



**Douala / Johannesburg /  
New York: Cityscapes Imagined**

**Dominique Malaquais**

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# Douala / Johannesburg / New York: Cityscapes imagined

Dominique Malaquais

## **Abstract**

Much is made of globalization as a phenomenon characterized by high-tech, high speed communications and the ability of the few deemed to participate in it fully to travel the globe unfettered. Implicit in such definitions of globalization is the assumption that millions upon millions of Africans play but a tangential role in the emerging, global 21<sup>st</sup> century. African cities, in particular, are portrayed in the literature on globalization as marginal spaces, whose dwellers stand at a passive remove from the places and events that shape their lives. This paper argues otherwise. Africa's cities, the author holds, are hubs of globalization, sites of phenomenally rapid change whose inhabitants commonly boast a more sophisticated understanding of political and cultural economies worldwide than do their counterparts in Western Europe and the United States. Movement – travel across vast distances, under conditions that defy the imagination – coupled with distinctly more versatile approaches to the media, information technology and the art of imagining others than are encountered in the so-called “first world” play a significant role in this state of affairs.

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# Douala / Johannesburg / New York: Cityscapes imagined

**Dominique Malaquais**

The capability to imagine ... worlds is now itself a globalized phenomenon (Appadurai 1999:8)

## **THINKING CITIES: FIRST WORDS**

Consider an image (fig. 1). What you are looking at is a panel, painted in acrylic on wood, on the side of a barber's stand. Such stands (fig. 2) are a mainstay of cities in West and Central Africa. Here, a man can get his hair cut and shaped. Here too, people gather, discuss current events, politics, sports, the shape and state of the city. On structures of this kind, painted images of people and places are common: celebrities from the president to Ossama bin Laden and Mickey Mouse, sites the owner has inhabited, visited or dreams of knowing. This particular stand shows a city skyline, pictured at dusk, flat against a reddening sky, a sun setting in the distance; several buildings loom, their facades in shadow. The structure with this image is in Douala. It is located in a neighbourhood called Nylon, so named for its propensity to flood (water pools there, as it does when spilled on synthetic fabric). Nylon is a neighbourhood typical of Douala in many respects: grossly underserved in terms of formal infrastructure, formal housing, formal job markets, where the majority of inhabitants are in flux, in transit from or to another place,



Barber stand, Nylon quarter, Douala – detail (photo by Dominique)



Barber stand, Nylon quarter, Douala (Photo by Dominique Malaquais)

inside or outside Cameroon, in voyages real and imagined.

I propose to use the image on this barber stand to think, broadly, about definitions of the term “city.” My focus is African cities. One caveat, however: I am far from convinced that it is possible – or even reasonable – to speak of African cities as constituting a category on their own. It would be significantly more productive to discuss cities more generally, with given African cities as starting points, prototypes for an emerging, global form of urbanity. (What “global” might be taken to mean in this context, I return to by and by.) The types of urban centres scholars have tended to think of as normative – so-called First World, Euro-American cities – I contend, are in fact nothing of the kind. Far more normative, or in any event more useful as points of reference, if only because they are infinitely more numerous, are cities outside the industrialized “North.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This suggestion – that, in discussions of cities worldwide, we start by looking at cities in Africa (or the “South” more generally) rather than at their “Northern” counterparts – differs from another, related suggestion by Enwezor *et al.* (2002:14) to which I fully subscribe: that we eschew notions of *the* African city, a concept entirely too broad and reductive.



If we can agree that cities in South-East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa or the Indian Ocean offer as valid a set of spaces from which to initiate a discussion of the urban condition today as do those of Western Europe and North America, it seems fair to argue that a re-conceptualization of the city is in order. Douala, after all, though it undoubtedly shares certain features with London, is very different from its sister on the Thames; the two are far less alike than are London and Paris, or Barcelona and New York.<sup>2</sup> What, then, do we mean – what precisely are we referencing, when we use the term “city”? An initial set of answers might involve a re-thinking of notions of place and boundary.

Douala, I propose – like Lagos or Kinshasa<sup>3</sup> – as an urban centre is significantly less invested in ideas of locality than cities such as London or Paris. This is not to say that “placeness”, i.e. conceptions of the city as an entity bounded in space, is absent here. Like most cities, Douala is a locus of histories, pasts and, for some of its inhabitants at least, rootedness; children are born there, loved ones are buried in its cemeteries, life stories unfold on its streets. At the same time, however, it is a site of infinite porosity. The appearance and demographic makeup of its neighbourhoods is constantly shifting.<sup>4</sup> Only its colonial core-cum-formal business district, Bonanjo, seems, at first glance, relatively untouched by such shifts, by a propensity for change so common in other districts that it is best described as a daily occurrence. Every day, boundaries – physical, social, interpersonal – are dismantled and reconstituted, re-thought and constructed anew (or not), often, as AbdouMaliq Simone has shown (2002a), in accordance with rules, or for reasons, that defy ready classification. Radical alterations, microscopic to the eye perhaps, but socially, politically, economically fundamental, are par for the course, in ways arguably less common in urban centres the likes of London and New York. The city’s edges are in constant flux as well, expanding and, on occasion, shrinking virtually overnight. So too is – and to this I shall return shortly, for it is my principal concern here

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<sup>2</sup> Clearly, there are many differences between London and Paris, Barcelona and New York. It is not my intention to elide these. Limitations of space, however, and the focus of this essay on cities in Africa, may result, as here, in what a specialist of European or North American cities is likely to see as over-generalization.

<sup>3</sup> Here too, there is a risk of over-generalization. I base this comparison on numerous exchanges with colleagues at work in Lagos and Kinshasa, notably Filip de Boeck, Ch. Didier Gondola, Brian Larkin, Ruth Marshall-Fratani and AbdouMaliq Simone. I hasten to say, however, that I myself have not lived or conducted research in either of these cities.

<sup>4</sup> Here, I echo Appadurai: “This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks of kinship, friendship, work, and leisure, as well as birth, residence, and other filial forms. But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion ...” (1996:33-34).

– the city’s identity as a node, a place one chooses to be “in.” Douala, I propose in these pages, is a city defined above all by mobility. Passage – in, through, beyond – in active refusal of closure, of boundedness, is one of its primary characteristics.

Recent studies of globalization have begun to challenge notions of place and boundedness, notably in relation to the idea of the nation-state and its borders (Appadurai 1996 and 1999; Mbembe 1999; Pieterse 2004; Roitman 2004; Sassen 1999, *inter alia*). In discussions of cities too the relevance of these notions has been queried (see, notably, Sassen 2001). In the latter context, however, the focus has tended to be on what Saskia Sassen terms “global cities”: urban centres typified by strong concentrations of capital and infrastructure – sophisticated financial instruments, banking institutions, transport, electronic and telecommunications networks that support a significant volume of traffic with like centres, over vast distances mitigated by the instantaneity of cyber-exchanges (Sassen 1999). Fundamental to their study, indeed to their very identification as sites worthy of investigation, is their imbrication in what many agree are two key features of globalization, namely the collapse of space and the concomitant collapse of time made possible by the advent of the digital age and the availability of increasingly streamlined high-speed transport (Augé 1992; Pieterse 2004; Shami 1999). The fact nonetheless remains that many cities of the “South” are unevenly affected by such phenomena. For the overwhelming majority of their inhabitants, both time and space, thoroughly *un*-collapsed, remain very real, tangible in the extreme. Indeed, it might be argued that, in certain respects, they are exacerbated by the availability of images (on the Internet, via satellite TV) showing far away places most know they will never see. (Shortly, I shall contradict myself on this point, but contradictions are integral to the contemporary urban condition in such places as sub-Saharan Africa. They belong to the world of “disjunctive flows” theorized by Appadurai (1996), which, he has shown, are both characteristic and productive of globalization, the latter in ways that can prove extraordinarily creative.<sup>5</sup>)

