

4 Sacral spaces in two West African cities

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Introduction

The implicit compromise that has characterized relationships between rulers and ruled in West Africa during the postcolonial period is no longer capable of maintaining a functional semblance of social cohesion within existent nations. The compromise that curtailed political contestation and investment in social development in return for allowing elites from diverse social categories to feed off the accumulation availed to the states pursuing strategies of extraversion has given way to political and economic restructuring mandated as conditionalities for access to needed resources and legitimacy. Even though former regimes have proved adept at remaking themselves to adapt to new conditions, the increased diversity in the itineraries of political ascension gives rise to new actors, as well as increased levels of social inequality and the normalization of violence in some national contexts as a modality of social recomposition.

Given an intensified fracturing and privatization of state functions, a widening rupture among generations, and pervasive uncertainty as to what constitute effective practices for securing livelihood, religion has become the predominate narrative through which West African residents now attempt to account for and structure what is happening to them. Through its transnational networks, religion also becomes an important locus of accumulation with many murky ties to political regimes, in some instances rendering the spaces between the state and the civil highly ambiguous, particularly where religious institutions become vehicles for illicit economic activities and forms of political mobilization otherwise foreclosed (see Banegas and Fratani-Marshall 2003).

The discussion here is centered on Abidjan and Douala, the largest urban areas of two West African states. Each manifests a contrasting expression of national anxiety and responses to the prospects of social upheaval. Côte D'Ivoire has, for the past three years, experienced a violent contestation of nationalisms where religion, ethnicity, generation, access to land and economic practice assume multiple and competing configurations. The result has been to fracture the country's largest urban area into shifting and overlapping territorial particularities that give rise to broad-based local participation in neighborhood rule but within increasingly narrowing socio-spatial parameters (see Banegas and Losch

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2002). In Cameroon, fear of the social disintegration exemplified by Côte D'Ivoire has produced a politics of inertia, where the preservation of an image of political stability secured through the regime's highly visible practice of seeming to involve as many actors as possible in matters of policy- and decision-making means that few decisions are actually made. Everyone thus becomes convinced that invisible forces are behind any significant endeavor. For most citizens it is not clear how anything happens, and in the rampant expansion of the sense that things are not what they appear to be, there is little confidence in any form of mediation which would enable residents to have a working sense that specific actions they undertake are likely to produce certain results.

In both cities – one experiencing heightened levels of violence, the other heightened levels of inertia and dissimulation – social collaboration in all but the most basic of tasks appears increasingly dangerous and provisional. Captured increasingly by designations such as 'young patriot' or 'congregant' and manifested through highly emotional displays of nationalist and religious fervor, such collective collaboration becomes increasingly homogenized in urban situations requiring large measures of heterogeneity in order to make a living where there are few resources to go around. What are the incipient if largely underplayed and uncoded opportunities where new forms of sociality can be reworked and where opportunities are kept open for such reworking to emerge into broader areas of application?

This chapter focuses on a range of sacral spaces – minor configurations of highly kinetic sociality existing in the shadows of otherwise highly visible nocturnal zones – that confer to participants wide latitude of performances and stylization while still enabling them to sustain the conviction that they are operating in concert. This is the case even when there is no overarching narrative that provides their transactions a clear purpose or sense of coherence. These spaces are not strictly liminal, transgressive, or diasporic. Rather, they exist as a concretization of the possibility of individuals circulating continuously through seemingly incommensurable forms of tentative subjectification. Convened, for example, in long half-completed housing developments or in the back courtyards of small boutiques contiguous to volatile yet political neutral nightlife domains, these spaces permit gatherings of urban actors who are otherwise antagonists or socially distant to transact and collaborate with each other for purposes and with practices that remain intentionally vague and malleable, but always capable of keeping them in face of each other in an affective politics.

The key question is how these spaces 'insert' themselves in the interstices of urban balkanization occasioned by the increased deployment of violence as a means of articulating political claims in Côte D'Ivoire. Additionally, how are they inserted in the cultivation of a collective social paralysis in Cameroon whereby political rule is cemented by making as much of everyday life as ambiguous as possible? While these spaces may remain minor to the overall political trajectories along which city life in West Africa is being substantially recomposed with heightened degrees of immiseration, they constitute steadily

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1 prolific sites where the irruption of certain landmarks from their encapsulation in
2 formations of both state and religious practice are being reworked.

Backgrounds and backdrops: Abidjan

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6 Until his death in 1993, Houphouët-Boigny, *Le Vieux*, was Côte D'Ivoire's sole
7 head of state, its paternal guarantor of the link between workable diversity and
8 prosperity, as well as a pre-eminent tactician in using the state as an instrument
9 of national coherence. Ever since, the country's politics have become increas-
10 ingly fractious. Even in his waning years, the old man constituted such a source
11 of gravity, that key political actors never made sufficient investment in config-
12 uring viable alliances amongst themselves. Whereas Alassane Ouattara was
13 appointed prime minister during the last years of Houphouët's reign in order to
14 effect a drastic restructuring of the state's finances and economic policies, presi-
15 dential power fell to Konan Bedie, a much less capable administrator, whom the
16 old man, nevertheless, had groomed to succeed him (see Akindès 2003 and
17 Sindzingre 2000).

18 Despite the regional devaluation of the local CFA franc¹ currency in 1994,
19 which cut deeply into the salaries of civil servants and urban residents in
20 particular, the country's dynamic export sector, buttressed by Ouattara's struc-
21 tural reforms, enabled Bédié to maintain power in the 1995 presidential elec-
22 tions. To ward off competition from Ouattara, a policy of *Ivrité* was enshrined
23 in electoral law, mandating that a candidate was only eligible for presidential
24 office if both parents were born in Côte D'Ivoire and that the candidate must
25 have resided continuously in the country for the past five years. As Ouattara had
26 taken a senior job in the International Monetary Fund in Washington the year
27 before and available records stated that his father had been born in Burkina
28 Faso, Ouattara was ruled ineligible to stand. The only other significant political
29 grouping, that of the Front Populaire Invoirien, led by the perennial opposition
30 figure Laurent Gbagbo, stayed out of the 1995 elections (LePape and Vidal
31 2002).

