, covered in sheets of plastic. They cooked in the shelter of the bridge, blackening the concrete with smoke, and then drew everywhere using the charcoal from their fires.

“They draw ships,” Moshoeshoe once told his wife, but he could not say why, nor was he particularly interested. These people, these bridge-men, made work for him, plus they were tsotsis, drug-smokers.

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Michael Bakili from the Central City Improvement District’s security detail had received orders of his own: get rid of the bridge-men before the arrival of the VIPs. It would not be easy. With the sun shining for the first time in a week, the grass embankments were already populated by prostrate bodies. Sunshine in winter tended to have that effect on the bridge-men. It carried their bad habits into their brains through their blood, Bakili had always thought. The group from the traffic island between the onramp to the highway and the red tarmacadam of the Rapid Transit Route would give the most trouble. They had made their sleeping places right there in the plants, squashing the agapanthuses to a reedmat thinness. However, if anyone could get them going, it was Bakili. He could speak to them in KiSwahili, their own language, which he had learned from his father, whose people were from Arusha in Tanzania. An understanding had already been established by which Bakili left the bridge-men be as far as it was in his power to do so, and they in turn cleaned their living areas each morning, returning the boulders they used as chairs around their night fires back to the abutment walls from which they had prised them.

When Bakili arrived at the traffic island one of the men, just a boy really, wearing a red overall with reflective strips at the knees, was lying back in the warm sand between the plants. In one hand he had a Die Son news poster, with which he was shielding his face. The other arm, missing from the long sleeve lying across the boy’s chest like a flat tube, was working up and down inside the overall pants.

“Wanker,” shouted Bakili, and made as if to stamp on the boy, who laughed at the fact that his own joke prevented him from freeing his hand to defend himself. Some of the others joined in the laughter and then they picked up their personal items – torn jackets, water bottles, sun-bleached rucksacks – and wandered off into town.

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Under Nelson Mandela Boulevard
SEAN CHRISTIE, DAVID SOUTHWOOD
Across the road, Moshosho was not having the same success. He had been cutting the grass with his weed-eater but was now staring gravely off in the direction of the civic centre.

“Everything OK?” Bakili shouted across to him. The old man shook his head and looked down at his feet.

“Your friends shit everywhere,” Mosheoshoe said. “Mess, man, mess.”

He’d struck a human crap with his weedeater, spraying the stuff all over his work trousers.

“Sorry baba,” Bakili said, meaning it.

By the time the mayor arrived wearing a shiny red suit everything was in order, at least it looked that way. The people seated before her in the tent were a mixture of black suits (MPs), white dog collars (faith leaders) and green, black and yellow t-shirts (African National Congress members). The mayor greeted them in English, Afrikaans and Xhosa, and said that it was a great day for the City of Cape Town. “Today,” she said, “we take a step towards making our city even more inclusive.”

From his position behind the tent Bakili noticed a group of bridge-men approaching down Oswald Pirow. They were unmistakeable in their multi-coloured overalls and woollen hats, each with a rucksack around his shoulders. He glanced nervously at his superior. The media were all over the event. This was not the time for a scene.
“The apartheid government,” the mayor was saying, “knew full well what it meant to claim ownership of our public spaces. Through a careful strategy of selective naming and selective cultural recognition, it sought to stamp its interpretation of the world on future generations.”

The group of homeless men reached the intersection and waved at Bakili, who waved both his palms at them to signal they should not come any nearer. They did not. Instead they followed one of their many paths around the bridge off-ramp, and disappeared into the amphitheatre gloom beneath the soaring overpasses. There, Bakili knew, they would start preparing lunch, probably chicken and rice, shoplifted from the Adderley Street Shoprite.

“That apartheid planning,” the mayor continued, “sought to keep us divided, even long after the apartheid government was gone. As such, we have an imbalance in our named public spaces. We recognise some histories, but not our shared history. We are changing that today.”

At this the mayor pulled on a cord and the black cover slipped from the mysterious sign. Previously it had read ‘Eastern Boulevard’. The new sign read ‘Nelson Mandela Boulevard’. The ANC men and women began chanting the iconic name as the mayor climbed into a car, which swept up the Boulevard onramp in a cavalcade of blue lights. The crowd began to disperse just as the first curlicues of smoke began to waft from the underpasses.

“Get those fucking guys out of here,” Bakili’s superior grunted, but like the other VIPs he too was on his way back to an office, and Bakili was not about to get between hungry slum dogs from Dar es Salaam and their food.

Before the sun disappeared behind Signal Hill that evening the new sign had been amended. Beneath the words Nelson Mandela Boulevard someone had written, in permanent marker, “Memory Card. I like ship, no like pussy.”
4 June 2011

David Southwood called today to tell about the community of Tanzanian stowaways living under Nelson Mandela Boulevard at the foot of Cape Town, where the high rise buildings end and the docklands begin. He explained he’d been visiting the underpasses for two years with a book of photographs in mind, and felt the time had come to begin collaborating with a writer. Was I interested?

I met him after lunch where Christian Barnard Street, named for the city’s world famous heart surgeon, slips under the foreshore freeways and comes to an end at the port’s trident-spike palisade fence. Being autumn, the hectare of landfill beneath the highway substructure had sprouted lurid green grass and oily puddles. As we clodded across it Dave pointed out a surface deposit of beer bottle shards and bone chip.

“Cow molars,” he said.

“Large groups of Tanzanians used to gather here every Sunday to boil cow heads, bought for R1 a pop from a Woodstock butchery.”

When we reached the far end Dave turned to his right and began climbing the flyover’s steep abutment wall, digging the toes of his boots into the stone facing and pointing out slogans written here and there in permanent marker and white paint.

*The power of sea forever and ever*
*Seaman life no story only action*
*Toddy Africa Tomorrow Europe*

We paused by one inscrutable message – Aver Theang Isgoabe Orite – but then noticed the three young men sitting above us on the metal barrier of the bridge, their faces deeply submerged in their hoodies. At the top we collided with their knees and then milled awkwardly around in front of them, bounded by the dizzying drop down to the start of highway on the left, the sloping wall we’d just scrambled up and the cars flying by on the bridge to the right, rushing down to join the highway. Ahead lay a 100m slice of lopsided, downward sloping land, which was grassed and broken up by three wild olives. Beneath the first of these three more men lay submerged in dirty blankets. At the sound of our voices one of the sleepers wriggled out of bed and pissed against the second tree, all the while squinting in our direction. Dave raised his hand.

“Haiyo Dave,” said the distant figure, zipping up his jeans and raising a hand in reply.

“Adam!”

“Yeah is me, Dave, I’ve been in Russia since I last saw you man, in Saint Petersburg.”

“No shit. What was it like?”

“Cold there in Russia, Dave.”

The obscure city ledge was exposed to the wind off the Atlantic and Adam, in a holey black T-shirt, was already shivering, clutching his hands together by his groin. He had a rough tattoo of a container ship all the way up his right forearm, and a much neater tattoo of a nautical wheel atop his left hand.

“You know, Dave, we beach boys call this place ‘The Freezer’ because it’s so fucking cold,” he said, a gold-plated incisor glinting in his grin.
Beach boys. Seamen. Seapower – these, I was told, were the names the bridge-dwelling Tanzanians had given themselves.

Skirting back around the knees of the three sitters Dave pointed at the alien-speak on the abutment wall --Aver Theang Isgoabe Orite.

“What does it mean?”

Adam laughed.

“Tha’s not Swahili, Dave, tha’s Bob Marley,” he said, in the tailings of what I’d have said was a Brummie accent if the likelihood of his having ever lived in Birmingham wasn’t so infinitesimally small.

“Baby don’t worry, about a thing. Because every lil thin, goabe orite,” he croaked, and the three gray sitters cracked wide grins.

While Dave and Adam caught up I absent-mindedly rolled an anvil-shaped rock under my foot, and then tipped it over. Beneath it, in a sweating plastic sleeve, were the emergency travel documents of one Kham’si Swaleh Kigomba. The ink had bled and the beach boys who gathered around to see said that Kigomba had possibly caught a ship, or had more likely been arrested and deported. Nobody could say for sure what had become of him.

“Take it, as a memory,” Adam advised, and I did want to get the find somewhere nicer, drier. In the end, though, I folded it up and put it back on the flattened yellow grass, next to a blanched snail shell, and placed the ship-shaped rock back on top.
19 June 2011

I arranged to meet Adam under the Edward VII statue at the southern end of the Grand Parade, where dozens of beach boys gather each day to play a game they call “last card”, betting with R1 coins. If Cape Town has a crucible of cultures then the Grand Parade is it. Here the Italianate City Hall overlooks a market in which francophone immigrants display rip-off handbags alongside Rastafarians in sack cloth clothes, who put out tubers harvested from the slopes of Table Mountain for the interest of the commuters going to and fro between the railway station and the inner city. It is the perfect place to hide in plain sight if you happen to be foreign-born and undocumented, and it is here that the beach boys make their living, either pushing the traders’ lockable trolleys to and from nearby warehouses for a R10 fee, or by pushing drugs behind the chip and salomie stalls at the square’s west end. Edward VII, hat in hand, a seagull almost always shitting down the imperial forehead, is something of a beach boy Christ the Redeemer, if only because the elevation of the statue’s stepped plinth makes it easy to spot police a long way off.

It was drizzling, however, and the statue steps were deserted, as was the square. I eventually found him by the toilet block at the northern end, where streams of piss crisscross the pavement, the toilet facility having been moth-balled years back. He was wearing an orange overall, and with his caramel skin, gold-plated incisors and home-made tattoos looked – on purpose, no doubt – like a prison gang general. The policeman frisking him completed the image quite nicely.

“Haiyo Sean, the police just searched me for drugs,” said Adam, sauntering over a moment later.

“I take it you’re not carrying?”
Adam opened his mouth and rolled a white plastic cube around with his tongue.

“Coke?”

“Heroin”

“Don’t swallow.”

“It’s no problem. I’ll just throw it up later.”

Adam felt like a smoke so we headed for The Freezer via the chaotic taxi deck above the railway station, where he spent more time walking backwards than forwards, cursing people at the top of his voice and making enquiries about their narcotic wares. “You got Swazi? No don’t talk to me about Swazi, don’t ever talk to me about fucking Swazi!”

Everyone seemed to be on something, or looking to get on. I’ve been up on the deck a hundred times and the people around me have always seemed like ordinary folks, on their way to jobs in Edgars, Shoprite or KFC. In Adam’s company it was an entirely different relational dimension, alive with criminal opportunity.

We descended to the foreshore, aiming at the port, and came once more below the Nelson Mandela Boulevard flyover, where he lifted a metal lid in the pavement and revealed a washing machine tumble of rags. “Tha’s my bed folded up in there. Tha’s my wardrobe.”

Up at The Freezer we ran into a 19 year old called Daniel-Peter, whose lips were so full they made his entire face look distended, until he smiled and his features claimed the golden ratio of facial beauty. Daniel-Peter had been staring intently at the harbour, and now pointed to a vessel with a flag of Jamaica painted on the smokestack. He said something to Adam in Swahili.

“The boy says it’s a good ship because it’s low in the water. That means it’s loaded and ready to go,” Adam explained.

“We’re going to try to stow that ship tonight, me and this boy. I love this boy,” he said paternally. “He’s not scared of anything. He’s a little boxer from Keko in Dar es Salaam. All these Keko boys are little boxers.”

Notebook against a knee, pen poised, I asked Adam for a short summary of his career as a stowaway.

He finished mulling his weed and quickly rolled a joint, which he lit and puffed on a few times before beginning theatrically in the third person:

“Adam is a outcast boy from Tanzania. His daddy, who he never knew, is from Greece. His poor mummy is a black girl from a place called Mbwera, where the people are all witches.”

My immediate thought was that I was being fobbed off by a canny wide boy, my over-eager pen fed a meaningless blend of myth and stereotype. But if it was Adam’s intention to hide himself behind the general he had not factored in his side-kick’s eagerness to please.

“His name is Memory Card,” Daniel-Peter broke in. “That is what we call him.”

The legend himself, Kilroy of the underpasses. Memory Card. I like ship, no like pussy
Adam sighed, “that’s right”, and like a family pariah playing for the hero-worship of younger cousins pulled off his shirt and pointed out where he’d had the nickname tattooed on a pectoral in crack-cocaine font.

“They call me Memory Card because I always remind the boys what is good and what is bad behaviour. I’m a peacemaker. I don’t like to see people fighting.”

“Who is Aniya?” I asked, pointing at a tattoo on his shoulder.

“Princess Aniya is me daughter,” he said, pronouncing it door-ah and putting the provenance of his accent – Birmingham – beyond doubt. He went on to relate the story of his passage to England, how he had entered through the Port of Hull in 2003 concealed in a Maltese bulk carrier called Global Victory, which he had boarded in the Port of Richard’s Bay on South Africa’s north coast. In his first months in the UK he had lived in Sheffield with a benevolent Cameroonian before bussing to Birmingham, where the Jamaican gangsters around Handsworth had permitted him to hustle small amounts of marijuana. Aniya’s mother, a second generation Jamaican immigrant, had tried to save him from the streets by convincing her own mother to take him in, but with no other way of making money Adam continued to hustle by day and was eventually done for dealing. He met Aniya for the first time in the visitors’ room in Winson Greene prison. Two months later he was put on a flight to Dar es Salaam.

I scratched it all down.

“Tell them,” said Adam, “that I’m fucken West Brom for life. Up the Baggies, yeah!”

The football hooligan in him receded behind plumes of blue smoke and we talked about the thrill of stepping out into the unknown. I regaled him with short biographies for Ibn Battuta, Wilfred Thesiger, David Livingstone, and he said, “Tha’ Dave had the heart of a seaman, man.” Then he became broody.

“You know we rob the new boys, Sean? We do. We bring them some place like this and ask them questions. Where you from? What you doin here? Where’s your money? Then we search the guy. In ’99 this Tanzanian boy came here, about Daniel-Peter’s age. Nobody knew him from before, so we took his clothes, his phone and his shoes. That night the guy stowed a ship. Three other guys stowed in the engine room of the same ship. The crew found those three guys after a few days but they only found the other guy when they opened the hold at the next port. The captain called those three guys and said ‘we have a dead body here, do you know him?’ The guys said they did not know him but then the one guy started to cry. You see Sean, that night when they stole the boy’s things, this one guy felt bad and took the clothes back to him. The dead person was wearing those clothes so he knew it was the same boy.”

I asked if he was the person who felt bad and he shook his head. “No, that was another guy.”

23 September 2011

Bumped into Daniel-Peter, whose once tiny English vocabulary (which had nevertheless contained the words “anchorage”, “fibreglass”, “first mate” and “consulate”) now enables unmediated conversation. It was an unplanned meeting, so the story he told about his life went down on the inside of a KFC burger box, the contents of which we’d just eaten sitting up at The Freezer.

My mother I like too much. Ma, she like me too much. Father made wrong, father no good. I have sister. Sister is die. Ma she sick, one month she never talk. She need blood so I make out blood. One day she look me, sit up and take me (grabs his shirt lapels in his fists), pull me down. I do like this (forcefully opens the fingers of one fist with the fingers of his other hand) and she die like that. I left Tanzania.
The story of his subsequent journey to South Africa had an adventure book quality, which I found dubious: lions at night with eyes like torches gorging on hapless fellow travellers in the wilds of northern Mozambique, and so forth. I steered the conversation back to the ships. Where had he hidden on the vessels he’d boarded? Daniel-Peter waggled a mini-loaf in the direction of a cargo ship in the Duncan Dock, clearly struggling for the right words. Then he had an idea. Reaching into a small blue rucksack he pulled out a large blue faux-leather 2010 diary, the corners of which had swollen and burst. This he opened first at the pastel-coloured continental maps that large diaries have at front and back, where he pointed out Dakar, Jakarta, Singapore, Dubai – some of the cities he had travelled to. On almost every other page he had drawn cargo and container ships in pencil and pen. He began jabbing at them with his callused fighters’ fingers, pointing out the engine room, the lifeboats, the tonnage hatches, even the bulbed area above the rudder – all established beach boy hiding places. Lastly he pointed out the portal to the anchor chain locker, and waved his hand to indicate danger.

“Fire.”

“Fire?”

“Anchor out, fire in,” he clarified, and to demonstrate what a gigantic anchor chain rapidly paying out through a small portal would do to a human body caught up in the action he scooped up a handful of dirt from between his feet, and threw it out over the N1.

3 January 2012

Not all the beach boys welcome our interest in their business, and some, like the crew that have made their beds among the restios on the Herzog Boulevard traffic island, are nakedly hostile.

The friendlier beach boys repeatedly insist there are no leaders in the community. Without doubt, though, the dominant member of the Hertzog Boulevard crew is Juma, a broad-nosed man in his late 20s, whose matted dreadlocks glint with colourful beads. Juma is as common a Tanzanian name as Dave is an English one, but the relationship that developed between Juma the seaman and Dave the photographer is fairly unique. They first met in the winter of 2011. Driving rain had forced the island boys to join the general population under Nelson Mandela Boulevard. Temporarily de-territorialised, Juma was chattier that day than he has been since. Without being asked to, he expounded on the dangers inherent in the beach boy life, foremost amongst which, he said, were the Chinese.

“Not Hong Kong Chinese, Mainland Chinese,” he clarified.

“If the ship crew is all Mainland China you have a problem because they might throw you overboard. On other ships there is a mixed crew – India, Greek-y, Korea – so this is not possible.”

Juma said that a beach boy who had spent time in Cape Town had been thrown overboard by a Chinese captain off the coast of Tanzania.

“He has become our hero because he survived and reported that ship. The captain was given his whole life in jail and the crew were given 20 years. You can still see the story on the internet,” he said, at which point he hauled off his jacket and his hoodie, and several more subsidiary layers, and presented us with the dolphin he’d had tattooed on a shoulder blade. It was, he said, his protection against drowning.

No doubt encouraged by his forthrightness Dave asked Juma if he would mind posing for a photograph. Juma nodded, pulled his layers back on, and smiled for the camera. After taking his portrait...
Dave asked if he could photograph the protective charm. Without hesitation Juma asked for money, and just as reflexively Dave refused. Dave and Juma have bumped into each other a dozen times since. On each occasion Dave has asked Juma if he wouldn’t mind taking his shirt off and just as reliably Juma has grinned and asked for money. For R50, possibly R20, Juma would happily expose his shoulder to the lens, but Cecil Rhodes will return to govern the cape before either man – the beach boy from Dar es Salaam or the photographer from Pietermaritzburg – will back off a principle.

8 June 2012

Adam called to say he had seen a ship he liked the look of in the Ben Schoeman Dock, and that he would probably be gone before the end of the day. We met at The Freezer, where he smoked the usual series of joints and unpacked his travel bag at my request.

Of the two 2l coke bottles of cloudy water that emerged first he said, “The glucose makes it like that. You must have glucose to survive.” Two packets of tennis biscuits followed some Jungle Oats yoghurt bars, and that was it for food and drink.

“It lasts me maybe ten days.”

He also had a torch, a short length of tubular metal and five or six empty plastic packets.

“The best place to hide is inside the cargo hold,” he explained.

“The only problem is they lock the hatch and don’t open it again. It’s dark down there so you need a light.”

The length of metal had a more vital function.

“When your food and water run out you need to use a small iron like this to hit the hatch, so that the sailors can hear and let you out. Otherwise you die.”

I had been under the impression that the beach boys aimed to remain hidden for the duration of their sea voyages.

“Never,” Adam corrected.

