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Rogue Flânerie: Cultural *Takhawalu* In Urban Extremes

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On rogue encounters

"You are not supposed to leave your tour group!"

I was standing on the deck, bewildered, watching the boat I came with slowly moving away from the harbour.

Our tour guide warned us while we were reaching the shores of Robben Island that the boat would leave sharply at 4.30pm. At 4pm, we had done the bus tour around the Island, seen the clay sites where prisoners were slowly losing sight and strength; we had taken 'the' picture facing Table Mountain and the CBD from the other side of the ocean; we had learnt about the wedding option with free boat ride on every February 14th; we had witnessed the mostly deserted houses, the school now closed since 2011, forcing the kids of the museum staff living on the island to commute by boat to Cape Town everyday; we had done the tour of the prison guided by one of the ex-cons, victim of the Apartheid regime; we had followed and proceeded to the whole script and I had 30min to pay my respect to Sheikh Abdur Rahman Matura buried about 260 years ago on the island after having defied Dutch colonial rule and being imprisoned there in the 17th century.

I thus went to the burial of this historic figure that is not included in the tour package and came back at 4.20pm to witness my boat leaving the harbour. As said, bewildered.

(Personal notes, November, 11th, 2014)

This ethnographic snapshot allows me to introduce a personal reflection, which is located in two distinctive extremities of the continent, southern and western, Cape Town and Dakar. This contribution suggests an experiential analysis that is essentially about stressing and telling two specific stories of culture, creativity and urban development, while focusing on day-to-day experiences of distinctive African cities that were/have been homelands for me: as a diasporic returnee to Dakar for a couple months over ten years, and as a foreign worker establishing herself in Cape Town during three years.

Looking into a schizophrenic Dakar, singularly diverse, with its traditional republic *Lébou*, its myths and mystics that regulates the city and

cohabits with a formal institutional system, with its cosmopolitan sites and its 'CFA rhythm', there is much to learn from *Dakar l'Ineffable*. In its overwhelming humanity of interlaced urban extremes, which Sow Fall (2001) in her *La Grève des bāttu* so imaginatively describes, Dakar does not sleep. This state of affair is reflected in both the symbolic and physical invasion of public space; streets, squares, sidewalks and other public locations are not to everyone but rather to nobody; a free-rider *praxis* applies, whereby each feels free to appropriate it for commercial purpose, from street vendors to shop extensions².

There is in Dakar, an overwhelming freedom of movements, of participation, always constrained by the already used and abused

liberty taken by the other, in her/his desperate humanity, ready for interaction, communication, exchange, *waxalé*³ of all kinds. The Cape Town I experienced, on the other hand, is marked by a certain Northern efficiency that can restrict improvisation, but also one that is pregnant with suspicion, if not fear of the other, where eye-avoidance, let alone physical contact with street or random encounters is a rare dynamic in a 'clicky' city; and where the central market (Greenmarket Square?), which always occupies such a central socialising position in African cities⁴ (Simone, 2008; Grabski, 2013) stands as a pale figure of its diverse and cosmopolitan citizenry⁵.

Moreover, and with its political ambition of a 24-hour city (Charman and Govender, forthcoming), Cape Town certainly does not want to sleep. However, the clean and secured streets of the CBD reveal empty places where taxis are – rather than stopped or hailed at – called through a company. Rather than inferring

Dakar displays a spatial mixity in its urban fabric. The area of Parcelles Assainies suitably illustrates this observation, for there, the high civil servant lives nearby working class and unemployed people.

security and convenience, this reminds how the question of safety is always being at the back of one's mind. This feeling is reinforced in numerous places and encounters across the city: the many shops where entry is permitted by buzzing a gated door; where the use of public transports is discouraged⁶, and acquiring an individual car is highly recommended.

Mapping improbable contrasts of urban extremes

As most African contexts, Cape Town and Dakar, are characterised by a more and more deeply divided urban complex (Myers, 2015).



Taxi rank in Cape Town against the backdrop of table mountain.

