

Some Reflections on Making Popular Culture in Urban Africa

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Abstract: In contemporary urban Africa, the turbulence of the city requires incessant innovation that is capable of generating new ways of being. Rather than treating popular culture as some distinctive sector, this article attempts to investigate the popular as methods of bringing together activities and actors that on the surface would not seem compatible, and as experimental forms of generating value in the everyday life of urban residents. This investigation, sited largely in Douala, Cameroon, looks at how youth from varying neighborhoods attempt to get by, and at the unexpected forms of contestation that can ensue.

Introduction: The Long Way Home

Discussions of popular culture too often reduce it to a kind of accessory to what are considered the more important facets of urban life—the policies and development agendas, the structures of wealth generation, and the infrastructure. Parceled out among its supposed constituent elements—music, art, fashion, stylized performances, and codes of interpretation—popular culture risks a kind of commodification that detracts from its capacities to voice the processes of exchange and reciprocity that are a function of the city's social density. Popular culture is too often disaggregated into specific

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modalities of expression, or it becomes a populist catch-all with no apparent “sectoral home” in the all-encompassing category of “culture.” These approaches divert attention from the very processes through which social relations in cities are thickened and the heterogeneous accomplishments of residents are brought into relationship with one another (Gandy 2005).

I want to consider some stories here about Douala—particularly about leaving the city and the often opaque routes through which the city is returned to—as a way of thinking about some of the tensions inherent in urban popular culture. Douala is an important city through which to think about issues of popular culture as it is increasingly fraught with tensions about who has the right to operate there and whom particular resources such as land and economic opportunities belong to (Geschiere & Nyamnjoh 2000; Ndjio 2006). There is a proliferation of fault lines—marked by ethnicity, age, gender, social class, religion, and political affiliation—that affect where individual residents can live and how they can operate. What I want to do in this article, however, is to think about the ways—often barely discernible—in which residents cross these lines and the role that popular culture plays in this crossing.

If urban popular culture is a mirroring process through which residents understand something about their collective life, as well as a vehicle through which implicit forms of social collaboration are put to work, how far does this process go in terms of getting residents to take one another into account, to interact with one another, to get rid of the impediments that may stand in the way of real collaboration? And what is real collaboration, after all? What is concretely possible and what remains a gesture toward some goal that remains always out of reach? Here I want to briefly explore notions of an egalitarian ethos—a way in which residents perceive that they operate on the same playing field and, more important, that they all coexist. This does not mean that all differences of power and struggles over power based on various modalities of social stratification are put aside. Rather, that there exist collective projects that convert differences of power and legitimacy into forms of calculation beyond the conventional notions of status or hierarchy, and in which everyone can participate and benefit without the outcomes being the product of consensus, conciliation, or brokered deals.

Elsewhere I examined one dimension of this egalitarianism in the intense anxieties of the professional class living in the middle-income Douala district of Bonamoussadi (Simone 2008). Here the proliferation of deals that their neighbors were believed to have made with a variety of opaque mystical, religious, political, or business entities made residents feel that their own well-being was significantly threatened. Even though everyone was relatively familiar with the jobs their neighbors held—as teachers, bureaucrats, entrepreneurs—the sudden accumulation or loss of income, health, or status that seemed to become increasingly prevalent was not easily explainable. Neighbors came to distrust one another’s intentions, and

tried to find ways to protect themselves by constraining or compromising the political and economic operations of others. To this end, residents often enrolled various acquaintances and strangers across poorer districts of the city into loose-knit networks of support and subterfuge—sometimes resulting in a significant transfer of assets and opportunities to individuals who would not otherwise have had the faintest chance to acquire them—in often convoluted projects aimed at undermining a particular neighbor. While the overall structures of social positioning and authority did not change significantly, the calculations of what was lost and gained in these transactions became increasingly complicated, as individuals who by chance had become part of these schemes were often able to involve their friends and associates in remaking their lives at the expense of the more powerful, who were desperately trying to cling to the status quo.