“That ship can be at sea for 30 days. You can’t carry that much food and water.”

He explained that any beach boy who successfully secretes himself onboard an outgoing ship will aim to remain hidden only until the ship is beyond the reach of the national coast guard before coming out into the open. It is at this point, he said, that the really difficult part of being a stowaway begins.

“The first thing the crew will do is report you to the Captain, and the first thing the captain will ask is ‘where did you shit in my ship?’ That is why I have these,” said Adam, holding an empty plastic bag up in each hand and flashing his wide boy grin, much the way he would, I imagined, when presenting a week’s worth of shit to some unfortunate ship master.
9 June 2012

Woken by a text message at 5:46am.

“Yoh i m going last night i jup on ship name bluu sky. pls keep on touch with me family. fhone my daughter mum pls. pls tell her what is hapen. Memory Card. sea power.”

Five minutes later the phone went again.

“Sean can feel the ship is moven braa sound so nice. alone this time and have no food. i have only wotar but still me go make.”

13 July 2012

Winter seems to draw out with Adam gone, and whenever I go driving on Nelson Mandela Boulevard, when clouds like giant box jellyfish drag skirts of rain across Table Bay, I can’t help but think of the beach boys below, huddled around their fires cooking rice in blackened pots, and of Adam, presumed dead by some of his friends. In fact, the whole seaward view has been permanently changed for me. Where before the light playing off the Atlantic tended to turn the flyovers, cranes and ships into an oil painting, now I see only cracks and chinks: bent palisade struts, tunnels, portals, hatches – not just flaws in a postcard perfect view but rents in a great system of human controls. And I see the human nobodies crawling through them, or lying curled up in dark spaces. Some lines from a poem by the late Stephen Watson keep playing in my head. In Definitions of a City, Watson’s imagination walks an old path on the face of Table Mountain. He fancies that the path pre-dates human settlement, and it then occurs to the poet that the paths he is walking do not end where the city begins,

that…should you follow these footpaths really not
That much further, they soon become streets,
Granite kerbs, electric lights. These streets soon
Grow to highways, to dockyards, shipping lanes.
You’ll see how it is – how these paths were only
An older version of streets; that the latter, in turn,
Continue the highways, and the quays of the harbour,
And even, eventually, the whale-roads of the sea.

I find myself missing Stephen, who was a friend and mentor until his sudden death from cancer last April. And I worry about Adam, my guide in inner city matters, a man whose experiences outreach even the poetic imagination.
15 September 2012

The sun appeared without warning today and lashed the peninsula with the sort of heat-bearing rays that unseal, lift and give voltage to the smell of every urine stain and beetle carcass on the city floor. It was a perfect day for lifting beach boy graffiti from the highway substructure because the Hertzog Boulevard boys who guard the entrance to the underpasses would be too busy washing themselves out of 250l paint drums to mind our snooping. Down under Nelson Mandela Boulevard Dave and I skirted a tree which had been turned into an eerie mobile of home-made coat hangers, and began transcribing slogans as defiant and crude as the men soaping their genitals on the island, at eye level with the passing vehicles.

Memory Card Me Like Ship No Like Pussy
Easy to Die tough to Get
Opportunity Never Come Twise
God Yucken Bless Mi
Don’t West Your Time
Sea never dry
Escape from cape
Nothing is tough accept tough is yourself
No pain to spain

Our next destination was the Lower Church Street bridge over the N1 highway, an area the beach boys call “Vietnam” on account of the number of palm trees growing from the verges there. The green embankments were abloom with drying clothes – exploded views, when seen from the elevation of the bridge, of the beach boys’ winter uniform: Peruvian beanie, hoodie, overshirt, second overshirt, undershirt, second undershirt, pair of baggy jeans, fingerless gloves and the notable absence of underpants and socks. In a rare sonic lull between passing vehicles we heard strains of reggae, and followed these beneath the bridge to find Rashidi Mwanza and his friend Ngaribo Masters wedged like overgrown pigeons up where the abutment wall met the underside of the bridge. They had just smoked a joint, and giggled uncontrollably when we spotted them. When we explained we were there for the graffiti they almost fell off their perch they laughed so hard, though they both agreed to look at our transcriptions once we were done.

TMK
CTR/018729/03
Junior No More
Some Win some Lost Some die

Looking over the slogans, the beachboys became serious.
“TMK is for Temeke in Dar es Salaam, where we are both from, and this number is a permit number. We write out permit numbers on the walls so that we don’t lose them,” Rashidi began.

“Who is Junior?” I asked, and Ngaribo, who had taught himself to make Rastafarian amulets out of beads and fishing gut, rubbed his hands together worriedly.

“Junior no more,” he said.

“He means Junior is dead,” Rashidi clarified.

“He was crushed last year by a truck, crossing by the highway to The Freezer. He was Ngaribo’s main man,” he added. Ngaribo looked away and for the first time I noticed his tattoo: three tears spilt from the corner of his right eye.

“Some lost, some win, some die. It’s no fucking joke,” said Rashidi.

28 June 2013

The Friday before the Obama visit, and what with the shuddering of Chinook rotors on test runs to the city from the US destroyer at anchor in False Bay, and the constant wailing of ‘blue-light brigades’ on the city’s highways, even documented, paid-up citizens are starting to feel a little hunted, a little ring-fenced.

I ventured down to the Grand Parade on the Friday afternoon before the vaunted visit and found it unusually devoid of beach boys, no doubt because the place was crawling with cops and security guards. By the Golden Arrow bus shelters at the northern end of the Parade I spied gap-toothed Suleiman Wadfa, more commonly called Senegal, on account of his dark skin. He was hurrying away from the fixed food stalls, looking concerned.

“The police are arresting everybody. Everybody. It’s because Obama is coming. There are already 50 or 60 beach boys in Caledon (police station),” he said, not stopping to talk.

The holding cells at Caledon Police Station are often crammed to capacity when dignitaries visit. Using a city vagrancy by-law the city’s Displaced Persons Unit rounds up as many undocumented immigrants as they can lay their hands on, only releasing them when the event or visit has passed. Senegal was on his way out of the city at the double step.

“The bridges are no good, the police are coming there too,” he said.

“I’m going to ‘the Kitchen’, nobody comes there.”

I’d often heard Adam talk about The Kitchen and knew it was somewhere between the N1 highway and the railways lines heading into the city, at the far end of the Culembourg industrial site. Try as I might, though, I’d never been able to find it.

“I’ll drive you,” I told Senegal, an offer I knew he wouldn’t refuse. He directed me down Main Road into Woodstock, and then down Beach Road in Woodstock’s industria to Tide Street, so-named because the sea had lapped there prior to the land reclaims of the 1940s. We came to rest beside a dumpster in the yard of an oil-recycling company.
“Through here,” said Senegal, working his broad chest through a slender gap between two bent palisade struts. We crossed the railway lines, which were overgrown with Purple Loosestrife, and came before two railway tunnels under the N1, running to the Duncan Dock. The graffiti on the visible tunnel walls was so dense it looked several inches thick. Beyond a few metres we couldn’t see. Smoke was billowing out of the nearest mouth.

When we were about 20m away Senegal said, “Wait here,” and continued in alone.

A Chinook thundered by overhead, followed by another, and when I looked down Senegal was walking towards me, accompanied by a slender, lighter-skinned person, who raised a hand in greeting.

“Haiyo Sean,” he said, grinning his golden grin.

“Haiyo Adam,” I said back.
Living Dangerously in Petroluanda

WORDS: ANTÓNIO ANDRADE TOMÁS
PHOTOGRAPHS: RUI CARLOS AFONSO

IN HIS HASTE TO SQUAT IN AN APARTMENT in downtown Luanda, António Macedo may have run into a group of those city dwellers, mostly white settlers, who began packing up to leave the city in May 1975. It was the end of almost 500 years of the so-called Portuguese Empire in Africa, and the settlers were making a hasty exit from a country that would very soon be ruled by former guerrilla fighters. The contents of their apartments and residences, in the words of the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski, were transferred from the “stone city to the inside of the wooden city” – to the thousands of crates standing in the main downtown streets, or in backyards, waiting to be shipped to Portugal, Brazil or South Africa.

I can imagine my uncle Macedo wandering amid the debris of a past civilisation, picking through the remnants to lay claim to a place in the phantom-like cement city that had been built for settlers. He was one of the million Angolans who squatted in the houses of the settlers before and after independence. Before claiming a place in the cement city, Macedo had lived in the musseque of Prenda with family members of some unknown and untraceable blood relation. With independence approaching, he moved to an apartment building in Coqueiros, a cozy neighbourhood only one block from the famous Marginal. That area of Luanda was flatteringly described by the author Gabriel García Marquez, in a visit to the country in 1976, as a “French Riviera” because of its pavements planted with palm trees in front of rows of glass buildings.

Like many other Angolans, Macedo did not occupy only one apartment. He was young and unmarried, but he took four apartments. His estate in this building consisted of one apartment on the first floor, another one on the third, and two more on the fourth. Besides these, he also controlled the little service rooms in the corridors, those spaces that colonial architects had designed for black caretakers. These cubicles, hardly big enough for a single bed, would be in high demand decades later when the city became a hub for speculators. For his part, Macedo would later use these rooms to accommodate family and friends.

As a soldier and an athlete of CODENM (the powerful military sports club), as well as a member of the ruling party, MPLA, Macedo was easily able to amass property. He had proudly represented Angola as a long-distance runner at the Olympic Games and in marathons around the world. He was well regarded by the political elite, and a recipient and distributor of gifts in a culture of patronage instituted by MPLA.
The Angolan state never recognised the property rights and claim to title of the squatters who occupied those buildings. Instead, through the Act covering the Nationalisation and Confiscation of Factory and Other Goods enacted in 1976, the state became the sole proprietor of a great part of the urban stock. In the first years after independence, with the abundance of urban space and the demonetisation of the economy, the settlers’ old apartments lost their value: they could be acquired, and exchanged almost for free. But things would change in the late 1980s. Luanda would become the final destination of thousands of Angolans fleeing the bleak economic prospects of the countryside, as well as of many foreigners coming to work in the country. Urban dwellers, or the tenants of the state, could still informally acquire apartments, as long as they could navigate the bureaucratic labyrinth of the Junta da Habitação Housing Board to get their names on the payment receipts. With this in mind, one of Macedo’s subletters on the third floor began to plot to get her hands on one of those receipts so as to transfer the apartment into her name. The neighbour quickly befriended Macedo’s daughter, who would often invite her over. One day, when Macedo was out, she managed to sneak in and stole the pile of receipts that he kept in a drawer. A few days later, when Macedo was about to set out for the Housing Board to pay the rent, he realised that the papers were missing. He had no doubt who had stolen them, and went downstairs to confront his subletter. She denied these charges, an altercation ensued and Macedo slapped her twice in the face.

Macedo then decided to sell the apartment. A few days later, a young man came to his house and told him that there were two potential buyers downstairs. Macedo went down to find two well-dressed men inside an expensive Audi, which in those years was the car most likely to be driven by a minister, MP or army general. Macedo was invited to get in and listen to their proposition. He acquiesced, but after taking his place in the middle of the back seat, between the two men, he suddenly realised that one of them was a Unita general who had recently been integrated into the unified national army.

The situation became eerie when the car stopped at Quinaxixe (in the city centre), to drop off the young man who had introduced the alleged buyers. Night was approaching and the city was getting darker. Suddenly, the men began to hit Macedo, beating him so badly that by the time the car arrived at its final destination, Cacuaco, a satellite city of Luanda, he had lost his senses. He felt nothing when he was dragged out of the car to a secluded place, dumped with his belly on the ground, and shot three times in his back with an AKM automatic rifle.

Almost miraculously, the bullets failed to kill him. He recovered consciousness in the middle of a pitch-black night, and somehow managed to drag himself to the closest village to get help. Once there, he had to first convince the villagers that his appearance was not the outcome of a failed robbery-theives were frequently subjected to vigilante justice – but, rather, a failed murder attempt. He was then taken to the Military Hospital in a pick-up truck, and admitted after paying a gasosa (bribe). After several months there he was discharged, and immediately filed charges against his third-floor neighbour and her associates. Nothing happened to her, since her material involvement in the affair was never proven. The young man who had come to his apartment, however, was sentenced to 15 years in prison, and died after 10. The general was never convicted, but he died a couple of years later, from natural causes. Macedo still lives in the same building and, ironically, earns a living by helping a group of Portuguese citizens recover property they lost after independence.

Today, Luanda is a city haunted by its colonial past. Walking through certain parts of the city one experiences a phantasmagoria akin to what Walter Benjamin found in the ruins of Naples, which he deemed a “transiency of empires”. For Benjamin, the decaying Naples was allegorical in its refusal to be reduced to the architectural forms that were triumphing all over Europe. And Luanda’s decay can also be decoded in such allegorical terms. Like Paris, the Angolan city’s centre was conceived to have a vibrant commercial life. But here the arcades have been tropicalised: they are open to the city. In the Quinaxixe Market, buildings are supported by poles, so as to both provide shade that protects
passersby from the irradiating sun and create a space for built-in stores. Even though a number of the stores have been refurbished and operate normally, a great many of these spaces are in ruins. Today, a number of the arcades are simply showcases of the infrastructural problems that afflict these buildings: extensive water damage and decay.

Anyone seeking to understand the negotiations of liminality in a Luanda on the verge of imminent collapse, need look no further than a specific complex, formed by five buildings with twelve apartments each, distributed in six storeys, located in the Municipality of Rangel, in the neighbourhood of Nelito Soares. This housing project, built in the early 1970s, signalled a shift in Portuguese urban policy, when housing for Africans began to take on the form of vertical constructions. These buildings were erected very quickly by the Portuguese, using a prefabrication technique that made it possible to assemble a pre-built iron structural grid, which would then be plastered with a thin layer of cement. As with many other buildings in Luanda, they were only inhabited after independence, when the Housing Board distributed the keys of these apartments to a number of its clerks. Now, 42 families (roughly 250 people) live there. Time has eaten away the cement that once covered the building. The decaying walls, with large holes through which the rusted iron structure is visible, recall a putrefying prehistoric animal. On the first floor, where the signs of decrepitude are most prominent, industrious tenants have tried to repair the damage. Parts of the iron structure have been welded to pieces of tyre rims. As almost everywhere else in Luanda, water damage was probably the key cause of the deterioration of this complex.

Inhabitants of the complex would often go for long stretches of time without running water, forcing them to fetch it from outside the building. Worse than the lack of water was its sudden appearance: it would start running from the taps with such pressure that pipes would explode, creating leaks, sometimes in parts of the steel casing. So now, with the walls eroding in most parts, some corridors have only the steel casing left. There are no more stairs, no more banisters, and, in some parts, not even a floor. In the worst parts of the buildings, the outer walls, which support the bathrooms, have collapsed. From the streets, those bathrooms – one stacked upon the other, some hidden by curtains and others not – can be seen, as if the whole building had been longitudinally cut open.

But it is not only necessity that forces the building’s inhabitants to live under such appalling conditions. Nobody in this complex wants to leave their apartments. A couple of years ago the tenants were approached by a developer – certainly one of those investors acting for people in power – to leave their apartments in exchange for a total payment of US$1 million to be divided among 42 families. In addition, they were offered houses in Zango, a social and urban development project on the outskirts of the city, where the government relocates squatters cleared from other areas. They rejected the offer. There is a sense of justice in the squatters’ reasoning: it is not fair for them to be relocated to a place that is situated 30 km further from the city centre than the place where they were born, and for which they have paid the rent for many years, especially because they would have to live alongside squatters who have never paid rent. But there is also greed in this story. The apartments they live in do not have any value; once they leave, the building will be bulldozed. But this patch of land, which could be the location for a factory, or a hotel, is worth a great deal, especially in an Angolan economy inflated by oil. But to get that money, which the squatters believe they deserve, they must first gamble with their own lives, by sticking around and living in unsafe conditions.

Prices for buying and renting space in Luanda have risen in a way that almost replicates the ups and downs of the only product that supports the Angolan economy: oil. However, the relationship between oil and real estate in Angola is more complex than this. It is true that in times of bonanza the demand for space in the city drives prices up. But it is no less true that Luandans in general have absorbed a kind of consciousness that derives from oil. As the “devil’s excrement”, oil has the effect of providing the nationals of the country who live off it with the impression of value production outside the realm of labour. Luanda, as we have seen, was for a great part squatted in by people who came from the musseques. For many
years, those houses had only use-value. Now that space in the city has become scarce, and those houses cost many hundreds of thousands dollars, the impression a number of Angolans have is, metaphorically, that they have struck oil.

In this way, a number of Luandans have founded business ventures that yield them profits without investment or labour. Or, to be more precise, living off rent has allowed a number of people to de-link labour from income. For the most part, however, this has been the only way to have access to services that are not available in Angola. Take, for instance, the case of Mr Lemos, a clerk at the Banco Nacional de Angola. He owns a residence in Bairro Azul, which has been rented, while the apartment he shares with his daughter and son was given to him through his job. What Lemos earns as a bank clerk and teacher at a private college is enough to meet his family needs. The money he garners from the residence he owns allowed him to pay the college fees of his sons in Portugal (where he has also purchased an apartment). Furthermore, the money from the rented house has also allowed his daughter to pay for expensive treatment for her serious health problems, which force her to spend long stretches of time in Lisbon.

To understand the question of the value of real estate and how this informal sector works, I followed two informal real estate brokers. The first is Abrãao, who spends his days in Quinaxixe Square, at a spot in front of the new branch of Banco de Poupança e Crédito. The other one is Agostinho, whom I met through a friend who was looking for an apartment to rent. The work of these agents is primarily to visit residents in a section of the cement city, from Mutamba to Quinaxixe, to offer their services. If the owners of the apartments are interested in renting their spaces, the agents seek clients for them, in exchange for a commission of 10 per cent of the contract.

Any one of the crumbling apartments, some of them simply in ruins, can be rented for US$1,500 per month. The prospective tenants have to advance a year or two of the contract rental. Furthermore, they are responsible for repairs, either because they have to undertake them in order to make the place liveable, or because this is stipulated in the contract. At any rate, this provision ends up guaranteeing the improvement and conservation of many of these buildings. In some of them, where more affluent residents have rented apartments, there are already functioning lifts.

If the real estate business is booming, it is partly due to the indirect investment the Angolan state is making in this sector. Its major clients are oil companies, and according to the terms negotiated between the state and the companies, each company pays the maintenance costs of its expatriate labour force. Thus, companies will not look at prices when it comes to finding places to accommodate their workers. Furthermore, this system has been replicated in many other areas of the economy, serving as the template for the entrenchment of a foreign labour force in the country.

Abrãao, the informal broker, is left with those clients who do not have the means to do business directly with the rental agencies. And the terms of business are always murky, even for one who knows the labyrinthine complications of the Housing Board. Abrãao is trying to legalise the ownership of his family house, a couple of blocks south from Quinaxixe, in a street where a number of owners have already sold their houses, for prices not less than US$1 million. Those houses have been demolished and in their place high-rises are springing up. Selling is always easier than renting, because sometimes tenants may refuse to leave, or may find ways to change the ownership title of the houses they have rented (as Macedo’s tenant once attempted).