Image: Tseliso Monaheng

However, the way such a fragmented composite unfolds on their respective landscape is quite singular. Cape Town as a South African city scarred by the apartheid era is rather marked by a persisting spatial segregation. Townships such as *Mitchell Plains* or *Kayelitsha* are far removed from wealthy gated communities as well as from the trendy neighbourhoods such as *Green Point* or *Camps Bay*. Some popular areas are showing signs of spatial mixity, such as Woodstock or Sea Point. This however mostly stems from a gentrifying process, whereby the most vulnerable part of the population are slowly but surely being pushed away.

Dakar, on another hand, displays a spatial mixity in its urban fabric. The area of *Parcelles Assainies* suitably illustrates this observation, for there, the high civil servant lives nearby working class and unemployed people; the businessmen and CEOs near by the street vendors and second-hand goods dealers. More generally, the CBD (*Plateau*) is juxtaposed to *Médina*, and the privileged residential areas of *Fann Residence* and *Point E* are only minutes away from the much popular neighbourhoods of *Fass-Colobane* and *Gueule Tapée*.

Hence, variegated urban extremes are evident in these continental extremities. Yet both Cape Town and Dakar share an increasingly neoliberal urban development agenda, whereby a market-led form of city governance is more or less implicitly animated by two guiding principles. One pertains to the economics of tourism, whereby the city develops a cultural strategy for place marketing, relying on a tourist imaginary and aiming for urban tourist attraction; the second, a rationality potentially defined per what Ghertner (2011) calls 'a world-class aesthetics'¹⁷ – a very

globalising discourse that has been shaping cultural and urban policies, and which finality is to reach this 'global/world' city status and image. In a way, this is an aesthetic follow-up of the 'world city hypothesis' (Friedmann, 1986) and the 'global city discourse' (Sassen, 2001), whereby cities have become the new 'command and control centres' of the world, increasingly competing with one another in a context of ever increasing economic and social polarisation. In this global urban competition, in 2014, Cape Town became the World Design Capital, and in 2015 Dakar, one of the Cities of Digital Arts, as part of UNESCO Creative Cities Network. Both acquired titles somehow translate this neoliberal aspiration of imagining and inscribing cities on the competitive and hierarchical global urban map.

Looking closer into such an agenda, Dakar recently saw its seafront (*La corniche*) completely revamped with the emergence of luxury hotel complexes (such as Sea Plaza in 2010) as well as major refurbishment of its road systems – right on time for the Summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (2008). Inscripting Dakar on the global urban map has also implied 'Grand Works' under Abdoulaye Wade's presidency, such as the Monument of African Renaissance (2010), the third edition of the FESMAN, World Festival of Black Arts (2010) and the National Grand Theatre (2011), West Africa's largest one yet.

In Cape Town, this neoliberal articulation of culture, creativity and urban development was confirmed by the Central City Improvement District that issued a call for the establishment of 'A Cape Town that's alive 24/7'¹⁸. In fact, a public-private partnership in charge of advising



and informing the city's urban and cultural policy, Cape Town Partnership has been advocating a '24 hours city', one that is 'safe, clean, caring and open for business' hence attracting tourism, culture and creativity⁹ In this regard, policy action and implementation strategies are just one overt side of the 'coin of urban development'.

The other one and much less obvious side – which is often compromised for the sake of policy imperatives of quick turn-out and delivery – has to do with the thinking process that precedes any realisation and which necessarily calls for some 'spatial literacy' of the city and its creativity.

Situating the zones of Flânerie

"In storytelling, there is always transgression as in all art. Without transgression, without the red boundary, there is no risk, no danger, no frisson, no experiment, no discovery, and no creativity" (Okri, 1997, pp.63–66)

An informed spatial literacy refers to the capacity to read and connect all the different knowledge that exists in silos within a city, which once identified and explored, can improve urban development policies. Indeed, governing an inclusive and open city involves attention to issues of appropriation and sustainability. These in turn imply an acute focus and a genuine recognition of the multi-layered spaces and publics inhabiting, using, 'owning' and often 'transgressing' the city. A spatial literacy of reading in-between the lines of multiple urban worlds¹⁰ can as such be paralleled with 'seeing through' the 'threshold', the borderlands' of our urban environment in such a way it becomes a refreshing opportunity to revisit the simultaneous processes of closure and openness.

