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INHABITING OCULAR GROUND: Kinshasa's Future in the Light of Congo's Spectral Urban Politics

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THE OUTPOST

In 1896, some years before Joseph Conrad published *The Heart of Darkness* (1883) he wrote "An Outpost of Progress," a short fictional story that is part of his "Tales of Unrest" (Conrad 1961) and in which he starts to use the material of his Congo years for the first time. A psychological thriller, "An Outpost" may also be read as a political statement undermining the very idea of empire. The storyline focuses on Kayerts and Carlier, two white traders who are out-posted in Africa at an ivory trading station along an unnamed river, easily identifiable as the Congo river. The trading station's storehouse is called "the fetish," "perhaps," as Conrad remarks, "because of the spirit of civilization it contained" (Conrad 1961:93).

Soon after the steamer that put them ashore disappears beyond the horizon, Kayerts and Carlier begin to feel uneasy and alone. At first, they still enjoy discussing the few novels they brought along, and from time to time they receive the visit of Gobila, the old chief of the surrounding villages, with whom they get along well. They also find some old copies of a home paper, left by the previous stationmaster who died of a fever and lies buried in the yard . . .

that print discussed what it was pleased to call "Our Colonial Expansion" in high-flown language. It spoke much of the rights and duties of civilization, of the sacredness of the civilizing work, and extolled the merits of those who went about bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places of the earth.

Carlier and Kayerts read, wondered, and began to think better of themselves.

2 Carlier said one evening, waving his hand about, “In a hundred years, there
3 will be perhaps a town here. Quays, and warehouses, and barracks, and—
4 and—billiard-rooms. Civilization, my boy, and virtue—and all. And then,
5 chaps will read that two good fellows, Kayerts and Carlier, were the first
6 civilized men to live in this very spot!” [Conrad 1961:94–95]

7
8 In spite of this comforting thought, it soon becomes painfully clear that Kayerts
9 and Carlier are not really up to the job, and have no clue how to go about the
10 heavenly mission of “bringing light, and faith and commerce to the dark places
11 of the earth.” All Kayerts and Carlier seem to be able to do is sit there and wait for
12 the steamer to return. A deep silence sets in, and they sense that they are out of
13 their element, not in control of events, and totally dependent on their “nigger”
14 Makola (or Henry Price, as he himself maintains his name is) who, “taciturn and
15 impenetrable,” despises his two white bosses.

16 They lived like blind men in a large room, aware only of what came in contact
17 with them (and of that only imperfectly), but unable to see the general aspect
18 of things. The river, the forest, all the great land throbbing with life, were like
19 a great emptiness. Even the brilliant sunshine disclosed nothing intelligible.
20 Things appeared and disappeared before their eyes in an unconnected and
21 aimless kind of way. The river seemed to come from nowhere and flow
22 nowhither. It flowed through a void. [Conrad 1961:92]

23
24 Foreshadowing the fate of Conrad’s best known fictive character, the infamous
25 Mr. Kurtz, Carlier and Kayerts are overtaken by what they call “the unusual,” and,
26 slowly, to paraphrase Fabian (2000), they go “out of their minds.”

27 The story does not end too well for Kayerts and Carlier, but they were
28 right about one thing indeed. The river stopped flowing through a void. Their
29 modest “outpost of progress,” adjacent to the grave of the first stationmaster, did
30 indeed become a town, and what a town: Kinshasa, a city that counts among the
31 African continent’s largest urban conglomerations today. This megalopolis, which
32 some describe as “the quintessential postcolonial African city” (Pieterse 2010:1)
33 and “one of the most drastic cities of the world” (Simone 2010a:291), is now
34 home to a population of over 9 million and keeps growing steadily. In this article,
35 we first situate the three main phases of Kinshasa’s expansion from the colonial
36 era to the present day, before turning to an analysis of the ocular and spectral
37 politics underlying the Congolese government’s plans for the future expansion of
38 Kinshasa.

THE COLONIAL PLANNING OF THE CITY (1874–1960)

None of Kinshasa's unbridled growth was foreseeable at the end of the 19th century. Beginning in 1878, Henry Morton Stanley set up four stations along the Congo River manned by 150 European and U.S. officials and supplied by four steamers. The trading post at Stanley Pool formed the meeting point between the caravans coming from the Lower Congo and the navigable upstream part of the river that reaches deep into the heart of Central Africa. In the early years, while Savorgnan de Brazza was busy claiming the land at the opposite bank of the Congo river in the name of the French, the post transformed into a thriving model station that became the administrative center of the Stanley Pool District in 1886 and flourished into the urban conglomeration of Léopoldville–Kinshasa soon afterward.¹ In fact, Stanley's first station was far from isolated, and the villages surrounding it far less pristine than Conrad's description of chief Gobila's village leads us to believe. Already at the beginning of the 19th century, these villages formed the regional core of a large market system with wide-ranging connections, a bustling place where goats, fish, salt but also slaves and European goods changed hands and were being traded by the local Teke and Humbu populations. But all of that activity was still a far cry from the town that this settlement was soon to become.

Between 1885 and World War I, the core of present-day Kinshasa shaped up around a ten-kilometer-long axis between two sites, close to where Stanley and his men first set foot: the old military and commercial center Ngaliema–Kintambo to the West, and what is now known as Gombe (formerly Kalina), the easternmost point of Ngaliema Bay. By the end of the 19th century, the Kintambo and Kalina outposts had thus developed from small trading stations into comptoir towns, Léopoldville and Kinshasa respectively. By 1900, this Léopoldville–Kinshasa agglomeration, connected by a railway and a road that became Kinshasa's main *Boulevard du 30 juin* after Congo's 1960 independence from Belgium, had already considerably expanded to engulf the former fishermen's village of Kinshasa and beyond, all the way east to Ndolo, turning that whole riverine zone along the Stanley (now Malebo) Pool into a more industrial area, a transshipment hub for goods and raw materials to be siphoned off to the Belgian Metropole. By 1910, the spirit of civilization that had been contained by the "fetish," the first trading station's storehouse, had shape-shifted into its true form, the full-fledged spirit of capitalism. In 1910, the riverbank was lined with at least 80 storehouses, belonging to several industrial enterprises and trading companies. Around that time, also, a railway was constructed to connect Ngaliema, Gombe, and Ndolo. In the meanwhile, the white

2 population had grown to 1,000 inhabitants, mostly men. And all that was left of the
3 “pristine” village of chief Gobila was its name. The now infrastructurally derelict
4 port of Beach Ngobila is still one of the main gateways to present-day Kinshasa.