I learned these realities first-hand when I looked to Abraão to help me find an apartment. We went to visit a couple of places, and then we happened upon a studio apartment in Mutamba. I met the owner, who was sharing the apartment with three or four other young women. We agreed on a six-month contract, set at US$1,000 per month. On my way out, I met other brokers with other clients, and at least one of them was from a real estate agency. The next day I got a phone call from the owner, to nullify the agreement. Later
Abrão told me that people in Luanda are reluctant to rent their places to Angolans, who are more likely to know how to navigate the bureaucratic system and grease the palms of the bureaucrats at the Housing Board. The owners might also be trying to avoid having to pay for the intermediary – if the owner does not want to pay the commission, they simply talk directly to the prospective renter, which exposes the precariousness of Abrão’s work.

This was the situation in the housing system in Angola until 2008, when the country held elections for the second time since independence in 1975. In various assessments of the conditions in which people were living, the government came to the conclusion that the problem was a scarcity of housing, and it was agreed that speculation could be brought down if the city increased its urban stock. However, the devaluation of Luanda’s real estate is due less to the expansion of the urban housing stock than to the global crisis that rippled through the Angolan economy in 2009. Some economists claim that speculation in the housing sector in Luanda has more to do with bureaucracy and corruption than with the economic relationship between supply and demand. In other words, although the urban crisis is an economic problem, the solution sought has been political.

During the election campaign, President José Eduardo dos Santos made a bold announcement: that between 2008 and 2012 his government would build one million houses. Details of the mega-operations were only given a month after the election, when Angola hosted World Habitat Day at which, in the presence of the head of UN-Habitat, Dos Santos not only reiterated his electoral promise but also provided more specifics on his plan to restructure the city. At stake was the need to eliminate the slums by upgrading them into planned, formal and yet affordable housing for the poor. A government agency was created, the Program for Management and Projects, which would see to the construction of 115,000 houses. The private sector would be responsible for 120,000, the cooperatives (such as that of the Veterans) for 80,000, while the lion’s share, 685,000, would fall into the murky and unspecified category of “Directed auto-construction”.

Kinaxixi Market, Luanda, 1991
It is expected that the elimination of the slums as proposed by Dos Santos will bring a profound realignment of the fabric of the city, in the same way that the war and the economic crisis had an impact on the urban environment. Those who flocked to Luanda built their houses in every available space: within other houses, in buildings, in public gardens and near deactivated railroads. Concomitantly, those years were also marked by the emergence of a middle class with very particular tastes in terms of housing and locations. Creating and controlling the desire of those groups has thus become a powerful technique of political control.

The architectural form that predominates in many of the projects of Luanda Sul, a veritable satellite city in the south of the capital, signals the recent transformations of forms of Angolans’ habitation. Whereas during late colonialism, and in the first decade of independence, the city’s predominant architectural forms were either the housing block and the single family residence in the cement city, or the shack in the musseques, Luanda Sul brought about a radical innovation: the gated community, locally called the condominium, protected by barbed wire and private security firms. Inside these walls inhabitants can enjoy some urban amenities that the city no longer offers, such as gardens, parks and sometimes, as in the most affluent ones, swimming pools and tennis courts. This urban model was imported primarily by South African construction firms, in their first experiences of internationalisation with the post-apartheid normalisation of economic relations with neighbouring countries.

Luanda Sul, in the beginning, looked like a viable solution to the problem of speculation, since it was anticipated that the increase in housing supply would bring down prices. But it only worked in the first years, while the number of inhabitants remained relatively low. It was conceived as a residential area, with limited commercial services. Those who moved to that part of the city faced a daily and congested commute to town for work and to take their children to school, because the business area was still located in downtown Luanda. Luanda Sul had to be totally re-planned, not only to accommodate roads and freeways, but, more importantly, to accommodate a number of services so as to prevent its inhabitants from having to go to Luanda proper on a daily basis.

Recently, in a newspaper interview, a leading Angolan economist, Alves da Rocha, made the case that the expansion of Luanda southwards (Luanda Sul) has been the main device for siphoning off financial resources from the state to a handful of private entities. The modalities of those transfers have varied from simple to elaborate. A high-ranking member of MPLA and of the government, for instance, recently explained how he became wealthy by moving to the new house given to him on account of the job he holds, and renting his old house – in Alvalade, one of the most expensive neighbourhoods of Luanda – probably to an oil company for a premium price that can reach US$200,000 annually.
Angolan laws concerning foreign investment are very permissive, and allow holders of public office to do business with foreign investors. Portuguese firms investing in Angola have among their board members various Angolan politicians. Furthermore, Angola does not produce construction materials locally, and every item (including cement) is imported. The way to accumulate funds here is to overprice construction materials and transfer the difference to private accounts in Western banks.

One of the consequences of corruption and the traffic of influence in the construction sector is that it is only the state, through state-owned companies, and oil companies that can invest in this sector. As such, housing in these new projects is so expensive that very few Angolans can afford it, thus reinforcing distribution as an important political tool. For instance, the market price for condominium housing for the middle class is between US$200,000 and US$400,000. This type of housing is out of reach for the Angolan middle class, unless they have access to a bank loan; loans are very restricted and have prohibitive interest rates attached.

So, as a member of the middle class, the only way to access a house is through a working relation with one of the state companies, such as Sonangol. But this is political. The MPLA forces workers of state-owned oil companies to become party members. Moreover, not even the urban poor, those who apparently have nothing to trade, are out of reach of this political juggernaut. For instance, in 2010, after several months of indecision, the government finally announced the official price at which the social housing would be sold: US$40,000. And this in a country where the beneficiaries are unemployed and underemployed, or, if they are employed probably make about US$100 per month, the official minimum wage.

In a recent development, Sonangol was given control over the housing construction project, through a newly created subsidiary called Sonangol-Imobiliária (Sonangol-Real Estate). This political decision shows that the Angolan government intends to develop the housing sector along the same lines as oil production. Oil is extracted offshore, by foreign companies, and the vast majority of the population is ignorant of the legal niceties that preside over its production and the money that it brings to the country. Technology and a specialised labour force are imported. It is likely that the same will hold true for construction projects, which will be given (as has been the case so far) to Portuguese, Brazilian and Chinese construction firms.

The best example to illustrate this is the construction of the housing project Kilamba City. The Angolan government, through Sonangol, contracted the China International Trust and Investment Corporation (CITIC), and together they launched the US$3.5 billion construction project to house 200,000 people. One of the most ambitious projects developed by the Chinese in Angola, it involved 10,000 workers, of whom only 4,000 were Angolans. The first phase of the project was inaugurated in July 2011 by President dos Santos. Kilamba, located 20 km south of Luanda’s centre, stretches over an area of 52 km².
and is expected to add 20,000 residential apartments and 246 business units to Luanda’s urban stock. Plans also include 24 preschools, nine primary schools and eight high schools. It will also be equipped with two electrical substations, 77 transformer stations, water supply stations, a sewage treatment plant and infrastructure for drainage.

It is not only from the point of view of infrastructure that Kilamba will be self-sufficient – and cut off from the rest of the country. The management of Kilamba will be rooted in an idea that has gained currency in the global South, pertaining to the formation of charter cities, special urban zones accorded their own administrative status and special by-laws, which according to the urban scholar Filip de Boeck “would allow governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country.”

If profit (by speculation) is the essence of charter cities, Kilamba may be different in this regard. Ultimately, Sonangol is not particularly interested in making profit out of real estate. But the government, through Sonangol, may exploit the distribution of housing and space for economic ventures and political gain. According to Bornito de Sousa, the Minister of Internal Affairs, it will be the first rehearsal in the government’s attempt to decentralise the state administration, through the formation of autarchies, or local power structures. These autarchies will have financial autonomy, elect their own management bodies and produce by-laws. When Joaquim Marques was appointed, by Dos Santos, as “President” of the administration of Kilamba – a position that does not exist in Angolan administrative law (as cities are administered by governors) – the political contours of Kilamba became more visible.

The transformation of material space into political space deprives people of the possibility of making claims over any occupation of land outside politics. However, until the arrival of this ethical horizon, the political community will always have the power to deprive its members of their rights. The Luanda case at hand shows the extent to which the elimination of disposition of usufruct – the right to use or enjoy a thing possessed – from the legal system erases the distinction between politics and land tenure. Political space, then, not only allows the government to conduct forced removals, but also opens up new ways through which people can make claims on land. The new class of squatters in formation is no longer comprised of those who expect to legalise their occupational rights in the future, but people who expect to be given accommodation by virtue of occupying the land that the state has earmarked for various purposes, such as urban development projects, infrastructure or business ventures developed by private interests under the umbrella of the state.

Since the end of the civil war, the Angolan government has conducted major slum clearance campaigns. According to Human Rights Watch, more than 3,000 houses were destroyed in only four years between 2002 and 2006, a crisis which affected more than 30,000 people. Although the number of people evicted in the period after 2006 is not known yet, it will probably have increased. This is partly because the Constitution has brought a new wave of removals. For instance, when in March 2010 Isaac dos Anjos, the governor of the province of Huíla, ordered the forced removal of thousands of people, he backed his action with reference to the recently approved Constitution. Furthermore, the assumption that people forcefully removed are outright squatters might be misleading.

When the Land Law was first discussed, in 2002, a window of three years was included, so as to allow squatters to legalise their occupation rights. However, because the law was poorly regulated, this provision was not implemented or reinforced. Consequently, very few people have taken advantage of it. Some people, like residents of the municipality of Kilamba Kixi, had bought title deeds from the local administrations that were nullified when orders were given for the destruction of these informal settlements. Let me now illustrate both situations with some examples.
In April 2009, violent tides once again swept across the Island of Luanda. These tides occur with such seasonal regularity that they have been integrated into the popular culture not only of the communities of the Island of Luanda, but of the city of Luanda itself. These tides, called calemas, have to be appeased by gift-giving ceremonies, in which fishermen in canoes throw food onto the surface of the sea to feed the Kianda (or spirit of the waters). This ceremony, apparently pre-Christian, is so important that it has entered into the Catholic cosmogony. A church called Nossa Senhora do Cabo (Our Lady of Cape) was built in homage to Kianda on the Island of Luanda. In the first years of independence, these ceremonies were abolished on the grounds that they were promoting obscurantism and devil worship. But when calemas started taking a heavy toll on fishermen, they were re instituted. So, the tides that swept the island that day in 2009 were part of the fishermen’s everyday lives. But this time, the provincial government acted swiftly to clear the area. As such, the entire Avenue Mortala Mohamed – the main paved artery on the island – was evacuated. According to Sebastião Vemba, a reporter for Novo Jornal, in less than 24 hours the provincial government had organised a convoy of several trucks provided by the Casa Militar. A woman who had just lost her baby was forced to board one of the trucks with its corpse. Alongside her were thousands more people (roughly 700 families) with their wares, clothes, furniture, appliances, and other things they could salvage from the tides, first, and then from the destruction by the brigades sent by the Casa Militar. After a trip of more than two hours, people were left in Zango, in a sort of refugee camp. Like many others displaced by the destruction of their houses, they were relocated more than two hours from their workplaces, left to live in tents under the rains, and their children were left without schools. The vast majority of these people are still living in tents, a provisional situation that has become permanent. Thus, a temporary response to a natural disaster has become the alibi for forced relocation.

Later on, the governor of Luanda, Francisa do Espírito Santo, announced that the cleared area in the Island of Luanda would be part of the extension of a recreational project to offer space in the city for a number of leisure activities. A vast pavement area has been built to accommodate restaurants, bars and other ventures for Luanda’s nightlife. As elsewhere in the city, the logic of these removals is to displace the urban poor and build urban infrastructure for the middle class and the burgeoning national bourgeoisie. Informal settlements in Iraq and Bagdad (named after their Middle Eastern counterparts, probably for being places that received many people fleeing from war in the countryside) were also cleared so that the housing project Nova Vida, a middle class neighbourhood for government officials, could be expanded. The destruction of these settlements in July 2009 was even more merciless than that of the Island of Luanda. With no notice, bulldozers (30 vehicles again from Casa Militar) did the job, leaving no one time to save furniture or clothes. This time, the police also encountered a woman giving birth, and waited for her to finish before taking her out and destroying her house. Those displaced staged a protest whose destination was Cidade Alta, the presidential palace. But while they were on their way, a heavy contingent of the National Police, with armoured cars and dogs, dissuaded them from continuing. Later on, one of those residents would tell a journalist that he “had never seen so many armed men in [his] entire life”.

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During colonialism and in the first years of independence, the area of Boavista was the city’s refuse dump. By the 1980s, squatters had taken it over. Boavista, home to thousands of people, is an informal settlement strategically located between Port of Luanda and Roque Santeiro. It would not have expanded without the market that provided squatters with the means to eke out a living: by stealing commodities in the port to be sold in the market; by supplying the market with a variety of services, such as loading and unloading and carrying goods; and with whatever people can keep at their houses to rent to sellers, such as chairs, shades and generators. As the shacks of Boavista have been literally built on refuse and sand, landslides are a constant occurrence. Every year, during the rainy season, a few people die when the ground on which their houses are built collapses. However, unlike the situation in other places, the removal of the Boavista settlers has not been treated as a priority by the government. According to informal conversations I had with a number of residents, the distribution of houses for them is a matter of time. Moreover, local government officials have worked in
that settlement, registering the households and allocating numbers to the shacks. Counting and recognising these houses have given them value, turning them into commodities or assets to be bought and sold. But to be given a house requires more than proof of registration: squatters have to live there. So now, in Boavista, there is no longer a distinction between those who moved to that part of the city because they had nowhere to go and those who have purchased houses so as to get accommodation in Zango. What they share is the experience of living in danger.

Among those drawn to Boavista by the allure of a new house in Zango is my cousin Zezito. Zezito was born not very far from Boavista, on the other side of the road that divides the Sambizanga municipality from Barrocas (a waste dump). When he became a taxi driver, he moved to Kwanza, a neighbourhood where a significant number of people work directly or indirectly in the taxi business by fixing cars, selling parts, driving, and so on. When he heard of an imminent relocation of Boavista’s residents, he purchased a very derelict shack, for US$2,000. When I reconnected with him during my return to Luanda in 2008, he was in the process of fixing the house.

One Saturday morning, Zezito gathered his friends, his business associate Bari, a native of Guinea-Conakry, his helper Rei Leão, and many other youths in the neighbourhood to help him fix his house. They climbed the hill to the market, to get a wooden door, half a dozen sheets of corrugated tin, nails and so on. They passed through infested alleys that smelled of rotten food and urine, where the most dangerous burglars of the market gazed at them (men who would kill a stranger on the spot for a cheap cellphone). They then passed through a clearing, where they could see children and adults defecating. And then they had to go down the hill, through the zigzag passageway that people have opened through the heaps of refuse.

Zezito’s house is halfway down the hill. It is literally built on refuse. This became apparent when his friends started to dig a big hole, to serve as a toilet: an archaeological cut through layers of Angolan practices of consumption over time. Hundreds of cans of imported soft drinks, along with many plastic bags, were extracted from the hole. After that, a petrol barrel was placed about a metre deep in the hole, and its surface covered by a piece of wood pierced with a little hole. “You can do your thing and it never smells, since the heat dries everything,” one of Zezito’s neighbours told me.

Zezito did not have money to invest in the construction of the house, so I decided to help him. My plan was to move in with him as soon as the house was ready. As I also wanted to observe the process of building a house in such circumstances, I gave him money to buy sacks of cement. I went to the market with him and he bought four sacks (US$150). We then paid two men to haul the cement down the hill. A couple of days later, Zezito hired two experienced neighbours as masons to make the floor. For the door and the walls of corrugated tin, he did not have to pay for labour, only providing his friends with marijuana and whisky. But when it came to the floor, things were different. His neighbours were professionals who had held formal jobs as masons. They finished the floor on a Sunday morning, after paying a group of children and women to fetch sand from nearby, further weakening the ground. Only with the floor done could Zezito move in, for a cemented floor brings more stability to a house, reducing the risk of a collapse.

Zezito moved to this house a while after I left Luanda in November 2008. He lived there with his wife for almost two years. When I went back to Luanda in December 2010, he had split with his wife and moved to Viana, another neighbourhood. He had someone taking care of the house, and he expects to be given a house if the government decides to relocate Boavista’s residents.

Boavista is quintessentially a political space. More specifically, it is a space of exception. The transformation of the waste dump into an informal settlement is only possible in the context of a particular understanding of rights and law. Boavista is not a place over which property rights can be claimed. And yet its occupancy allows settlers to make demands for a relocation to decent accommodation. But for this to happen, they must first live in danger.
City Building in Post-Conflict, Post-Socialist Luanda
Burying the past with phantasmagorias of the future
ANNE PITCHER, MARISSA MOORMAN

AFTER FOOD AND WATER, everybody needs shelter. At least for the last century, politicians on the left or the right, in the East or the South, have vowed to supply it. The delivery of one million homes seems to be the magic number around which governments erect elaborate promises of public housing and the financial and physical security to be had when one is finally a homeowner. Back when state retrenchment was positively heretical rather than simply hegemonic, the Thatcher government in the UK stridently asserted in 1986 that it would produce one million new homeowners from the sale of council houses to sitting tenants. Nearly a quarter of a century later, the grandly named, Minha Casa, Minha Vida (My House, My Life) program launched by the Lula administration in Brazil pledged to build a million homes for low-income families.

After three decades of conflict in which destruction rather than construction was the order of the day, the Angolan government began to devise its own ambitious housing program following the conclusion of the civil war in 2002. Eventually, the magic number appeared. Perfectly timed to coincide with the 2008 election campaign – the first election to take place following the war – President José Eduardo dos Santos promised to build one million homes in four years.1 Angola only has 18 million inhabitants, and nearly 40 per cent of them live in and around Luanda. Owing to the war, steady rural to urban migration and natural population growth, about three quarters of the residents in the capital live in informal settlements with poor housing and sanitation.2 Until a few years ago, those whose housing conditions were comparatively better off still lived in homes that had not enjoyed infrastructural repairs for 30 years.

Adopting the imagery of illusion rather than the deductive logic expressed in the Brazilian slogan, the government branded its housing policy, Meu Sonho, Minha Casa (My Dream, My House) and proceeded quickly to erect the institutional architecture to advance its goals. It reorganised government units to focus on urban planning and large-scale revitalisation projects in the capital (though without ever adopting an overarching master plan). To oversee the residential component, it anointed a prominent military general, who is a close advisor to the President, to direct the impressive sounding Cabinet of National Reconstruction (CNR). After the general was accused of being involved in a corrupt business deal involving the importation of hundreds of vehicles for use by his new office, the government changed its mind and handed over the core functions of the CNR to Sonangol Imobiliaria e Propriedade (SONIP), the real estate arm of Sonangol, the state oil company. The core function, it turned out, was not reconstruction but real estate. Using its vast revenue from the sale of oil, the government hired architects from Israel and South Africa and construction firms from Portugal, Brazil and China. It shipped in workers from Portugal, China and Vietnam, and imported everything from nails and cement to glass.

Especially in the capital, cranes are as ubiquitous as street traders and no journey through the city and its environs is possible without interruptions and delays owing to “obras em curso” (works in progress). This frenetic activity is financing a massive building boom not only of houses, but also of office complexes, hotels, hospitals, malls, monuments, and even entirely new cities.