32 Meanwhile, prices of cocoa and coffee declined drastically, and the frame-
33 works that had rationalized producer prices, commercial sales and investments
34 were increasingly distorted and prone to corruption, significantly weakening the
35 country's relationships with multilateral institutions. Thus began a steep decline
36 in living standards. When Ouattara returned to Côte D'Ivoire in 1999, he
37 assumed the mantle of *Rassemblement des Republicains* (RDR). This marked
38 intensifying efforts by the Bédié government to eliminate Ouattara as an elect-
39 oral threat, leading to the detainment of the entire leadership of the RDR and
40 Ouattara's flight from the country. In December of that year, the head of the army
41 Robert Guei staged a coup forcing Bédié to flee for France.

42 Guei attempted to form a government of national unity in preparation for
43 drafting a new constitution and holding new elections. However, in October
44 2000, Guei, against his previous stated intentions, decided to run for the presi-
45 dency and disqualified almost all presidential candidates, leading the RDR and

PDCI (Democratic Party of Ivory Coast) to boycott the elections. Massive dissatisfaction in the military led to widespread purges. Gbagbo won a truncated presidential election, but Guei initially refused to step down, leading to a popular insurrection in Abidjan where hundreds of people were killed, and forcing Guei to return to his hometown near the Liberian border. Gbagbo moved to further entrench a policy of Ivoirité, and in doing so disqualified Ouattara's candidacy for parliamentary elections – elections marred by widespread violence (Langer 2003).

It is clear that if elections were free from boycotts and manipulations, the RDR would have substantial support, primarily in the north, but in many of the urban areas of the south as well. Gbagbo's support did not run deep, and he was forced to take an increasingly strident populist stand in order to reinforce his political prospects. While the state had often been a key integrating mechanism for the country's diverse ethnicities and regional interests, the economic contraction of the state apparatus forced many civil servants and much of the political class to turn to alternative methods of accumulation.

As the agricultural sector remained the key domain of economic productivity and capital investment, many urban actors attempted to acquire land in their ancestral areas. But for much of the prior century, Ivoirian productivity had been dependent upon the *métayage* system, a harvest-sharing approach where usually migrant laborers from the Sahel retained fixed percentages of the proceeds as they worked across an interlocking network of farms and plantations, eventually acquiring land of their own. Thus these returning 'indigenes' found little land to be acquired. Struggles over land thus became a key element in the manipulation of ethnic tensions. Additionally, there was a growing perception that Muslims were significantly overtaking the Christian population of Abidjan and that the purported dominance of trade and entrepreneurship by the Dyulas, historically from the north, was squeezing out the economic capacities of the Baoules and the Betes in the country's economic capital (Steck 2002).

Disaffected soldiers launched a failed coup in September 2002 which rami-fied across the country, displacing several hundred persons from the northern region and its largest city, Bouaké, and instituting a practice of what could be considered ethnic cleansing in Abidjan, as entire popular quarters of residents whose lineage was from the north of country, as well from other West African countries, were destroyed. The country has been effectively divided into two from that date, with the *Mouvement Patriotique pour la Côte D'Ivoire* in charge of the north, with two ancillary rebel movements, *Mouvement pour la Justice et la Paix* and *Mouvement Populaire Ivoirienne du Grand Ouest*, nominally in control of varying regions in the west, while turning the frontier areas bordering on Liberia into highly insecure and fluid zones.

Despite a wide range of military and diplomatic efforts to end the conflict, most notably the Linas–Marcoussis Accord signed by all parties to the conflict in January 2003 – which provided a road map for disarmament, a government of national unity, the appointment of a prime minister acceptable to all sides, and presidential elections scheduled for 2005 in which all major political actors

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1 would be eligible to participate – the crisis showed little sign of abating. A
2 United Nations peacekeeping mission of 6,000 troops was deployed in 2004 to
3 supplement 4,000 French peacekeepers (Reporters Without Borders 2003).

4 Although a government of national unity has been formed the *Forces Nou-*
5 *velles*, as the conjunction of the three rebel groupings is known, has largely boy-
6 cotted ministerial meetings, accusing Gbagbo of repeatedly violating the
7 Marcoussis agreement and demonstrating no interest in rectifying the conflict, at
8 least until he tries to win a new presidential mandate in 2005. Abidjan has wit-
9 nessed periodic convulsions of violence, with the deployment of death squads
10 targeting opposition leaders and ordinary civilians, and then the targeting of
11 French residents in November 2004, following the destruction of the country's
12 military air force in retaliation for the government's purportedly accidental
13 attack on a French military base near Bouaké. These led to the evacuation of the
14 bulk of the French expatriate population. While the French are widely seen as
15 complicit with the events of the last several years, and are widely despised
16 among many Abidjanais, French involvement in Ivoirian commerce has intensi-
17 fied in recent years, as French interests have acquired major holdings in water,
18 electricity, and telecommunications.

19 Current resolution efforts, led now by President Thabo Mbeki of South
20 Africa on behalf of the African Union, have largely hinged upon revising the
21 constitutional provisions that prohibit the candidacy of Alassane Ouattara. Cir-
22 cumventing the mandated referendum necessary to make changes to the consti-
23 tution, Gbagbo has invoked a clause that gave him the powers, under times of
24 national crisis, to override the prohibitive section of the constitution, and thus
25 Ouattara will run in the coming elections of October 2006. But this hinge,
26 although politically significant, is clearly overdetermined – made to stand in and
27 for the extensive fissions that make Côte D'Ivoire a highly turbulent society,
28 where religion, access to land, practices of livelihood and accumulation, claims
29 to urban space, and competing networks of regional articulation are significantly
30 entangled with each other. In Abidjan especially, the levels of populist hysteria,
31 the entanglement of local democracy with xenophobic attitudes, the arbitrary
32 violence, and the interweaving of powerful parallel structures such as major
33 churches and youth movements with the state, will require radical governance
34 renovations in order to deter the further implosion of the city (International
35 Crisis Group 2005).

Douala

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38 Douala is a sprawling, ramshackle city of 2.5 million named after the original
39 inhabitants of the area. From its inception, the city has reflected an intricate con-
40 testation as to what it is to itself and to the larger world. In other words, the
41 unfolding and construction of the city has contained multiple levels of argument
42 about suitable images. What is the image of the city that works; what should a
43 city be, and how?