5 The industrial growth of the city necessitated an increasing transfer of cheap
6 labor from the country’s rural hinterlands. The growing city also attracted people
7 from all over the Belgian Congo and these were housed in a rapidly expanding
8 number of labor camps and “indigenous” living areas. These included Saint Jean,
9 Kinshasa, and Barumbu, which were spatially demarcated from the “white” Gombe
10 by the railway line between Gombe and Kintambo. Between the end of the Second
11 World War and the end of the Belgian colonial presence in 1960, Léopoldville
12 multiplied its population tenfold, from 40 thousand in 1945 to approximately 400
13 thousand in 1960.

14 In the first half of the twentieth century, Léopoldville thus rapidly grew into
15 what essentially was a segregationist, Janus-faced city, a city like a Bounty candy
16 bar, with a white heart, *La Ville*, the home of the city’s European population,
17 constructed along the Kintambo–Gombe axis, and a surrounding, quickly growing
18 peripheral African city, commonly referred to as *La Cité*, home to an increasing
19 number of Congolese. By 1959, these African *cités* included Dendale (currently
20 Kasavubu), Ngiri-Ngiri, Bandalungwa, Kalamu, Lemba, Matete and Ndjili. They
21 were the result of a large-scale housing scheme launched by the Belgian colonial
22 administration, a plan marked by the modernist ideals that were also *en vogue* in the
23 Metropole during the 1950s. In ten years, more than 20,000 houses were thus built
24 by Belgian urban planners and architects in an impressive effort to respond to the
25 demographic explosion of the city and the increasing social unrest it engendered
26 after WWII (see De Meulder 2000; De Boeck and Plissart 2004). Although the
27 white and more residential areas of Gombe were partly extended into Limete in
28 the 1940s and 1950s, La Ville did not expand very much after 1960, caught as it
29 was between the curbing Congo river on its western and northern side, and the
30 growing belt of *cités* on its eastern and southern borders.

31 To some extent the division between La Ville on the one hand, and a growing
32 number of townships on the other hand, continues to mark Kinshasa’s urbanscape
33 today. In the past, the two areas were not only separated from each other by
34 a tangible color bar but they were also physically set apart by railway tracks,
35 strategically placed army barracks (such as the notorious Camp Militaire Lt. Col.
36 Kokolo) and other *zones tampons*, empty no man’s lands that spatially drew a
37 divisive line between these various living areas. These zones of separation were
38 also responsible for the fact that the city became scattered over a vast distance.

1
2 Even today, in the historical heart of Kinshasa many of these empty pockets of land
3 have not yet fully densified in terms of housing and construction.
4

5 **THE CITY'S POSTCOLONIAL EXPANSION (1960–2010):**
6 **THE RANDOM OCCUPATION OF URBAN SPACE**

7 After 1960, the number of cités and communes *urbano-rurales* increased dras-
8 tically. Existing cités further densified and expanded, and others were added: Se-
9 lembao, Mont-Ngafula, Makala, Ngaba, Kisenso, Malweka, Masina, Kimbanseke,
10 Kinkole, and beyond. Some of these post-1960s expansions, such as Kinkole, had
11 still been planned by the Belgian colonial administration, but many others were
12 added onto the existing urban core in a rather unplanned and chaotic fashion.
13 Today, the city continues to spread incessantly in western and southern direction
14 toward the Lower Congo, and eastward, way beyond Ndjili, Kinshasa's national
15 airport, toward the foot of the impressive Mangengenge mountain, the eastern
16 gateway to the city.

17 It is in these increasingly numerous urban areas that the city's inhabitants,
18 giving little or no credence to the claims of official urban planning and its related
19 matters of the map, have started to reterritorialize and reclaim the urban space, de-
20 velop their own specific forms of urbanism and infuse the city with their own praxis,
21 values, moralities, and temporal dynamics. In the 50 years of the postindependence
22 period this process, which started at Kinshasa's margins, has engulfed the city as a
23 whole, marking a move away from the physical and mental "place" of colonialism
24 (its spatial layout, its work ethos, its time management, and its language, French).
25 Unhindered by any kind of formal industrialization or economic development, the
26 city has bypassed, redefined, or smashed the colonial logics that were stamped
27 onto its surface. It has done so spatially, in terms of its architectural and urban
28 development, as well as in terms of its sociocultural and economic imprint.

29 Reaching across the formation period of high colonialism and its modernist
30 ideals, Kinshasa rejoined, to some extent, its earlier rural roots. Aided by a
31 neverending political and economic crisis, the city (re-)ruralized in many ways,
32 not only in terms of its social structures and spheres of social interaction but also
33 in terms of its economic survival and coping strategies, engendering a new type of
34 agrarian urbanity.

35 The unused wastelands that were part of the segregationist colonial urban
36 planning are increasingly being turned into gardens and fields, as are the empty
37 spaces along the city's main traffic arteries. Formerly occupied spaces within the
38 city, such as the cemeteries of Kasavubu or Kintambo, which were officially closed

2 down by the urban authorities in the 1980s, are being occupied and converted
3 into fields as well (De Boeck 2008). An even more striking example is provided
4 by the transformation that the Malebo Pool is currently undergoing. Over the
5 past 20 years, the inhabitants of the neighborhoods along the Congo river, from
6 Kingabwa all the way to Nsele and Mikonga, have converted large parts of the Pool
7 into arable land. They were inspired by the example of the Koreans, who started
8 to develop rice paddies in the Malebo Pool near Kingabwa in the 1980s. When the
9 Koreans abandoned these rice fields in the 1990s, the local population took over,
10 and further expanded the farmland into the river, often with very basic tools or
11 even with their own bare hands. By now, in certain areas such as the mouth of
12 the river Tshangu near the Ndjili airport, the empoldered area is already reaching
13 ten kilometers into the Malebo Pool. In this way more than 800 out of the 6,000
14 hectares that make up the Malebo Pool have already been transformed from water
15 into arable land (see <http://culanth.org/?q=node/384>).