Infamous among these new projects is New Kilamba City, recalling the kimbundu term of endearment for the first president of Angola, Agostinho Neto. Kilamba is a wholly conceived, planned city located roughly 20km southeast of Luanda’s downtown just off the recently repaved dual carriageway, the Via Espresso. Kilamba was financed with a US$3.5 billion credit line from the Chinese government through its Industrial and Commercial Bank. The Hong Kong-based China International Fund (CIF), which recently built two towers in Luanda’s city centre, built Kilamba using Chinese and Angolan workers. But Kilamba is no ordinary public housing project designed to put roofs over the heads of the poor and downtrodden. Rather, like many parallel city building projects elsewhere in Africa or Asia, or Latin America for that matter, its master plan calls for schools, shops, basketball courts, soccer fields, paved sidewalks, manicured gardens and even recycling bins for paper and plastic. Its 20,000 units of four, eight, and 12 storeys are expected to house 100,000 middle-class residents when operating at full capacity. Opened with much fanfare by President dos Santos in 2011, the site soon became a required stop on the itineraries of visiting dignitaries, who posed happily for photos in front of freshly painted buildings. In advance of the 2012 elections, Kilamba and the government’s other signature building projects seemed to offer visible proof that the government’s 2008 pledge to build one million homes before the next election was no hollow fantasy.

3. Claudia Gastrow notes that housing and urban requalification plans have been on the books since the mid-1990s though most were not initiated until after the war ended. Gastrow, C., (2014) “Negotiated Settlements: Housing and the Aesthetics of Citizenship in Luanda, Angola,“ PhD Dissertation, University of Chicago, pp.97-100
5. Croese, S., op cit: 22
8. Anne Pitcher, Site Visits, Kilamba, May-June 2012 and June 2014
In the project to revitalise Luanda, Kilamba is almost dreamlike. It mimics China’s many pop-up cities in its configuration, size and the speed of construction. In fact, when we showed pictures of Kilamba to a colleague who works on housing in China, she exclaimed, “When were you in China?” Built in less than three years, it seems to have risen like a phoenix, almost overnight, on land previously scraped clean by bulldozers following the forced removal of an informal settlement. Organised in a fairly standard grid pattern, the configuration of Kilamba displays a quintessentially modernist aesthetic. It could just as easily be in the US or China. The city contains 27 blocks in total. Each block contains about 27 buildings and a total of 740 units. At the core of each block are several pairs of 10 or 12 story buildings ringed by buildings of eight stories that are flanked in turn by buildings of four stories. In the interior of each block, there is a school or a sports field; a park, a fitness centre or a clinic, although not all of these amenities are fully operational. The bottom floor of each building in the block is reserved for shops or the local political administration.

The presence of carefully laid out, orderly buildings, manicured lawns, broad boulevards, clean sidewalks, covered bus stops and working street lights contrasts sharply with the “old city” of Luanda, which, despite a stately beauty dating back to the 16th century and much ongoing construction, displays the scars of conflict and neglect. Many of its old stone buildings are derelict. In some cases, only the facades remain, propped up by rusty columns anchored in overgrown weeds and grass. Beautifully crafted, wrought iron balconies and railings, now rusted and broken, serve as jarring reminders of the wealth accumulated by the small settlement of Portuguese and Brazilian slave traders who resided there during the 18th and 19th centuries. Buildings adorned with art deco logos and graphics from the 1930s sitting uncomfortably alongside 1960s hyper-rational, high rise cement monstrosities architecturally date the long, oppressive presence of the Portuguese colonial administration and metropolitan businesses.10 Open sewage runs on narrow, potholed streets and dumpsters, where they exist at all, overflow with trash. Modernist gems of the early 20th century, like the Kinaxixi market, have been torn down to make space in the downtown for a new shopping centre. Newly erected stoplights often blink or are ignored by throngs of drivers whose cars crowd the city streets.

The stark contrast between old Luanda and Kilamba sends two clear and powerful messages to both Angolan residents and visiting dignitaries: first, the government has a vision for the future and second, the government can deliver on that vision. Given the context in which these two messages are being articulated, their effects are potentially quite powerful. If they are successful, they bury a complicated, torturous, divisive past by delivering a future that is spatially and materially distinct from what went before. Ironically, such a radically different material future may indeed sustain one of Africa’s longest serving ruling parties – once one of the continent’s loudest, proudest, and strongest redoubts of socialism. Before discussing the messages and their reception, let’s look at the historical context.

continued on pg. 128
BYLINE
Kilamba City, Luanda, 2011, Santa Martha
Transatlantic hauntings

For at least five centuries Luanda and its hinterland have been part of the world economy that fueled the expansion of capitalism. In its earliest days and until the middle of the 19th century, Luanda was a key port in the transatlantic slave trade. Like Liverpool or London, what Ian Baucom calls “specters of the Atlantic” mark its past and shape its present. These are the ghosts of Africans enslaved and lost in the middle passage but also the hauntings, and the ties that bound the diaspora and the metropole to fuel capitalist accumulation. Industry in the metropole churned with raw materials produced by slaves ripped from Angola and transported to plantations in the new world. But human bodies were not only sold and traded like sugar or cotton, but also, just as grotesquely, they greased the wheels of finance capital through insurance premiums and pay outs. Losses of these valuable “commodities” could be financially determined and monetarily compensated. And, as Baucom shockingly documents in the case of the Africans who were thrown overboard from the British slave ship, The Zong, their lives could be sacrificed in the pursuit of insurance fraud.

In a conversation with the journalist and writer, Lara Pawson, about her research on Angola’s attempted coup in May 1977, an Angolan man tied the losses incurred by the slave trade to the country’s present. He speculated that those Angolans lost to the middle passage as well as the thousands of others killed in Angola’s recent conflicts had washed out to sea. They had become the source of Angola’s underwater black gold.

“When the oil dries up, it’ll be a good sign.” The metaphorical suggestion here is that Angola’s current oil wealth is intimately bound to a centuries-old circulation of capital, trade and bodies across the Atlantic. Today the Angolan government negotiates credit lines and tenders contracts with China and the West using oil-backed loans and mortgaging future oil production for present infrastructure projects, chief among them housing projects like Kilamba.

At the height of the transatlantic slave trade, Luanda was one of the most significant exit ports of enslaved Africans. Briefly dominated by the Dutch, the Portuguese crown and Brazilian commercial capital controlled Luanda. The city grew in fits and starts, its demography fluctuating with demand across the Atlantic. Luanda’s population, including Portuguese and Brazilian traders, spoke Kimbundu, one of the languages from this region. Africans recently arrived from the interior, Brazilians, some Portuguese, and residents with longer tenure in the city (both African and mixed descent) constituted the urban population, concentrated around the bay. Fishing villages of the axiluanda, the oldest populations in this area, dotted the island across the bay from the city. Traders, whether European, Brazilian or African, lived in the finest and largest stone homes in the baixa (lower city) with interior courtyards that often held those enslaved before embarkation, while Africans newly arrived to the city lived in mud and daub constructions. By the end of the 19th century the slave trade gave way to “legitimate commerce” and the General Act of the Berlin Conference came into effect. Yet in Luanda, a creole elite of mixed descent and Africans held positions of power in the civil service, military and clergy. In 1932, with the coup that brought António Salazar and his Estado Novo (New State) to power, the Portuguese presence in Luanda intensified. Racial segregation of urban space came to characterise the second half of the 20th century and the period of Luanda’s greatest growth (prior to the post-2002 boom).

12. Baucom, I., op cit
13. Pawson, L., (2014) In the Name of the People: Angola’s Forgotten Massacre, IB Tauris, p.177 (quoted with author’s permission)
Salazar, and his successor Marcelo Caetano, centralised colonial administration in the metropole, instituted a policy of white immigration to the colonies and marginalised the former elites politically, economically and spatially. A boom in coffee production in the 1950s, coupled with increased white immigration from Portugal and growing rural to urban migration, led to rapid growth in Luanda after World War II. During this period, roughly 160,000, people lived in Luanda, yet, by 1974 the number had grown to 600,000. Urban planning served the colonial administration: planners and policymakers designated the built urban core or cidade de cimento (cement city) as the commercial and white residential areas and the musseques (sandy places) on the city’s outskirts for African residents.

In this process of urban development, the former creole elites lost their jobs, their property in the baixa and their cultural capital vis-à-vis the colonial state. A set of binary oppositions later differentiated the cidade de cimento from the musseques: European versus African residential spaces; formal from informal settlements; and avenues of asphalt from paths of sand.

At Independence in 1975, encouraged by egalitarian promises embedded in socialist discourse, returning exiles and refugees from the anti-colonial war (numbering in the thousands) and some musseque residents moved into homes abandoned by the Portuguese. But the civil war that followed halted urban construction even as urban migration continued and increased. By the time the war ended in 2002, an estimated 3.5 million people lived in the city; now six or seven million people reside in the capital – 75 per cent of them in the musseques. 17

In the late colonial period, the musseques had been home to cultural elites and new migrants, the birthplace of nationalism, of a vibrant cultural scene, of new, urban music and of a cosmopolitan sense of angolanidade (angolanness), but by 2002, all of this was under tremendous strain. The civil war that followed the anti-colonial war, the economic crisis post-independence, failed socialist planning, the isolation of Angola by the West, and tight-fisted control of oil revenues by a small oligarchy had left musque residents to fend for themselves. Informal systems of land tenure and property rights were adopted and respected; emergent informal markets thrived alongside state controlled stores until the free-market was unleashed by economic reform; and residents found innovative means to survive alongside overcrowding, poor infrastructure, unemployment and unrest. The war excused the lack of political, economic and infrastructural change; but with the signing of the Luena Memorandum between the rebel group, UNITA, and the government to end the war in 2002, popular expectations for improvements in infrastructure and the supply of housing swelled.
Building the Modernist City

With the war’s end, the government has shifted its attention to state-building. There are many elements to the strategy of securing its own political and economic future and strengthening the party and the state: city building and residential housing delivery are critical components of what Tomas calls the “regime of relationality” that the government is trying to forge between state and society.\(^{18}\) As we mentioned, the building of Kilamba conveys two messages: first, the government has a vision for the future and second, it can deliver on that vision. These messages communicate that the government is capable and modern – it has rejected Luanda’s preindustrial past with its narrow, irregular streets and its wrought iron.\(^{19}\) It has embraced icons of modernity: shopping malls, business parks and suburbs. It rejects the so-called disorder of the musseque and the mussequification of the city centre.\(^{20}\) In doing so, the Angolan government is following in the architectural footsteps not only of iconic architects such as Le Corbusier, but also of contemporary architects in Israel, South Africa and Brazil. As Holston observes in his analysis of Brasilia, “By asserting the primacy of open space, volumetric clarity, pure form, and geometric abstraction, modernism not only initiates a new vocabulary of form, more radically it inverts the entire mode of perceiving architecture”.\(^{21}\) Crass functionalism and a strict linear order replace the apparent chaos and disorder of older cities.

Like Brasilia, Kilamba seems out of context, official engineering plopped down in the middle of nowhere. The style is imported, more associated with Guangzhou or Shenzhen than the environs of Luanda. The horizontal and vertical enclosure of space in repetitious blocks of glass and concrete expressed in Kilamba, along with the succession of towers, complexes, centralidades, and condos link Luanda figuratively and architecturally to these other new urban spaces in other places in the world. In his inauguration of Kilamba, President dos Santos emphatically stressed points of connection with other similar constructions around the globe and declared that urban renewal would make Luanda one of the largest and most beautiful cities in the world. The rhetoric used to market Kilamba to outsiders announces that Luanda is a cosmopolitan city; it is a global city, a world city.\(^{22}\)

Yet, Kilamba is not entirely foreign or global in its orientation. It turns on a modernist aesthetic – the desire for order and clarity – expressed in pockets of Luanda’s urban centre built by architects of Portuguese and Angolan birth in the 1960s.\(^{23}\) For more local consumption, the construction of Kilamba is an essential element of a re-packaged discourse that yokes the government’s previous socialist inclinations to a new capitalist logic. Consider, for example, a promotional video for Kilamba that boldly asserts “a model of modernity and social responsibility – Kilamba City: a reason for all of us to be proud!”\(^{24}\) Luandans – whether they live in the musseques or in apartments in the downtown – desire modernity, with which they equate consistent electricity and water, functioning elevators, and access to shopping and transport. These conditions exist only for the wealthy few, who can provide a private supply system of generators, cisterns, and trucked in water for themselves in the downtown. Private infrastructures strain urban life. They physically and materially endanger the buildings and spaces they make livable (the fire

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19. Even projects to maintain the old city use joint private/state reconstruction instead of historic preservation, as was the case with the Palácio de Dona Ana Joaquina, rebuilt from the ground up by Banco Africano de Investimentos (The African Investment Bank), whose board is full of high-powered business and political figures.
22. On the President’s speech for the opening of Kilamba and associated media hype, see “Kilamba City” http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma8e4NqNMig. Accessed 20 July, 2013. As Jennifer Robinson (2006) maintains, global and world city aspirations are mostly “regulating fictions” more imagined than real, but governments and urban planners continue to articulate the vision nonetheless
department declared the back courtyard of the building where one of us lived in Luanda a fire hazard due to the excessive number of water pumps, cisterns, and gas storage tanks there). And the noise of the neighbour’s generator and the gas fumes it produces as others sit, sweat, or toss and turn the night swatting at mosquitos, breed social stress and fisticuffs.

By linking modernity and social responsibility, the video implies that a modern space is also a socially responsible place, free from chaos and disorder, free from war, free from social protests (something which Luanda has not been in recent years). By tying these two concepts together in a modernist project, Angolan elites are joining their counterparts in other countries and other eras. City governments and urban planners in 19th century Europe and 21st century South Africa have also tried to control “unplanned growth” and “unruly development” by reconfiguring urban space. In a country that was a socialist republic for 20 years, social responsibility inflects in particular ways. The ruling party must refashion its former incarnation as a worker’s party into something fresh. It must harness old values to new, moneymaking projects, to satisfy not only Angola’s growing business class, but also its foreign investors from Brazil and China. Titles of address obey a similar rationale. In the socialist period the president was addressed simply as Comrade President. Today, in the new era of state and city building, he is Comrade President, the Architect of Peace, the builder-in-chief – as publicity for the 2012 elections boldly proclaimed.

Kilamba as Phantasmagoria

Kilamba might demonstrate that the government can fulfil its promises of modernity but, unfortunately, the vision of constructing one million houses in communities such as Kilamba began to vanish almost as soon as politicians and planners conceived it. Before the “Meu Sono, Minha Casa” policy was even fully formed, it had already changed into something else – as dreams tend to, they evanesc. After a university professor calculated that over the four-year period (not counting weekends) the government would have to build 1,127 houses per day in order to reach the goal of one million houses, the government subsequently stated that actually it would be responsible for only 115,000 houses (part of which would be social housing and the other part would be “affordable housing” in novas centralidades), with 120,000 additional homes provided by the private sector, and 80,000 built by cooperatives. The rest, or rather the majority of homes, would be “self-constructed”. Kilamba alone meets 15 per cent of the government’s revised quota, but if no one lives there it makes a mockery of the target. Priced at $125,000 for the smallest unit, Kilamba received little interest after the inauguration. Buyers failed to materialise. Very quickly, the government’s showcase for new urbanism took on a dystopian status not as a housing El Dorado, but a “ghost town”. After construction finished in July 2012, Louise Redvers, then the BBC correspondent, dropped in and filmed it with her phone. The wind howled and whipped between empty buildings as Chinese construction workers walked by the product of their labour. Bloated prices and non-existent financing kept the rainbow coloured units beyond the reach of Angola’s supposed growing middle class. Redvers ridiculed it as a “ghost town”, reminiscent of those in China and Spain. The phrase spread like wildfire on social media, no doubt greatly embarrassing the Angolan government.

But a ghost town is a bounded space, haunted by the spirits of those who once resided in its homes or walked its streets. It is a space left abandoned by people who have moved or been moved. A place of half-empty glasses, cobwebbed chairs and stories left mid-arc. Kilamba and projects like it are not quite that. Often, they are sites where inhabitants have been forcibly displaced, but also the products of conscious strategies by market actors and state elites to construct a spatial dreamscape that is highly desired by buyers. They are the urban spectacles, the chimeras, the phantasmagorias that are integral components of Angola’s quest for the spatial fix. Kulandus (Luandan residents) do not view the image of Kilamba with disdain, they are entranced by it: they want consistent electricity and water, schools for their children, parks for them to play in, and health care centres where they do not have to wait for hours to be attended to. They want quiet. Unlike a ghost town, Kilamba is thick with dreams, hopes and promises of the future.

Walter Benjamin’s analysis of the Arcades project laid bare the use of fantasy and illusion by capitalists to seduce buyers into associating consumption with pleasure. As Marc Berdet observes, with the creation of Disneyland, Las Vegas, the mall of America and other grandiose projects, the coupling of consumption with fantasy reached new heights in the 20th century. These “phantasmagorias of capital”, as Berdet labels them, rely on architectural storytelling, powerful historical, religious or aesthetic symbols and tricks of design to market an imaginary world for the purpose of profit. To do this work, they may reconfigure powerful tropes of the past or market future fantasies. In Angola, socialist promises are repackaged into dreams of homeownership in spite of the fact that the state did not and cannot now deliver a sufficient number of homes for Angola’s population.

As Berdet remarks: “Phantasmagoria is a collective dream generated by a specific social class (for instance, the phantasmagoria of the Orleanist bourgeoisie or of liberal bourgeoisie), which picks up and neutralises socialist utopias. It is a distraction from social reality in a better world, a world without classes, but it has always the ideological function to hide, protect and reproduce the social order.” A phantasmagoria like Kilamba deludes its audience into thinking that everyone will have shelter in postsocialist, postconflict Angola. By referencing the former President’s nickname, it also cultivates a nostalgia for the past, for a time when independence held the promise of a better life. As Gastrow argues “an independence that was symbolized by the bringing to a halt of construction was symbolically re-enacted twenty-seven years later through the embrace of construction as the preeminent symbol of the post-conflict state.” Civil war put the hopes of independence that Neto represented on hold. New construction reignites that dream. Trading on the heroic status of the first president, Dos Santos rekindles ideals of social justice and belonging associated with the early days of independence. Using the nickname, Kilamba, dos Santos invokes that utopic moment when relationships seemed more horizontal than hierarchical without actually promising anything. A capitalist ethos now structures and drives the ruling oligarchy and the Angolan economy. So we see the pastel shades of the building pull against the strident tones of the country's flag and anthem, which still resonate with internationalism. The new centrality of Kilamba is more like Ché Guevara in an Absolut advertisement than the Internationale.

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30. Chloe Buire describes Kilamba and Pangulia, another planned settlement, as places where “the expectations of the state and the dreams of inhabitants” meet. See Buire, C. (2014) op cit, p. 242
31. A point António Tomás makes with reference to the construction projects and imaginaries enfolding Luanda as a whole. See Tomás, A. (2012) op cit, Chapter 2. See also Buire, C. (2014) op cit, on the appeal of these spaces.
33. Berdet, M. ibid, p.6
In an ideal market economy, prices ultimately serve to distinguish fantasy from reality. If dreams cannot be bought, then those who wish to profit from their sale must lower the price or alternatively, potential buyers go away disappointed, their dreams discarded. Since the “market” is far from ideal in Angola, the government simply solved that problem in Kilamba by slashing the price of the least expensive unit, by 44 per cent from $125,000 to $70,000 and offering to subsidise the cost of borrowing for eligible buyers. Despite its considerable distance from the city, there was an immediate and overwhelming response. In February 2013, thousands stood in line to submit the requisite forms to acquire a property there to Delta Properties and SONIP, the two property management companies that administer New Kilamba City.