Throughout this discussion I also want to point to the opaque processes of circulation and infiltration of an “elsewhere,” which always haunt any collaboration, upset any easy or predictable formula, and force any such effort to remain vigilant and take nothing for granted.

The Making of an “Elsewhere”

When I first came to Douala in 1999, I stayed in a compound in a central area district, New Deido. One evening, while entering the compound, I noticed an acquaintance, Clara, reminding a rude boy, sweating and more than a little bit anxious, to watch his manners. It certainly was not an uncommon request. After all, even though only thirty-eight years old, she would be considered an elder, deserving some respect. The interiors of the thousands of small shops providing a household’s basic link to the larger world were also the spaces in which social solidarity was displayed and reinforced.

Clara was in the middle of handing over small coins for a purchase of rice. In the dancing rays of a kerosene lamp the shopkeeper had hesitated a moment in counting the coins. Demanding matches, the boy had pushed her aside, perhaps more in a rush to complete whatever mission he was embarked on than out of arrogance. And Clara had never become used to being pushed around—even as such experiences are unavoidable in the daily overcrowded taxi rides to and from the office, in queues to pay for her daughter’s schooling, and in the demands of a husband whose real place of residence remained, as she preferred it to remain, unknown. Clara glared at the boy, and with a gesture that was more symbolic than anything else, she placed her fingertips on the rude boy’s shoulder. She did not particularly want the fifteen or so people in the shop to use the boy’s infraction as an occasion to parade old wounds.

In almost every minor commotion, the easy rise of passions inevitably results in picked pockets or, in general, things missing from the immediate vicinity. The shopkeeper would then select someone to blame for starting the incident—usually the obviously aggrieved person, who would then be

refused credit when it was most needed, just before the end of the month. Leaving the store, Clara stepped through the circle the boy had made with his small posse. She pretended to whisper something in the boy's ear, but she said nothing intelligible. Nothing stood out except the general and pervasive threat of danger, and as she had told me, she felt tired of feeling afraid.

In the evening Clara often enjoyed the camaraderie of a quick drink of schnapps with two friends (after their husbands had passed out early), but this time she decided to go right home. Their discussions usually gravitated to feelings of relief at once again being freed from their nocturnal marital obligations. One of the reasons Clara had chosen relative poverty, investing most of her resources in her daughter's schooling, was that she hoped the daughter, Nzumi, would become a chemist, independent of men and finding an alternative to the tired complicities and attractions that kept women orbiting male planets. For herself, Clara told me, she wanted little except a certain kind of oblivion, doing the chores of everyday life in complete silence, avoiding her husband, and laughing at the behavior of her drunken uncles rather than thinking too deeply about the way the city had worn them down.

What I would later learn was that when Clara arrived at her small room in the compound, the boy had somehow slipped behind her. The distant relatives, who charged her an exorbitant price for the meager accommodation, probably did notice, but they were always prepared to think the worst about her and her idiosyncrasies. As she turned the lock, the boy held a knife at her back, ripped the silver crucifix from her neck, stuffed it into the front of his pants, and ran off. Clara managed to crawl to the courtyard where the men were drinking; they, in turn, beckoned their wives to manage the situation. The women covered the wound, placed her on a sisal mat, and carried her out in search of a taxi to take her to the hospital—which might be convinced to wait weeks before receiving all of the necessary fees.

The story continues in 2007, some eight years later, on a rooftop overlooking the O'Russey market in Phnom Penh—a tiny area under a veranda by the edge of a makeshift two-room dwelling. There sits Nzumi, Clara's daughter, along with a young Khmer woman, Dara, and her boyfriend, Sann. Dara runs a crew of young women who move through the interstices of the major markets, braiding hair, doing body piercing, and supplying stalls with smuggled cosmetics. These crews also insert themselves into secondary school traffic, peddling Japanese accessories and make-up, and at night sell a variety of just-expired pharmaceuticals to bar girls and sex workers, as well as doing a brisk trade in cassettes of Khmer singers who were popular in the 1970s and have made a comeback. The crew of girls is drawn primarily from the rooftop population, a densely woven circuitry of wooden shacks, cardboard shelters, and even sophisticated masonry that runs across the central city.