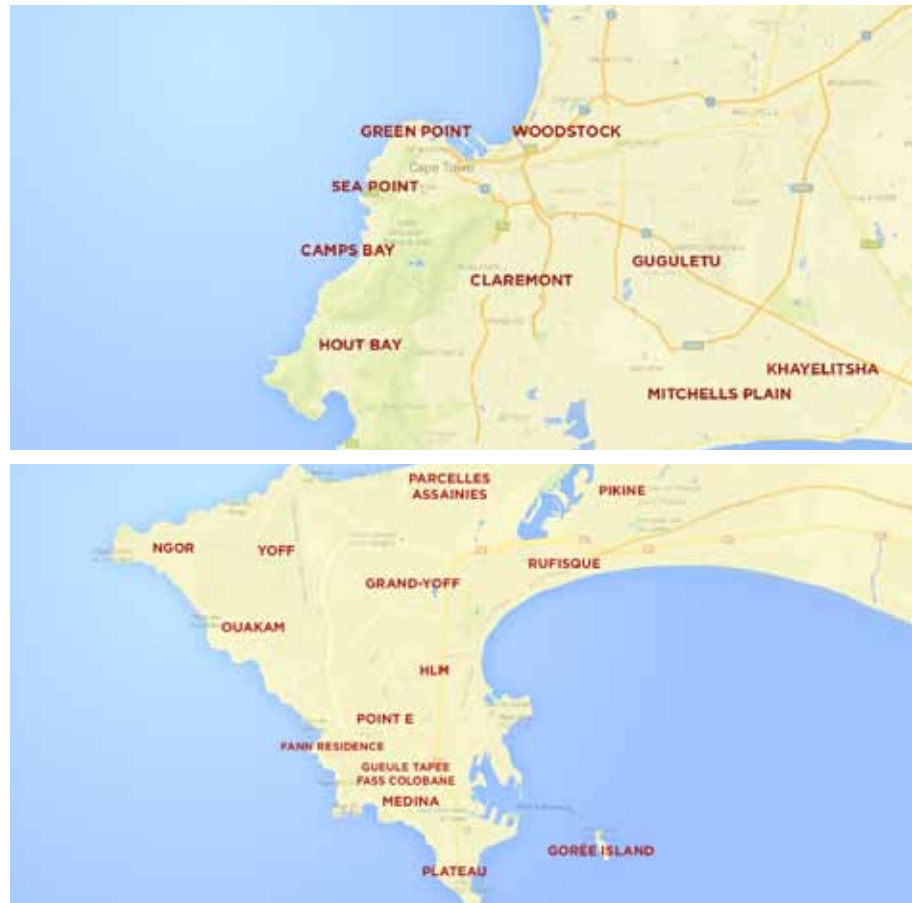
Moving beyond restrictive binaries of inside versus outside, planned versus organic, centre versus periphery, or formal versus informal (to name a few), to embrace the 'threshold' and 'borderlands' of the city can reinvigorate our spatial literacy, allowing a space/lens to regard the interactions between culture, creativity and urban development in African cities. As such, the spatial literacy comes back to the question of how far one can engage in one's own terms with the city s/he inhabits, though still in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power. Indeed, a process in which urban openness is always conditional to the equipotentiality of individuals¹¹.

Here, Benjamin's contribution is of peculiar relevance for his *flâneur's* contemplative stance belongs to a foreigner¹². Indeed, such a stance can allow us to further our learning, our literacy of how to inhabit a city, for "to stand on the threshold, to stand in the zone, means to be able to possess the gaze of a foreigner in one's own homeland" (Nuselovici, 2014, p.28). Similarly, in his praise of a public space where the *flâneur* can still go by wandering in the streets of the city, where everything is not all planned or hence devitalised, La Cecla (1988) stresses the progressive contribution of 'getting lost in the city'. Such a borderline stance of the loss of the body onto an urban territory is a way of creating singular perceptions of space, as a value and a purpose for distinctive 'writing of the voice' (Rubin, 2004)¹³ within the urban fabric of foreigners at home.