44 As the commercial center of Cameroon, Douala certainly has a broad range
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of political institutions located within it. But as the city has not been primarily focused on administrative activities and the concomitant salaries upon which large numbers of extended family members throughout urban Africa have come to depend, surviving in Douala entails a larger measure of individual entrepreneurial initiative than is characteristic of many other African cities (see Bayart 1985). Even with large numbers of people who are unemployed, the overall sense of the city is one where residents are trying to make livelihoods happen.

At the same time, the relative absence of political institutions and a dependency on public employment means that important instruments of urban socialization (i.e. domains around which social collaboration and solidarity can be fostered) are absent. Historically, cadres of civil servants, public sector unions, and networks of local authority that were forged through their efforts to secure positions in the state and negotiate resources from it played a critical role in fostering a sense of social cohesion in many African cities. As the burden of survival in Douala is much more incumbent upon individuals and households, a greater value is placed on the autonomy of operations rather than on fostering social interdependency (Warnier 1993).

This tendency also produces a greater divergence in the characteristics of individual quarters. Without strong gravitational fields generated by critical political and civil institutions, quarters are more inclined to 'go their own way.' Some are characterized by a strong sense of social cohesion forged through particular histories of settlement, ethnic composition, location, access to resources, and the nature of local leadership. Other quarters have little to distinguish them as coherent places except for either an administrative designation or a particular reputation (Orock 2005).

Without either strong institutional supports or impediments, some quarters have been able to proficiently mobilize local initiative and resources to provide essential urban services in a judicious and cost-effective manner. On the other hand, for some quarters, the absence of strong political incentives means that there is little basis for residents to come together for any significant form of cooperation. In these instances, quarters can easily become overwhelmed by the absence of regulation and planning, as there are few mechanisms for land use and waste disposal – particularly thorny problems given Douala's tropical climate and riparian setting.

While urban households may be adept at securing livelihood and opportunity, the largely ad hoc manner in which this is pursued means that there are massive problems with critical urban functions, such as circulation across the city, drainage, refuse collection, and security. At the same time, it is difficult to foresee how applicable the array of local solutions often effective as stopgap measures in many other African cities with more substantive histories of social cooperation would be in Douala. So the city combines heightened ingenuity, a high degree of urbanization of behavior and social outlook, a largely inadequate institutional framework for regulating urban processes, and a highly contentious relationship to the political regime in power – all dynamics which make innovative urban development planning both necessary and difficult. Long afraid of

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1 the city as both a center of opposition and a countervailing force to its reliance
2 upon ethno-regional divides and privileges as a method of maintaining rule, the
3 state has frequently come down hard on Douala over the past two decades. This
4 has often meant the use of extrajudicial killings and detentions of problematic
5 figures. In recent years more 'silent' yet insidious methods have been used to
6 promote fear at the local level, including the delivery of large amounts of cash to
7 unsuspecting households in the middle of the night, the appointment of local
8 opposition activists to insignificant yet highly visible and symbolic positions of
9 authority without their knowledge – in general manipulations aimed at promot-
10 ing unease as to who is doing what to whom.

Distorted publicities: Abidjan

14 The agora, public discussion forums of the street, originated in Abidjan's com-
15 mercial center, Plateau, during the mid-1990s as a place where young men in
16 particular would gather. Although the discourse centered on politics, it was not
17 so much a place of political speeches as it was of efforts to debate prospective
18 popular frameworks for understanding current political events. The agora that
19 initially attained the greatest notoriety was called Sorbonne, and the emphasis
20 here was to utilize the redundancy of the gathering and its growing audience as
21 an instrument of crystallizing a dynamic voice for 'the people.' Accordingly,
22 while young militants from existing political parties would engage the process,
23 the agora was not strictly a battle for political affiliation, but rather a conver-
24 gence of very diverse social identities upon an emerging political critique (Bahi
25 2003). Heavily stylized performances, bordering on the irreverent and the mad,
26 were intentionally deployed so as to mask attention to specific social or political
27 identity attributions. This surface self-effacement and humor sought to cultivate
28 camaraderie and openness among the participants, which could then allow for
29 certain battles of words, intensifications of contested viewpoints and positions.

30 As the agora was situated in a protracted period of problematic political
31 transition, it became the object of sporadic political repression. The continuity of
32 the Sorbonne in face of such repression, and its rededication to the freeing of
33 speech substantiated its reputation widely throughout the city. As its influence
34 becomes more extensive, it also had to balance the pressures of maintaining its
35 status as an informal manifestation of the street and seize the opportunity to cap-
36 italize upon its activities through more formal means, making it a clearly
37 legitimate interlocutor with other major political actors. As a body willing to
38 read the political trends and events, translate them into a language popularly
39 comprehensible, and then specify probable futures that ensue from these polit-
40 ical actions, it provided a context of action itself. It did not incite participants to
41 a particular ideological viewpoint as much as it reiterated the possibility of
42 action, of taking the future as a changeable object of consideration because a
43 heterogeneity of voices could be heard and thus serve as elements for any polit-
44 ical recomposition.

45 Yet, in the imaginations of those responsible for reproducing this opportunity –

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as a kind of public university, a place of open and thoughtful exchange that operates as a forceful political conscience – there arose the dilemma of how this particular spatialization of politics would extend across an increasingly divided city or, more precisely, where the politics of ascendancy were increasingly invested in accentuating divides among the city’s inhabitants. Its existence then also accentuated the degree to which the majority of residents either have little to say or little opportunity to say it, and so a range of asymmetries were amplified. If the agora served the function of popularizing the sense that politics is something to be made – through demystifying the pronouncements and obscure analytics issued by the state; by reading through the ideological narrowness and hysteria of the predominant newspapers; by bringing to the fore the possibility of political voices that could make their mark outside of the calcified bureaucracies – then the city is opened up onto a wide range of instruments for the remaking of that very politics. Thus what ensued was the proliferation of street demonstrations and the claims and pronouncements of a widening network of actors taking various public stages, particularly that of the written press.