16 Over the years, the official authorities, from the National Ministry of Agri-
17 culture down to the level of the municipality (known as “commune”), have made
18 half-hearted attempts to impose a legal framework to direct, control and, above all,
19 tax these new farming activities on previously nonexistent land. In theory, the state
20 administration has the right to allocate the land to farmers. The latter are supposed
21 to make a payment (\$200) to the land registry office of the province of Kinshasa,
22 before being able to obtain a “contrat d’exploitation” from the Urban Division for
23 Rural Development (\$10), and a “permis d’exploitation agricole” (another \$10)
24 from the Inspection of Rural Development and Agriculture, a administrative unit
25 of the municipality. One then acquires the right to use the land for as long as
26 one wants, on the condition that one can prove it is continuously cultivated. The
27 municipality is supposed to send an inspector to check on this once a year. In
28 practice, however, none of these regulations and procedures are applied in any
29 straightforward way. The inspector has never come, and because none of this land
30 is on any official map, the authorities often don’t even know which land should
31 be paid for. In reality this huge new garden belt is organized outside any clearly
32 defined form of government control on the ground. The factual “ownership” of
33 these gardens is, therefore, in the hands of some 80 farmers’ associations. These
34 have divided the riverine farmlands into a number of “secteurs” (Kingabwa 1, 2, and
35 3, Rail 1 and 2, Tshangu, Mapela, Mafuta Kizola, Lokali 1 and 2, Tshunge-Masina,
36 Tshunge-Nsele, Mikonga 1 and 2), which in turn are subdivided into a varying
37 number of “blocs,” each consisting of hundreds of tiny garden plots that rarely
38 surpass two to six acres. A “président de secteur” (officially representing the level

1
2 of the municipality but in reality acting quite independently), aided by a number of
3 “chefs de bloc,” overlooks the farming activities of over 1,000 farmers. They also
4 organize and oversee the contacts with the thousands of women who each day buy
5 up the gardens’ produce and ensure the vegetables’ distribution over a large part
6 of the city’s numerous markets.²

7 In this way Kinshasa’s inhabitants not only continue and reconnect with the
8 city’s and river’s long-standing market and trading history (in which women have
9 always played an important role, see Bouchard 2002 and Mianda 1996) but they also
10 remind us of the fact that the city has not only looked into the mirror of colonialist
11 modernity to design itself but also that it has always contained a second mirror.³
12 This mirror is provided by the rural hinterland, Kinshasa’s natural backdrop, which
13 does not only form the city’s periphery, and feed the peripheral city, but also has
14 deeply penetrated the city, economically and socially (in terms of the ethnic make-
15 up of large parts of Kinshasa), and above all, culturally and mentally. Rather than
16 pushing the rural out, Kinshasa’s urban identity has constantly been invaded and
17 formed by, blending with and depending on rural lifestyles, mentalities, moralities
18 and modes of survival (see also De Boeck and Plissart 2004:40ff).

19 The small-scale modes of action that punctuate rural living—often reformu-
20 lated yet continuing within the urban context—provide Kinshasa’s inhabitants
21 with an urban politics of the possible. These—often unsteady, provisional, and
22 constantly shifting—possibilities and action schemes are perhaps not the only ones
23 available to Kinshasa to give form to the making and remaking of associational life
24 in the city (e.g., think also of the mobilizing force of Neo-Pentecostalism), but
25 as a lever for the conceptualization of collective action in the urban configura-
26 tion it is impossible to underestimate their importance. It is in local zones and
27 domains such as the one described above, with its myriad activities and its com-
28 plex web of “informal” economies that have spun themselves around the river
29 and Kinshasa as a whole, that the city reveals its own production, and gener-
30 ates the possibility of economic survival and of social life in the urban context.
31 Here the city reveals itself not as the product of careful planning or engineering
32 but, rather, as the outcome of a randomly produced and occupied living space,
33 which belongs to whomever generates, grabs, and uses it. Of course, this occu-
34 pation is always accompanied by (the threat of) expulsion. The whole of the city
35 is caught in a waxing and waning movement between capturing and letting go,
36 invading and retreating, seizure and expulsion. Because the urban residents of
37 Kinshasa stand in no steady or lasting proprietary relationship to anything they
38 own, scarcely even to the space they seize, occupy, and inhabit, unsteadiness, or

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2 movement, thereby becomes a form of property in and of itself. Life in the city
3 often takes on the aspect of a seminomadic journey generated in the temporality of
4 the moment.

5 Plans are one thing, journeys another. That is also why such random occupation
6 of urban space almost always engenders new conflicts. Again, the riverine fields
7 provide a good example of that. The creation of new arable land in the Malebo pool
8 has led to innumerable and sometimes violent clashes concerning ownership and
9 land rights over this previously nonexistent land. On one level, these conflicts are
10 mainly played out between the farmers' associations and the Teke and Humbu land
11 chiefs, Kinshasa's original landowners. The latter have sustained their livelihood
12 since the late 19th century by selling plots of ancestral land to the city and its
13 inhabitants. At the beginning of the 21st century, however, they are running out
14 of land to sell. That is the reason why they have turned to these newly available
15 plots of land, claiming ownership over them. Backed by some government officials,
16 but without the farmers' consent, they have started to sell large stretches of this
17 new farmland to individuals and families. These in turn have started to destroy
18 the gardens to convert them into a shanty area (see Figure 1). Hundreds of new
19 "landowners" construct their shack in what essentially is a very unhealthy swamp
20 area that does not exist on any official map of the city, lacks even the most basic
21 infrastructure in terms of water, electricity, and sanitation, and is totally unfit for
22 habitation.



37
38
FIGURE 1. Construction of a new shanty area in the Malebo polders. (Photo by F. De Boeck, February 2010)

1
2 What complicates matters is that both the farmers, the land chiefs and the
3 owners of the newly constructed houses are each backed by various administrative
4 and judicial instances on the communal and the provincial level. This has created
5 a highly explosive situation leading to currently ongoing violent clashes between
6 the various parties involved. In one instance, in early 2010, the bodyguards of a
7 local traditional Teke chief, backed by some army officials, attacked a provincial
8 minister while the latter visited the disputed site with some policemen and ordered
9 the destruction of what he considered an illegal occupation of farmland.