The *zones of the flâneur* who purposely gets lost into the city, this interstitial space that allows the contemplative stance of the foreigner on his homeland to emerge, thus highlight how the main infrastructural unit in the African city or at

Rooftop Panorama looking towards Central Dakar

Image: Jenny Mbaye



Map of Cape Town (above)
and Carte Darker (below)

Image: Alioune Ba

least its principal element of construction is the human body (De Boeck and Plissart, 2005, p.236): in fact, "people as infrastructure" (Simone, 2004).

Beyond the reflection: enterprise of Takhawalu

"Please proceed to the Nauticat", "Please proceed to the buses"

After over two years of my Capetonian citizenry, I visited Robben Island, which to my surprise was not a systematic trip undergone by Cape Town residents. Located ten kilometres away from Cape Town coast, this heritage site suggested for me the capacity of an insular retreat from the Babylonian rhythm of the city. I was naturally drawing on my experience of another island located few miles away from another cosmopolitan and diverse African city that is Dakar: Gorée Island (3km), which for so many Dakarais remains a common way to escape the city in order to go and 'breathe'. To enjoy the contemplative stance of the foreigner at home, to 'get lost' on the island, and away from these hustler-improvised-tour-guides, requires

some linguistic capacities and some distinctive socialising skills, such as a convincing *"Fii la dëkk!"* ("I live here!").

Robben Island was another kind of experience, where an impersonal loudspeaker welcomes and farewells you, orders you around. As the introductory snapshot highlighted, my individual *flânerie* on the island implied that I missed my boat and was left to wait another 45min to be able to catch the next one. "The boat does not leave at 4.30pm sharply", a staff member later explained me, "but when everybody is here". And added with an accusing, reprimanding tone and a scolding look: "You are not supposed to leave your tour group!"

I draw on these experiences of heritage sites in two of my African homelands to reassess how a *rogue flânerie* in contexts of urban extremes provides a way to look between the buildings and beyond the technological fixes and tricks, and to focus on actual processes of urban citizens' experience. Indeed, the in-between movement that our body in the city allows, this *entre-prise*¹⁴ that reveals the capacity for a multiplicity of

individuals to inscribe their aspirations and trajectories in the city, can significantly inform our spatial literacy of an urban fabric.

established relationships and insular networks, and reinvests in movement and mobility.

I would like to conclude by suggesting the practice of *takhawalu*¹⁵. The expression comes from '*bantu takhawalu*' that translates into the "pilgrim's stick". In the past, in Dakar, when kids were too agitated in the house, (grand) -mothers would send them to pick up this imaginary object at neighbours' houses.

This practice permitted preserving social relations, while keeping the kids busy, freely circulating in a traceable environment. In many respects, *takhawalu* stands as a practical reiteration of "the spatial and temporal openness of the city as a place of manifold rhythms forged through daily encounters and multiple experiences of time and space" (Mbembé and Nuttall, 2004, p.361).

*Takhawalu*¹⁶ is this possible potentiality to meander, to drift through the city, to get lost and become emotionally and imaginatively engaged with the city. More importantly, this notion permits a productive focus to revisit critical questions regarding the relationships between participation and operational modalities as far as culture, creativity and urban development are concerned.

To be sure, it reaffirms how the city, still in contexts of urban extremes, always operates as "a site of fantasy, desire, and imagination" (Mbembé and Nuttall, 2004, pp.355).

Genuine urban governance then becomes a question of informed and grounded spatial literacy indeed – one which challenges

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- 1 This is a title of a coffee-table book written by late Oumar Ndao, with photographs by Djibril Sy; published in 2012 by Vives Voix, Dakar
- 2 I am however acknowledging the significant battle the city hall of Dakar has led on this issue in the past couple of years; and its effective clearing-up of the central market Sandaga, and its surroundings, among other places.
- 3 Wolof term that means bargaining, negotiation
- 4 Markets indeed often emerge as crossroads of every extremes of African urban composite, between people who come for grocery and daily care products and others for souvenirs and other craft products