By their very nature, however, fantasies are fleeting. After deposits were paid, Delta and SONIP failed to contact some Luandans to conclude sales; others received units that were larger than what they requested and were asked to pay the difference. In May of 2013, rumours circulated that despite the drop in prices and continued vacancies, an additional $3,000 was required to get one’s name on a list for one of the apartments. Complaints in the comments section of online news services, such as Angonotícias and Club-k, offer evidence of the frustration by those who submitted paperwork and transferred funds (typically thousands of dollars) to Delta and SONIP, yet months later still had not received keys or seen their names on the official lists of residents. More recently, allegations of false contracts and favouritism of personnel connected to SONIP, have circulated. As of June 2014, the government suspended SONIP from distributing houses and launched an investigation into the allegations.

Moreover, for those who now occupy selected units in Kilamba, their housing is hardly a dream. Facebook groups maintained by residents show flooded streets and public gardens, overflowing rubbish bins and vandalised storage lockers. Messages implore fellow residents to pay the condominium fee, install air conditioners according to the regulations, and park in designated parking spots instead of on sidewalks. Some irate residents are posting photographs to shame neighbours into good behaviour. There are frequent complaints about shortages of water and electricity, ATMs without money and the distance to the city’s only supermarket, which is actually located outside Kilamba. These flaws expose the false promises of this supposed infrastructural wonderland.

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40. Redvers described Kilamba city as “eerily quiet” in the July 2012 BBC report. Both online news sources and the Facebook groups of Kilamba residents are full of commentaries by Kilamba residents expressing their discontent about poor management in apartment delivery, the lack of services, the additional costs this causes, and security concerns; see also Brandão, R. (2012) op cit
Luxury in Misery

A Luandán contemplating the prospects of living in Kilamba employed the ironic term, luxo na miséria (luxury in misery), to capture two contrasting states, like a beautiful house with no running water or owning a piece of land in the city without a house on it. The Angolan government’s postwar modernising ambitions also have these contrasting elements. As Manuel Ennes Ferreira argues, the Angolan case further unsettles the increasingly challenged, conventional wisdom regarding the supposed peace dividend that should follow from the end of war, whereby military spending is shifted to spending on social services, economic development and other sectors that benefit overall well-being. Instead, Ennes Ferreira finds that Angola exhibits what he calls the “peace dividend insecurity paradox”, in which the majority of the population are largely excluded from any dividends that accrue from peace (including physical as well as economic security), while a small, rent-seeking minority consisting of political elites, the top military brass and powerful businesses benefit from the distribution of selective goods, such as housing, the allocation of mining rights, positions on company boards, for example, as well as the private security required to protect such goods.

In the case of the numerous city building projects that are underway, many of the more negative socio-economic effects of Luanda’s latest encounter with modernity have been replicated alongside the efforts to impose legibility on Luanda’s urban residents. In the quest to revitalise the city, neighbourhoods are consciously stratified geographically and visually as they might be in Detroit or Cleveland in the 1950s. Resettlement is preferred over slum upgrading. Like the intention behind Le Corbusier’s Plan Voisin, which Kilamba uncannily resembles, poorer residents are pushed farther and farther into the suburbs, out of the way, out of sight. In the words of Odonato, a character in Os Transparentes (The Transparent Ones), Ondjaki’s 2013 novel about urban space in Luanda, “We’re not transparent because we don’t eat. We are transparent because we are poor.”

Several analysts have observed that the post-independent government has not been innovative in addressing housing needs or respecting existing settlements. Instead, according to Gastrow, “the general attitude taken by planners and government officials toward the musseques has imitated colonial patterns, namely slum elimination and forced removal.” The current phase of forced removals began in 2001 and has continued to the present day, despite violent protests by residents slated for removal and local NGOs like SOS Habitat. Human Rights Watch and SOS Habitat estimate that 20,000 residents were displaced between 2002 and 2006.

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44. Holston, J. (1989) op cit. Although, by and large, Kilamba’s residents are not poorer as prices, and Buire’s ethnography, attest
47. Gastrow, C. (2013) op cit
48. SOS Habitat and Human Rights Watch, (2007)“’Eles Partiram as Casas’: Desocupações Forçadas e Insegurança da Posse da Terra para os pobres da Cidade de Luanda” Human Rights Watch, 19(2A), May
As massive urban resettlement followed by redevelopment continues (aided by the government’s heavy-handed constitutional assertion of eminent domain), old or inner city Luanda is being revalorised. Consistent with the pattern of reinvestment in the urban core that has occurred from Boston to Berlin, luxury high rises are replacing residences inhabited by Angolans who moved in after the Portuguese departed; or musseques close to the city that the authorities have cleared. Social engineering by the state coupled with profit driven construction firms have produced some startling contrasts in land and real estate values. In the city centre, the price of land can run as high as $800 per square metre; in suburbs such as Viana in the east, or Cacauco in the north, land values can be $100 per square metre. Thus a fancy three-bedroom, three-bathroom house in the posh neighbourhood of Miramar in Luanda can cost $3 million, whereas a modest three-bedroom, two-bathroom apartment in Kilamba now costs a “mere” $78,000.

Slick videos preach social responsibility on Youtube, but harrowing news accounts of murder and mayhem, corruption and crime suggest that things are very different on the ground. Attacks by rebel separatists in the province of Cabinda, where most of the country’s offshore oil drills are located, call attention to the hostility felt by some local residents because of the lack of development and local politics. Robbery and carjackings are common in the capital, although official statistics are unavailable. Consider also the gruesome death of Barbara Sá Nogueira, a manager of Banco Millennium, a Portuguese multinational bank whose Angolan subsidiary is partially owned by the Sonangol. Judith da Silva, a “friend” of the victim, confessed to her murder. She is rumoured to have killed her out of jealousy and over a $15,000 debt she owed to Sá Nogueira. On Facebook, the singer Daniel do Nascimento bitterly decried this and other senseless murders in Luanda noting that “at this rate, the country will have as many cemeteries as buildings. Even people will be walking concrete blocks, without hearts, without souls, without anything.” Material progress has created more social distress as concrete blossoms harden hearts and the frenzies of capital cannot be neatly contained.

Forced removals and futuristic longings – the sinister tales of Luanda’s everyday existence alongside city boosterism, and growing differentiation between the revalorised urban core and the areas outside the capital – no doubt makes this city another “ordinary” urban metropolis, subject to similar processes and dynamics as São Paulo or Shanghai. Yet, it is equally important to consider the political ramifications of the government’s rather ordinary “spatial imagination”. Will the construction of urban fantasies guarantee the legitimacy that the government so badly wants? Not if the water doesn’t run and the lights aren’t on.

49. Tomás, A. (2012) op cit, p. 48
51. World Bank Development Workshop, (2011) op cit, p.92
Dispossessed Vigils
Mourning and Regeneration in Inner-City Johannesburg

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHS: MATTHEW WILHELM-SOLOMON

A Zimbabwean man who had friends killed in the Caledonian Hall collapse stands outside the wreckage.

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“Only the conscious horror of destruction creates the correct relationship with the dead: unity with them because we, like them, are the victims of the same condition and the same disappointed hope.”
– Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno.

“Home is an appropriated space. It does not exist objectively in reality. The notion of “home” is a fiction we create out of a need to belong. Home is a place where most people have never been to and never will arrive at.”
– Santu Mofokeng

“‘Good’ death not only promises a rebirth for the individual but also a renewal of the world of the living; while ‘bad’ death represents a loss of regenerative potential”
– Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry

ON A MORNING IN MARCH 2012, firemen searched the rubble of End Street for bodies. The sky was off-white, the fallen stones ashen brown. A palm tree stood over the waste, a funereal umbrella. A hushed crowd waited for the further revelations of this wreckage. Two bodies had already been disinterred: these young men were to begin their long journey, with their bags of clothes and few possessions, back to Zimbabwe.

The stones of the collapsed building were themselves itinerant: they had travelled from Scotland in the early 20th century to the end their journey burnt and broken, surrounded by barbed wire, on the eastern periphery of inner city Johannesburg. The Caledonian Hall was built in 1905 after the South African War by the Johannesburg Caledonian Society, a club of Scottish migrants that had organised militias to fight with the British. Gables had adorned the roof alongside an ornate and ostentatious turret. During the 20th century it had housed a theatre, a warehouse, a carpet business and a dance club from which drugged up middle-class whites had flowed into the streets of Doornfontein.

By the 2000s the Hall had become of the dark (isinyama) buildings of the city, as they are called in street language – decaying, without electricity, filled with detritus and stagnant water, and appropriated by the city’s poorest migrant populations attempting to lay claim to the city’s promise. Isinyama in isiZulu and isiNdebele can mean both the absence of light or misfortune. These buildings are sites in which city lights are subsumed. They are places in which terror and intimacy, sorrow and song, co-exist. They are inhabited by both the living and the dead.

These buildings are also called the bad buildings of Johannesburg by municipal policy makers. They are considered by state officials, the media and the middle classes as a blight on the city’s well being and economy: places of criminality and dirt. And yet they are home to thousands of migrants, both South African and from elsewhere, trying to find a decent and dignified life in the city.

I first visited Caledonian Hall several weeks before its collapse, after it had been wrecked by a fire. Its interior was blackened. Groups of men stood around the threshold guarding the path to its inner belly. During the fire a group of Rastafarians, who had a carpentry workshop in the building, built a large structure of beds onto which those fleeing the fire could leap to safety.

Various rumours circulated around the cause of the fire: one was that it was a xenophobic attack against the migrants who lived there; another that it was arson by the owner to claim insurance; and the more prosaic was that a woman had fallen asleep in her room and spilled her paraffin lamp.

A few nights before the fire a man had been found with his throat slit in one of the rooms. Neighbours had found his body when the smell became rank. One possible reason for the fire and the subsequent collapse and deaths, explained to me by several former residents, was that it been vengeance for the murder carried out by the murdered man’s ghost. A related theory had been that the man’s Venda relatives had caused the fire through magic, or muthi, to avenge their relative’s loss.

The murdered man, whom I shall call Ezekiel, had lived in the building only a few month. Ezekiel had been evicted from a nearby building, known as Chambers, only weeks prior to his death. He had lived with the evictees on the street for a while, before finding shelter in the Hall which was to be his last dwelling.

In the early hours of a morning in January 2012, the Red Ants, an infamous private security company adorned in red gear and armed with batons and whips, had raided the building Chambers, another of Doornfontein’s dark buildings, forcing its residents onto the street. The eviction came only a month after the Constitutional Court had ruled that evictions, even by private owners, could not be carried out unless the City ensured against homelessness. Yet, in-fighting in the building had led to its residents losing their legal representation. ³

I witnessed the aftermath of the eviction. As I arrived groups were stripping their mattresses so they could sell the wire – many had been evicted before and this was one more displacement. Mattress fluff puffed like pollen through air, failing to seed in the infertile paving. Groups huddled around coal stoves surrounded by buckets and bags wondering about their futures. A security guard in a Father Christmas hat wandered off at the end of his shift. A gasping woman in a Springbok rugby t-shirt looked for her asthma pump and children fought and played in the streets. A man sat on the paving in furious tears threatening to go and rob somebody.

Families created rooms made of mattresses in the streets, moved into abandoned cars, and waited for the coming summer rains. A few days after the eviction the Metro police came with a municipal truck and carted off many of the group’s remaining possessions, including blankets and mattresses. Those who had remained on the street scattered to other unlawfully occupied buildings, or dark buildings in the area, including The Caledonian Hall.

Life for many residents in the inner-city is characterised by long periods of waiting and searching for work or housing, punctuated by moments of crisis that incite new dispossessions and journeys. The murdered man, the alleged spectral arsonist, had been among those on the pavement, though his story of dispossession was not to continue much longer. He was to leave one haunted place to haunt another: Chambers, as I will discuss below, was also a haunted place, with its own histories of dispossession and violence.

After the fire at The Caledonian Hall many of its residents found themselves homeless again. Some continued to shelter in the burnt enclave. Others set to work on a project that would bring renewed destruction: some of the young men in the building began recycling the inner skeleton of the building. They piled floor-high steel beams on small steel trolleys rolling them off to nearby recycling yards where they could get nearly R1,000 for the steel. They were to extract from the city what the city had stolen from them. The walls began to sway and eventually the structure imploded.

³. I have documented the social and legal history of Chambers in an article under peer review at the time of writing, entitled “Removing the Blind: Urban Regeneration, Territorialized Stigma and Divergent Dispossession”
I met one of the men who had been taking the beams, whom I will call Samuel, and who had been living inside the building. After the Hall collapsed, I was sitting in the End Street Park, a block away, when an unknown man came up to me. Samuel wore a grey jacket and green hat and torn sneakers. He looked ill and spoke quietly and slowly as if through language he could reconstruct a demolished world. He did not know who I was – I was merely a figure from outside the borders of his speech and thoughts – but he asked if he could tell me his story.

Samuel was from the Eastern Cape. He had wanted to be an artist and had come to the city to be trained. He believed in reincarnation – his own idea of regeneration – and claimed to once have reproduced a Picasso painting without ever having seen it. In the city he worked several jobs, including one at the Emperor’s Palace, a casino near the airport. He had an eight-year-old child in the Eastern Cape: “All the work I do is for him,” he said, “I do nothing for myself.” Eventually he found himself jobless and homeless.

Samuel then moved into the Caledonian Hall. It was called the Green House by its residents because its olive green walls. He paid R5 per night to an illegal landlord to share a room, and lived from money collected from recycling. The Hall was a space of shelter, but also of terror. There was den in the building called the Burma Room from where mandrax and heroin were sold. Knife fights often broke out. The basement, according to Samuel, was flooded and there were rumours that newly born children, aborted foetuses and bodies were thrown into the water. It was said that the building was haunted by the ghost of a white girl, who had been killed when the hall was a dance club. These impressions of The Caledonian Hall are those of a man in deep distress perhaps mingling memory, fantasy and trauma, but they were echoed by others. Throughout the city I’ve found stories of violence and trauma alongside stories of haunting.

After the fire, Samuel had remained sleeping inside Caledonian Hall, huddled beside a friend. One night a rock fall had killed the friend sleeping next to him. Then, a few days after I had first met Samuel, the building collapsed again, killing two young men who had been trying to remove a remaining beam. Samuel had been inside the building helping them when a wall fell. He had escaped with a large gash on his head. I asked him why he returned to the building and he replied, that in addition to needing money, “When it is your time, you must go. God decides.”

It is in these moments that “God’s time” is evoked. “God’s Time” conveys not simply a religious fatalism, but an acknowledgement that loss, dislocation and death might come at any moment. It is about faith in a higher being and also reveals a common experience of life in the city, where deportation, eviction, infrastructural collapse can come suddenly. Survival in the city is as much about good fortune as about economics. After the building had collapsed, some of the young Rastafarian carpenters came to me and asked me to take their photographs saluting the dead: “We are the survivors”, they said.

The journeys of Samuel and Ezekiel are among those easily forgotten. They are stories of continual dislocation. Samuel had not painted or drawn for a while, lacking materials and space. His inability to paint is perhaps a motif for so many lives the city – it becomes a site that subsumes visions.

The story of Caledonian Hall too, like so many spaces in Johannesburg, is a story of continual renewal and inhabitation, but also a reminder of the imminent possibility of death and presence of death in the city. It is a place where the failed visions of a future were recycled with catastrophic consequences. As the city’s government, along with its private sector partners, push the rhetoric of urban regeneration, we might pause a moment to reflect the term regeneration – its etymological roots are to “create again”, inferring both reclamation and renewal. But what is being reclaimed and what is being born?

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4. Oxford Dictionary
The city of Johannesburg emerged in 1886 as a vast mining settlement in the area of Doornfontein; End Street marked its eastern periphery. The subsequent century elicited the massive and rapacious transformation of the settlement into a vast, modern metropolis ringed with highways and mine-dumps.

Throughout its history Johannesburg has undergone successive periods of intense migration and often brutal attempts to control its population. The first mass slum clearances in 1904 involved burning down the location of Indian labour in the city, supposedly justified by the threat of bubonic plague. The 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act regulated black migration and residency in Johannesburg, laying the basis for Apartheid-era urban segregation. Following the Act, throughout the 1920s and 1930s, mass clearances of urban slums and the evictions of black residents were the norm. They were removed to Orlando in what was later to become the township of Soweto. The 1950s saw the mass removals of black communities in Sophiatown in the northwest of the city, and again in the 1970s there were municipal clearances in Doornfontein. The city has gone through phases of intense construction followed by periods of decay and intense inward migration followed violent evictions and exclusions.¹

During the Apartheid years, the inner city was the centre of White commerce: large office blocks and luxury hotels created the skyline. However, in the 1980s, as racial segregation began to breakdown, the character of the city became more mixed and informal. In the immediate post-Apartheid era, the old industries, in particular the textile industry, declined and the city experienced a flight of capital investment leading to many abandoned and unused buildings – the bad buildings of the inner city: buildings like Chambers and Caledonian Hall.

The response of the City of Johannesburg (COJ) to the transformations and crises of the inner city has been to look to the private sector for solutions: a series of urban regeneration policies have been founded on the assumption, one might say myth, of regeneration based on market logics. The COJ’s website claims that “The goal of the City government’s Inner City Regeneration Strategy is to raise and sustain private investment in the inner city, leading to a rise in property values.” It views the bad buildings of the inner-city as “sinkholes” that discourage inner-city investment. In the language of city policymakers, the lives of those living in these places are erased; they are reduced to an economic blight, sites of criminality and waste, and sinkholes of economic value.

The inner city of Johannesburg is gradually being transformed through speculative capital investment. Former slums are being converted into formal housing. It is misleading to see these developments as driven primarily by middle-class developments, which have promoted loft-style living targeted at the so-called creative class and encroached the poorer areas of the inner city. The bulk of residential investment has been driven by providing so-called affordable housing catering to relatively low-income groups. Thousands of units in this end of the market have been created, mainly by the private sector, but also through public-private partnerships. These buildings are large-scale apartment blocks, often protected with fingerprint security and requiring identification to enter. However, there is a chronic shortage of decent formal accommodation for households earning below R3200 a month, which include, among others, informal traders, cleaners, sub-contracted workers, the unemployed and beggars – the majority of those living in the bad buildings.

The paradox of these developments is that securing lower cost housing in the city requires the further displacement and dispossession of thousands living in precarious positions. The residents of Chambers were, ironically, evicted to make way for a low-cost housing development built by a company called the Affordable Housing Company and funded by the Agence Française de Développement.

Representations of Johannesburg, in the mainstream media and in the rhetoric of urban policy, have been schizophrenic: One perspective, as discussed, is a view of the city as an apocalyptic space filled with violence, crime and dirt: a no-go area. In contrast is a celebratory vision of urban regeneration: the city as a wellspring of potential, vibrant, full of life and opportunity. Mainstream and contemporary visions of the city vacillate between these two perspectives, which in fact have an affinity: they share the myth of collapse and ruin, in contrast to which urban regeneration brings new life into the city. Waste violence and decay are a kind of ground zero for reconstruction.

These views erase the violence of regeneration policies themselves: the displacements, evictions, and further exclusions necessary to secure higher real estate values. More than this, they erase local histories and memory in the march towards urban transformation. They occlude the ways in which residents of the inner city, many living on the margins of the law, create order and seek security under conditions of...

8. Defined by the Social Housing Regulatory Authority as households with an income units between R1500 and R7500 per month, see www.shra.org.za.
12. These headlines and quotes on the city’s urban regeneration on the city are illustrative: “How the Inner City got its groove back: A new Jo’burg initiative is bringing people back to the city’s streets” (Mail & Guardian); “Making downtown less dodgy: A cosmopolitan clean-up in one of the big city’s worst areas” (the Economist); “Nowadays, young Johannesburgers from different backgrounds are working together to remake their city for the next generation, tapping into a wellspring of creative energy and entrepreneurial spirit. Parts of Johannesburg’s once-decrepit inner city have turned into a vital gathering place” (New York Times); “Johannesburg’s hip transformation” (BBC).
adversity. In particular, dominant representations of urban regeneration erase a consciousness of violence and death and of the widespread need not only for security, but also to deal with the experiences of dislocation and trauma.