If “global cities” are the stuff of instantaneity and distances collapsed into near-nothingness, what is to be made of cities like Douala or Lagos, where travel from one

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<sup>5</sup> “The new global cultural economy,” Appadurai writes, “has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order.” Constitutive of this order, he proposes, are flows – of people, media, technologies, modes of financing and ideas – that crisscross the globe, overlapping, reinforcing and contradicting one another, giving rise, in the process, to multiple, coeval worlds or, in the words of Saskia Sassen, to multiple spatialities and temporalities (Appadurai 1996:32-33; Sassen 1999:260).

point to another can take hours and typically involves stops and starts the duration of which cannot be anticipated? Where the Internet, beholden to an electricity grid at very best uncertain, is subject to innumerable failures? Where 1960s jets rust on the tarmac of airports bereft of the most elementary security procedures and the business of negotiating one's exit from customs can take as long as the flight from a country thousands of kilometres away? As Mbembe (1999) has argued regarding such regions as the Chad Basin, it will hardly do to call such spaces "marginal." Forty percent of Africa's inhabitants – 320 million people – live in cities akin to Douala (Enwezor *et al.* 2002:15); given such numbers and the urban explosion they represent<sup>6</sup> notions of "marginality" seem inapposite, not to say racist. This is all the more so as the cities in question are staging areas for remarkable cultural innovation, not least in the international art world, a point brought masterfully to the fore by such recent exhibitions as "The Short Century" (2001) and "Dokumenta 11" (2002). Nor will it do to define these cities as "not yet" or "in the process of becoming" global. Such permutations, rooted in the teleologies of Modernist discourse, are plainly Eurocentric and, for this (and other) reasons, largely useless.<sup>7</sup> Many neo-Marxist analyses present problems as well. Clearly, economic globalization, in its present form, is a source of sharp inequities, the overwhelming burden of which is shouldered by "Third World" city-dwelling populations. Yet discussions that focus on these aspects alone, articulating (as do certain right-wing approaches as well<sup>8</sup>) a vision of cities fundamentally beyond the reach of anything positive globalization might have to offer, vastly oversimplify complex states of affair. Still more problematic, they deny agency to the "Third World" citizens in whose defense they rise.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> While the populations of Mexico City and New Delhi quadrupled between 1950 and 1985, over the same period those of Lagos and Kinshasa grew sevenfold (Enwezor *et al.* 2002:15). Douala has grown by similar leaps and bounds (see Mainet 2001 and Séraphin 2000); at this point, estimates of its population vary from 1.5 to 4 million, with the latter most likely closer to the actual total.

<sup>7</sup> Such analyses are mere extensions of those that see Africa, whether urban or rural, as a place likely never to be "modern." For a disappointing stance in this vein, from a writer usually ahead of his time, see Lefebvre 1991:123. (A pithy critique of this approach is found in de Boeck 2002:264 *ff.*)

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Kaplan 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Such parallels between "left" and "right" approaches to the effects of globalization are usefully (though in a rather different context) outlined in Parker 1998.

## WHAT THEN?

In cities like Douala, movement may be curtailed – stopped dead in its tracks, even – by dysfunctional traffic patterns and crumbling infrastructure, resulting in an urban experience characterized by near-intractable boundedness. Nevertheless, this does not mean that other, radically different, experiences of the city are impossible. In fact, wholly contradictory ones are common. Mired though they may be in *embouteillages* (“traffic jams”) – “bottled in” is the literal translation – Doualais frequently know more about cities and city-dwellers half a world away than do their infinitely more mobile Euro-American counterparts in New York or London. An inhabitant of Nylon is likely to be much more curious about, and better versed in, the ways of streets and spaces far removed from his own than a high-ranking functionary or the founder of the Douala stock exchange, for whom such “otherwheres” are ordinary. In the face of immobility, ideas and ideals of mobility are deployed, to ends as creative as they are unpredictable. If, as has been widely theorized, a key aspect of globalization is vastly increased knowledge of the world, throughout the world, then Douala is beyond a doubt a city of the global age. For significant numbers of Doualais, such knowledge is a platform for action, within and (far) beyond the city. In this setting, the imagination plays a fundamental role. Conjurings of mobility – mobilities imagined, acted upon or not, attempted, thwarted and launched over and over again – are the driving force of the city. They shape the ways in which it is thought, lived and daily transformed.

Better suited to my argument here may be the French *imaginaire* rather than the term “imagination.” *Imaginaire* encompasses both the act of imagining and that which is imagined, the sum total of what can, or might, be imagined of a given place, person or idea.<sup>10</sup> Central to its articulation is the idea of “the possible.” Contemporary Douala, I would suggest, is a place of the *imaginaire*, brought into being – made – by the aspirations of its inhabitants to what is conceivable, to what (and where) they and it *might be*. This is not a matter of the intangible, though the invisible unquestionably plays a significant role here (Geschiere 1997; Séraphin 2000). Fuelled by possibilities of becoming, Doualais bring into being tangibly new, and different, identities, objects and spaces. Of course this is true, to some degree, of all people everywhere. Nevertheless, in Douala, in Kinshasa, in Lagos, such processes are so prevalent, so fundamental a part of

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<sup>10</sup> Appadurai defines *l’imaginaire* as “a constructed landscape of collective aspirations” (1996:32).

everyday life, that they must be seen as constitutive. They are an integral part of the architecture of the city, a building block in the most literal sense.

### **IMAGE-“IN”-ING CITIES**

First and foremost among these processes, most vital of the city’s motors, are mobilities imagined over vast spans of space, the ability to “see” (and to see oneself in) otherwheres far away. Consider, once again, the image with which we started (fig. 1).

Below the skyline, outside the frame of the image itself, are three words, painted in eye-catching orange script: “New York City.” Let us suppose for now that, as these words suggest, the skyline depicted is (or is meant to be) that of New York. Self-evidently, this is a very particular view of the “Big Apple.” Most Euro- and African-Americans, it seems fair to say, would not represent New York as it appears here: as a city where some fifty percent of the buildings are mosques or, in any event, with a strong affinity to Islam. (Part-curve, part spine, the lettering below the image brings to mind features of Arabic script, adding to a sense of things Islamic in the scene depicted.) The presence of palm trees, framing the skyline to the far left and right, seems also less than typical. The view pictured, however, is not a simple figment of the painter’s imagination, for it includes two elements that suggest a real knowledge of the city. First, slightly off centre and to the viewer’s left, is a building whose profile most New Yorkers know well: the Citicorp Centre, Midtown Manhattan’s high-Modernist architectural anchor, with its distinctive slanted roof. Second, further to the left, is a high-rise equipped with a quintessentially New York appendage: a water reservoir. (Faced in brick or stone, such structures – squat and often less than aesthetic – appear atop most apartment buildings; less expensive to construct than an entire additional floor, they extend upward from the building’s roof, which, in the process, acquires a stocky, truncated profile.)