10 Yet, in spite of such conflicting interests, and the uncertainties and constant
11 renegotiations these clashes entail, it is this organic approach to the production
12 of the city and its spaces that enables Kinshasa to survive at all. In many respects,
13 Kinshasa's cités are conceived around architectures that remain almost invisible,
14 and are defined by lack and absence on a material level. And many activities in the
15 city become possible not because there is a well-developed infrastructure avail-
16 able to sustain them but, rather, because that infrastructure is not there, or only
17 exists through its paucity. People's lives in large parts of the city unfold around
18 truncated urban forms, fragments and figments of imported urban technologies,
19 echoes of built environments from the colonial period, and recycled levels of
20 infrastructural accommodation. Although these infrastructures might have origi-
21 nated as the product of a careful engineering of the urban space, they no longer
22 function along these lines today. Constantly banalized and reduced to its most
23 basic function, that of a shelter, the built form is generated by a more real, liv-
24 ing city that exists as a heterogeneous urban conglomeration through the bodies,
25 movements, practices, and discourses of urban dwellers. This embodied praxis of
26 urban life is embedded in, as well as produces, the entanglement of a wide variety
27 of rhizomatic trajectories, relations, and mirroring realities. All of these enjoin,
28 merge, include, fracture, fragment, and re-order the urban space. They create,
29 define, and transform new sites of transportation, new configurations of interlaced
30 spatialities, new public spaces of work and relaxation, new itineraries and clusters
31 of relations, new social interactions, new regimes of knowledge and power. And
32 the more there are opportunities to short-circuit any dependence on (unstable)
33 infrastructure and technology, and to bypass the intricate questions of mainte-
34 nance, ownership and so on, the better all of these actions and transactions seem
35 to work. In this way, the city exists beyond its architecture (see also De Boeck and
36 Plissart 2004).

37 Of course, this level of urban functioning outside of the official frameworks of
38 formal urban planning characterized by precariousness and hardship, and defined

2 by necessity. Therefore, it is often far from an ideal way to live. But yet, at least to
3 a certain extent, it also seems to be efficient and to work for many. It generates a
4 specific agency in a specific urban experience. It also generates the capacity or the
5 possibility to become a willful actor in these urban networks. And it is efficient be-
6 cause it allows urbanites to be local producers and controllers of infrastructure and
7 technology, rather than local consumers of technology imported from elsewhere.
8 It transforms city dwellers from passive victims into active participants with their
9 own social, economic, political, and religious agendas, which are often situated
10 far beyond the level of mere survival. Concretely, it offers them a considerable
11 freedom to capture the sudden possibilities opened up by unexpected occasions
12 that are generated by the synergies and frictions of urban life. These energies con-
13 stantly force the urban dweller to master the tricky skills of improvisation. Kinosis
14 seem to be very good at doing exactly that; at being flexible, at opening up to this
15 “unexpected,” that often reveals itself outside the known pathways that constitute
16 urban life as most in the Global North know it. Urban residents of cityscapes such
17 as Kinshasa are highly skilled at discovering itineraries beyond the obvious, and at
18 exploiting more invisible paths and possibilities that lay hidden in the folds of urban
19 domains and experiences. Often, these city dwellers have trained themselves to
20 successfully tap into this imbroglio, and to exploit to the full the possibilities these
21 juxtapositions offer. They are constantly busy to design new ways to escape from
22 the economic impositions and excesses that urban life imposes on them. They often
23 know where to look and what to look for to generate feasibility within what is
24 seemingly unfeasible.

25
26 **THE NEW KINSHASA: THE POLITICS OF ERASURE**
27 **AND OF SPECTRAL URBANISATION (2010–?)**

28 All of this stands in sharp contrast to the official planning of the city that
29 the urban authorities and the Congolese government have recently committed
30 themselves to after decades of disinterest and *laisser-faire*. For some years now,
31 a successive series of city governors has been engaged in “cleaning up” the city.
32 This cleansing basically boils down to a hard-handed politics of erasure, destroy-
33 ing “irregular,” “anarchic” and unruly housing constructions, bulldozing bars and
34 terraces considered to be too close to the roadside, and banning containers, which
35 Kinosis commonly convert into little shops, from the street. The same is happening
36 to the small street “restaurants” known as *malewa* (which provide many women,
37 and therefore whole families, with an income), as well as many other informal
38 structures and infrastructures allowing urban dwellers to survive in the volatile

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2 economy of the street. The urban authorities not only started to wage a war against
3 these “illegal” structures and activities but also against the very bodies of those
4 who perform or embody them. Among those who first fell victim to the state’s
5 effort to “sanitize” and recolonize the city, rewrite the city’s public spaces, redefine
6 who has a right to the street and to the city, were Kinshasa’s street children and
7 youth gangs, commonly referred to as *bashege*, *pomba*, and *kuluna*.⁴ In an attempt to
8 stamp a new material and moral scale onto the city’s surface, the urban authorities
9 started to organize operations such as *Kanga Vagabonds* (“Grab the Vagabonds,” an
10 operation reported by Geenen 2009), to expulse street children from the city’s
11 public eye.⁵ But this urban policy went much further than purifying the streets of
12 unruly kids or prostitutes. What it envisaged was a much more harmful attempt at
13 willfully disrupting what is commonly referred to as the “informal economy,” the
14 proverbial *système D*, or Article 15, which essentially refers to the entrepreneurial
15 capacity of urban dwellers to generate the networked agencies, coping mechanisms
16 and survival strategies that were discussed above. In Kinshasa, every singular life is
17 embedded in a multiplicity of relationships. Many of these relationships are defined
18 by family and kinship ties, but many others have to do with the specific ways
19 in which one inserts oneself—has to insert oneself—in multiple complex, often
20 overlapping, networks that include friends, neighbors, colleagues, acquaintances,
21 members of one’s church congregation, professional relations and so on. Within
22 the megalopolis that Kinshasa has become, this capacity “to belong,” to socially posit
23 oneself within as many different collectivities as possible, and thereby to obliterate
24 anonymity—in itself an almost unthinkable concept—is crucial to survive and to
25 exist beyond the raw reality of mere survival and bare life (see also Lindell 2010a,
26 2010b). The capacity at insertion constitutes the prerequisite for a life worth living
27 in this kind of urban environment, in economic as well as social terms. The state’s
28 brutal destruction of citizens’ material and social environments under the guise of
29 an urban reform that once again seems to be inspired by the earlier moral models
30 of colonialist modernity, therefore forms a violent attack on precisely that crucial
31 creative capacity that is a sine qua non to belong, and to belong together, in the
32 city. The official urban politics “orphans” many urban residents and in the end
33 defines them as out of place in the contours of this newer, cleaner, “better” and
34 more “modern” urban environment.