My proposition here is that urban regeneration is not something to dismiss out of hand: the desire for order, security and hygiene are not simply fantasies of the paranoid and propertied middle class, but widely shared particularly among the poorest in the city. But the question of regeneration cannot be reduced to the views of property developers, the popular media and state officials. Residents through the city, including those seen as its blight – squatters, informal traders, undocumented migrants – seek their own regeneration, their own ways to revitalise hope, in the face of dispossession, loss and death.

The stories I tell here are not the grand narratives of urban rebirth. They are, rather, the lines of lives that criss-cross the inner city, and the stories of people who are continually dislocated by the processes of urban change. They are stories of the experiences of death and violence, loss and haunting. I tell them as, they seem to me, to point towards a different notion of regeneration, one in which mourning is integral to renewal and memory is integral to revival.

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Naledi is thin and radiant, laughing constantly. She is partially sighted and can only see blurs of light and dark. Naledi once lived with her children, one disabled, and her blind husband in a small room on top of a furniture factory and panel-beater shop in Marshalltown. On the second floor of the factory, an intricate hive of sky-blue boards formed the walls of the rooms and the noise of DVDs and hip-hop echoed everywhere. In the building, small rooms – barely the size of a double bed – cost R1,000 a month. To enter, one has to pass through biometric security (these border technologies are entering even the poorest areas). Outside there is security guard with white, wolffish-looking dog.

Her own journeying through the city has involved a continual evasion of violence. Naledi came to Johannesburg with her husband as survival in Zimbabwe was no longer possible. She had first moved into the Chambers building in Doornfontein with her family. Chambers was extremely dark, lit only by paraffin lamps, candles and cellphones. Yet, it provided a refuge for many of the blind living in the city, who could navigate its darkness with relative ease.

In the city the blind, particularly those who are foreign, face many forms of stigma, but Naledi is proud to be blind. “When someone is meant to be blind, you are blind for life.” I ask her about her blindness. “Some believe that maybe you did wrong with the ancestors,” Naledi continues, “They will tell you to do something, and if that’s not done then your grandfather could be angry and make you have a blind child to punish you.” She continues, “The umthakathi (witch) can also make you blind for business. In rural areas they say they can make you blind to use in business (begging). Some believe that blindness comes from God”.

However, the disability was to become a form of protection. In May 2008, Johannesburg was struck by unprecedented anti-immigrant violence, which spread from the townships surrounding the city and across the country. Sixty-two people were killed and more than 100,000 displaced. The inner city also experienced violence, particularly as groups of men came into the area from the southern outskirts. Chambers, where many non-nationals lived, was a target for violence. Naledi and her family only escaped because of their blindness. She explains: “It was on a Monday when Zulu people, I should say South Africans, were carrying kieries (wooden clubs). When they saw you they would greet you. If you greeted them in Zulu they would ask how you say this [she held up her thumb, and then pointed to her elbow]. I met them many times. Some didn’t believe I was blind, but when they found it, they would release you. I was not beaten.

13. As argued, for instance, by Martin Murray in his Cities of Extremes, which views the investment in housing narrowly in terms of a neoliberal logic.
“They came to our flat. They were using torches and knocked next door. My next door neighbour was a Malawian. They spoke in Zulu and he answered in Malawian. They beat him until he died. Then they came to our room. The first thing we said was that we were blind. They argued whether I was blind, but then the others came out and they saw we were all blind. When we were outside a woman came down the passage with her baby and they killed her. I heard them saying they had killed her”.

However, they let the blind leave the building. Naledi believes that it was “because we are abnormal” and the killers would be afraid of the supernatural punishments that might come to them if they killed them. The blind went to stay in Jeppe Station, and after that they went to a building in Marshall Street, but were later evicted.

“They then went to a building in Commissioner Street, but it was so expensive so we went back to Chambers. When we went back the security welcomed us nicely, so we stayed.”

Chambers like other buildings in the inner-city was experienced by many residents as a haunted space. Those who died prematurely, from AIDS, accident or violence, and whose funeral rites were not performed by their families were thought to remain in the buildings, as Naledi explained: “Where we stayed there were many things happening. A certain lady lit a paraffin stove and threw it over her husband. The husband was burning, and he died... After a month you could hear footsteps, and you ask someone to go outside but they can’t see anyone, and can hear voices. I was staying next to the room where the husband was burnt. I saw the ghost. The whole passage was only bright. You only see a fire, and then you see nothing. You smell dagga [marijuana] burning, and you ask someone to look who is smoking but there is no one, or you see a tallness but don’t know where that height is ending... You can hear people on top of the roof, but you can’t see this person, you can only hear the footsteps, or someone speaking from nowhere or your hear the words but the voice is not familiar”. In a sense, haunting can be viewed as a form of memory of deaths that are not recognised or mourned. Social regeneration in these places requires coming to terms with unmourned death.

One day in 2012, I visited Naledi where she was begging outside a fast food restaurant in Noord Street. In the period since I had last seen her, her young child had died. Bishop Paul Verryn, the well-known and controversial leader of the Central Methodist Mission in downtown Johannesburg, had paid for the child’s funeral and burial in Soweto. I asked her if there was any meaning in what had happened.

“It is God’s gift,” she told me, “To remind us he cares for us.”

Again the suffering of life in the city, its daily deaths, was surrendered to the will of God. This gives the pain meaning. Regeneration requires a way to turn a bad death into good death, to make sense of the pervasive sense of loss. Later, in 2013, Naledi fell pregnant again. She had a difficult pregnancy (the baby was breech) and she struggled to get treatment at the local clinic – she thought it was stigma of being blind and foreign. Eventually with the help of Medicins Sans Frontieres she got a referral to the Charlotte Maxeke Hospital, or as it’s commonly known, the Jo’burg Gen.

I visited Naledi in hospital passing through the long empty wards, which form an intricate maze. I was born in the Jo’burg Gen more than 30 years ago. The hospital is a grey, geometric and concrete structure and red lines painted on its exterior lead to a large chimney. It looks like a factory for life and death: a place in which sorrows and hopes are ground up and exhaled into the orange evening sky.

I wondered, walking through those passages, whether there was any affinity between lives who come into being at the same point in space as those who depart? How do places bear our traces? Why do mourners in the city go to the sites of death – the ward, the roadside or the bedrooms to gather the souls of the dead to take them home?

In the ward I found Naledi looking very thin and frail, her large sightless eyes like moons against her gaunt skin. She was on a drip and had been vomiting all night. She couldn’t breathe the night before and they had put her on oxygen. She told me that her child had died shortly after birth.

“It is time,” she told me.
“Time for what?” I asked.
“It is God’s will,” she said.

She spoke about being with her child while he was still alive: “his heart was beating slowly, slowly, too slowly” she said, “The only question I have,” she told me, staring into the emptiness, “is why he took the child after I had struggled so much? This has been so hard for me. I’ve really tried.”

Grey light gleamed off her skin and some machine, out of sight, hummed incessantly. “What do you listen to when you lie awake at night here?” I asked her.

“I listen to the rain. Last night, it was raining, I think” she said smiling, “I like that very much. But now there is just the sound of the machine, it confuses things”. She recalled listening to the rain even as a child: “There were many trees, so the leaves would catch the rain.” She told me that during the fruit season the children were very happy. “The rain would wash the mangos to the ground.”

Naledi survived, but her child received no burial and was cremated. The family do not know where the ashes were spread. They wondered, when I met them later – gathered in the small room in the south of the city, sitting on buckets beside the bed with a floral cover – what happens to the spirit of children who die so young? They had no answer. The riddles of living and dying, of why some children survive and others do not, are the more intimate questions of social regeneration in the city

August 2013 in Johannesburg was the time of wind – the time when “fishy things” were going on because the “spirits were in”, according to Chihera, a fiery and garrulous Zimbabwean woman. There had been several uncanny deaths in the city. A woman and a man had drunk poison killing themselves in separate incidents. A woman had been stabbed to death by her husband in a building. There had been a fire on the upper floors of a large tenement killing a woman and her child. Chihera had spent much of the month at funerals.

Chihera was the committee member of an appropriated building in the inner city, known as Diamond Exchange. Residents of Diamond Exchange were under a High Court Order to be evicted, as rent payments had lapsed because of disputes over building maintenance. In spite of Constitutional protections against such evictions, they continue to take place throughout the city and many buildings, Diamond Exchange included, fail to maintain legal protection. This particular eviction was ordered by the High Court for health and safety reasons. The interior passages of the building were often filled with stagnant water and large piles of refuse had accumulated on its roof and outside its windows.

The residents of Diamond Exchange lived under the knowledge that at any moment they could end up on the street. The threat of eviction was always present, though the residents had no idea of when it might happen. Inside Diamond Exchange lived cleaners, prophets, traders, shebeen owners, beggars, musicians, sex workers – all surviving through fragile alliances with each other, with the gangs, with churches and with the state. In the eyes of the law they were criminals: squatters, hijackers, illegal migrants and gangsters.
The irony of the inner city is that communities living informally are often seeking the same goal as those in the city government: work, security and healthy living conditions. They are also negotiating the threats of violence and waste, searching for their own regeneration in the face of adversity. Surviving in Diamond Exchange, for Chihera, often required forming tenuous alliances with both criminals and the police.

Two deaths in the previous year had shaken the community, causing both celebration, terror and social division. The first was a well-known criminal, not a resident of the building, but someone who regularly robbed its residents outside the local tavern, ran into the building to evade the police. He climbed out one of the windows, trying to hide from the police, but fell to his death on the balcony several floors below. As news of the death spread, a crowd gathered around the building, including members of the man’s family, singing and ululating at his death. As Chihera explained, “We had never seen anything like. People celebrating at a death!”

The corpse was collected to be taken to the mortuary, but the man’s family did not undertake the physical and ritualistic cleansing at the site of death. The stains of blood remained on the balcony for several weeks. The balcony was one of the access points to one of the two taps in the building, serving several hundred people, but the residents stopped using the tap. An air of anxiety set in and residents reported feeling the hair on their heads pricking when passing that floor. The residents only started using the tap again once the rains had come and washed away the blood stains.

Two months later another incident took place. A fight broke out between two lovers. A man, Bhekha, estranged from Patience, his girlfriend and the mother of his child, tried to stab her. Several of the residents restrained him and locked him inside the room with his young son. When they returned to the room the man was gone. He too had fallen to his death on the balcony below. The recurrence of this death by falling led to rumours that the spirit of the dead thief had possessed and caused the death of the man.

In this case Bheka’s family performed the death rites, cleansing the area of death with white cloth and coming to call the spirit home with the body. The man’s body was taken away in a car, which subsequently broke down. The man’s family circled the car telling the spirit he must leave the building, that his wife had left with his child and he must return home. The car started again after that and the body was taken away, eventually to Zimbabwe. Nonetheless, it was considered a violation of funeral rites that the mother of the man’s child and the child did not attend the rituals.

Still, the residents of Diamond Exchange felt the building required cleansing of its aura of death, and Bishop Verryn was brought in to cleanse the building with holy water, while members of the congregation carried palm leaves. After the cleansing, according to residents, the experiences of haunting quietened. These are some of the rituals of regeneration required to survive in the city.

Chihera has learnt the funeral rites required to bring peace to the dead: the gathering of dust from the rooms where the dead lie and the calling of the spirits back home. Her journey in the city, like so many others, has also been one of mourning and death. Chihera came to Johannesburg from Zimbabwe with her husband, who was a driver. They lived well until Chihera’s husband died in a car accident and she could no longer pay rent and was evicted from her flat. She moved into Chambers, the same building in which Ezekiel and Naledi had lived, but was also evicted from there before moving to Diamond Exchange.

Chihera survived in the city through begging at traffic lights. She would travel out to the peripheries of the city, to Midrand and other areas “where rich bastards live”. She helped start an organisation of street beggars, which arranges yearly Christmas parties and mobilises around basic rights, in particularly against the practice, by social welfare authorities, of taking the children of beggars into state care.
Chihera managed to save enough money to start life as a trader, selling cellphone starter packs and funeral insurance. For R30 a month paid via cellphone, migrants can ensure that their bodies are returned home after death. Large companies are using new technologies to encroach on the terrain of the old burial societies. Death is big business in the inner city.

Chihera’s social network extends throughout the city; it is an intricate web linking the dark buildings: lines of connection have formed among those whose paths have crossed on their sojourns through the city, who have experienced, together and apart, their continual displacements. Many of these networks come together in times of mourning and Chihera often presides over the funeral rites: “the songs are sung according to what you used to do when you were alive. If you took drugs, they will say so. If you were a prostitute, they will say so. If you told lies they would say so. If you were a womanizer or a thief they will say so. They also sing to sympathise with the family, to look after your kids or property. The songs are to tell stories, to have mercy on a dead person.” Funeral rites become a way of articulating the troubles and failures of life in the city, of giving them meaning and recognition.

During August 2013 a grey fog came over the city and at night the wind battered the windows of my room. I was staying on the 13th floor of an inner-city apartment block. From this viewpoint the city spreads out below and easily becomes an aesthetic analgesic, allowing the suffering to dissolve in the expansive seduction of lights. Watching over the city it occurred to me that each evening, hidden in the darkness, lit by paraffin lamps or illegal electricity connections, are a multitude of hidden rituals, songs circling in the stairwells, gatherings in the darkness of those who, at any moment, could be thrown onto the street, those who live in the shadows of urban change, who are engaged in their projects of private and collective regeneration, and who mourn and celebrate nonetheless.

Chihera has been struck deeply by her own losses – of her husband and her young daughter, who died from electrocution. The child was buried in a cemetery in Johannesburg; Chihera explained that the souls of children could not return to Zimbabwe as they might be lost or drowned crossing the Limpopo River. Chihera learned the funeral rites when her own husband died. She went with his family to the ward in which he died to call the spirit back home with a branch. The spirit was called to the mortuary and then to travel home to Zimbabwe. Regularly they would stop the cars to let the spirit rest and to explain where they were going. Once home, in the Zimbabwean midlands, the woman in the family washed Chihera while she was wracked with grief. After the funeral, she had a dream that he came to her in his family’s house. He stood over her and said, “My house is built, yours in not yet built, now stop crying.”

It seems to me that urban regeneration is as much about the rebuilding of meaning in the face of loss, learning to live with violence and hauntings, as it is about the construction of walls and tenements. A renewed city, in my view, would be when the one was not at the cost of the other; when the mourning and memory of so many in the city was not erased or consigned to the shadow by police, property developers and municipal officials; and when people and their histories were not evicted into the streets to wander, like lost spirits, in the cold glare of the city lights.
Epilogue

On December 5, 2013, after the writing of the body of this piece, Nelson Mandela died. Throughout the country mass memorials and grieving took place. Vigils were held at Mandela’s home in the wealthy suburb of Houghton and at his house in Orlando, Soweto, where those evicted from Doornfontein in the early slum clearances were almost a century ago. Candles, flowers and numerous cards were laid at these sights.

On Friday 13 December, leading into the weekend of Mandela’s funeral, the residents of Diamond Exchange were brutally evicted onto the streets by a private security organisation calling itself the Black Bees. The eviction took place across the road from the Drill Hall, where Mandela was tried for high treason in 1956. Three people were hospitalised, including a blind man, having been beaten by the security. After the eviction, hundreds of people, including families and children, were left to live on the street in shelters made of mattresses. Many lost most of their possessions in the process.

During the nights after the eviction and prior to the burial, the women of the Diamond Exchange stayed up all night singing hymns and tributes to Mandela. Unlike the other vigils around the city, these tributes received no public acknowledgement or television coverage, although Chihera and her friends watched the burial on a public screen in nearby Joubert Park. Their vigils, as usual, were dispossessed. Chihera does not understand why South Africans treat foreigners so badly, even those who are naturalised citizens. Mandela, she commented, “was also a border jumper”.

In Nairobi, more than half of the population dwell on 18 per cent of the land. In Dhaka, more than 70 per cent are reduced to living on 20 per cent of the city’s land. In Mumbai, 90 per cent stay on 10 per cent of the land; in one of the city’s shanty towns, Dharavi, there are reportedly more than 300,000 people per km², which is six times as many as in downtown Manhattan. Seven people normally live in one house, which on the average is 1.8 m x 2.4 m. There are few places left where people want to live and little space left to occupy.

According to the municipal authorities this settlement with houses on stilts in Lagos Lagoon is illegal and to be demolished. According to the national authorities it has a long tradition as a fishing village and is to be preserved. I am going to Makoko to visit a floating school being built in the area. The settlement is accessible by canoe from the mainland section of the community. On arrival at the school I ask Segun Omodele, who is in charge of the construction site, about the recent decision by authorities to declare the school illegal and a target for demolition. He is not worried. He says this happens often because the authorities want to clear the land for sale. There is some hope and some fear, depending on who you talk to, that this spectacular floating three-storey school will be an exception to the rule.

Halong Bay (the bay of the descending dragon) in Vietnam is an archipelago of about 2,000 islands. Only two of them are zoned for legal habitation, so most of the 2,000 residents have opted to live in floating communities. There are several floating villages in this vast archipelago, with dozens of houses in each of them, along with infrastructure, such as schools. Kiosk boats travel everywhere within the archipelago, transporting goods and services (including daily waste from the floating villages). These have attracted more attention from the visiting tourist boats and the Vietnamese authorities, wary of the country’s tourism brand, are planning to move these communities to mainland.
Smoky Mountain – Manila
More than one-third of Manila’s 12 million inhabitants are living in slums. In the documentary Manila’s Lost Children (2008), Olivier Delacroix follows some of the children living in one of the world’s largest open dumps, “Smoky Mountain”. The landfill includes a shanty town with about 3,000 inhabitants, where authorities are completely absent and there is only one international aid organization engaged (it wishes to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals in a notoriously corrupt environment. In Manila, the most densely populated city in the world, it is a punishable offence to be homeless. Children, who make up a large percentage of those without formal residence, are hiding as best they can. Those who are caught end up in municipal detention centres, where they sleep in shifts, and in cramped quarters without mattresses or blankets. They are provided two bowls of rice a day, and no access to health care or education. They are usually released back into the streets, only to be detained again.

Mafrouza – Alexandria
In ancient times Mafrouza was one of the largest cemeteries in the Mediterranean region. In the 1970s, people began moving there from the south: 10,000 people came to live informally in the graves above and below ground. The cemetery was the subject of a documentary film, Mafrouza – Oh la nuit, by Emmanuelle Demoris (2007). The area has now been cleared by the city authorities and the residents moved to new housing 20km outside the city centre. The jobs, however, are still in the central region and the former cemetery residents find themselves using one-third of their wages, and a large part of their time, commuting. Mafrouza was just one such settlement; another, City of the Dead (Qarafa) in Cairo is a cemetery where an estimated one million people occupy “grave houses”. The actual graves are used as tables or shelves, and clothes lines are hung between headstones.

Baia Mare - Romania
The Mayor of Baia Mare, a city of about 150,000 inhabitants, recently commissioned a wall to be built to separate the area to which the local Roma community had been forcibly relocated from the rest of the city. Shortly after he announced the plan, the Mayor was re-elected in a landslide victory.