I have spent many hours wandering about New York in search of vantage points to glimpse such views of the city’s skyline. I am not suggesting that there is a place from which New York City looks – photographically – like the image considered here. On the other hand, this *kind* of view, dominated by mosque architecture or by a profile of the Citicorp Centre, is possible. Two particular vantage points are of interest in this regard and one noteworthy thing about them is both are places of transit, spaces one moves through on one’s way from one place to another. One is the Van Wyk Expressway,

leading from Kennedy Airport to Manhattan. The other is the Tri-Borough Bridge, which one crosses, en route to Manhattan, when coming from Kennedy and LaGuardia Airports. On the Van Wyk, some seven minutes after leaving the airport, one is struck, on the passenger side of the car, taxi or bus in which one is riding, by a distinctly Islamic architectural form: the profile of a dome-topped building identified in bold letters, quite similar to those seen below the Nylon skyline, as the “Headquarters of the Al-Khoei Benevolent Foundation”. This structure, together with a cluster of mid-rise buildings at its side, is the first hint of a monumental skyline one encounters after leaving Kennedy Airport. From the second vantage point, the Tri-Borough, particularly at sundown, the first view of Manhattan, with the Citicorp at centre, is quite similar to that depicted on the Nylon barber stand.

What might the relevance of this be? It seems likely that the panel’s painter has visited New York. While one might argue that vistas highlighting the Citicorp Centre at nightfall are the stuff of postcards, one or several of which the artist might have seen outside New York, the same is not true of structures akin to the Al-Khoei headquarters or the reservoir-capped buildings he<sup>11</sup> depicts. This, however, strikes me as less noteworthy than the particular vision of the city the painter proposes: a vision of New York as a place one is approaching from elsewhere – transiting toward – rather than a place one is *in*; so too, by logical inference (and to this I will return), a place one will eventually be transiting away from (by car, by bus, by plane).

In terms of myths prevalent in the United States about foreign desires concerning the American city – desires to settle, to make America home – the foregoing is striking. The goal of staying, it seems to me, is very much absent from this picture. The focus here is on coming and going, going and coming. Transit to and fro – the voyage to and from the place depicted – is not only foregrounded: it trumps the place itself. This, in turn, I find interesting because it speaks, in ways at once very concrete and metaphorical, to one of the primary characteristics of a place like Douala.

In Nylon, as in most quarters of Cameroon’s economic capital, the matter of coming and going is paramount. Virtually every conversation leads, at some point, to a discussion of

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<sup>11</sup> As the overwhelming majority of sign painters in Douala are men, I use a male pronoun in referring to the artist, but the possibility that the painter is a woman should not be discounted.

leaving. Dreams of elsewhere are everywhere. On the subject of such dreams, in an as-yet unpublished paper, AbdouMaliq Simone quotes a man named Malam.<sup>12</sup> The subject is New Bell, a quarter of Douala similar in many ways to Nylon:

We in New Bell always seem to imagine ourselves somewhere else. While we don't necessarily want to leave, we behave as if we already have. This affects us in various ways. On the one hand, those who are neighbors, who share this street, sometimes act as if they don't see what is going on. The life around them doesn't impact them because they are not really here; they are living their dream. As a result, people are freer to do what they want to do. On the other hand, because so many people are in so many other places in their minds, this becomes their only common point of view; and so they can't really ask each other for anything, can't rely on one another, because no one has a sense of what others are really experiencing. Also, it means that things are sped up: the children have already left the house and gone somewhere else; the father is already old, the mother is already old. The normal rhythm of growing up, of dying, of leaving and coming back is all collapsed into a single note that everyone sings. And so no one listens. It is a way of living everywhere and nowhere at the same time (2002b).

Whether Malam's somewhat pessimistic attitude to the effects of this phenomenon is warranted is a matter for debate.<sup>13</sup> The situation he describes, i.e. living here, everywhere and nowhere at once, nonetheless seems characteristic of much of the city. Transit, the distances between places, the experiences and the time spent getting there and back, the itineraries followed in doing so, routes often improvised or un-anticipated, commonly take precedence over places where one stops, where the body stands still. This is so on multiple levels. Within the city, the absence of a regular public transport system means that the business of moving about occupies the better part of people's days and nights. A

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<sup>12</sup>“Malam” is a pseudonym, the professional name chosen by Simone's interlocutor, an artist of considerable talent (see note 13) called Isaac Essoua Essoua.

<sup>13</sup> Malam's stance might be attributed, in part, to who he is: a brilliant artist who has decided to stay in Douala despite the fact that, in Europe or the U.S., he would likely lead a far more comfortable life. His choice parallels that of several other artists of his generation, notably members of a collective by the name of Cercle Kapsiki, whose members have all elected to live in Douala because they feel a responsibility – ethical, creative – to the (often very poor) communities in which they grew up. But such choices are not, or in any event are significantly less, open to young people who depend for their livelihood on employment that is increasingly difficult to obtain.

similar state of affairs obtains within the country more broadly; movement between the city and the capital, Yaoundé, smaller urban centres and *le village* – places where one sells things, looks for work, goes to bury kin – accounts for significant chunks of daily life. Most consuming of all is movement beyond the city and the country: travel between Douala and cities abroad, in Africa and elsewhere. For so many, in Douala as in other cities of the continent, movement of this kind has become so common that it is something of a cliché to say that Africa, today, is a continent on the move.

Such movement, constant, back, forth, back again and crisscrossing vast expanses of space, has a very tangible impact on readings of African cities by those who inhabit them. This is underscored by life stories, tales told by men and women of transit between and through cities, over thousands of kilometres. A rich body of such tales chronicles the experience of moving between Douala and Johannesburg. Over the past two years, I have had occasion to speak with many Doualais who undertook such journeys. Most of those kind enough to share their experiences with me live today in Hillbrow and Yeoville, neighbourhoods of inner-city Johannesburg that, since the fall of Apartheid, have become magnets for intra-African migration. Characterized by near-total neglect on the part of city and private interests, over the past ten years they have morphed into over-crowded, insalubrious and (in Hillbrow's case in particular) extraordinarily dangerous places for foreign Africans to live in. The great majority of those with whom I have spoken were living in New Bell and Nylon when they left Douala. Most abandoned these spaces for those of Johannesburg in the hope of finding work there or, in more general terms, opportunities – the means, financial, instrumental, psychological, to change their lives.

One aspect of these stories strikes me as fundamental. My interlocutors' views of both Douala and Johannesburg are marked not so much by the cities themselves as by the experience of travel between them. A majority of the people with whom I have had occasion to discuss such matters spent months or even years in the process of moving from one city to the other. One man left by bus via Equatorial Guinea.<sup>14</sup> From there, he

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<sup>14</sup> Neither this man nor any of the other people whose accounts of travel from Douala to Johannesburg I consider hereafter are identified. This is so for obvious reasons: most of them are in South Africa illegally or, where this is not the case, because it is so difficult to be a foreign African in South Africa today, they do not wish to draw undue attention to themselves. Pseudonyms would, of course, have been possible, but to use them would obscure the experiences of exclusion and alienation many African immigrants describe as an everyday experience in the Rainbow Nation today. All of the Doualais whose experiences in transit I allude to



travelled to Gabon, mostly on foot. Then came Brazzaville. He was on his way to Kinshasa, where he planned to stow away in a boat sailing South. But there was no moving beyond Brazza, which, at the time, was mired in a hugely destructive civil war. For sixteen months he remained there, caught in the crossfire of militias – Zulu, Cobra, Ninja – named after cultures and places, lands and ideas, countries and continents away. When the guns fell silent, he made his way, through DRC, to Angola, where again he was waylaid, this time by a love affair that may or may not have involved a marriage. Disentangled from a relationship he did not wish to pursue, he proceeded to Namibia, where an attempted passage into South Africa failed. This prompted a re-direction into Zimbabwe, which failed as well. From there, the traveller returned to Namibia, where he lost everything to a passer who reneged on getting him across the border. Eventually, a good Samaritan, a truck driver, got him across, depositing him on the edges of Cape Town. There, for months, home became a refugee camp. Previously, the camp had been a mental asylum. A few inmates remained on the premises, forgotten he surmises. The first experiences he recalls of South Africa were of negotiating the space between inside and outside, leaving and entering the camp anew. The guards, it appears, could not tell the refugees from the insane because they shared no common language with either group.