During the first years of Phnom Penh's resettlement, beginning in 1979, residents bargained to occupy the higher stories of buildings as a way of warding off frequent incursions by authorities looking for hoarded and banned goods and seeking to curtail illegal trading. As commerce was increasingly liberalized, residents with higher incomes or with trading connections and commercial skills bought or bartered their way to the ground and second floors where shops were opened. These were usually residents of Chinese and Vietnamese origin who plied their historic connections to diasporas elsewhere as a way of rebuilding the urban economy of the city. In the process, darker skin Khmer residents were pushed to the upper floors, and now reside primarily on the rooftops of these areas where entire informal settlements have been constructed.

A particular dynamic has ensued in the context of these spatial arrangements. While those with greater economic power often attempt to dominate spaces supposedly held in common—particularly stairwells and streetfronts—such impositions are often contested by those of the upper floors and roofs, particularly as these spaces have become important sites of articulation, not between ground and upper stories, but across upper-story settlements divided by streets and other gaps between buildings. And while rooftop constructions have been consigned to a legal twilight zone and could legally be eradicated, residents on the lower levels have been known to intervene with the authorities on behalf of these settlements, in part because they are the source of various kinds of labor, from porters, security guards, and housekeepers to local “spies.”

Some of Dara's crew had been or remain domestics for households in the apartments below; many had worked in garment factories and didn't feel like going back to their rural homes once the contract had ended. They are small facets of a massive machine of young, single, female laborers, often living on their own, that in important ways drives the urban economy of Phnom Penh. Their services consist not only of sewing pieces of fabric, but also in articulating disparate parts and actors in the city in a constant stretching and pulling of the social fabric. And then some find small schemes and hustles like the one that Dara puts together.

Dara's boyfriend, Sann, works for an NGO dealing with migration. He leaves early in the morning for IT classes, puts in a long day at his organization, and is attempting to start his Master's degree and finish English courses at night. He had been lucky to find this rooftop spot through a woman who made tea at his office and had taken him under her wing. Sann's family had lived in the massive squatter settlement, Sambok Chap, and was still one of the several hundred families living in plastic far outside the city in Andoung Thmei, waiting for an allotted plot.

Sann met Nzumi when he was in the process of taking an inventory of different associations in the Khan Chamkarmorn district and she was helping with various errands for the pastor of small apostolic church attended by the mostly Nigerian African congregants. As I would learn during several

conversations with Nzumi, after her mother's death, relatives, not knowing quite what to do with her, had collected money for a ticket and sent her off to visit a cousin working with English property developers in Bangkok. The cousin had told her she could find work helping to manage the accounts of some older West African aunties who had bought up old buildings in the small lanes near the Nana skytrain stop and were turning them into rooming houses for scores of young Africans. The cousin turned out to be involved in shady dealings, however, running dangerous errands for his handlers in connection to fraudulent real estate deals that also served as covers for narcotics transactions.

Nzumi made a quick trip with him to Phnom Penh, where she was supposed to have received a ticket to Milan, to visit another cousin, another possibility. After the arrival in Phnom Penh, however, the details become even more sketchy—a night spent drugged in a penthouse suite of a luxury Chinese hotel, lines of white powder on an emerald-encrusted mirror, a guy named Min Yah yelling on a phone in broken French, a dash down back stairwells, and finally refuge in the flat of Jean-Pierre from Douala. I had met Jean-Pierre in 2004, on the upper balcony of the former Butterfly Lounge, and it was through Jean-Pierre that I came to remeet Nzumi, who had only vague memories of me.