35 The same exclusionist dynamics are fueling an even more outspoken attempt
36 at redefining what a “proper” city means today. During the campaign leading up
37 to the 2006 presidential elections, president Kabila launched his “Cinq Chantiers”
38 program, his Five Public Works. The concept summarizes Kabila’s efforts to

2 modernize education, health care, road infrastructure, access to electricity, and
3 housing accommodation in DR Congo. In 2010, the year in which Congo celebrated
4 the 50th anniversary of its independence from Belgian colonial rule, and a year
5 before the next presidential elections, the “chantiers” were geared into a different
6 speed, especially with regard to the latter three issues. Downtown Kinshasa (la
7 Ville) went through a quite radical facelift, under the guidance of Chinese engineers,
8 Indian or Pakistani architects, and real estate firms from Dubai, Zambia or the
9 Emirates. Along the main boulevards and major traffic arteries all trees were
10 cut down and adjacent gardens and fields were destroyed, while the roads and
11 boulevards themselves were widened to become eight-lane highways leading right
12 into the heart of the city. Some landmark buildings were embellished or restored,
13 while others made way for new construction sites on an unprecedented scale. Plans
14 also exist, so the city’s rumor mill has it, to build a new viaduct connecting an
15 upgraded Ndjili International airport with La Ville (and more precisely with its
16 Grand Hotel, one of the two international hotels of downtown Kinshasa). The
17 viaduct will follow the Congo river, and run over and above the heads of the
18 hundreds of thousands of impoverished inhabitants of the municipality of Masina,
19 commonly referred to as “Chine Populaire,” the People’s Republic of China,
20 because it is so overpopulated.

21 Today, also, almost every main street and boulevard of Kinshasa is covered
22 with huge billboards in a sustained politics of *visibilité* for the five chantiers policy.
23 The boards announce the emergence of this new city and offering the spectral,
24 and often spectacular although highly speculative and still very volatile, vision
25 of Congo’s reinsertion into the global oecumene. The advertisements promise
26 to bring “modernization” and “un nouveau niveau de vie à Kin” [a new stan-
27 dard of life to Kinshasa]. Apart from the classic infrastructural works (bringing
28 light to the streets, bridges, roads etc), the billboards also show representations
29 of soon-to-be-constructed conference centers, five star hotels, and skyscrapers
30 with names such as “Modern Paradise,” Crown Tower or Riverview Towers (see
31 <http://culanth.org/?q=node/384>). Many advertisements sport a portrait of Pres-
32 ident Kabila alongside the statement that Congo will soon be “the mirror of Africa.”
33 Kinshasa, in other words, is again looking into the mirror of modernity to fashion
34 itself, but this time the mirror no longer reflects the earlier versions of Belgian
35 colonialist modernity, but instead it longs to capture the aura of Dubai and other
36 hot spots of the new urban Global South.⁶

37 The most striking billboard of all is to be found near the Beach, Kinshasa’s main
38 port, close to the spot where, in Conrad’s novella, Kayerts and Carlier watched over

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2 “the fetish,” the storehouse containing the capitalist spirit of civilization. Today,
3 however, the Beach offers a sorry sight. It has become an industrial wasteland. The
4 riverbank itself is hidden from view by boats that have all sunk and do no longer
5 offer possible lines of flight; instead cadavers of boats, in every possible shade of rust
6 eaten brown, just lie there stranded, immobilized, stuck in the mud and entangled
7 by floating carpets of water hyacinths. It is this very same setting that was chosen
8 by a construction company that calls itself “Modern Construction” to erect a new
9 conference center. On a huge billboard, a poster again shows a photo of a smiling
10 Kabila. On his left and right, one beholds a computer-animated picture revealing
11 the new international conference center, which will be built in the form of . . .
12 a giant cruiser, complete with a rooftop terrace and restaurant! This building,
13 Kabila seems to tell the Kinois, is the ultimate metaphor for the new Kinshasa
14 and the new Congo. It offers the nation a new start and promises a prosperous
15 voyage en route to global modernity. Even if, rather cynically, the name given to
16 the building by the project developers is “Modern Titanic,” the image of the ship
17 setting sail toward a new future for Kinshasa is powerfully seductive (see Figure 2).
18 Although there is no doubt in anyone’s mind that the odds against the Titanic
19



FIGURE 2. The Modern Titanic: Congo soon to become the “Mirror” of Africa. (Photo by F. De Boeck, February 2010)

2 not sinking are overwhelming, and although many urban residents in Kin know
3 that they will never have a right to this new city, the hope that this naval image
4 engenders, the hope for a better future, for new and more advantageous ways to
5 cruise through life and navigate the city, simply proves to be irresistible. Even those
6 who count themselves among the president's political adversaries cannot help but
7 exclaim: "If only this were true," or "And what if it would be for real this time?"
8 Although utopias usually remain locked within the realm of pure speculation and
9 material impossibility, Kabila's "chantiers" seem to awaken new hopes, seem to
10 have rekindled a dormant capacity to "believe" and to dream against all odds: "C'est
11 beau quand-même, ça fait rêver!" [It is so beautiful that it makes one dream] people
12 exclaim.

13 But nowhere does the speculum of neoliberal global modernity conjure up the
14 oneiric more spectacularly (and nowhere does it reveal its exclusionist logics more
15 strongly) than in another construction project, which is currently already underway:
16 the "Cité du Fleuve" (see Figure 3; see also <http://culanth.org/?q=node/384>).
17 This is the name given to an exclusive development to be situated on two artificially
18 created islands. These will be reclaimed from sandbanks and swamp in the Congo
19 River, a small distance from Kingabwa's Port Baramoto, another one of the city's
20 sorry harbors, adjacent to the Beach. The Main Island, the larger of the two, will
21 offer mixed commercial, retail, and residential properties, while North Island,
22 the smaller of the two, will be reserved strictly for private homes and villas.