But it was in this very tension between maintaining the spatial parameters that would continue to ensure its openness and the organizational logics that would constitute the main agoras as a formal interlocutor that allowed them to become available to major political entrepreneurs who insinuated themselves into their operations as a means of steering free deliberations into increasingly strident populist messages, themselves corresponding with the tactics of the now ruling *Front Populaire Ivoirien* of Laurent Gbagbo. From 2000 on, following Gbagbo’s ascendancy to power, these agora would become the primary instruments of popular mobilization for the *l’Alliance des Jeunes Patriotes* managed by Charles Blé Goudé in an attempt to standardize political thought and focus upon reclaiming Abidjan for Ivoirians – a nationality now reserved for non-Muslims and non-Northern Ivoirians.

The sacral in the volatile city

Conventional notions of municipality have tended to emphasize the progressive gathering up of discrete urban places and experiences into a scalar order capable of generating a comprehensive image of the possible intersections of these urban elements – how they can and might interact and affect each other. This is what, in another context of discussion about methodology, John Law calls a ‘romantic complexity’ – a successive incorporation of different elements that formally attempts to make explicit how these elements are related to each other and the complex reality that emerges from these relationships (Law 2003). As Serres indicates, this is the conviction that there is an open path from the local to the global, and by breaking up the city into its various compartments, administrative districts, economies, and identities, an overarching logic of organization can thus penetrate throughout the urban flux as it is differentiated into calculable units which refer back to an all-encompassing global (1995).

In conventional modes of apprehension, then, specific places, practices and

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1 inclinations can only be productively viewed in a process of recomposition,
2 potentiation, and affectation through the ‘integrating’ maneuvers of scalar sup-
3 position. What is ruled out in these conventional modes is viewing any instance
4 of territorialization and urban social composition as a multiply textured and
5 shifting architecture of openings, enclosures, recesses and incursions. This is
6 architecture of transductive relays of sensation and impulsion capable of mixing
7 along all dimensions and inciting new materialities and experiments of living –
8 not only those specified by the geometries of embedded scales. Subsumed by
9 cadastrals, zoning regulations, truncated historical narratives, infrastructural
10 reticulations, and the calculations of economic decline and renewal, urban quar-
11 ters nevertheless participate in an ever-proliferating set of lateral connections
12 across the city and other cities. These connections bring to the city (and bring it
13 to) overlapping possibilities and actions, regardless of the modes of regulation
14 and surveillance applied. Systems of calculation clearly make visible and discurs-
15 ive specific sets of relations, which come to be references for how people
16 understand what is taking place.

17 Yet the materiality of discrete elements – places, experiences, actors – is
18 itself opened up onto, connected with and made to embody an innumerable
19 series of relationships with other elements. If these relationships are always
20 shifting, the specificity of each element is itself constitutive of and constituted
21 from a complexity of intersections that makes an event or object of considera-
22 tion in a neighborhood or organization always volatile, always open to and over-
23 flowing onto wider activities. Indeed, if we consider urbanization to be a
24 thickening of realities through the intense circulations and interrelationships of
25 place, body, discourse and object, it is through this process which cities expand
26 their capacities.

27 But this complexity cannot be represented in a totalizing, comprehensive
28 picture that comes across as an array of stably differentiated elements. The
29 specificity of a quarter or urban activity may be inclusive of a vast range of
30 urban elements, there is no bird’s-eye view or account that could sum up the
31 entirety of such an intersection of elements. Inclusiveness cannot be made
32 explicit in the way logical frameworks that attempt to model whole systems
33 attempt to do. What is at work is the linking of something contingent, something
34 always to be explored. As these connections proceed then outside any natural or
35 fixed relationship to a larger whole – and therefore outside the perspective that
36 renders particular urban processes as either productive, implosive, fragmentary
37 or cohesive – the inexplicability of their force means that they can only be
38 caught, associatively or indirectly, at the edges of perception – in what I desig-
39 nate a sacral dimension, something elusive and excessive of sanctioned urban
40 ordering (see Law 2002).

41 This sacral dimension is partly captured in notions of embodiment – a
42 process where actors can conjure up an as-if world, a kind of self-referential
43 totality, by taking up and transforming features of particular place and setting in
44 order to portray a style of life that shows itself what it is, and where the actors
45 themselves are reconfigured in light of the possibilities that flow from them, but

yet remains a world which does not exist beyond the particular setting of this act (see Thrift 2000). That is, there are moments and scenarios across everyday life that exert themselves as critical events – collectively enacted disjunctions from the ways in which normative social transactions are marked and regulated.

Here, the particular histories, styles, memories, desires, and anticipations specific characters carry with them into a particular arena are put into play, are ‘bounced off’ each other in ways that put each actor ‘on the line’ – i.e. faced with having to exceed how they have come to account for or know themselves; to literally be something different in the event that is being affected. The instrumentality and affective textures of individuals may be moved into new directions. Or, actors may recoup from such differentiating events by returning to that which is familiar or normative, but even in such instances, whatever sensorial, cognitive or affective resources they were ‘equipped’ with are inevitably recalibrated.

There are two related ways of looking at this spatialization of the sacred. In one sense, with Bataille, the sacred has no specific space, but rather is a bringing of the spiritual into the profane, and the profane into the spiritual – a leakage in the act of attempting to contain or seal off an agenda, a demand or a concerted attempt to overturn, a non-event in the midst of an assemblage and, as such, a potentially convulsive communication (Hegarty 2003). A gathering up of intentions and aspirations that transgressed – yet as a movement that is always in operation, as what is gathered is not subsumed under some overarching attentiveness or stillness in face of some promise of coherence, but rather a trajectory of contagion, a crossing of lines back and forth (*ibid.*).²

It is also possible to experience the space (or time) of the sacred as the very practice of doing the everyday – its routines, circumnavigations – yet re-enchanted with a different mode of inhabitation or style of articulation that is felt. Something that is affective rather than discursive. Here, seemingly everyday objects are gathered up into a relational topology of movement, senses, rhythm and affect. In this intermixing of elements, each has its own intensities and programs that impact upon the experience of enacting the sacred in that they induce moments that are full of potential outcomes (Holloway 2003).³ As such there can be the irrupting of the sacred into the everyday in such a way that every aspect of the everyday can potentially reveal the sacred.