The three of us standing on this rooftop were an improbable gathering, but such are the connections and disparate stories forged by the city. In the city, people's roles, identities, functions are not important in themselves; rather they act as devices, nodes of absorption and deflection, that steer them in particular directions, into contact with particular people. Everyone's life is so implicated in the lives of others that any gesture takes on an incalculable number of meanings as arrangements are momentarily put together by diverse residents trying to figure each other out and live together.

The Urban World and Africa

In all regions of the urban world, the present moment is one of intense conflict over how cities are to be used and by whom. Urbanization as a locus of social integration is probably finished even as a popular myth as the spaces and objects of urban life are appropriated as a means for making highly particularistic claims and solidifying zones of disengagement, thus rendering the ideals of interchange increasingly abstract.

In contexts of intensified contestation, mediations that could provide even provisional anchorage and continuity to the uses made of the built and symbolic urban environments dissipate. Thus the manner in which elements of the city can be used takes on a wider range of meanings, even as crisis becomes more pervasive. Territorial and cultural proximities do not facilitate collaboration or negotiation—a point exemplified brutally by the

example of the Middle East—so other forms of coexistence and cooperation will have to be developed.

How do the tensions currently characterizing one African city, Douala, point to the possible emergence of a new urban sociality, even under dire conditions? Here, I would like to suggest, popular culture may posit a range of possible methods of mutual engagement.

A Market of Projects

The market remains the center of gravity in most African cities. Of course, the market is the domain where goods and services are bought and sold, despite the large volume that seem to appear static and immovable. From pharmaceuticals to tomatoes to hardware, certain inventories seem to always remain in place beyond the purchasing choices or capacities of consumers. These stagnant inventories complement the used clothing, which is turned over rapidly, or sudden swells of foodstuffs released from price-fixing during times of potential political unrest. Just as important, the market is also the site for incessant performance, for feigned connections and insider deals, for dissimulation of all kinds, for launching impressions and information, rumors and advice. The resulting confusion about what is really going on breeds its own makeshift interpreters, who pretend to have real skills of discernment and can steer customers to the best price, quality, or hidden deal.

This state of affairs gives rise to increasingly bizarre and even hideous transactions, where there are few prohibitions as to what can be bought and sold. As the volumes of such transactions grow—from the sale of body parts to the hiring of hit men—the more normal domains of economic life are increasingly sullied and undermined. Yet by far, the bulk of navigators through the market are increasingly taking a chance to see what happens, to see what deals they can insert themselves into, to observe who is talking to whom, who is buying from whom, who might be open or vulnerable to an empty promise of assistance, or alternatively, who is actively recruiting for participation in any number of “projects.” As most decisions are quickly taken, actors must be prepared to be anything to anybody without prolonged deliberations or assessments as to whether one possesses the requisite skills or daring. There is little overview, little room for planning out strategy or best practices, or assessment of risks. Even though African markets demonstrate increasingly complex capacities to bundle together various goods and services, to pay for consumption over time or in advance, and to do their own versions of futures trading, most actors live in the moment. There is no predicting how well they will “score,” whether their deals will provide enough money to live month to months or simply until the next day (see Mbembe & Roitman 1995).

Performing the Minimum

Residential neighborhoods abutting such central urban markets have largely sunk into a prolonged malaise that seems to be a by-product of such proximity. For example, in the New Bell district—Douala's sprawling historic inner city neighborhood, which is near the city's main Nkololoun market—the interface with the market sometimes appears reduced to the most petty activities, such as easy early-morning thefts of a few items that can be resold for the purchase of a few beers and some rice. In fact, for the youth who make up the majority of these quarters, theft constitutes their daily living, and the market seems to concede to this thievery as a kind of excise tax.