38 **FIGURE 3.** The Cité du Fleuve project. (Photo courtesy of Cité du Fleuve)

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2 The two islands will be connected to Kinshasa by means of two bridges (see
3 <http://culanth.org/?q=node/384>).⁷

4 According to the developers' website,⁸ La Cité du Fleuve will provide "a
5 standard of living unparalleled in Kinshasa and will be a model for the rest of
6 Africa" and, so the website's comments continue, "*La Cité du Fleuve* will showcase
7 the new era of African economic development." In reality, once more, most people
8 currently living in the city will never be able to set foot on the two islands. If all
9 goes according to plan, the latter will be probably be accorded the administrative
10 status of a new "commune," and will be subject to their own special bylaws. Thus,
11 operated as a huge gated community, the Cité du Fleuve will inevitably redefine
12 what is center and what is edge in Kinshasa. The Cité du Fleuve echoes many of the
13 ideas behind concepts such as the "charter city," that is, a special urban reform zone
14 that would allow governments of developing countries to adopt new systems of
15 rules and establish cities that can drive economic progress in the rest of the country.⁹
16 But at the same time, it also replicates the segregationist model of *Ville* and *Cité*
17 that proved so highly effective during the Belgian colonial period. It is clear that
18 the islands will become the new *Ville* while the rest of Kinshasa, with its 9 million
19 inhabitants, will be redefined in terms of its periphery. In this way the new city map
20 will redraw the geographies of inclusion and exclusion in radical ways, and relegate
21 its current residents to the city's edges (see <http://culanth.org/?q=node/384>).

22 The first victims of the Cité du Fleuve project (the realization of which is
23 planned over an eight-year period) will be a number of fishermen's villages in
24 the Congo river, as well as hundreds of farmers who now work on the land in
25 the riparian area discussed above.¹⁰ All of them will be forced to move else-
26 where to make room for the new development. Others will have to follow
27 soon. As noted before, the emergence of the new city drastically changes the
28 content and scale of what is deemed to be proper urban existence, and is go-
29 ing hand in hand with a destruction of the small-scale networked agencies and
30 coping mechanisms that currently allow the majority of Kinshasa to survive in the
31 city.

32 Undoubtedly, the reurbanization process regularizes Kinshasa and ends its
33 "exceptionalism" in the sense that Kin's dynamics of urban growth has started,
34 at last, to resemble that of other world cities in the Global South such as Dubai,
35 Mumbai, Rio or the urban conglomerations of Southern China (see Appadurai
36 2000; Cinar and Bender 2007; Pieterse 2008; Simone 2010b). Simultaneously,
37 however, Kin will also join the shadow side of that global process of urbanization, a
38 side revealing itself in an increasing *favela*-ization and an ever more difficult access

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2 and right to the city for many of its current inhabitants, the majority of which is
3 under the age of 25 (see also Hansen 2008). Here, the spectral dimension of the
4 marvelous inevitably combines with the dimensions of terror and the dismal. The
5 nightmarish side of these new spectral topographies forms the tain, the back of the
6 mirror, which constantly reflects the occulted “underneath of things” (Ferme 2001)
7 accompanying this process of urbanization, and bringing it back to the surface and
8 into the daily life experience of the Kinois.

9
10 **HETEROTOPOLOGY: DREAMING and SPEAKING**
11 **THE NEW KINSHASA**

12 And yet, it is this very same mirror that somehow also unites Kinshasa’s
13 powerful and powerless, its Big Men and its *petit peuple*. Kinshasa’s residents
14 and its leaders do not only share the same longing for a better city, but also,
15 remarkably, often share the same dream of what that city should look like. On my
16 asking the farmers who are in danger of being relocated because of the Cité du
17 Fleuve development whether they were well aware of what awaited them, they
18 stated: “Yes, we’ll be the victims, but still it will be beautiful.” In other words: even
19 though the governmental management of the urban site generates new topographies
20 of inclusion and exclusion, of propinquity and distance, and of haves and have nots,
21 and even if this dream of a new future for the city simultaneously generates very
22 tangible forms of ever more pronounced segregation, even then, those who will
23 not be granted access to the new “Mirror of Africa” revel as much in this dream of
24 the modern city and of “inclusion in global society” (Piot 2010:166) as the ruling
25 elites.¹¹

26 In this sense, their commonly shared longing for a better city is not a utopia,
27 it is something else. Unlike utopian, visionary dreams it does not generate or offer
28 hope. Instead, it offers Kinshasa a new heterotopia, a new space that escapes from
29 the real order of things,¹² its standard forms of classification and accumulation, if
30 only because it conjures up the marvelous through its appeal to the imagination
31 and oneiric. It is precisely in the specular qualities of the image of the new city, the
32 very process of mirroring, realized in all those spaces where the interplay between
33 real and unreal, or visible and invisible is realized that this new heterotopology for
34 Kinshasa is generated, allowing Kinois to overcome, even if only for a moment, the
35 fragmentedness, the contradictions and the ruptures that have scarred the face of
36 the city’s existence for so long now. It is not as if this new heterotopia, this other,
37 mythic Kinshasa, doesn’t have a very real relation with existing social, political or
38 economical processes in the city: all of these aspects are present in a very real, often

1
2 material, form, but at the same time without any real or sustainable connection to
3 place or location.

4 This is also the reason why, in the end, it is as if it almost doesn't seem to
5 matter whether the new city is physically built or not. It remains unclear whether
6 the government seems to believe the new polis will emerge in any lasting way,
7 otherwise why would it have chosen to cynically refer to it as a "Titanic"? And
8 the Kinois themselves are not easily fooled either: they know very well from past
9 experiences not to trust or believe in the official discourses or the outcome of its
10 policies. The new city might well prove to be as chimerical and volatile as the
11 speculative capital, the hedge and vulture funds, which are supposed to finance the
12 construction of the new Kinshasa.¹³ Indeed, for this kind of speculative and highly
13 volatile capital it is inconsequential whether or not a development such as Cité du
14 Fleuve is really built or inhabited. One might even argue that this kind of venture
15 capital is attracted to an urban environment such as Kinshasa precisely because of
16 the latter's inherent instability and volatility. Daily life in Kinshasa is constantly
17 punctuated by uncertainty, risk, provisionality, and the continuous hedging of bets,
18 and these qualities also form the city's main asset, and generate its main financial
19 opportunities, precisely because both city and capital share the same fundamental
20 characteristics (see also Rao 2007).