Spaces and times of the sacral: Youpougon

Long before the present crisis in Abidjan, I lived in one of the city’s largest quarters, Youpougon II, with a partner who was finishing her masters degree at the university. We lived in university housing, which basically consisted of a seemingly endless series of contiguous compounds sharing walls. The maze-like assemblage always seemed intimidating in that it threatened to swallow up the capacity to discern entrances and exits – leading the novice residents to inevitable mistakes on their way to or from home until they came to feel their way to the right house. Yet, it seemed to, through cheap architecture, enforce a sense of even-handedness to the motley composition of residents, including stu-

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1 dents, entrepreneurs, civil servants, factory workers, all of varying ethnicities
2 and nationalities.

3 As the bulk of domestic space was outdoors, daily life was enacted in the
4 midst of a cacophony of instructions, arguments, mundane commentaries, and
5 even shouted intimacies coming from all directions, and which always consti-
6 tuted a wide trajectory of responses for whatever discursive requirements might
7 have emerged from one's own highly localized deliberations. At times it was lit-
8 erally impossible to assume a point of view that would not be punctuated or
9 steered away by fragments of disembodied talk circulating across the suburb.
10 Even any ranked order of audibility seemed to disappear, as the faintest whis-
11 pers sometimes were able to supercede the blaring radios or televisions. What
12 got amplified at any particular juncture often did not make sense, even though
13 the semantic strings were perfectly clear and capable of wafting their way
14 around any effort to work out who would cook that night.

15 Living at the edges of this concrete puzzle, one was at somewhat of a disad-
16 vantage in precisely locating the destinations of those who got into and out of
17 the taxis or who bought cigarettes and soft drinks from the Mauritanian shacks
18 that were scattered throughout the narrow passageways. Taking a drink at the
19 local bars or buying fish and *alloko* from the lines of *maquis* around the corner, I
20 would always try to pay attention to the voices, to determine familiarities of
21 sound and link them to faces, out of curiosity if nothing else. But it rarely
22 worked, and the aural landscape retained its strong autonomy from visual
23 performance. Besides, there was enough to deal with at home. Domestic life was
24 nearly always stormy and subject to quick exits at any time of day. As this was
25 in part a function of an over-close relationship, in part driven by the fact that we
26 had to keep our relationship fairly invisible as my partner was escaping an
27 engagement to a powerful Ivoirian politician, every time one of us walked out,
28 the other soon followed in pursuit.

29 Even with a substantial head-start, changing from taxis to buses back to taxis,
30 and seeking a quiet night's sleep in the grungiest of rooming houses in the quar-
31 ters on the other side of Abidjan, my partner would always find me. It might
32 have taken up to six hours but she always managed to knock at the right door or
33 appear at the back of the right bus. Although it was always easy to attribute this
34 skill to sorcery, it was a little too easy, for such attribution really doesn't answer
35 the key questions, and tends to leave you out of the equation. I was never sure
36 how she did it, and she was always eager to explain in such precise ways that
37 her systematic manner could never be credible.

38 But I recall how she had a close friend who lived some thirty meters behind
39 our compound, crossing another household, a small lane, and then two addi-
40 tional courtyards cum kitchens, eating and laundry areas. As far as I remem-
41 bered her friend had never visited our compound, even though we shared many
42 drinks and dinners at local *maquis*. There were no apparent impediments to such
43 visits; she lived with a younger sister, there were seemingly no domestic com-
44 plexities at her end either.

45 Yet almost every night each of them dragged chairs and washbasins and

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stools to some unsteady elevation over the walls and spoke. My partner would act as if she was engaged in a conversation, but I don't see how it could have taken place. I tried to raise myself over the compound wall to see if they actually could hear each other, but the distance appeared to great and the interruptions too prolific. Even though the neighbors never seemed to object too strenuously to the apparent invasion of privacy, as both, in their elevation, had visual access to at least twenty different households, they were not going to keep quiet about it, or, more accurately, in face of it.

The volume of the everyday chores and chatter seemed to go up considerably every time she scaled the walls. But it didn't seem to matter, and my partner would always treat me incredulously if I queried her about the conversation, or why she just didn't go around the corner and down the road, or why they persisted in this particular arrangement. Certainly my partner didn't need to draw any more attention to herself, as we had already been the talk of the neighborhood for some time. For a long time I made no association between these talks and her search party skills, and even now hesitate to make excessive claims for them. But it seems that these nearly nightly interchanges, girlfriend to girlfriend, might have been a way of practicing a kind of lateral apprehension, a way of sensing and feeling across a field of discrete interchanges, discrepant histories, repeated banalities, machines blaring in the background, and kids shouting their rhymes. That between her and her friend existed many pitfalls and detours, many diversions and trajectories, delays and accelerators, attractors and thresholds—all making any semblance of an unmediated correspondence impossible. But not necessarily a sense of intimacy, for obviously my partner, in the few things she was willing to say about these encounters, claimed to value the special closeness she felt.

What could be attributed to whom, whose words belonged to whom? What in this field of sound, words, longings, and anxieties was affecting who, and who could offer a definitive interpretation of what was or could be said? It is clear that both positioned themselves in a certain way, facing each other, in a stylization that both could convincingly put them into some kind of direct line and transmission. Yet the evidentiary pool which constituted the anticipation of each other's anticipation – necessary for any dyadic articulation – did not rest in their own speech, but rather in some collective that had no existence separate from these exchanges but which, at the same time, had little to do with the actions of the 'conversants.'

And so a certain movement of the conversation and exchange is being rehearsed – not marked by the usual discursive or cognitive characteristics dependent upon the semiotic but by the referencing of the exchange to its own variations, its own changes in intensity, rhythm, and affect. As my partner moved around the swirling field of words, sounds, and sensations in keeping her friend in view and engaged, what maybe, just maybe, came to her was this capacity to sense her way through the sectorized urban world in a mixed up way so as to always track me down despite my best efforts to mix her up.

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Treichville

Abidjan was becoming an increasingly dangerous place in the years leading up to the present conflict. Everyone with guns – from police to militias to gangs – responded with greater nervousness. It was harder to get a sense of what was going on in anything called the city as a whole since individual quarters, no matter how heterogeneously composed, seemed to accentuate their own specificities. Some became nearly balkanized enclaves; others merely took on heavily exaggerated styles of walking, talking, rhyming or of doing nothing.