As more players use the market, more participants slip from any effective control. As more items are smuggled from loosely controlled borders and docks or are dumped in large volumes at neoliberalized ports of call, profits are reduced for many entrepreneurs, in turn reducing their abilities to maintain adequate controls and storage. An indifference to theft escalates, but the more thieves there are, the smaller the takings, and the lower the expectations. It is not uncommon to see middle-age men still residing in the houses of their parents, even subletting out their rooms for a little cash and sleeping by the side of the building. In Cameroon barely 2 percent of school graduates will find formal employment, although in most parts of the country parents still make an effort to send their children to school. In many parts of New Bell, however, school attendance is a rarity. Instead, increasing numbers of youth make do with the minimum necessary for survival, attained with the minimum of effort.

When these areas were first designated as the primary site for permanent African urban residence by the colonial regime, they were an intense laboratory of entrepreneurship. The convergence of peoples from different towns and villages gave rise to new forms of collaborative effort that remained largely opaque to the scrutiny of the authorities. As Lynn Schler (2003) describes it in her history of New Bell, artisans, traders, tailors, vulcanizers, and mechanics of all kinds helped secure an economic foothold on which many households were able to acquire land, build homes, and invest in a modern urban future for their children. While New Bell today remains full of entrepreneurship and improvised making-do, there are simply too many making too many demands on available resources. Natural, constructed, and social environments are progressively eroded by overuse, lack of money for repair and rehabilitation, the incessant short-cuts and improvised uses of objects, tools, and spaces, with little being replenished or renewed and the discarded remaining in plain sight. For any endeavor or undertaking it is never clear who will participate or be implicated, who has to be looked out for, who will demand a cut of the proceeds or remind the enterprising individual of his or her obligations. In economic sectors that have become vastly overcrowded, the improvisation stands out boldly, and innumerable others will try to follow the pathbreaking move. Again, under

such conditions it is difficult to make plans, to project into the future, to pace oneself with a series of advancing steps geared to some overarching objective, particularly when the state apparatus, at all levels, looks on with indifference, and where politics is itself parasitic. Thus the challenge posed to popular culture is to maintain spaces where diverse actors and ways of being can intersect, but in practices that enable the intersection to generate new imaginations rather than simply being another occasion in which people “feed off” the resources and energies of others.

Initiatives for Making Everyone Count

On the surface, a sense of dynamism seems to intensify in the residential quarters more removed from the central market, such as New Deido or Bepanda Casamondo. Here the semblance of initiative must be maintained, whether it is in the pursuit of education, a trade, or a more long-term and consistent involvement in the income-generating schemes of others. It is also in these neighborhoods that the effort to get out, to work elsewhere is the most intense—a project that increasingly requires greater levels of dissimulation, networking, and greased palms. So even in these neighborhoods the market—the site of exchange—is not really far away (Ndjio 2005).

Evidence exists of the many initiatives undertaken by youth with the objective of sparking a sense of creative resourcefulness and community development. In many cities across Africa youth have often undertaken efforts to upend social practices and local power regimes which they believe hold them back or contribute to a suffocation of possible change and progress. From Filip de Boeck’s (2005) work on the appropriation of the dead and funerals in Kinshasa as a way to challenge local hierarchies, to studies of youth efforts to take over local government councils in Nigeria in an attempt to run local affairs in new ways (Adebanwi 2005; Watts 2004), scholars have been documenting the intensity of the effort to break with the past and the different forms devised for doing so. But while these initiatives may have ominous undercurrents, they usually pull back from the “brink,” stopping short of effecting complete rupture. In this context, particular manifestations of popular culture may inspire urban residents to think of new ways of operating together and provide idioms through which they can view their everyday lives as somehow interconnected.

New Deido is a neighborhood just beyond New Bell, a kind of spillover district, made up of households with a better standard of living and living conditions. Still, there is widespread concern about the future of youth on the part of most local residents, particularly as New Deido was seen as a source of roving youth gangs that were participating in armed robberies across the city. In 2005 a group of youth, some formerly associated with the preeminent arts association in Douala, Doual’art, and others from various Catholic youth organizations, announced plans to hold a weeklong culture exhibition at a local private school. The objective was to showcase local talent and reiterate

the notion that the district possesses a great deal of local resources. By bringing together various examples of this resourcefulness, local residents might feel more confident about possibilities for their future.