The story this man tells is by no means exceptional. The overwhelming majority of the people with whom I have spoken followed similarly circuitous routes. And not a few doubled back, most or all of the way, one, two, even three times, after having been caught, racketed, deported or otherwise waylaid at various border crossings. For some, such stops, starts and doublings back produced precisely the kinds of change they sought. One traveller, turned back after a violent encounter with soldiers on the southern fringes of Congo, made his way to Gabon, where he settled in Libreville; in time, he entered politics there. As such careers, in Africa as elsewhere, are commonly short-lived, three to four years later, he left. Still, he had experienced things in Libreville, accumulated knowledge and means, which might well have been beyond his reach in Douala. Another

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in this essay are men. This should not be taken to mean that women do not play a significant role in this context. Several Doualaises have agreed to speak with me of their travels; some of their accounts share important similarities with those by men which I discuss. It seems to me, however, that there remains much to be done in teasing out differences between men's and women's accounts of migration; indeed, there may well be a need to theorize profoundly gendered cartographies of the movement between cities. My research in this regard is at too incipient a stage, however, to make such theorizations possible. Many more conversations are necessary, in both Johannesburg and Douala, and significantly more reading. Under the circumstances, and as I have had occasion to speak with more men than women, I prefer to limit myself here to men's accounts.

Doualais remained for a year in Luanda. There, he bought a bakery from a Senegalese man who, if memory serves,<sup>15</sup> was on his way to South-East Asia. The acquisition proved a mistake, as the bakery was a poor investment. With his business crumbling about him, the new owner did the only reasonable thing. With the many sacks of flour still in his possession, for weeks he fed the expatriate community of Doualais moving through Luanda. In so doing, he built friendships, networks and ties which, a year and more later, proved of immense use in Johannesburg, where several of those whom he had fed found him again.

Many who tell these stories have no intention of staying in South Africa, which adds in significant ways to the focus on transit that typifies both their tales of travel and the experiences of urban life these suggest. Many are already planning to move on.<sup>16</sup> North America and South-East Asia are the destinations most often mentioned. The plan to move on, however, is often several years old. For a great number, every day is an exercise in trying to accumulate the funds necessary to begin the next journey. A sense of movement always incipient structures their daily lives. This is underscored by the very names of spaces many occupy, typically in the interstices – geographical, legal, financial – of the inner city. A case in point is a squat known as *l'Ambassade* (“The Embassy”), run

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<sup>15</sup> I invoke memory, here, with a specific purpose. The memory to which I allude is both my own and that of the story’s teller. It will not do to speak of the itineraries described here as “facts” – precise mappings of travel over time and space. The types of stories discussed here, like most stories, are subject to change in the telling and retelling both by the speaker and the writer. They are shaped, some of their details highlighted and others, if not necessarily elided, given shorter shrift. They are shaped, also, by other speakers. Some of the people who have spoken to me of their travels have done so in private. Others have come together as groups, in which contexts it is not uncommon for stories to meld into one another, for one teller’s memories to bleed into another’s and vice versa. This is particularly true as such tales reflect the experiences of so many people and are in the process of becoming a genre, a type of oral literature subject to its own internal dynamics. Central to these dynamics is conversation among Doualais living in Hillbrow and Yeoville, notably in two bars, both located in Yeoville, one a drinking place-cum-small restaurant and pool hall, the other more like a local shebeen. The writer’s existence, as well, impacts on these dynamics; with every request to hear stories, with every conversation she initiates, in one of these bars or elsewhere in the city, she participates in the construction of a genre of stories. This, in turn, shapes the types of details foregrounded by the tellers and the modes of telling they favor.

<sup>16</sup> Carlos Monsiváis encounters similar intentions – the ever-present plan to move on, sometimes before one has even arrived – in discussions with city-dwellers transiting between Central and North America: “If we are going to stay, let’s try to leave as soon as possible”; “When I arrived at the border I brought with me a desire to leave soon.” “These days,” Monsiváis writes, “... the city (as a totality, as a concept) is escaping from the traditional idea of a city and becom[ing] instead an anxiety to populate city-space without the intention of staying” (2003:34, 35).

by a Cameroonian in Johannesburg.<sup>17</sup> Many see as the best approach a movement back and forth between Douala and Johannesburg, the business of daily life taking place not in one city or in the other, but in both at the same time, in neither and, most saliently, in between.

Such approaches to cities and movement are not a Cameroonian phenomenon *per se*. I doubt that they are specifically African, either. Similar states of affair, I imagine, obtain in many Asian, Eastern European and Middle-Eastern cities. What this suggests, among other things, is that classical definitions of the city are very much in need of *re*-definition. For a majority of the earth's inhabitants, it seems clear, the city is not by any means an entity bounded in space, nor even one bounded in time, as Malam's statement on New Bell suggests. In very real ways, it is always, for a huge number of its people, several places simultaneously: places that it will or might be, places that have been previously seen or that will be seen in the future and – again, saliently – the spaces, experiences and time of travel between and through these places.

To propose, by way of definition, that the city, in many parts of the world, is radically de-localized, gets in part at what this signifies concretely. Still, it is not quite enough. The definition is inadequate because notions of de-localization – a mainstay of globalization theory (Augé 1992; Pieterse 2004; Sassen 1999) – call on models developed to articulate the realities (or aspirations) of a highly specific minority: a high-speed, Internet, video-conferencing, jet propelled “First World” which, we have seen, bears little relation to the daily experiences of the majority of people. The notion of de-localization is problematic also because – like ideas of the trans-local, dear to globalization theorists as well – it is predicated on the pre-eminence of locality. Places bounded in space, localities, structure the trans-local; without them, there is no “trans.” How does this relate to places like Nylon and New Bell, for many of whose inhabitants, it seems fair to say, the “trans” takes precedence over the spaces it is intended to bridge?

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<sup>17</sup> Here again, stories and genres intersect. I have heard of *l'Ambassade* from one teller and read of it too in a text, part-novel, part-document, entitled *Finding Mr. Madini*, a heart-wrenching book on homelessness, exile and illegality in Johannesburg, authored by a collective of writers known as The Great African Spider Writers, under the direction of a writer named Jonathan Morgan (2000).