Although the coastal layout of the city and its historical interpenetration of West Africans from everywhere mean that it is nearly impossible to deter all mixtures of circulation, an inordinate degree of calculation started informing just how residents navigated their movements across urban corridors. In addition, policing agents interrupted any fluid circulation of traffic during the night, making travel between Adjame and Treichville, Marcory and Vridi Canal, Youpougou and Koumassi tedious and unpredictable. As the everyday interweaving of visits, shopping, sojourning, and trade dissipated in face of the over-coding of identity and the valorization of ethnic particularity, crime quickly filled the interstices, further marking out boundaries of relative safety, proliferating no-go areas and redrawing the geographies of individual networks.

Even the Abidjanais' obsession with outdoor dining, particularly for the middle classes, was channeled into one-stop large parks with scores of *maquis* and secure parking. While increasingly railed into their historic domains of operation, the sex trade – always important in times of prosperity and decline, peace and war – continued to be one of the few anchors of night life. While Zone 4C in Marcory in recent years may have supplanted the southeastern corner of Treichville as the dominant night spot, particularly for expatriate and middle-class consumers, the impending sense of political doom tended to restore a large measure of possibility to the place. Although part of a larger 'leisure district' in past years, its size had shrunk considerably, particularly with the closing of cinemas and dance halls. Only *Cabine Bambou* and *Whiskey A Go Go* remained to anchor a series of small restaurants, bars, and coffee houses that covered not more than two square blocks. An all-night bakery added to the traffic, as did stalls of hawkers constituting the place as some form of an all night market. In years past, there were rasta clubs, upmarket cocktail lounges and even theme bars, but these were all gone. The Treichville zone clearly survived on the basis of prostitution, and no matter the disposition of a city, there are always casts of characters looking for sex – if the businessmen go, the soldiers will come, and vice-versa; there are always different externalities that find particular articulation to a city via sex.

Lingering at the fringes of this zone, are small bars and coffee shops. Many are waiting lounges – for boyfriends of the sex workers, taxi drivers, and gangsters, who are the reserve army for the club owners in the event they need to supplement the staff already present. There are hangers-on, insomniacs, and even intelligence agents. Who knows who they are exactly. These are basic

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operations, but the coffee is strong, and some serve cheap food, shwarmas and burgers, maybe the occasional *attieke* and very dried fish. Most have an opening onto the back, small courtyards illuminated at moments with kerosene lamps, with basic metal tables and chairs strewn haphazardly; spaces that never close, and never really open.

Yet for hours, into the night, gatherings can count old men with faces crushed from various accidents dressed impeccably in red suits and yellow ties, young boys, no more than 13 or 14, in oversized *Ecko* track suits that give them underserved bulk, academics with briefcases full of obscure works on European sociology, with texts underlined repeatedly in different colors and arrows linking words seemingly extracted at random; market women, whom one would surmise spend their days surrounded by cassava aside some peripheral truck stop who find their way to an completely unanticipated elegance with intricately brocaded, perfectly tailored dresses but whose occupants have none of the rehearsed arrogance of the elite; sex workers taking a night off with nowhere to go; bankers who appear so relieved to wear skullcaps and full white *boubous* as if conformity to Islamic stereotypes is finally the concretization of some new found freedom.

The ambiance is jumpy, never relaxed, and alcohol, although present, almost appears shunned. Initially the scene appeared as an accident, as if this assemblage of idiosyncrasies was the exaggeration of a Saturday night or the culmination of sleepless nights that struck at the heart of every social class or identity group, and where's the city's constrictions left it no choice but to end up here. Even if such a presupposition indeed did account for their peculiar compositions, these backyards of coffee houses did stage, night after night, never the same content of jumbling but always a scene out of place. In part, the repetition was likely made possible by the fact that rarely did anyone say anything clearly intelligible to each other. I would find myself engaged in protracted conversations with near lunatics, street boys, maids, truck drivers, directors of statistical bureaus, clergymen, and software programmers where either the French was so distorted or idiomatic as to be incomprehensible to most gathered, where the *Dyula* was so mixed with English colloquialisms as to defeat the purpose of either language being mixed, or where someone spoke in his local dialect of *Abé*, *Grebo*, or *Wé* and no one else at the table knew the language, or where there was just gibberish.

But the absence of linguistic consonance didn't seem to matter; for all other signs would indicate that people were attuned to whatever was going on, paying attention, responding to and fro to an nearly effortless rhythm of interchange. Anger, joy, indifference, curiosity, and tenderness would all be exchanged and at moments that did not appear to be ineluctable to anyone; every affective response seemed to make sense although there was no surface evidence as to why particular feelings might come and go.

Although this 'event that is not an event' would seem foolish and trivial in retrospect, there was some powerful injunction at work that acted to deter making inquiries about it. No matter how curious I was about trying to identify

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1 and understand what was taking place in these nocturnal sessions, I could never
2 bring myself to perform the role of the social scientist and deliberate among the
3 various potential tactics that might enable the participants to best represent, in a
4 functional language, what was going on.

5 It wasn't that I believed that such sessions were devoid of a potentially dis-
6 cernible purpose. Nor was it that I was afraid that these proceedings would come
7 down to being simply a game about duping the white boy. Nor was it some
8 nagging unease that such queries would be construed as signs of disrespect for
9 something I was allowed to experience but did not have the cultural resonance to
10 comprehend. Rather it seemed that a great deal of effort was expended to consti-
11 tute a site and experience where nothing was really going on, and that in this
12 apparent vacuum – this absence of accumulating evidence and accounting –
13 nothing and everything could be simultaneously risked. For it was difficult to
14 qualify or frame whatever was felt or sensed.

15 As the possibilities of attribution scattered like shattered glass, whatever was
16 said, whatever was in the air that compelled specific reactions, laughs, shouts, or
17 silence, inevitably belonged to you, came from you as well as anyone else, and
18 so was not so easily discarded, deflected or assimilated. And after all, it was
19 clear that this was not just a 'neighborhood affair.' People came from distances,
20 some were drenched from long bike rides; others carefully made arrangements
21 to have their cars tended to.