What was particularly interesting about this effort was the very broad and open-ended sense of so-called cultural materials that were to be included in the exhibition. In part, this openness stemmed from the group's recognition that many other cultural events across the city were fraught with debilitating conflicts about whose works were to be considered worthy of inclusion, and the concomitant complaints about favoritism and patronage. The group in New Deido wanted to avoid being perceived as using this initiative as a way to consolidate local political power. But additionally, many in the group genuinely were committed to an idea of popular cultural materials as going beyond the arts and embracing various forms of creativity and achievement.

Thus the group attempted to include crafts, inventions, business plans, achievement certificates, drawings, cartoons, writings, video productions, diplomas, photographs, fashion, and fake visas and travel documents generated by youth in the neighborhood. It was intended as a veritable archive of expression and documentation that in its momentary and centralized compilation was expected almost to act as a repository of dreams that could launch everyone's private initiatives into a different plane of orbit: a kind of collective talisman that could concretize the strivings of neighborhood youth. Here again is the market's dream of agglomeration at work, of putting diverse things and actors in connection with one another, allowing each to inspire in the other some newfound capacities or possibilities.

The New Deido group worked carefully to canvass the different associations, religious groups, and businesses in the area. They did this not only to solicit donations but also to make sure that they had a broad base of support and that they themselves might have maximum exposure to materials for the exhibit.

The Night of Seeing Red

Shortly before the scheduled opening of the exhibition in July 2005, two stalls in the main New Deido market began playing cassettes of the renowned psychedelic pop Khmer singers, Sim Sasmouth and Ros Sereysothea, from the period of the mid-1970s just before the Khmer Rouge seized power. Although these cassettes were finding their way across markets in different parts of the world, in New Deido they also spurred a wave of graffiti that began appearing on walls. The images included various combinations of Cambodian references that were, for the most part, distorted—that is, even though “Khmer Rouge” was sprayed in red across a few walls, most of the examples were composed of fragments such as “Ka-Mer Rouge” “K-Mart Rouge,” “Chateau Rouge,” “Cum-ma-mère Rouge,” “Genocidaires Rouges,” “Marché Rouge,” and “Ka-Ka Rouge.”

Although the surfaces of New Deido walls normally sported graffiti on various topics—political, scatological, millennial, and idiosyncratic—one I spoke to knew quite what to make of this rash of “rouge” writings. While urban Africa often makes reference to the zones of war and destruction in other parts of the world as a source for the names of local places, gangs, or styles, it is seldom clear why one particular reference is chosen over any other. But something did become clearer on the opening night party for the exhibition, although again, it was a momentary manifestation, a flash that quickly came and went.

The long opening night consisted of a talent show in which groups of kids donned a variety of different garb to show off their abilities to assume a wide range of roles and styles. Whether it was the devotee in full religious garb or the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model, rapper, businessmen or soldier for hire, the persona itself did not matter as much as the facility to change gears and the commitment to pursue any identity.

At the peak of the night’s performance, shortly before 1:00 a.m., a shower of flyers was dropped from the rooftop of the school by a small group of masked persons who quickly disappeared along adjacent buildings. The flyers were printed in red ink and referred to the gathering as an “internment camp for the re-education of souls.” Attendees were instructed that they were to remain in this camp, that all of their houses and possessions had been appropriated and been put in a communal trust for some unspecified future use. Everyone was to “begin again,” “from the start,” with “no preconceptions and no memory.” “You have now come naked into the new world,” the flyer went on to read, and “there is nothing to stop you from being one of us.” Perhaps most important was the fact that the flyer was signed, “the Khmer Rouge.”