Kibera – Nairobi
One of the world’s largest slum communities, with about one million inhabitants, Kibera is arguably the world’s most studied slum, not least because the headquarters of Habitat, the UN housing program, is located in the city. In August 2011, a census claimed that there were only 170,000 people living in Kibera. Representatives of Habitat disputed the claim, saying the Kenyan authorities were deflating the figures to suit the branded image of Nairobi as a centre of high-tech commerce. Yet, a former employee of the UN agency argued that Habitat and other NGOs operating in the area, had inflated the numbers in order to justify their work and to be able to harness more resources and funding.

Uros Islands – Peru
On floating islands in Lake Titicaca, nearly 4,000m above sea level, some 1,200 descendants of the Uro people, reside. The Uro have lived in this area since before the time of the Inca and are traditionally hunter/gatherers. Ten years ago the archipelago consisted of 35 floating islands in a shallow part of the lake. In the last 10 years the number of floating islands has nearly doubled, and have become, in some instances, a tourist attraction and thus a main source of income for the Uro. The islands are made of layer upon layer of totora, a type of reed. The inhabitants must constantly replenish the reed stock to avoid seepage and rot. Everything from the houses to furniture and boats are made from totora. It is also burned for heating and eaten. Local government is run by a parliamentary structure and tourism has become a main source of employment.
“who’s leg is that?” (ta’n l’ese?) or “ira” (swamp) in Nigeria
“poor villages” (vijiji) in Kenya
“ghettos” (shawl) in Eritrea
“houses built in moonlight” (tcharacka bet) in Ethiopia
“informal areas” (ashwaiiyat) in Egypt and Syria
“shacks” (imijondolo) or “chicken coop” (UmKhuku) in South Africa
“the location” (malocation) in Zimbabwe
“people settling anywhere” (ma ipa fela) in Botswana
“area for poor people” (mtaa wa maskini) in Zanzibar
“lost cities” (ciudades perdidas) in Mexico
“mushroom settlements” (poblaciones callampas), “marginal settlements” (poblaciones marginales) or “camps” (campamentos) in Chile
“misery societies” (villas miseria) or “emergency societies” (villas de emergencia) in Argentina
“ranches” (ranchos) in Venezuela
“settlements” (asentamientos) in Guatemala
“invasions” (inversiones) in Ecuador
“communes” (comunas) in Colombia
“young towns” (pueblos jóvenes) or “human settlements” (asentamientos humanos) in Peru
“the precarious” (precarios) in Costa Rica
“shacks” (chabolas) in Spain
“shantytowns” (kåkstäder) in Sweden
“it happened during night” (gecekondular) in Turkey
“shallows” (or “gutters”) (bassifondi) in Italy
“simulated cities” (bidonvilles) in France and other French speaking countries
“cardboard settlements” (kartosko naselje) in Serbia and Croatia
“barracks” (baraki) in Ukraine
“thicker” (trustsjoba), or “a poky hole of a place” (zocholustie/Захолустє), or “christjov-housing” (christjovka) or “back of beyond” (glusj/Глуышь) in Russia

“slum area” (dzielnica slumsów) in Poland

“misery quarters” (Elendsquartier, Elendsviertel) or “poor quarters” (Armenviertel) in Germany

“non-urban neighbourhood” (mahala) in Romania

“illegal camp” (kachi abadi) in Pakistan

“very poor neighbourhoods” (mehla ryta) in Kurdistan

“filth neighbourhood” (mahalle-ye kasif), “poor neighbourhoods” (mahalle-ye faqirneshin), “shack districts” (manteqe-ye alonakneshin) or “neighbourhoods in the outskirts” (mahalle-ye hashiyeneshin) in Iran

“principally poor district” (mahale fagher neshin) in Afghanistan

“dirty areas” (kolache pradesha), “dirty settlement” (gallicha wasti), “our settlement” (machi wasti), “ramshackled huts” (jhugi-jhopdi) or “row of huts” (jhopadpatti) in India

“garden” (Watta) or “shanty settlement” (palpath) in Sri Lanka

“homeless people’s settlement” (sukumbashi basti) or “people without shelter” (ukumbashi) in Bangladesh

“town of thin people” (Saimingai), “pauper town” (Hinmingai), “area of bad residences” (Furyō jūtaku chūkì), “illegal occupation” (huho sengkyo), “gang of poor people” (hin min kutsu) or “on-the-road livelihood” (rojo seikatsu) in Japan

“congested community” (chum chon ae at) or “slum” (sa lam) in Thailand

“moon village” (daldongnae), “mountain village” (sandongnae), “settlement without permission” (Muhoga Chongchakji) or “village with cardboard houses” (panjachon) in South Korea

“anarchic settlement” (sammong anatepatai) in Cambodia

“settlement of rat’s houses” (khu nha o chuot), “temporary house” (Nhaa tam bo), “precarious house” (Nhaa lup xup), “house along the river” (Nhaa ven song) in Vietnam

“rights owned by the people” (Hak milik) or “illegal settlement” (kampong liar) in Malaysia

“village in a city” (chéng zhōngcūn), “dirty areas” (zàng luàn dì dìfāng), “alley” (Lòuxiàng) or “slum” (ping min ku) in China

“towns of rough cabins” (shanty towns), “back rooms” (slum) or “informal settlement of people with no legal title” (squatter camps) in the UK and English-speaking countries
IN 1997, JUST THREE YEARS INTO “DEMOCRACY”, South African church leaders gathered in Johannesburg for a Church Land Conference. The children of God were gathered together to confront a bitter reality: the church in South Africa is more than an accomplice in the un-peopling of Africans through land dispossession. Indeed, the church is a land thief and it is keeping the loot.

The conference grovelled, confessions of sin were declared and commitments made to repent and redress. Notwithstanding, and almost 20 years later, land has not returned. Ironically, the same band of thieves left a message in their official conference communiqué back in 1997: they declared that land was above commerce and politics; land was the source of life and death; it was, they suggested, like a mother who gives her children sustenance without which they would perish. We were reminded that land is always with us, it gives us life and when we die it takes us back.

If land was more than just land, what then have Africans lost by being dispossessed of it? Moreover, can this other loss be named, and the conditions of redress concretised in a set of demands that can speak the language of rights and fit into the established lexicon of the losses that can be repaired? Will these losses be repaired and satisfied with the return of the land?

When one loses a lover, it’s not so much the loss of this beloved person, but a loss of one’s capacity to love without fear again in the future. One grieves for not only the past, but also a future that is so linked with the present in ways that already are too damaging. A charred future? Without understanding the dialectical relationship between history and the future, we end up being unconscious agents of a history we wish to obliterate. We have to plumb the heart and soul of history, crack open the narratives and data that organise our contemporary agonies and desires.

When I reported these thoughts, a friend pointed out that I had, by accident, put my finger on three things that haven’t been sufficiently reflected upon: love, loss and land! My friend indicated that a loss to death is traumatic, but nevertheless a loss fully accounted for and for which closure, of sorts, can be attained. Loss of land is altogether more devastating because we are condemned to encounter it every day – in passing koppies, smiling mountains and angry rivers – as a loss that exists as a gain for the other. The loss of land dramatises the loss of too much for the African who became the Black – a void and a great menacing silence. This loss is the most complete.
My friend noted that the foremost Africana scholar, Lewis R Gordon, had also ventured into similar territory in one of his meditations on melancholia: “[A] form of suffering that is a consequence of loss that is distinct from bereavement. In the case of death, there is not a chance of reconciliation with the lost object. But in the case of melancholia, there is a continued presence of that which has been lost.”

Blacks in South Africa, and perhaps the world over, live with a loss that resists demands for reparations. When we lost our land, it was part of the trajectory of the irreparable loss inaugurated by slavery. Once the African was reduced to property next to other beasts in the auction block, claims to territory, to autonomy and bodily integrity became silly luxuries not available to us. Often, we forget that land dispossession through colonialism is the second coming – the first being the dispossession of the selfhood of blacks through the long nights of trans-Atlantic horrors untold. Most narratives of loss have focused narrowly and dangerously on land and thereby cut off the black experience, or rather the creation of blackness from its very base. There are grave implications for this move, which the current obsession with the 1913 Land Act repeats with relish.

When in 1997 the South African clergy declared land the mother who took care of us in life and in death, they were talking the language of the living among those who exist through death. This register failed to account for the impossible way of being in the world for blacks. The rights to land, which the church – and later the constitution – gave, were spoken in a language whose structure automatically and fundamentally excluded black people. I’m not accusing the church of scheming – in fact the clergy may have meant every word – but words refused to speak! This is the danger we face 100 years after the Land Act: generating another set of discourses of denunciation, commitment and disappointment.

Six years after the church’s land declaration, we lived through an incident that speaks to what signifies black life today. Sipho Makhombothi, our brother and leader of the Landless People’s Movement, who had been ill for some time, declared he would be buried with his forefathers on the land from which they were forcibly removed by whites, who now occupy it under the protection of the law. I remember how the instruction: “bury me at my land” was delivered to us. Makhombothi, who knew clearly that he had not many days left on earth, smiled and told us: “You are cowards! You won’t bury me at my land.”

It must be remembered that Makhombothi had been violently and forcibly removed from the land where his ancestors rested. Now, with the existence of a movement and friends, he made a clear demand that the fight must be had over his bones. On the night of the burial, a vigil was held. The family was divided. The less militant ones said it would be best if the body was buried at the nearby squatter camp, among the discarded. The more militant said, “the word of a dead man can’t be defied.”

Those of us who represented the movement had heard clearly what he said. The representatives of the movement said they couldn’t defy Makhombothi and therefore all must at once leave and go to prepare the grave of a warrior. We moved in dark cold night and dug with anticipation and reverence. Morning came. The people arrived in their hundreds and buried the body of their beloved brother in defiance of the police and white farmers armed with guns and dogs.

Two years later, the farmers won a court order and exhumed the body of our brother. It is said that they did it with total disrespect. Makhombothi’s bones were made landless by a court of the democratic state, the exhumation was presided over by the guns of the democratic government of the people, which is committed to “dignity and equality for all”.

With hindsight, and struggling now with the location of white and black bodies in regimes of loss, I see clearly the contrast, observed through an exhilarating moment in 2004 in the small city of Montpellier, France. I was there at the global meeting of peasants and the landless (La Via Campesina). José Bové, a highly respected veteran land activist and small-scale farmer, had just been released from prison, having served time for fighting global food polluters, McDonalds and Monsanto. (The story goes that Bové and others broke down a McD’s structure brick by brick.)

There was a concert of celebration planned as part of the conference and at which Bové was to be welcomed back by thousands of supporters. Some 10,000 waited for him to show up, and gave him a deafening and long standing ovation when he did. By evening, the gates to the large farm where the event took place had to be closed because more than 350,000 people had gathered! A stampede was feared. At one point during the concert, José Bové appeared back on stage, with me and other representatives of movements across the globe. We raised our hands and voices in unison: ANOTHER WORLD IS POSSIBLE! More than a quarter million voices shouted back in affirmation.

Away from the seductive moment of brotherhood in struggle, I had to acknowledge the contrast. In France, small-scale farmers are fighting with a grammar that responds to their demands or rejects them within a community of shared language, desires and pain. However, Sipho Makhombothi’s struggle and that of millions of dispossessed people in South Africa, extend beyond the loss of land into the realm of a loss of fundamental human rights. Bové’s humanity, however harsh it might sound, is derived from the un-peopling of Makhombothi.

Perhaps it is to Orlando Patterson’s brutal coinage we need to turn in an attempt at explanation: particularly his idea of a “social death”, which offers insights to Black lives in a White world. The fact that José Bové can call for a recognisable demand for autonomy and Makhobothi cannot, speaks sharply to the conjoined reality: for Bové to be human, Makhobothi was produced and existed in the zone of death.

Patterson doesn’t seek to speak back to power; he seeks to show that slavery has shaped blacks’ desires in ways that even when they seek liberation, reproduce the plantation. Patterson is scathing, for example, on the cultural heritage of blacks in the US: “It was not a heritage to be passed on. Like their moral compromises, this was a social adaptation with no potential for change, a total adjustment to the demands of plantation life and the authoritarian dictates of the masters… A people, to deserve the respect of their descendents, must do more than merely survive spiritually and physically. There is no intrinsic value in survival, no virtue in the reflexes of the cornered rat.”

Enter Sol Plaatjie

What I’m thinking about is how the same regime of compromised expressions of freedom has wobbled black South Africans on the land question? The problem is not the creation of Sol Plaatjie, but he was certainly its modern founding father. Plaatje’s Native Life in South Africa records the sadistic destruction and dissolution that the 1913 Land Act visited upon the majority of South Africans, as evoked in the opening line of the classic: “Awaking on Friday morning, June 20, 1913, the South African native found himself not actually a slave, but a pariah in the land of his birth.”

Plaatje catalogued the consequences of the Land Act and invited the world to condemn the unnecessary and vile suffering these caused. But the world didn’t respond. The sensibilities of some in British high society might have been offended by news of such naked brutality taking place in their colony, but most likely shrugged their shoulders and swanned off to the next important social function. Plaatje’s words had no place to land and germinate and thus were rendered landless. It must have felt like speaking into the white void that gained its coherence by resting on his blackness. The black can’t speak!
Plaatje’s problem was that he arrived too late and helped author a discourse of demand that was already compromised. What he saw in the Land Act was the impact of desperate whites, who needed to carry out petty thieving and exhaust their desire of whiteness through total brutality, which, in turn, led to the scores of blacks gravitating to the roads with no sense of place or time. Plaatje recorded the opportunistic evil of whiteness, but not whiteness itself. The 1913 moment was a dramatisation of what had been taking place for more than 250 years, from the arrival in 1652 of Jan Van Riebeeck and his gang. Bambatha’s fall in 1906 was the confirmation of a sad truth: the Maxim gun had gained total dominance over the assegai and the shield. Shaka’s horse-shoe formation did not hold the white tide back. We blacks were created! The Land Act was a codification of a fact, not a creation of one.

Plaatje listened and recorded whites debating what they could do and would do with blacks and he was moved to indignation. But our ‘thingification’ was long achieved and Plaatjie, like so many black political actors, assumed the position of common humanity with the oppressor. He constructed a set of concerns in the grammar of suffering that was understandable to the white world. As Frank Wilderson, the dramatist and filmmaker, so beautifully put it: “to act politically the black must assume a structurally adjusted position.”

As a result, we have two discourses which have been rarely examined in parallel. Plaatje and the Congress movement represent one, the other is represented best by Okonkwo, the tragic hero in Chinua Achebe’s Things Fall Apart. Yet, there is a historical figure who carries the mark of Okonkwo better – Autshumao, also known as Harry die Strandloper! Recall how Harry was brought from Robben Island by Van Riebeek to negotiate peace with the defeated; he, unlike the 1994 negotiators, spat at the face of the invader and ended the dialogue. He wouldn’t sell his birthright for peace. It was about the land.

Plaatje believed in the powers of dialogue, but he didn’t realise how loaded the dice of dialogue was against the dispossessed of the world. His appeals were sent to Europe, packaged to be understood and empathised with by the world. One wonders if he should have wasted his money and time with such niceties, or rather given serious consideration to turning the Maxim gun on the enemy and chasing them out of town, once and for all; kill whiteness so that new relations could be realised.

Native Life reproduces the colony of blacks as the beings without being. Thus our imagination of the devastation of colonialism was dramatised by Plaatjie’s accounts. This first mistake has led to other, bigger mistakes in the contemporary era. When the African National Congress took power in 1994, it was advised by whites and it happily agreed to peg the land question to 1913. Here, one can’t help feel that the African educated class, of which Sol Plaatje was a member, entered the chambers and continued the debate on what to do with the native and the land. Like good house Negroes, they carried the motion of legitimating dispossession through a devious plan of doing something to ensure nothing happened. The South African Land Reform programme is a perfect example of such.

The mistake of placing the black and white on the same humanist plane without accounting for the fact that the white is human at the expense of the black, led to tragic mishaps. Plaatje ended up repeating the US tragedy of good whites from the north and baddies from the south, albeit his discourse took the form of bad Afrikaner vs. the good English. Pleading with the British crown, Plaatje went further and, in the end, legitimised and sanitised British colonisation:

“[T]he British vocabulary includes that sacred word Home – and that, perhaps is the reason why their colonising schemes have always allowed some tracts of country for native family life, with reasonable opportunities for their future and progress, in the vast South African expanses… [I]n 1910 much against our will, the British Government surrendered its immediate sovereignty over land to colonials and cosmopolitan aliens who know little about Home – because their dictionaries contain no such loving term…”
Contrast the above with his take on the bad Afrikaner: “The northward march of the Voortrekkers was a gigantic plundering raid. They swept like a desolating pestilence through the land, blasting everything in their path and pitilessly laughing at ravages from which the native races have not yet recovered…”

It is hard to understand how Plaatje could possibly have made such a neat distinction – heaping scorn on the one faction of the same band of marauding thieves and murderers, while at the same time praising the other. Was this a desperate attempt at placating the Brits against their Afrikaner cousins? There is a simple but devastating truth we must face: whenever whites are at war with each other, blacks need to know that it’s about finding the best mechanism to subjugate the blacks. The idea of bad and good whites is an oxymoron; whites exist within a system of power which by definition is anti-black.

It is too easy to claim that Plaatje’s problems could have been improved had he not been among the early nationalists within the African Native Congress, who spent day and night preparing petitions to the British Crown. The discourse around land and the demands for it that Plaatje launched permeate all formations that claim to speak for liberation in South Africa, including the Africanists who broke away from the ANC. It’s not enough to say izwelethu! (The land is ours!) We need to see that what was taken was far more than the land.

If we look carefully at the church and its theft of land, we see that it was not only the land they took, but also the souls of black people. If we take seriously the burden of loss and the hopes of redress and reparations within a paradigmatic reality that doesn’t yield to the coordinates and charms of dialogue, rationality and proposition, but rather to the very demand of life itself, then we must imagine the impossible. We are indebted to Aimé Césaire, who anticipated and framed the task of reclaiming one’s soul in another world; we sit with him the whole night, holding vigil from a small European island in his majestic Notebook of a Return to the Native Land:

“But who misleads my voice? Who grates my voice? Stuffing my throat with a thousand bamboo fangs... dirty end/ of the world. Dirty end of day break. It is you weight of the insult and a hundred years of whip lashes... What can I do? One must begin somewhere. Begin what? The only thing worth beginning. The end of the world.”
WERE THERE’S NO WILL, THERE’S NO WAY to reconcile the dead and the living. All across this
Mzansi of ours I have attended funerals of people who died without leaving any inkling of where they
wished to be buried, or how they wanted their assets distributed; preparing for death is not a priority
among my kind, regardless of poverty or wealth. For a lucky few, this has not been a problem, but I’ve
witnessed many, many instances in which a lack of clarity has led to brutal family squabbles over the
control of a deceased person’s afterlife – including, very recently, in my immediate family.

On the morning of 18 August 2012, we were preparing to bury my cousin, Hasani, at a cemetery in
Thembisa, a township east of Johannesburg. He had died a week before, at the age of 57, in a horrific car
accident while on his way back from his rural home in Giyani, where his mother, my aunt Norah, lives.
Hasani’s funeral did not happen as planned; in fact, it took two court interdicts and nearly two months
for him to be buried, finally, on 14 October. The delay in despatching Hasani to his final destination was
due to differences in opinion between his wife’s family and his family as to where his physical destination
should be. The relationship between the families proceeded to completely break down and the prospect of
them ever mending fences is very slim.