21 In the end, then, short-circuiting any real and tangible roadmaps for the
22 construction of a better urban future, and confronted with the government's
23 spectral politics, the ocular ground of billboards and advertisements in which the
24 city seems to appear out of nothing and might well vanish again into nothing, the
25 only place where the city can be inhabited and in where it is constantly being build,
26 is in the place of language, in the architecture of words. More than through material
27 infrastructures or new technologies, the sheer force of the word is perhaps the most
28 powerful heterotopia through which the city speaks, imagines, invents, and inhabits
29 itself. In Kinshasa, there is always the sneaking suspicion that the paths of transfer
30 between language and reality have become totally unpredictable. Nevertheless the
31 "truth" of words is also deeply believed in. They seem to be the ultimate weapon at
32 one's disposal to defend oneself against an unfinished, unlivable, harsh, and often
33 hostile city. Together with the body, the flesh of which is but a memento yet tells
34 the true condition of urban life, words also offer one of the most powerful tools,
35 one of the most important building blocks with which to conquer, alter and erect
36 the city over and over again.

37 In the Central African universe that brackets this urban world, the art
38 of rhetorics has always been the most efficient tool for self-realization and

2 singularization, at least for men. Words, also, have always had a tremendous
3 power to construct or change reality, conjure up alternative orders, generate social
4 networks and recreate public space (consider, in this respect, the word of the
5 diviner, the ritual specialist, the sacred king and the judge during a palaver, or
6 the speech acts of more recent urban figures of success such as the politician, the
7 musician and the preacher). In all of these contexts, the legitimate public word
8 always constitutes a demiurgical act of social reproduction and of world making.
9 It is no coincidence that in the autochthonous Central African cultural universe
10 that brackets Kinshasa, colloquy, the act of palavering and of speaking together, is
11 thought of as an act of “weaving” the social world and as (a masculine equivalent of)
12 giving birth to a child (see De Boeck 1994). Words, therefore, are always charged
13 with a lot of power, the power to make, conceive of, and act on the world in
14 which one lives. In this sociocultural constellation, words often seem more real
15 than physical reality.

16 In a city where the built form of the house is constantly banalized and reduced
17 to its most basic function, that of a shelter, and where the ordering and accumulation
18 of things rarely works beyond the simple architectures of heaps of charcoal, loaves
19 of bread or white cassava flour for sale in Kinshasa’s streets and markets, city
20 dwellers use speech as a similarly potent instrument to create new urban orders.

21 In this respect, one is also constantly reminded of the fact that, for decades,
22 Kinshasa was also permeated by the Word of the Dictator, and the all-pervasive
23 aesthetics of the Mobutist *animation politique* that accompanied that Word. It is
24 no coincidence that this totalitarian political discourse was laced with references
25 to God and marked by a constant religious transfiguration of the political field. In
26 today’s Kinshasa, that legendary Hegemon has been replaced by the Old Testament
27 God. With the help of the thousands of *églises de réveil* (Churches of Awakening)
28 and prayer groups active on every street corner of Kinshasa, and propagated by
29 the inescapable voice of preachers on every television screen in the city (see also
30 Pype in press), the omnipresent voice of Yahweh foists itself in just as authoritarian
31 a way on the public urban space, to turn it once again, by the light of his Word
32 and Will, into a City of God, a new Jerusalem. In such a city, where the Holy
33 Spirit manifests itself at every moment of the day in the form of glossolalia,
34 and where the trancelike prayers of the faithful are continuously charged with
35 the power of the Divine, it is not all that difficult to believe in the potential of
36 words to represent and redesign the city through the construction of rhetorical
37 architectures. Their speech, prayers, and songs contain an unremitting attempt to
38 subdue the rapture of urban madness, to comprehend the living thing that is the

1
2 city, to build and to govern the nonmappable world of people's journeys through
3 the city's perilous and transitory ground, and to conjure up new possible futures
4 for it.

5 * * * * *

6 On reaching the windy top of the Mangenge mountain one stumbles on
7 a rudimentary prayer camp. Resembling the white cliffs of Dover, Mangenge
8 mountain has always been considered as a holy place within Kinshasa's spiritual
9 geography. In previous times it was a site of ancestral worship for the local Bateke.
10 Today it has transformed into a place close to the Almighty God, which the white
11 missionaries brought along. Over the years, the mountain has become a site of
12 prayer and fasting for Kinshasa's Catholics and, increasingly, Pentecostals. The
13 path that leads upward is marked by the Stations of the Cross, inaugurated in the
14 early 1990s by the late Cardinal Frédéric Etsou Nzabi Bamungwabi, the Archbishop
15 of Kinshasa.

16 From the prayer camp, one is able to overlook the Malebo Pool and Kinshasa.
17 In the distance, the city's landmark Sozacom tower is simmering in the distance,
18 its downtown center blurred by the afternoon heat and the yellowish haze of dust
19 and pollution that envelops the city as a whole. Even further away, on clear days,
20 one can make out Brazzaville's skyline across the *Fleuve*.

21 In the camp, people's voices break the silence of the wind. They start to
22 sing now, to pray and to preach, with ardent, high-pitched voices. Some are here
23 for days or even weeks. High above their heads, against the deep blue sky, two
24 eagles are circling around the mountain. On the slopes of one of the adjacent
25 mountain ranges unfolding into the green emptiness of Bandundu province one
26 distinguishes tiny immobile, solitary figures in deep meditation. Some are dressed
27 in white robes. Some are crouching in the sand. Others are kneeling, with their
28 arms raised toward the sky, their hand palms turned upward. All these men and
29 women are in deep and concentrated prayer, in a fervid attempt, also, to retreat
30 and cleanse oneself from the urban pool of sin, its temptations, its problems and
31 its disillusion; to momentarily exorcise Kinshasa from one's body and mind, to
32 be stronger to confront it afterward, and to be able to insert oneself once more
33 into this omnivorous giant that is rapidly approaching the foot of the mountain,
34 engulfing the once empty sandy plains, dotting it with thousands of small rectangular
35 rudimentary housing constructions, the color of their cement brick walls barely
36 visible against the plain's grey sand, their sheets of corrugated iron roof glistening
37 in the sun.
38