The crowd was mostly bemused. Many had no idea who the Khmer Rouge were and little idea about what the content of the flyers meant. Most had been exposed to various exaggerations of religious sentiments pointing to rebirth, and this was simply an addition to a long line of such messages. But many in the crowd were also making connections to the rash of graffiti that had started appearing in the weeks before and didn’t know the extent to which they should feel alarm. They didn’t know whether the event was simply part of the night’s talent show proceedings. In fact, the organizers were asking one another, during a hastily arranged meeting, whether someone had invited a theater group to make this presentation. After the evening’s event it was difficult to pursue any answers as there were no sequels.

It is perhaps ironic that in an exhibition devoted to assembling diverse manifestations of a community’s talents and resourcefulness, the opening night was disrupted by a group identifying itself with a signature related to one of the world’s most despised political cliques. The Khmer Rouge, of course, had attempted to remake society from zero and ended up killing millions instead. In this instance one can only speculate as to what this group had in mind. Was it that the organizers of the exhibition were not go-

ing far enough in terms of taking seriously the objective of getting residents to value one another's contributions? Was it that the objective itself was flawed from the beginning since no amount of exhibition, representation, or exposure could ever be sufficient to the task of concretizing real collaboration? Rather than exhibiting the apparent "fullness" of community life through the accumulated talents of individual residents, would a project such as this one have made more of a contribution by stripping away all of these things? Is it possible that no matter how much a project may accord "equal value" to various talents, comparison and competition—and thus value judgments—are inevitable, and the more talents that are shown, the more the landscape of the community is strewn with impediments?

These were just some of the questions that the organizers asked themselves after the exhibition—questions that, however abstract and removed from the process of trying to do things in a district like New Deido, nevertheless tended to haunt the proceedings. After all, for most residents of this city, everyday life approximates emergency conditions, and if one does not want to retreat to the minimal parasitism of many in New Bell's zones of facile theft, then one has to be prepared to consider almost all possibilities outside of the order or logics in which they are presented. One has to keep all possibilities close at hand in some "democratic" relation with each other. As for me, I would have loved to have claimed that all of this had happened because Nzumi had returned home, bringing with her some actual residues of Phnom Penh. I looked for her, but she was nowhere to be found.

Exactly What Is Popular?

Today some African cities seem to be experiencing unprecedented efforts to define what they are—to ascertain the social, economic, and cultural identities of those who reside and operate within them (Davis 2004). Some cities are literally hemorrhaging young men to distant locations or condemning them to a starkly circumscribed existence. These urban situations are not just the product of spiraling impoverishment or the absence of sustainable development. It must be kept in mind that for generations, Africans were prevented from fulfilling their aspirations in cities or making use of the urban space to develop new forms of social and political expression. So, in some fundamental sense, keeping alive the prospects for creating new societies means, to a certain extent, running into the ground inherited images of what a city should be (see Mamdani 1996; Simone 2004).

Individuals and households in many residential quarters of Africa are often stuck in highly redundant relations with neighbors and family members. This is because the prospects for cultivating long-term relationships with institutions that can be used as platforms for exploring and negotiating new affiliations and domains of personal operation are so uncertain. As cognitive proficiency—the ability to assess information and adapt to new conditions—requires differentiation, where information is used to catapult

individuals into new opportunities, a highly circumscribed, even narrowing social universe comes to be punctuated with many dramas and conflicts, if only to ward off atrophy (see Malik 2005). So even though stability is retained by people dealing with a known set of others for much of their lives, this stability is incessantly at risk—threatened by disputes, jealousies, and provocations. Family and neighborhood life often come to resemble incessant crisis, a series of illnesses, accidents, social fissures, and deaths which then require a series of responses. Communities often resemble an incessant recycling of suffering and compensation—where there is a rhythm of movement and fluctuation, but no real development.