The skyline in the Nylon barber stand is a richly textured account of what such precedence might mean. The city depicted is peculiarly static. It is noticeably without people. Two figures do appear, both facing the viewer, but neither is located within the frame of the picture proper. Both are in the form of a truncated head and bust; they are haircut models, images clients can look at to see what kinds of haircut the barber offers. From a narrative point of view, there is no direct link between the skyline and the models. Scale, perspective and a clear-cut border, i.e. a painted frame surrounding the skyline, separate them.<sup>18</sup> The models are emphatically not in the city depicted. Dark, devoid of people, this city is not a place in which life is lived, not, at any rate, in the artist's estimate. If the models in the foreground, both of whom make insistent eye contact with the viewer, are any indication, it is a space lived, physically, *behind*. The skyline, from their stand point, reads almost like a landscape glimpsed in a rear-view mirror. The positioning of the two busts in relation to the scene behind them, as well as the space between the models, brings to mind a driver and the passenger at his side. The two men appear to be motoring away from the city, leaving it in their wake, empty and shrouded in darkness. From this stems a distinct sense of space lived in the process of leaving or, if one focuses, rather, on the skyline itself, moving towards. Process, movement – whether in approach or departure – rather than being “in” defines the place depicted.<sup>19</sup>

Whether in approach or departure, New York is not alone here. Other cities are being glimpsed as well. This is suggested by two of the buildings that make up the skyline. The first, a large domed structure to the viewer's left, brings to mind the mosque of Aya Sophia, in Istanbul.<sup>20</sup> Right of centre (again, from the viewer's perspective), a second building appears, whose form seems to draw on a number of structures at once. Third from the far right, it is capped by a needle-like extension, jutting up into space. For most U.S.-based viewers, this construction recalls the Sears Tower, in Chicago. For others, different prototypes may come to mind, among these the Djingeray Mosque of Timbuktu

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<sup>18</sup> One is put in mind, here, of portraits taken by urban photographers in West Africa in the 1950s and 60s, images in which the sitters appear against a painted background figuring a city, street or interior. Though an effort at *trompe-l'oeuil* has been made in some cases, more often than not it is clear (and meant to be so) that the backdrop is just that: a stage set.

<sup>19</sup> An extraordinary photograph by Stanley Greene (2003) offers, in a sense, a reverse image of that described here. In Greene's picture, a camera looks through a windshield at a road in Chechnya; the car is motoring toward people – likely refugees – who are walking away from a landscape stark and empty of other inhabitants.

<sup>20</sup> I am indebted to Jason Rosen for this observation.

and the Carlton Tower, in Johannesburg. Echoes of Johannesburg also are present in the skyline as a whole, not so much so in terms of form as of the scene's "feel," or atmosphere. The painter's handling of the sky, his articulation of a colour-saturated, almost tangible dusk against which buildings appear massive, yet at the same time peculiarly flat, bears a strong resemblance to photographic views of the City of Gold's Central Business District, images readily available on the Internet, in countless postcards and tourist brochures.<sup>21</sup>

From this accumulation of city-referents emerges a skyline that reads almost like an archaeology of architectural forms, one in which structures and landscapes have been built into and upon one another, giving rise to a profoundly hybrid space.<sup>22</sup> One is faced, here, with a vision of the city as a manner of palimpsest. Yet, unlike a palimpsest proper, the image we see does not foreground any one form: erasures are absent, giving way instead to a series of super-impositions in which all referents are equal and coeval.<sup>23</sup> Two further analogies come to mind, which might help put in words the sense of a city evoked by the painted skyline. One is Freud's "mystic writing pad," as rethought by Derrida and, in his wake, theoreticians of hypertext and virtual reality. The other is a type of talisman in use throughout vast swathes of Islamic West Africa.

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<sup>21</sup> Such images, it is interesting to note, in view of the suggestion made here that the city, as depicted by the artist, is one glimpsed in transit rather than a place in which one spends time, are commonly associated with warnings not to linger in the Johannesburg CBD. The overwhelming majority of travel agencies offering tours of South Africa, on whose websites such images can be found, avoid Johannesburg. Following arrival at Jan Smuts Airport, travelers are commonly housed in airport hotels and, following (at best) a bus tour of the city, in which they glimpse a picture-postcard view of the CBD – typically at sunset – are shuttled away from "the murder capital of the world," toward the primitivized spaces of various Kwas (Kwa Ndebele, Kwa Zulu-Natal), wilderness zones where they can encounter other kinds of "wildlife" and, finally, in a much-touted "return to civilization," the quaint vineyards and Dutch-inspired houses of the Western Cape.

<sup>22</sup> I pattern my use of the term "archaeology," here, on Foucault's. I mean by it a form of layering, in which strata (of knowledge, ideas, forms) come together to form a whole, the components of which, while they can, at least in theory, be distinguished from one another, are not, in fact, distinct.

<sup>23</sup> The idea of the city as palimpsest is explored, with considerable poetry, by de Boeck, regarding Kinshasa (2002). The vision I propose here differs from his, however, in that it stresses above all the coeval nature of the city's many parts. De Boeck's analysis looks at meetings and meldings of past and present, inside and outside, center and periphery (see p. 19, below). While such an approach certainly offers a rich palette of ideas for the study of Douala, it seems less apposite for consideration of the painted skyline and, more generally, the idea of the city with which we are concerned. What is striking here is the complete absence of "before" and "after," "either" and "or." The city depicted is all of the places it references at the same time and, most importantly, in equal measure.

Freud's mystic writing pad is a child's toy. It is in two parts: a thick waxen tablet and superimposed plastic sheet. With a pencil, a stylus or any hard-tipped object, shapes or words can be drawn on the plastic. These do not appear on the sheet itself but through it, in the form of dark traces, on the tablet beneath it. When one lifts the plastic, however, the traces disappear, as on a blackboard whose chalk markings have been erased. For Freud, the act of sketching, lifting, erasing and starting anew functions as a metaphor for basic cognitive processes. It is "analogous to the way the psychic system which receives sense impression from the outside world remains unmarked by those impressions which pass through it to a deeper layer where they are recorded as unconscious memory. Thus, 'the appearance and disappearance of the writing' is similar to 'the flickering-up and passing-away of consciousness in the process of perception'" (Keep, Mc Laughlin and Parmar).<sup>24</sup>

If, for Freud, the mystic writing pad is a metaphor, for Derrida it is a concrete model. Perception, for the French philosopher, "really is a kind of writing machine like the Mystic Writing Pad":

Derrida ... notes ... that the marks on the pad are not visible due to the stylus leaving a deposit on the sheet of plastic (in the manner of a pen, ink and paper). The marks only become visible because of the contact the wax has on the reverse side of the sheet ... This is also the case in perception. None of us, Derrida claims, apprehend the world directly, but only retrospectively; our sense of that which is beyond ourselves is the product of previous memories, previous writings" (*id.*).<sup>25</sup>

Derrida's re-reading of Freud can be reworked, here, to articulate the sense of a city brought to the fore by the painted skyline. The Nylon panel suggests an apprehension of the world that is the product not only of previous memories, or experiences, but also of future and possible ones. A useful analogy is that of hypertext.<sup>26</sup> In such a text, other words, images and ideas are always already present. They are an integral part of the text

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<sup>24</sup> Quotations from Freud here are from the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, English translation (1953, 1974), Vol. XIX:230.

<sup>25</sup> Keep *et al.* refer, here, to Derrida 1980:224.

<sup>26</sup> The parallel I draw between Freud and Derrida's mystic writing pad(s), on the one hand, and hypertext, on the other, is suggested by Keep *et al.* My approach to hypertext, however, differs significantly from theirs.

as it appears to the reader, yet prefigure the text's future, ways in which it can (or is likely to be) experienced by the reader thereafter.

Still, the hypertext analogy is insufficient. Like the palimpsest and the mystic writing pad (whether Freud's or Derrida's), hypertext does not offer an experience in which multiple, superimposed ideas, images or realities can be apprehended *at the same time*. To access other words and forms – other worlds – it is necessary to click on one or several links, a process which causes signs and images previously in the viewer's line of sight to disappear. One can only experience such a text as a series of strata, never as one landscape, with all (or even most) of its components in view simultaneously. This results in an experience palpably different from that prompted by the Nylon skyline.