ABSTRACT

This article addresses the tensions that exist between the lives of city dwellers in Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo, and those official attempts currently being launched by the Congolese government to create a new, albeit exclusionist, urban environment. During the campaign leading up to the 2006 presidential elections, President Kabila launched his “Cinq Chantiers” program, arguably the most ambitious project since the end of colonization in 1960 to overhaul the country and respond to its most pressing and urgent needs—or at least that of its elites—with regard to its urbanization. The article first situates the main phases of Kinshasa’s expansion from the colonial era to the present day. It then turns to an analysis of the impact of the “Cinq Chantiers” program by examining two concrete cases: the expansion of fields in the Malebo Pool (looking at current modes of “informal” urban expansion into urban space) and the development of a new urban project, the Cité du Fleuve (whose progressive uplift leaves out a large swath of the population). Are these examples of an African futurity, and for whom (and whom not) do they envision a new kind of urban life?

Keywords: Central Africa, Kinshasa, urban anthropology, spectrality, heterotopia

NOTES

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1. For a good overview of the colonial urban planning history of Kinshasa see, for example, De Meulder 2000, Lagae 2007, and Toulhier et al. 2010. See also Beeckmans (in press) for a history of Kinshasa’s colonial and postcolonial planning in relation to its public markets. On Kinshasa history of urbanization see also De Boeck and Plissart 2004, de Maximy 1984, de Saint Moulin 2007, La Fontaine 1970, Kapagama and Waterhouse 2009, Kolonga Molei 1979, Lelo Nzuzi 2008, Pain 1984, and Piermay 1997.
2. Apart from rice, many other vegetables are grown here, most notably *manangu*, an aquatic tuber, reportedly imported from Bunia, in eastern Congo, in the 1980s.
3. For a more detailed treatment of the notion of the mirror and of the city’s spectral structures see De Boeck and Plissart 2004. On the spectral dimensions of African city life see also Simone 2004.
4. The word *kuluna* derives from the Lingala verb *kolona*, which means: to plant, to sow, to cultivate. The verb is, of course, itself a derivative of the French *coloniser*, while also referring to the military term *colonne*. *Kuluna* originated with urban youngsters from all over Southwest Congo who would walk all the way to the diamond fields of the Angolan province of Lunda Norte to try their luck there and return with diamonds or dollars, a very common practice in the early 1990s (cf. De Boeck 1998). Walking the small trails through the forests of northern Angola they would follow each other and form a line, like a military cohort, while penetrating and “colonising” new and unknown territory. (On urban street gangs in Kinshasa see also Pype 2007.)
5. In more than one way, street children’s bodies constitute the very physicality of Kinshasa’s public space. That is why they sing: “Nzoto ya Leta, molimo ya Nzambe,” [Our bodies belong to the state, but our souls to God]. When the state inscribes its violence onto the bodies of the *bashege*, it is domesticating the city’s public spaces, overwriting it with its own logic.

- 1
- 2 6. At the same time, the billboards powerfully reveal the tensions and disjunctures between these
3 mirages and images of the new city and the histories and temporalities of the lives currently
4 lived in Kinshasa by most. In this way, in February 2010, I was struck by two adjacent
5 billboards on one of Kinshasa's main boulevards. One showing an image of a new shopping
6 mall, complete with fountains and gardens, soon to be constructed along the boulevard, while
7 a poster right next to it advertised a new brand of Aladdin lamp, still the most important tool
8 for many Kinois to light up their nights, because large parts of the city are not, or no longer,
9 or only at unpredictable moments, connected to the city's failing electricity network.
- 10 7. Officially, the Cité du Fleuve is supposed to relocate the entire Kinshasa downtown area of
11 Gombe. According to the current plans it will span almost 400 hectares, include 200 residential
12 houses, 10,000 apartments, 10,000 offices, 2,000 shops, 15 diplomatic missions, 3 hotels, 2
13 churches, 3 daycare centers, a shopping mall, and a university, but the management is already
14 scaling plans down somewhat (interview, Robert Choudhury, General Manager of the Cité
15 du Fleuve project, February 2010; interview, Jason Meikle, Director of Finance, Kinshasa,
16 February 2010).
- 17 8. See www.lacitedufleuve.com.
- 18 9. See *New York Times* 2009.
- 19 10. The first clashes between the developers of the Cité du Fleuve and surrounding inhabitants
20 on the point of being evicted from their land occurred in September 2010. Since then the
21 project manager, Mr. Choudhury, has started negotiations over financial compensations to the
22 inhabitants of this riparian zone.
- 23 11. In a similar fashion, Congolese subjects used to proudly sing along with *Njila ya Ndolo*, the
24 famous 1954 song by Antoine Mundanda about *Kinshasa poto moindo*, "Kinshasa, the African
25 Europe," even though they were—often physically—barred from La Ville, the city's white,
26 European heart.
- 27 12. Kinshasa's standard heterotopias are many, and include the bar, the street, the church, and
28 the body. For a full treatment of these sites, as well as for a more theoretical treatment of
29 Foucault's notion of heterotopia, see De Boeck and Plissart (2004:254ff). See also Dehaene
30 and De Cauter 2008.
- 31 13. The Cité du Fleuve megaproject is being financed by a private promoter, Mukwa Investments
32 via Hawkwood Properties, a Lusaka based company serving U.S. and European investors.
33 On vulture Funds, see Sookun 2010. The "vulture" terminology is revealing: where there are
34 vultures there must be a corpse, and it might well prove to be Kinshasa and Congo in this case.
35 Coincidentally, the same company that is building the Cité du Fleuve project is also investing
36 in the construction of a new cemetery just outside the city.

Editors' Note: *Cultural Anthropology* has published a number of articles on African Cities, including Danny Hoffman's "The City as Barracks: Freetown, Monrovia, and the Organization of Violence in Postcolonial African Cities" (2007), William Cunningham Bissell's "Engaging Colonial Nostalgia" (2005), Brad Weiss's "Thug Realism: Inhabiting Fantasy in Urban Tanzania" (2002) and Timothy Maliqalim Simone's "Metropolitan Africans: Reading Incapacity, the Incapacity of Reading" (1990).

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