Still, the weight of remaking urban everyday life lies in the extremities of those gestures offered, for example, by both the organizers of the cultural exhibition and the “Khmer Rouge” in New Deido. The former allowed almost everything produced in the neighborhood to seek some kind of affiliation with other productions, without prejudice as to how these affiliations might take place or what value they might have. While the organizers may not have gone far enough, may have been faced with contradictions and limitations that undermined any initiative, or may simply have added inadvertently to the very impediments to collaboration and community confidence they sought to bring about, they still attempted to do something, to bring about an assemblage of what New Deido is so that it might be something else.

At the same time, the “Khmer Rouge” signaled, through stealth, the infiltration of voices from elsewhere, even if the group calling itself by this name was indeed made up of local residents. But their performance, and the marking of the walls that preceded it, were a reminder that communities like New Deido cannot, of course, go it alone. For with everything a community does, there is an inevitable sense of uncertainty and provisionality that can never be identified or put into local idioms and which must be lived with and engaged. The critical question is how to live through this uncertainty. For all assemblages that seek to bring diversities—of people, practices, inclinations, styles, backgrounds, and aspirations—to some “collective table,” there is in the end no certain method of making an account, of fitting the pieces together, or of ensuring balance and viability.

In the first instance, then, urban popular culture entails a certain ethos of egalitarianism. No matter how hierarchical urban Africans may appear in everyday transactions, no matter how much those lower in social status may get ordered around or abused, the extension of the market across the city, as an arena of everyday transaction and performance, requires a sense of acknowledging all who are present. No matter how educated or rich one might be, the resounding reality of African urban life is that large numbers of residents, no matter the empirical realities of their livelihood, believe that it could all disappear at a moment’s notice, as very few are definitively protected.

As I emphasized earlier, this is not to say that there are no differences

between social classes in the city. Here I am not so much referring to the structural conditions of urban economies, or the fact that large numbers of the urban middle classes are skipping meals. Rather, I want to note a set of attitudes and ways of talking about urban life. In these ways of talking about what is going on, potential complicities among different classes of urban residents cannot be ignored. Residents across the board have to pay attention to what is happening, to what everyone is doing. For while privileged positions remain and the gap between rich and poor continues to grow, there are few privileged points of view or vantage points from which a person can consolidate a secure position within contemporary urban life.

But such egalitarianism is also a trap that can turn quickly into an incessant preoccupation with undermining the capacities of others, with getting in their way, blocking the path. Here the ability to survive is articulated as the ability to upend and to unsettle. This is not the situation whereby innumerable sufferings are acquired in anticipation of some messianic return that will redeem all that has been borne. Here the popular rests somewhere in the middle, keeping open the possibilities of joining the past—the once fundamental connections with ancestors, anchorage in a lineage of connections with personages both here and there, alive and dead—with relations to be built in the future.

Related to this egalitarian ethos is the capacity of many residential quarters to make connections among the scores of gatherings, consultations, reciprocal favors, improvised work crews and business ventures, group prayers, publicly shared meals, clandestine exchanges of goods, and hastily pieced together solutions to extended family or neighborhood crises that take place in a wide range of settings across the urban terrain—from markets, abandoned hotel ballrooms, deserted factories, and crowded intersections. These ways of acting are set off from the modes of participation prevalent in the household and other more formalized organizations, whether they are political parties, workplaces, or community-based organizations. They are also contexts which are themselves repeatedly rehearsed and revised, for the process of coming up with new modalities of associating and cooperating capable of dealing with rapidly changing realities is continuous.

The popular is, then, the shifting social architectures that residents put together—using their time, bodies, inclinations, tools, and all the material stuff that exists around and within them—to reach and connect to public necessities, such as water, opportunities for income, for good times, or even to disappear, fade away, fan out into a larger world of operations. These architectures—not easily mapped out with their labile topographies of openings, closures, circumventions, retreats, and dissimulation—are both material and ephemeral, infused with ever-shifting tactics but also a concrete shaping of bodies and places. They are conduits, connectors, spinning out unanticipated by-products and opportunities.

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