22 However bored or restless, reckless and self-destructive, there was determina-
23 tion at work; people did set off for here. Some would come back every night;
24 some had nowhere else to go; others would return sporadically; while still others
25 might designate a specific night – and so the composition would always shift,
26 but with no rise or fall in familiarity. Of course some gatherings were more taci-
27 turn than others; some would clear out after less than twenty minutes leaving a
28 vacancy that was not replaced neither that night nor even perhaps the next; while
29 some gatherings would last into the following day until no amount of caffeine
30 could ward off utter exhaustion. How does this 'event which is not an event'
31 ramify, circulate, find traces of its impact in other elsewheres; what does it mean
32 for this city, always upping the ante in the prospects for implosion and violence?
33 How does it find its place?

Trucks in the night: Bepanda Omnisport, Douala

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37 Luise White, in a book on rumors of vampires in late colonial East Africa,
38 conveys the popular alarm often expressed about certain vehicles and their tech-
39 nical implements – things like fire trucks and ambulances whose interiors were
40 usually obscured from external view. These vehicles were equipped with an
41 array of pumps, tubes, gurneys, tanks, and so forth as part of the emergency ser-
42 vices they were supposed to deliver. But these implements were often inter-
43 preted as devices of extraction, deployed to drain blood from victims,
44 particularly during nocturnal hours when their presence was most noticeable
45 (White 2000).

Emergencies of course do not adhere to working hours, yet the availability of these vehicles at all hours seemed to designate more than their ability to intervene at moments of the general population's maximum vulnerability – when witnesses were few and collective defenses attenuated. White notes how these imaginaries served to coalesce multiple changes occurring within cities – such as the consolidation of a small yet stable urban population through civil jobs such as those which entailed working with such vehicles; the more visible and arrogant extraction of resources; the intensified deployment of racial categories as a modality of structuring urban space and economy; and the proliferating anxieties as to urban life in general and its implications for cultural transformation.

Additionally, the provisioning of such services in themselves, and the technical logics and networks through which urban services were provided, accentuated a sense that the contingencies and accidents incumbent in everyday urban life were becoming disembodied from the ability of a social fabric to effectively guarantee some conviction of continuity. Instead, technical systems seemed to rearticulate bodies, cognition, and spirit to highly individuated and bureaucratic apparatuses of control. At the same time, they provided a concrete image of an extensiveness of social connections – lives tied up into the stories and situations of multiple unknown others – that was always an essential feature of the lived reality of urban residents but which was imagined and managed in ways very different than that of these highly visible technical implements.

Trucks racing through the night, at speeds unimaginable at other hours on routes otherwise full of traffic of all kinds, proved to be particularly fearsome. These fears also point to the subsequent preoccupations with access – how accessible do urban residents make themselves to a wide variety of actors and institutions who might attempt to locate them, for whatever reason?

Although the layout of lanes and pathways on which residents traverse in order to reach their homes is more a matter of the intricate and incessant subdivision of land and compounds, the shortage of residential space, and the peculiar environmental conditions on which residential areas most usually are built, a subsequent by-product of the maze-like structure of most African urban quarters is the difficulty any stranger would encounter in trying to track someone down.

In Douala, this particular architecture of lanes – often leading nowhere – is called *mapan*, as is the futility of trying to accord any urban resident a definitive location and identity. It also refers to any effort that attempts to make some kind of definitive link between resident and place, resident and scheme, resident and any specific story one might be tempted to elaborate about them. As such, *mapan* links a description of space to a particular urban ontological condition. In a city that has a long history of pursuing highly varied forms of entrepreneurship largely unencumbered by the official economies and functions of the state, this critical component of the city's imagination also reflects a general concern about the operations of various apparatuses of control to which, no matter how much residents may deflect or circumvent them, attention must always be paid.

Bepanda Omnisport is a quarter in Douala particularly shaped by the various connotations of *mapan*. The quarter borders on the city's primary sports

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1 complex and its construction produced an added densification of the residential
2 area that has remained. As a primarily poor yet highly urbanized Bamileke
3 neighborhood – in terms of its relationship to Bamileke authority structures
4 largely concentrated outside of Douala – and one of the most militant in terms of
5 opposition to the ruling politics, municipal authorities simultaneously neglected
6 it, in terms of service provision, and subjected it to heavy doses of repression.

7 Many of the city's *bendskins* – motorbike taxi drivers – came from the
8 quarter, so that their particular vocation gave the place a large measure of know-
9 ledge about what went on in the city as a whole. This quarter, along with Bakepe
10 and Bonamoussadi, was critical in driving the grassroots push for political trans-
11 formation that swept the city at the beginning of the 1990s and subsequently suf-
12 fered the most in the state's efforts to prevent Douala becoming an effective
13 center of such transformation. The bulk of arbitrary detentions, disappearances,
14 and extrajudicial killings were focused on this quarter.

15 Along the route that passes the stadium are a series of markets and stores that
16 service both the quarter and the traffic along this busy thoroughfare. Next to the
17 large Catholic Church complex just to the south of the sports stadium are lines
18 of used vehicles and vans that are for rent usually just for a few hours at a time,
19 and with minimal deposit and documentation. This proves very convenient for
20 those who do not have the time to rely on porters with their wagons or whose
21 load is too large for them or too small to hire other carters. The vans are usually
22 in bad shape, relegated to this role as their last conceivable function, and those
23 who run these lots are clearly trying to squeeze the last bit of profitability from
24 these vehicles.

25 Across the road are lines of noisy bars and cafes, full even in the daytime,
26 and overcrowded at night. They embody the quarter's reputation for roughness,
27 and are places where all kinds of observations about the city – mostly garnered
28 by the *bendskins* – and turned into speculative exercises by thieves, poseurs, and
29 tricksters eager to supply their unemployment with quick money. The circula-
30 tion of information was also aided by the scores of prostitutes, young and old,
31 who worked these bars for small change and had to drop as many hints and
32 speculations of their own.

33 While the city takes on a rough visage in many different locales, the passing
34 police vans and other security vehicles at night seemed to simply compel a
35 surfeit of reckless posturing.