A fourth, and final, analogy may serve us best: that of the talisman. As previously noted, it is a type of object in wide use throughout Muslim (and Muslim-inspired) Africa.<sup>27</sup> The object is a leather pouch, typically worn on the body. Created by a religious practitioner or a specialist affiliated to a spiritually-endowed caste (for instance, in the Bamana region of Mali, a *nyamakala*), the pouch contains words. These may be Q'ranic verses or (as again in the Bamana area) strings of signs drawn from an esoteric alphabet. The words are placed in the pouch in one of two ways. They may be scripted on a piece of paper or parchment, which is then inserted into the pouch, or – and this is the technique that strikes me as most interesting for present purposes – applied to a piece of paper or a tablet, which is then washed clean, resulting in a mixture of ink and water that is poured in (or on) to the pouch, where it fuses with the talisman's leather. By this latter means, further words can be added to the pouch, in time and as circumstances may require. The words within, and the ideas to which these allude, mystically charged, impact the owner's experiences and perceptions. All, no matter how many or how diverse, are always present with the wearer; they are an integral part of his/her apprehension of the world, which actively shapes his (or her) present and possible futures. In this sense, the talisman is very much like the Nylon skyline: it is a locus for, and gives tangible expression to, multiple possibilities – of time, space and being.

What, then, is the city in the skyline? New York? Timbuktu? Chicago? Istanbul? Johannesburg? Each one, it seems, and, as a result, none. In all likelihood, it is many

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<sup>27</sup>This type of object is discussed, among others, in Bravman 1984 and Prussin 1985.

other cities, too. It may, in fact, be Douala, as Douala might (or could) be seen from and en route to other cities, and in transit to still others. In this sense, the painted skyline might be seen to function itself as a talisman: *pars pro toto* for the dream of other lives in other cities, some or all of which might be(come) Douala herself.<sup>28</sup>

### **(RE) THINKING ARCHITECTURE**

If we suppose that the city is Douala, we are faced with the need to re-define not only what the term “city” may signify, but also the meaning of “architecture.” This is all the more pressing as what architecture is, or should be understood to be, in cities like Douala is a matter of some contention.

Although this seems to have escaped most architects and all too many architectural historians, among anthropologists and sociologists it is now agreed that the study of architecture should include the unplanned, the temporary, the recycled (see, notably, Agier 1994). What is less generally agreed upon – what has yet to be seriously examined as an object of architecture and a legitimate subject for its practitioners and students – are buildings that are not physically there, in other words, imagined structures, edifices that exist only (or mostly) as rumour.<sup>29</sup> The inclusion of these in discussions of the architecture and the life of cities, all cities, opens up a variety of perspectives, new ways of conceptualizing spaces, sites and the ways people live in them. In reflecting on urban centres like Douala, where, I have argued, the *imaginaire* plays a constitutive role, it is vital.

Structures of this kind, i.e. buildings said but not shown to exist, have as powerful an impact as edifices present and tangible and, arguably, just as much presence. They also

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<sup>28</sup> The picture (I propose) that the painter offers of the city is, in key ways, an inverse of that which Italo Calvino proffers in his *Invisible Cities* (1993). In *Le città invisibili*, Marco Polo regales Emperor Kublai Khan with tales of the many cities he has visited; in time, however, it turns out that each of the places Marco Polo is describing is, in fact, one place: Venice. All cities are one. The Nylon panel suggests otherwise. Here, one city is all others.

<sup>29</sup> Some treatments of the subject do exist; Burden 1999, Harbison 1994 and Thomsen 1994 are cases in point. None of these texts, however, consider in any depth the political implications of such rumored forms. All three, further, focus on buildings and sites imagined by “great thinkers” – da Vinci, Boullée, Verne, Finsterlin, Orwell and so on. The architectural imaginings of “ordinary” city-dwellers have little or no place in their pages, a factor that renders these three works less useful, for present purposes, than one might have hoped.



have a very real history. Architectural rumour has played a central role in the articulation of urban centres, political orders and movements and ideas elaborated in response to these. This has been so in a wide variety of geographical and historical contexts. A case in point is Washington, DC. The U.S. capital is the site of widely rumoured, alternative maps, a grid of Masonic meaning that the architect, L’Enfant, and his patrons are said to have built into the plan of the city. These maps, rumour has it, make it possible for Washington to be read and navigated in multiple, radically different ways at one and the same time. The sheer power of this rumour is underscored by the well over two thousand Internet sites it crowds, a number of which, it might be noted, were visited regularly by Timothy McVeigh, to whom we owe one of the great attacks of recent date on the idea of official architecture and its role in bringing the *polis* into being.<sup>30</sup>

In African cities, architectures of rumour have a rich history. The post-colonial period offers a number of significant examples.<sup>31</sup> In Kinshasa under Mobutu Sese Seko and in Douala too, in the reign of present president Paul Biya, rumour has affected in powerful ways the meaning of and attitude towards individual buildings as well as entire spaces within the city. So striking was one instance in Kinshasa, in the early days of Zaire, that it makes its way into tales told of the city by none other than Norman Mailer.

In 1974, Mailer travelled to Kinshasa to attend the “Rumble in the Jungle,” the boxing match in which Muhammad Ali famously wrested from George Forman the title of heavy weight champion of the world. Shortly before the arrival of the boxers and the phalanxes of trainers, reporters, celebrities and groupies following in their wake, a small crime wave swept the city’s nicer quarters. Four Europeans were said to have died at the hands of Kinshasa bandits. Stateside, alarm bells rang: was this African city really one that one could visit? Where (and *what*), after all, was Zaire, a country whose very name – “Zare?” “Ziare?” – many of the would-be travellers were having trouble pronouncing. Such worries were a matter of considerable concern for Mobutu who, by hosting the much anticipated event, sought to put his Zaire on the map of African countries attractive to Western moneyed interests. Under the circumstances, architectural rumour served the

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<sup>30</sup> A number of other examples of rumoured buildings and sites in the United States could be adduced. I have written elsewhere of some of these, among which the Denver International Airport, whose lower levels (said to house a vast underground city, concerning which much is written on the Internet) are a subject of fascination for conspiracy theorists (Malaquais 2002:21-23).

<sup>31</sup>For an overview of examples from the pre-colonial and colonial periods, see Malaquais 2002:13 *ff.*

dictator magnificently. In preparation for the match, he had erected a massive stadium. Shortly, tales of horror concerning the structure began spreading through the city, encouraged, likely, by Mobutu's redoubtable secret services. The building's underbelly, rumour had it, contained torture chambers awash in blood. To make his crime-fighting intentions clear, Mobutu had arranged for the arrest of one hundred criminals, chosen at random; none were ever seen again. All, it was widely believed, had disappeared into the bowels of the stadium, where they had been ruthlessly slaughtered. Above ground, on the stadium's stage, before a world audience whose TV viewing of the match was assisted by GMT-friendly scheduling, BB King, James Brown and their dancing girls spread the message of one world united under Mobutu; below, a hell of his creation lurked. Were the dungeons real? Did they in fact exist? To this day, no one knows. In the end, it may not matter: rumour and the profound, justified, fear it elicited made the killing grounds a fact of life in mid-70s Kinshasa. Not only did they bring to a halt violence against Europeans; they also strengthened and, in so doing, perpetuated the reign of terror Mobutu and his Western backers imposed for decades on the people of Congo.<sup>32</sup>