Some people on Hasani’s side of the family wanted him to be buried in Giyani, in the heart of
Limpopo. They saw no reason why he should be separated from his family and assumed that his spirit
would be at peace next to the graves of his father and ancestors. They argued that Hasani was their son,
that he was named for an ancestor of theirs and, therefore, that his spirit resided in Giyani, in the sacred
place of the Mabasas. They dismissed Johannesburg – where my cousin and his immediate family had
lived for two decades – as a foreign place. In their minds, there was no question: Hasani had to undergo
Vatsonga rituals in his ancestral home for his journey to be complete.

Accordingly, the path would be paved by a medicine man on behalf of the Mabasa family, and it
would involve many individual rites and sacrifices. Aunt Norah and Hasani’s wife, Wendy, would have to
be bathed with traditional Tsonga medicine. Then, they would both have to wear strings made out of a
nala plant plucked from ancestral land, as well as black clothes to symbolise their mourning. Furthermore,
both women would have to undergo a few incisions, which the Vatsonga medicine man would make, and
into which he would place some muti in order to dispel bad luck and to prevent a tragedy like this from
happening again. Oh yes, and Wendy would have to undergo a mourning period of six months, during
which she could not become sexually involved with another man unless she wanted him to fall ill and die.
The Mabasas, like other Vatsongas, indeed like most people of African descent in South Africa, believe that ancestors have more power over the living than living people themselves. They needed all this to happen to appease their ancestors, and they needed it to happen in Giyani.

This version of a despatch did not go down well with Wendy and her family. Wendy is Zulu; she and my cousin had been married for about 19 years, had had four children together and lived in Thembisa. She was not against Hasani being buried under Vatsonga tradition, but she wanted him to be buried in a place that she and her children would have easy access to whenever they wanted to condole by his grave. She knew that most of my cousin’s friends lived around Johannesburg; he had left Giyani more than 30 years before, after finishing high school, and had spent most of his adult life in Daveyton – a township to the east of Johannesburg, where his father still owned a house – and then in Thembisa. There were few people left in Giyani who knew him; even among close relatives and old classmates from school, most had died, or, like him, had moved elsewhere. To his wife and her family, it made perfect sense that Hasani be buried where he was most known. By settling in Thembisa, Wendy believed that my cousin had voluntarily cut the umbilical cord that connected him to Giyani. As his widow, she also believed she was entitled to have the final say.

Hasani and Wendy had taken out retirement policies at Transnet, where he worked, as well as a comprehensive funeral policy that would cover the cost of his burial. Resentful about being left out of his financial legacy, Hasani’s family began spreading rumours that Wendy had bewitched him in order to cash in. When Wendy began making formal arrangements for the funeral in Thembisa, my cousin’s family was enraged. They saw it as disrespect. Defiantly, they began making their own arrangements for a funeral in Giyani, to take place on the same date. Friends and relatives saw their loyalties torn, and neither faction was willing to compromise. Wendy’s family and their friends went to Thembisa for her vigil, while members of my cousin’s family went to Giyani and Daveyton. Luckily for Wendy, she was in possession of Hasani’s death certificate, and this helped her to ensure that his body was not handed over to the Limpopo side of the family.

At four in the afternoon, on the day before his scheduled funeral in Thembisa, my cousin’s body was delivered to his home there. But a curious thing happened: the casket would not fit through the doorway; it got stuck. Some of the people present, mostly Wendy’s friends and family, interpreted this to mean that my cousin’s body, his spirit and his ancestors were all crying out against him being buried in a foreign land – that this was their way of saying he should be buried in Giyani. Some women began to scream, others fainted and many believed that Wendy had been cursed by evil spirits because of her stubbornness.

Rumours began to spread. People said that anyone who attended the funeral at her house would either fall ill or die, as the real funeral was the one happening in Giyani. To this day, I do not know if and how Hasani’s family orchestrated any of this, but three women vomited and collapsed that day in Thembisa, most sympathisers who had arrived to bid him goodbye left hurriedly, and when the time came for a vigil, later that night, there was almost no one left.

As it turned out, the casket was wider than the door frame, but after the handles were removed, it went through fine. Regardless, and even before news of the cursed casket reached them, the family in Giyani applied for a court interdict to prevent Hasani’s funeral from taking place in Thembisa. They were granted a temporary stay, and the funeral did not take place the next day. In fact, it did not take place for the next two months, until Wendy’s family won a counter court order to have Hasani buried in Thembisa. Notwithstanding, most relatives on the Giyani side of the family did not attend.
I wonder, to this day, if Hasani ever reached his final resting place; if the two families will ever reconcile; would the problem have arisen if my cousin had left a will stating exactly where he wished to be buried; and will we see more disaster in the family? Indeed, Vatsonga culture decrees that when a person dies all members of the family of the deceased must shave their heads. An unshaven head signifies bad luck, yet many of my family members did not observe this tradition.

For most of us, the city is not a home, but merely a place of work. It doesn’t matter that you spend 99 per cent of your life in the city, you belong to the village you come from. No matter that you have permanently settled in the city, every festive season you have to go home to reconnect with your ancestors. Apartheid made sure that our grandparents and parents came to the city as migrant labourers, never as permanent residents. We’ve come a long way since then, but sometimes I wonder how far? A change in the law doesn’t necessarily or immediately result in a change of mind.
Remapping Buru Buru
WORDS: BILLY KAHORA
PHOTOGRAPHS: BONIFACE MWANGI

MY YOUNGER BROTHER, James, tells me another Buru Buru Phase 5 story when I make my habitual Saturday phone call and ask him what’s happening in the old neighbourhood. My question is always “Habari ya ghetto?” at which he laughs. Buru Buru 5 is not really a ghetto – and no one would laugh at the question if they lived in a real ghetto. Also, ghetto here, we both understand, is not a physical description, rather the closest description to a sibling common past, relative to where we are now.

Like most of the stories my brother gives over the phone, this one is in a confident, lazy tone, all the more incendiary because its latent content (about what is happening in the old neighbourhood, now a jungle) is unbelievable, absurd, farcical and tragic. I ask about the Saiyankas, old childhood friends, to hear about their most recent failures. They are safer to the madness of the present. We laugh from the liver (a sound we’ve acquired from other grown men of my family) with relief that we got away from it all: from Buru Buru’s inertia, its self-deceptions, its inflammatory realities, its temptations of matatus, drink and drugs, and also from our childhood friends.

Of course, the fact that we went to school on the other side of town helped us not get trapped in Buru Buru. And by the time we were older, we felt immune to the realities of failure across Kenyan middle-class society more evident in the lives of relatives, friends and neighbours. We also acquired an existential snarl in the stomach, which was a fear of failure, a fear of not being something, of not being able to say that things were okay and that we were on our way.

All these things saved us from Buru Buru. But there was and still is much going on that tells a bigger story about Kenya’s urban landscape. For the longest time, the default description of Buru Buru was that it was a middle-class suburb, which declined slowly into a lower-middle-class area in the 1990s during an economic downturn that affected the whole country. By the time it was done, many of us realised that our brand of middle-classness meant nothing. This was just another Kenyan urban soup bowl of different values, incomes, worldviews – as ephemeral and baseless as the latest political fad.

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Our parents were villagers who were the first of their generation to wear shoes for a prolonged period of time, write on paper and go into a classroom without a glance and discard all the things that would have come before them for “better”, modern things. It would have probably saved them and places like Buru Buru if they had only realised that what they had was too new to be taken seriously. The anger and ugly love from my father that I experienced growing up was not old, I realise, but came from the pressures of mortgages, “good school” fees, the everyday stress of being ok in this new world. So, Buru Buru became a place of failed dreams because it could never overcome its initial promise.

The estate was built of white, uniform two-storey maisonettes, with orange-brick roofs, which smelled of cleanliness, industry and possibility. Later, some model of Toyota became a part of the estate’s look. The men dressed in similar suits, but were distant because of their perceived trajectories. The women met the demands of modern African motherhood in a confused no-man’s land of arbitrary dictums. Everyone who played in the courts in the green grass was young and a child. Bigger and older children stood out. When they came home from the secondary school holidays, they crept out in the evenings, lurked in corners and screwed the house-girls.

Old people were absent and lived up-country and every other Saturday everyone left the uniform streets and the green playgrounds and went to visit them. We called it oshago or shags, out there in the reserve. We came back as Buru Buru people in a muddy car with sacks of produce, bright red carrots, light green cabbages, lush peas and huge potatoes and the house-girl washed the car the same night, even if it was raining.

There were fewer other forms of life within the estate. When we escaped the gaze of our mothers to wander the swathes of savanna beyond its borders, we saw chameleons, storks, herons, tadpoles and stray dogs.

The week-day adult world was about clockwork and cars. All the men drove away at the same time in the morning, to presumably build the nation, and came back at 5.30pm to avoid the traffic jams. I was too young to see the drinking, the men coming back to fuck the house-girls at lunchtime, the women taking to their respective churches, their neighbourhood groups – not because they loved Jesus, but because they had been failed by love, their errant husbands, the hellions that their children were becoming as middle-class Kenya and Buru Buru grew older and retreated.

We played in huge groups, all the kids in the neighbourhood, but at some point I remember the boys started beating each other senseless, wanting to fight more than anything else. So, when not sneering and being cruel, we played with anger and competitive meaning as if life on the Kenyan hustle had already started. But an entitlement lurked that would ultimately lead to some of our playmates refusing to grow up, like blue-bloods or problem children who had peaked too early, and, because the future could never be as bright as childhood, shrugging themselves back into early Buru Buru.

Many of these became matatu touts, retail traders, hustlers of all shades – things that their parents dreaded – entering a weird kind of civil disobedience that scorned school, grades, trajectories through university and a “meaningful” place in Kenyan society. The systemic changes seem to have come in the mid-1980s. And that is the line beyond which memories of uniformity fade and everything moves into the Buru Buru present – always chaotic, never-ending, a continuing antithesis to childhood.

It has lasted ever since, through the failures of many like the Saiyankas and now the latest fuck-ups, the new breed of crazies, mutants who will do anything for cheap alcohol and drugs, including beating up their old mothers and date-raping high school girls. Buru Buru was a pre-cursor to Kenya’s ambitious push for urban housing for the emerging new African middle-class. With Buru Buru’s success followed
Langata, Southlands, Ngei, Ngumo and South B’s Golden Gates and Plainsview – new middling and modernist extensions of the Kenyan state, straddling once-colonial and formerly white suburbs, such as Muthaiga and Karen, and African servant-quarters spaces, such as Jericho and Jerusalem. The estates were all funded by Housing Finance Corporation of Kenya, HFCK. Every pipe and water marker in Buru Buru was stamped with the acronym. We did not know what it meant and when bored we made up monikers for it.

Buru Buru and Langata’s decline were a long-ignored social phenomenon because they were less exciting than Kibera/Mathare, had little prospect for UN Habitat sympathy, and lacked the numbers to affect electoral outcomes and the ambitions of politicians (5,000 houses in Buru Buru, 10,000 voters max). These hubs of increasingly middle-class pretension and political non-participation emerged as spaces of little power and their lights dimmed without much ado in the late 1980s.

Some people living in Buru Buru and Langata eye wealthier estates and suburbs with a greedy gaze, while at the same time displaying disdain about all non-estate (read slum and low-income) spaces. Their aspirations and penchant for hype ignore the hubs of youth unemployment, alcoholism, increasing criminality, family breakdown, insanity and social dysfunction that places of middle-class normality such as Buru Buru have become.

It is said that nothing creates inequality like the perception of stability and the creation of surplus wealth, or the emergence of a new political force, for that matter. The Kenyan state changed under the leadership of Daniel Arap Moi: allegiances shifted from the civil service to party politics, and socio-economic priorities focused away from the emerging middle-class to rural populations.

I remember these changes, through a woman, a family friend, who I will call Mrs K. It was because of what happened to Mrs K, when I was still at an impressionable age, that I understood that Buru Buru was really in trouble. I had grown up and played with Mrs K’s kids. Her husband, a senior Central Bank of Kenya official, was more than a passing acquaintance of my father and before her “crack”, Mrs K was very good friends with my mum.

Mrs K, once an immaculately dressed woman, quiet and beautiful and a teacher at a private school, became a harridan who walked the estate pavements day and night muttering to herself and picking papers off the ground. It was worrying that a woman, a mother, could change so drastically and almost take her family down with her without much ado.

Under normal circumstances something would have been done about Mrs K. In an earlier time, she would have been institutionalised; middle class neighbours would have met and reinforced each other and their values would have embraced and smothered her madness. But not in 1990s Kenya. In a time of serious economic downturn, 200 per cent inflation, rampant corruption among small-time crooks, white-collar thieves, policemen and politicians, and in which the bribe became the most common currency in contemporary life, Mrs K became another symptom or, rather, a symbol of the general decline of the estate, the city and the country as a whole. In fact, many other people went crazy in their small ways, but not as evidently as Mrs K.

I’ve been fictionalising Buru Buru for at least 10 years and my default character is Mrs K. Short stories, short short stories, bar tales, diaspora exchanges – all variations of her context. Buru Buru is the stuff of urban legend, not history. Our way of talking about it is through the register of ‘fiction’. It is always narrative, not social fact.
The most recent story my brother tells is way beyond the notoriety of the Sayianka brothers of our childhood. The new Buru mutants he tells me are even more spectacular fuckups – a true criminal class, psychotic and dangerous. They still live at home with their parents; the luckier ones whose parents live in more affluent retirement homes have been handed their elders’ houses. They basically drink, spoil high school neighbourhood girls and move in and out of jobs. Possibly the most infamous are the Maitas, whose patriarch is a businessman and a failed politician. The eldest Maita is in his mid-30s and is somehow still attending university, trying to finish undergraduate degrees he began 13 years ago. When he is not pretending to be a scholar, he visits nearby Makadara, on the edges of slumhood, drinks “bombs” and goes home to unleash hell on his siblings.

There are variations of this kind of fuckedness. And so my brother and I laugh with some relief because we are not any of these families. We lack the wealth and recklessnesses, and possibly the daring and imagination, as a result of my mother’s heavy Protestant hand. Buru Buru gives people the connections but at the same time lacks the real economic or political forces and interests that serve as a deterrent to entropy.

A few months ago I got into an argument about my old neighbourhood. It started when someone made a passing remark about post-election violence and a comparison of Buru Buru to a middle class estate in Nakuru. I found myself getting completely and irrationally angry – arguing that Buru Buru lacks ethnic hotspots at the level that many other places hold, and that it has never had a defining voting conscience to endanger its own comforts for the sake of a political agenda.
I realise now that it does not matter. Buru Buru does not need national narratives to expose that there were, and are, other battles going on in places like it that indicate the general downturn of urban Kenya. Buru Buru long ago began exhibiting the worst symptoms of urban breakdown – those that would give a sense of things to come.

By arguing the way I did, I was, in fact, perpetuating the myth of Buru Buru. Without stories of places such as these, we continue to “remove” history, narrative and the idea of self. And we continue to laugh, to pretend and to refuse to live in the real world. I have just sent my brother this version of Buru Buru’s story – as a beginning, so that we can stop laughing, or at least think before we laugh.
Contributors

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Hunter And Gatherer Collective is a collaborative practise between architect Manuel Shvartzberg and writer Fabian Faltin. Their current interests include arts spaces, values-cultures-methodologies of architecture, social democratic design, utopian and dystopian global perspectives, as well as meta-level philosophies and fictions. Hunter & Gatherer’s collaborations may take any form - from pure research, to performative lectures and installations, publications and architectural designs. Manuel Shvartzberg studied at the Bartlett school of Architecture and is a registered architect currently overseeing the construction of the Turner Contemporary Gallery in Margate (UK) for David Chipperfield Architects, London. Fabian Faltin studied social policy, philosophy and economics at the London School of Economics and Sciences Po Paris. He has recently published his first novel Gute Macht with Milena Verlag, Vienna.

Jahman Anikulapo studied Theatre Arts, specializing in directing, dramatic theories and criticisms at the University of Ibadan (1983-86). He has been an arts and culture journalist for over two decades, writing mostly on the performing arts, visual arts, literature and cultural affairs. He worked as the Arts and Media Editor of The Guardian (Daily) between 1992 and 2003. He is currently the Editor of The Guardian on Sunday.

Koni Benson is a post doctoral research fellow in History and at the African Center for Cities at the University of Cape Town where she is producing life histories of unfolding political struggles of women shack dwellers collectively resisting slum clearance and displacement and fighting for access to public services in apartheid and post apartheid South Africa. She works with social justice organisations in popular education and research processes, creating accessible information through publications, public forums, oral histories, documentaries, social mapping, and graffiti arts. Since 2006 she has worked at the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) in Cape Town on research, education, and publications for trade unions and social movements and has been developing ongoing documentation in collaboration with the women’s leadership of a network of informal settlements under threat of removal in their campaigns to resist ‘slum’ eradication removal projects, and for access to public services including water, housing, and healthcare. Her post doctoral research focuses on the urbanization of poverty, development and displacement, and women in resistance movements. She is the author of Crossroads: I Live Where I Like, a graphic novel history series on women’s organized resistance to slum clearance in Crossroads South Africa, 1975-2015, (illustrated by the Tratraal Brothers and published by Isotrope Media 2014), and the co-author with Faeza Meyer of Writing Out Loud: Interventions in the History of A Land Occupation (forthcoming 2015). Her work has also been published by ILRIG and in the Journal of Southern African Studies, Feminist Africa, Pambuzuka Press, Gender Place and Culture: Feminist Geography, South African Labour Bulletin, Zambezia, Khanya College Journal, Zmagazine, and various newspapers in South Africa, Canada, and Kenya.
Faeza Meyer is the chairperson of the Cape Town Housing Assembly, an umbrella body that aims to build a city-wide movement of working class people fighting for decent housing for all. She was the chairperson of Tafelsig Residents Unite and one of the key leaders in the Kapteinsklip land occupation in Mitchell’s Plain between May 2011-October 2012. She is currently organizing a campaign against water meters, and recently completed a diploma in Adult Education at the University of Cape Town. She is undergoing training with the Popular Education Program and has completed the Community Activist Course at the International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG), and has done Advice Office training and Video Training with Worker’s World Media Production. “Victims of Eviction,” and “Tafelsig Doccie” are both available on YouTube. She has travelled to Johannesburg as part of a Marikana Solidarity initiative, and to Canada to participate in the Steelworkers Union leadership course. She has done numerous presentations, and television and radio interviews. She is the coauthor with Koni Benson of Writing Out Loud: Interventions in the History of A Land Occupation (forthcoming 2015) which tracks 18 months of a land occupation and her experiences of homelessness and resistance to the growing housing crisis in Cape Town.

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Billy Kahora is the Managing Editor of Kwani? He also writes fiction and completed an MS.c in Creative Writing with distinction at the University of Edinburgh as a Chevening Scholar in 2007. Before that, Billy studied and worked in South Africa for 8 years and in between worked as an Editorial Assistant for All Africa.com in Washington D.C. He has a Bachelor of Journalism degree and postgraduate diploma in Media Studies from Rhodes University. His short story, ‘Treadmill Love’, was highly commended by the 2007 Caine Prize judges. He edited ‘Kenya Burning’, a visual narrative of the Kenya post-elections crisis published by the GoDown Arts Centre and Kwani Trust in March 2009. His extended feature, ‘The True Story of David Munyakei’ on Kenya’s biggest whistleblower has been developed into a non-fiction novella and was released by Kwani Trust in July 2009. Billy was a Regional judge for the 2009 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize as well as the 2014 Etisalat Prize for Literature.