36 Late into the night the bars are usually still full. There are fights over beer
37 and women; old family wounds are re-assuaged countless times. On some nights
38 – there seems to be no clear pattern – a group will emerge from those assembled
39 and head toward one of the vans lining the opposite side of the street. The crew
40 will never be the same. There will be those that go out frequently, and others for
41 whom this will always be the first and/or the last time. At first, for me, it was
42 barely a blip in a loud and long night of subsidized drinking and keeping out of
43 view, tucked into a corner of the bar with a bevy of research assistants and
44 hangers-on. But after a while it seemed odd how different men of different ages
45 would suddenly stand up and head toward the vans, seemingly without signal or

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advance planning, without coordinating watches or waiting for a specific figure to take the lead.

Despite the reluctance of one of my assistants with a motorbike – reluctance born from the fact that nocturnal journeys are frequently interrupted by the harassment and shakedowns of police checkpoints – we began to follow the vans. There were usually at least three that would depart at the same time, and then quickly split up taking widely divergent routes. Given the checkpoints, and the fact that these vans and their drivers would in all probability never have the entirety of the insurance papers, ownership documents, inspection stickers, and commercial vehicle licenses demanded by the patrols, these vans took circuitous routes through various quarters and back roads. But they inevitably headed to specific sites, or as close to them as possible, where the occupants would proceed to walk, keeping shovels close to their chests, and never seeming to speak, though it was hard to tell from the distance we had to keep in trying to follow them.

Whether it was the New Bell detention center, Laquintinie Hospital, the naval base, the Bonanjo detention center, or the villages of Edéa and Petit Dibambu, or the cemeteries in Bonapriso where extrajudicial detainments, torture and executions were rumored to take place under the Operation Command, the occupants of the vehicles would fill empty rice bags with dirt, no more than two apiece, and hurry them back to the truck, the operation completed in a matter of minutes. They would then retrace their route almost precisely back through Bepanda and then take off again to various destinations. In the space of two weeks we tracked the bags of dirt to BonaMbappe, a precarious trip over the Wouri Bridge where checkpoints are normally constant, yet on this night nowhere in sight, and then to the local head of the ruling party, the *Rassemblement démocratique du Peuple Camerounais* in BonaMbappe – where the guardian was hit over the head, and the bags emptied by the entrance of the front gate. This scene would replayed in front of cheferies in Barcelone, entrepreneurs in Cité des Enseignants, and again party officials in Bonamouti Deido.

Having never interviewed any of the participants as to their motives or never able to determine how the recipients of these offerings, whose identity I was usually able to determine in retrospect on subsequent days, were affected, if at all, it is not clear what is taking place. Even so, it can be surmised, without much qualification, given the sites visited, the residential location of the occupants of the vehicles, the object placed in bags, and the identities of the recipients, that something about the disappearances, the hauntings of the various security operations, and the continued arbitrary detentions of various individuals, sometimes with nothing to distinguish them at all in terms of any actual crime or prospective danger, was being worked out.

Over the last 15 years, as various short-lived but vicious security operations have come and gone, have been forgotten, renamed, interrupted and made to appear as incidental, occasional, and exceptional, a continuous event of repression has transpired – something with no respite even if heavily punctuated. As conventional forms of political opposition have usually fallen apart and inertia

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1 and fear predominate, not only is a certain memory kept alive, but it is put to
2 work, as what has been attempted to be buried finds itself dispersed across
3 various vectors of power and status. What ensues is impossible to know; yet the
4 sacred makes its mark.

6 **Concluding note**

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8 For many residents of Abidjan and Douala the city is a constant reminder of
9 what could be but isn't. For some, extraordinary efforts are made, with generos-
10 ity and ingenuity, to articulate the disparate persons and things around them in
11 compositions of opportunity. If what is attempted does not always or seldom
12 work, at least things are kept open, and there is sufficient evidence generated
13 about the worthwhileness of effort. For others, the memory – of what might
14 have been possible – is continuously effaced in the escalating dramas of desper-
15 ate transactions played out in narrowing arenas.

16 As the old conventions of making oneself a real person seem to either no
17 longer apply or are under seemingly permanent seizure by calcified political and
18 social interests, many fellow residents are less seen as resources or virtuous ele-
19 ments than as blockages to a better a future that already—through machinations
20 of religious devotion, cultural entitlement, or inflated personal destiny—has
21 one's name written on it. The suffocation of living in an endless present is com-
22 pensated by choking off the lives of others. But it also chokes one's own way
23 out, chokes off the prolific entrances and exits that make up urban life no matter
24 how depleted.

25 Yet as both these minor collective efforts taken from Douala and Abidjan
26 show, inordinate risks are taken without great deliberation in order to use the
27 city as a means of keeping alive the implicit promise of the nation – to configure
28 a way of becoming that exceeds the particularities of ethnicity, race, and culture
29 that were the instruments of colonial domination. If Cameroon and Côte
30 D'Ivoire have largely given up the responsibility of definition – of securing even
31 the physical integrity of the nation and of investing in defining the judicious and
32 efficacious uses of territories, resources and persons – a stringent populism
33 comes to the fore that overcodes how people and places are to be known. If the
34 domain of the sacred is then found entangled in the mesh of the banal marking
35 of time, the ambiguous actions and languages of seemingly useless gatherings
36 and in the vacuums where neither church nor mosque think to go, then its siting
37 occurs in the recesses of the often vast quantity of outworn buildings – hotels,
38 restaurants, warehouses, nightclubs, storefronts, garages, and trunk roads – left
39 behind by all-colons, nationalists, technocrats, military boys, preachers, tontines,
40 ethnic foyers, and emerging stars. Only a fraction will ever witness something
41 new, but surveys are still required and at odd hours; otherwise from where will a
42 livable city come?

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Notes

- 1 Francs de la Communauté Financière Africaine.
- 2 'Only when made anachronistic, rather than timeless, impossible rather than useful, weak rather than heroic, can we start to think how Benjamin might have a notion of the "where" of something approaching the sacred' (Hegarty 2003: 113).
- 3 'This is not an embodied subject acting upon an inert world, but an embodied subject whose agency is constituted through a productive outsideness ... If we focus our analysis upon the event of sacralisation we can shift our understanding away from an (already) ordered division of the sacred and the profane toward a heterogeneous ordering that relies on a practice of differentiation: a making of the sacred with the profane such that the distinction only emerges from the very practice of its making' (Holloway 2003: missing page number).

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