Fifteen years later, as Mobutu's reign was winding down to what would shortly prove an end as unglamorous as it was anti-climactic, architectural rumour continued to play a vital role. In 1989, while at work in the Pende region of what was then still Zaire, art historian Zoe Strother encountered insistent rumours concerning the sprawling, marble-clad palace the dictator had built for himself in the village of his birth, Gbadolite.<sup>33</sup> In this palace, it was widely recounted, stood a chamber host to dreadful secrets. Mobutu, it was reported, had given stern directives to his wife, the twin of his official mistress (a public relations coup of some genius in a region where many see twins as sacred beings): she could go anywhere she wanted in the palace, save this one room. Those who have read "Bluebeard" know the rest: the lady, of course, defied her husband's orders. In the chamber, she found not corpses but a statue, standing on a pedestal. As she looked on, the statue began to dance. She had stumbled on the secret of her husband's success: he was un-attackable because his soul resided not in his body but in the figure on the pedestal, locked away from the sight of all but its owner. Horrified, she fled. Running from the

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<sup>32</sup> Mailer discusses these rumors and their effect in a documentary on the Rumble in the Jungle entitled "When We Were Kings," directed by Taylor Hackford and Leon Gast (DasFilms, 1996). On his return from Kinshasa, he published a book on the match and his experiences in Zaire, *The Fight* (1975).

<sup>33</sup> Personal communication, New York, April 2000.

building, she made her way to her limousine, which brought her to the airport and thence to her private jet, in which she flew to Rome. She was on her way to the Vatican, home to the one earthly being whose spiritual powers outweighed her husband's. Photographs of Mme Mobutu, widely shown in the press, and, thereafter, of the Mobutu couple, in the Italian city (a reconciliation, perhaps?) added fuel to the fire. Was the chamber real? Who could know? And who would be so foolhardy as to deny its existence outright, in a country done such apocalyptic violence for so long by one man and his helpmates in the "West"?

In urban Cameroon, architectural rumour is a powerful force. Spaces built and un-built alike are its focus. One structure, a hulking tower, stands near the administrative centre of Yaoundé. Unfinished, it remained for years gathering soot and grime, after its construction was brought to a halt by the staggering economic crisis of the mid-80s and 90s. For well over a decade, it served as a refuge for thieves and for the homeless. It acquired a fearsome reputation as a place of danger and death. In the final years of the century, just as the Biya regime was beginning to see the end of the tunnel in which it had nearly met its demise, rumours began emerging of training sessions held there for members of an elite corps created by the government to maintain itself in power, by extreme violence if necessary. Under the reign of a president in place for twenty years despite stringent opposition and for whom massive crackdowns, assassinations and torture have long been tools of the trade, such rumours had a chilling effect on the city.

In 2000-2001, Douala became a place for remarkable architectures of the *imaginaire*. Following what was presented in the press, both local and foreign, as a sharp rise in urban crime, the government created a paramilitary unit known as *Commandement opérationnel* (C.O.). Ostensibly, the C.O.'s purpose was to render the city safe. Its presence, in fact, had more to do with the need, for Biya and his clique, to bring to heel a growing number of young urban dwellers who, in the wake of a failed 90s movement to institute genuine political pluralism and in the face of disastrous living and work conditions, were proving alarmingly difficult for those in power to control. Within six months of its creation, the C.O. had perpetrated no fewer than five hundred extra-judicial executions; six months later, the number had doubled, drawing the very public attention of the city's highest prelate, Cardinal Christian Tumi, himself. During this time, Douala had become a city under siege, its streets barred by countless police and army checkpoints, entire

neighbourhoods held hostage and hundreds of young people arrested nightly. Torture was rampant, disappearances legion. Faced with a staggering death toll, the people of Douala took to the streets. Massive protests pitted thousands of inhabitants against the forces of the C.O., chiefly in a neighbourhood called Bépanda, which, in one night of violent arrests, had lost nine of its young people. In these and other clashes, Doualais were forced to acquire forms of knowledge about their city that, once deployed, proved profoundly de-stabilizing for those at the helm. In places such as Bépanda, not ordinarily used to such things, ways of escaping the armed forces were borrowed from districts long subject to intense police harassment. One such quarter is Makéa, at the heart of New Bell, arguably the economic capital's toughest neighbourhood. There, people fleeing the law have long made use of narrow alleys called *mapan*, barely wide enough for a grown man to slide through, escape routes that meander through the unpaved spaces of Makéa, past and often through private courtyards and dwellings. Adapted for use in Bépanda, the *mapan* system altered the ways in which the neighbourhood's inhabitants had for years apprehended their streets. New approaches to moving through the city were superimposed onto others, notably the use of cell phones, a recent introduction to Douala, which proved of considerable assistance, for individuals and entire crowds, in outflanking the C.O. Also of key importance were alternative cartographies of the city, born of the violence visited upon Doualais during this period. Rumours of mass graves, most of which existed, but whose exact location few could pinpoint absolutely, led to the elaboration of multiple, overlapping, contradictory maps of the city, complete with re-naming of important sites, plazas and streets, to accommodate a growing sense of the urban landscape as a place in which the otherworld (many of its denizens unburied) had been loosed onto the world of the living.<sup>34</sup>

Starting in 2001, if traditional indicators are to be believed, Cameroon's overall economic situation began to improve. Investments from abroad, notably South Africa, ushered in by renewed interest in the country on the part of the IMF and World Bank, have had a positive effect on its standing in the international community. For the majority of Camerounais, however, there has been little or no change. In Douala, this has resulted in

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<sup>34</sup> For a fuller treatment of the C.O., its *raison-d'être* and its effects on the architectural *imaginaire* of Douala, see Malaquais 2003. For still other impacts of the C.O. on the city, see Simone 2002a:37 *ff.* An evocative theorization of such conceptual maps of the city as are adduced here appears, in a very different context, in Dear and Leclerc 2003:6 *ff.*

a variety of phenomena, not least a pervasive disgust with what seems to many an intractable situation. Striking for observers interested in alternative approaches to, or readings of, globalization – what Jean-François Bayart and others have termed *la globalisation par le bas* – are rumours about Douala’s new stock exchange. Inaugurated with great fanfare in 2002, in an elegantly refurbished building of Akwa, the city’s oldest commercial neighbourhood, the exchange has yet to produce a single trade. In large part, the responsibility for this lies with the government, which has been riven, on this as on many questions, by internal bickering and turf battles. For ordinary Doualais, the new headquarters of the exchange are a subject of considerable cynicism. Indeed, for many, the exchange might as well not exist. Headed though it is by a dynamic and outspoken director, *la bourse de Douala* seems to them no more real than the several, de-centralized universities the government created in the 1990s, following student protests it violently repressed – Potemkin institutions where one would be hard put to attend a class, let alone obtain a diploma worth more than the paper it was printed on.

Such architectures of the *imaginaire* are not the stuff of buildings and spaces alone. Infrastructure – means of getting from here to there – is subject also to elaborations of this kind. Here, an example from Lagos might be given. In an essay entitled “The Visible and the Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa” (2002a), Simone mentions a catastrophe in 2002 in which many people drowned. Fleeing a disaster zone, entire neighbourhoods, most of whose inhabitants could not swim, took to the Isole Canal, trying to make their way to safety over a carpet of water hyacinths on the surface of the canal. Some two thousand people died as the vegetation, failing to bear their weight, opened huge gaps into the water below. One could look at this episode as an instance of misplaced belief, or hope, gone tragically disappointed; indeed, many have. But there is more to the event than at first meets the eye. The failed hyacinth bridge – a rumour of infrastructure – I would argue, belongs squarely to the realm of architecture. That it was made of transient materials and that it failed because it proved to be more rumour than tangible fact makes it no less fundamental a building block in the lived experience of the city. By the same token, the maps of Douala produced and used to imagine, tell and navigate the city in 2000 and 2001 stand as a fundamental fact in the understanding of Douala as an architectural ensemble. So too the itineraries mapped and re-mapped by so many Doualais in moving back and forth across thousands of kilometres and countless borders: these too become techniques in the production of architectural space.

I do not wish to suggest by this that the *imaginaire* and its architectures are a one solution, a means in and of themselves of resolving the crises faced by so many cities of the sub-continent. Romanticizing such constructions of the mind leads nowhere: clearly, water hyacinth bridges are not a viable alternative to bridges made of wood, cement or steel. Like related structures in Douala and Kinshasa, they nonetheless represent something that is painfully absent from much official discourse, whether by municipal and government authorities or international “lending” institutions, namely a capacity to imagine what the city could be. Implicit in these imaginaries is a critique of the city and its leaders and a conceptualization of what they both might offer, a vision for the urban where it is most needed, by those whom it most concerns. Simply put, a hyacinth bridge may not be the solution, but its production, in the *imaginaire* of a community, signals what should be there in the way of infrastructure and gives a sense of what form this might take. It stems from a lived knowledge of the character of the city and a study of its needs, which is a textbook definition of the term “urbanism.”<sup>35</sup> We shall revert to this matter shortly, in the final pages of the essay. For now, suffice it to say that the privileging of such knowledge, by practitioners and students of architecture alike, is a must.

#### **CITYSCAPES AND KNOWLEDGESCAPES: WORDS BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION**

In terms of contemporary theorizations, the approaches I propose to the city in these pages find, perhaps, the most resonance in Dear and Leclerc’s (2003) concept of the “postborder city”. As they define it, the postborder city is a place characterized by “hybridity” and “cosmopolitanism” (Ibid:10). The latter they identify as “neither European nor class conscious, but instead ... primarily grounded in an immigrant, diasporic experience of transnational crossings” (Ibid:6). “Cosmopolitanism’s postmodern geographies,” they state, “do not uphold historic structures of power and knowledge, but daily reinvent new pathways for living, for personal and collective visions, and for sharing knowledge” (*id.*); in so doing, they give rise to “new mental and

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<sup>35</sup> For purposes of comparison, see the definition given for “urbanism” in Harper Collins’s *College English Dictionary*. A rethinking of “urbanism” as the province of those who have a first-hand, lived experience of the city at its most difficult, as a “science” as much of their domain as that of professionals, most of whom do not have such lived experience, might offer the beginning of an answer to architect Rem Koolhaas’s much touted question: “Whatever happened to urbanism?” (Miles *et al.*, eds. 2000).

material cartographies that proclaim our collective futures” (Ibid:1), “alternative [mappings that] must continually be recast and contested” (Ibid:10). The city of which Dear and Leclerc speak is also a locus for producing path-breaking art, “a new cultural aesthetic being ... manufactured from the archaeologies of past and emerging identities” (Ibid:14).

In many ways, this view of the city echoes the Douala(s) considered here. There is one key distinction, however. Dear and Leclerc’s model in articulating the concept of the postborder is a city (or cities) astride a physical boundary, specifically, the emerging, trans-border metropolitan area made up of Tijuana and Mexicali, San Diego and Los Angeles, to which they give the evocative name of Baja California. The distinction, for Douala is located squarely within the borders of a single country, would be little more than theoretical were it not that the city the authors describe differs in significant ways from the city I, at least, have encountered in Douala. The presence of (and focus by the writers) on a border results in a reading of the city which, even as it seeks to dispel them, tends to reify binary oppositions: Mexico/U.S., tradition/modernity, rural/urban, past/present, family/strangers. Such dichotomous constructs are fundamental to their analysis, which situates the city in the interstices between these dualisms – in the “limen” (Ibid:10), a “third space” (Ibid:9), “the gap between two worlds” (Ibid:10). This is not, I believe, a problem of theorization, though certainly other types of approach would be possible; rather, I suspect, it reflects a very real condition of the urban space under consideration. I am struck, in this regard, by the resonance Dear and Leclerc’s analysis finds in de Boeck’s work on Kinshasa, a city poised itself on a border.<sup>36</sup>

The dichotomies Dear, Leclerc and de Boeck posit as building blocks or, more properly, as barriers – borders – that are transgressed in the production of new forms of urbanity in Baja California and Kinshasa respectively are very much present in Douala as well. A number are addressed by Séraphin in his study, *Vivre à Douala* (2000). There is, however, more. That a significant number of Doualais (Kinois, Lagosians and so on) are in dialogue with multiple otherwheres half a world away results in strikingly different conditions. Transit, whether real or imagined, in such settings, becomes so fundamental a factor in the experience of urban life as to overshadow many others. Movement, in a

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<sup>36</sup> See, in particular, de Boeck’s study of Kinshasa as a space of the in-between, wherein multiple dichotomies reflect one another as in a series of mirrors (2002).

sense, becomes place. Cities become city-scapes – scapes, that is, in the sense that Appadurai conceives of the term: constructs born of and giving rise to incessant, overlapping flows.<sup>37</sup> How to theorize this is, to say the least, a challenge. Augé’s otherwise fascinating analysis of spaces of transit as “non places” (1992) proves inadequate here.<sup>38</sup> Notions of liminality are problematic as well: if a man of twenty-five has spent five years – a full fifth of his life – in transit, is it reasonable to speak of his years on the road as time spent in limen? What beginning and end points – what binaries – might we adduce to define the in-between spaces to which such language confines him? How to say the process, the idea, the dream of moving, when movement itself is not the goal ultimately sought? How to render in words the sensations evoked by the Nylon skyline?

Still, the challenge must be met. Essays such as this are relevant only insofar as they might offer platforms for a productive, tangible re-thinking of the city. It is not enough to speak or write of the *imaginaire*, to identify and analyze it: it must be given leave to speak for itself. From the processes of moving, of thinking and planning movement, so fundamental to urban centres like Douala today, stem extraordinarily rich bodies of knowledge – about cities, peoples and geographies, political and economic systems, societies, cultures and art forms. The futures of a Douala, a Kinshasa, a Lagos, if these cities are to offer their inhabitants conditions less dramatic than exist for most today, rests on harnessing such knowledge. The challenge for those whose tomorrows may lie in the balance is to create the networks,<sup>39</sup> home-grown, yet extending beyond the local, to share this knowledge. For, in the sharing, its potential is staggering.

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<sup>37</sup> Appadurai, we have seen, speaks of “disjunctive flows”; these, he says, are a product of and actively shape globalization. Among these flows, or “landscapes,” he writes, are “ethnoscapes” (flows of people), “mediascapes” (flows of media), “technoscapes” (technology flows), “financescape” (flows of finance or modes of financing) and “ideoscapes” (flows of ideas and ideologies). “The suffix *-scape*,” he explains, “allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes ... These terms with the common suffix *-scape* also indicate that these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different ... actors” (1996:33).

<sup>38</sup> Whether such spaces of transit, even in the most high-tech of contexts, are really “non-places” is, in any event, a subject for debate. A person without a “home,” living (or seeking to do so) in an airport – the quintessential “non-place” for Augé – might well take issue with this.

<sup>39</sup> Here, Simone’s suggestion (2002a) that networks of people, rather than structures such as bridges, are the most productive forms of infrastructure at work in many parts of African cities today, is particularly helpful.





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