

Ojuelegba: The Scared Profanities of a West African Crossroad

The superficial inducement, the exotic, the picturesque has an effect only on the foreigner. To portray a city, a native must have other, deeper motives – motives of one who travels into the past instead of into the distance. A native's book about his city will always be related to memoirs; the writer has not spent his childhood there in vain¹

Introduction: Lagos, contemporary fetish

Amongst architects, stylists and other purveyors of the cool in the West, Africa is in vogue. From Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas and features in design and lifestyle magazines such as Wallpaper and Archis, to leading fashion brands Diesel and Prada, African cities and urban culture offer an exotic mix of stylistic sensibilities and seemingly incomprehensible juxtapositions, feeding capitalism's insatiable demand to manufacture new modes of taste². Semiotic engineers of corporate advertising zealously research the culture of the global poor to enhance western brands via a controlled dose of ghetto chic. At the same time, the image of Africa as a helpless wasteland of horror, corruption and incurable diseases is retrenched, thanks to the sporadic forays by international news media into zones of war and suffering. As the film rolls, flies land on faces, the bellies of the hungry children protrude, skin stretches tight over the face of the aids patient and the chaos that is Africa is confirmed.

It is no coincidence that this quixotic blend of glamour and decay acts as an irresistible magnet to the culturatis of Europe and North America. It is precisely the same edgy mix of expressive energy melded with social uncertainty that propels middle-class creatives to live in the semi-marginalized metropolitan areas of the west: the "little Africas" of London, New York, Paris and Chicago. In Tottenham, the Bronx, Barbès and Southside Chicago, crime and culture intertwine, creating an urban scene where dirt and depravity conceal the emergence of dynamic new sub-cultural patterns. In these inner-city zones, novel ways of speaking, dancing and dressing form around new music genres, creating a "total aesthetic" that is eminently marketable. As with the Africa-within, so too with the Africa without: the chase is always on for the new hip-hop.

In the case of Rem Koolhaas (2001), this aesthetizing Afrophilia has been taken a stage further. In his recent book "Mutations", the Dutch guru of all things spatial contends that Lagos represents the future for the western megacity. In a detailed site analysis of the market at Oshodi and Alaba electronics market, Koolhaas and his amply funded team of Harvard graduates suggest that the manner in which Lagosians occupy and re-work their urban setting is an exemplary statement on the futility of the master plan approach to urban design. The study shows how Lagos' modern infrastructure of flyovers and road junctions has been undermined by the proliferation of informal programmes of activity. For example, the Koolhaas team notes how one of the ramps for the cloverleaf road junction at Oshodi was quickly appropriated by the traders to provide additional space for commerce. Their analysis is, in effect, a positive assessment of the informal self-organization versus the power of state planning and regulation. In architectural terms, it is an appeal for something like anti-Haussmannisation, turning the boulevards into bunkers and streets into sties, the exact reverse of Baron Haussmann's linear flattening of Paris in the early nineteenth century. The usual stock-piling of Africa for the Western image bank is subverted, as Lagos is transformed into being the terminal state of the western metropolis; a Ballardian vision of temporary autonomous zones thriving amidst the decayed infrastructure.³

We suggest that double-edged compliments such as these should be seen for what they are: the third millennium mutation of that old colonial trope, the African fetish. Just as Freud, Giacometti, Picasso and the rest stuck masks in their studies in search of civilization, so in our times, the higher beings of our times troop off looking for the urban sublime in an exotic elsewhere, with the transference from a rural/tribal setting being the mechanism employed to fend off refreshed claims of primitivism. In both cases, the fetishism at work is a variant of commodity fetishism: the adventurous appropriation of an exotic object as a means of increasing one's own status and value. What is completely erased is any enquiry into what these objects and spaces might actually mean for those that use them. Koolhaas' conclusions would no doubt astonish residents of Lagos, who would much rather achieve Western levels of urban infrastructure, rather than continuing to live alongside piles of rubbish, open drains and insecurity, and promoted as apocalyptic spectacles in someone else's fantasy.⁴

In this paper, we will explore Lagos beyond the cool, disembodied and disengaged helicopter-eye-view of the architect and spatial thinkers uncovering different ways in which it frames existence and embodied experience for its denizens. Our aim is to show the richness and rhythm of this African urban scene, beyond the specular western projection of a city in chaos. The contention is that we have yet to begin to appreciate the depth of experience urban settings such as Lagos offer to their inhabitants. To focus our study, we will concentrate on Ojuelegba, one of the busiest crossroads in Lagos. We will approach this uniquely dense space from a number of different perspectives, including urban morphology, historical and spiritual resonances, lived experience, politics, and economics. In the conclusion, we will indicate how this multidimensional approach to an African urban space suggests ways forward for more effective interventions into the African city. On a wider scale, this study is an attempt at incorporating the “multitude” – giving a body and a voice to the informal economy that city planners and corporate capitalism discards, in spite of its productive vigor.

Ojuelegba: The Garden of Forking Paths

Ojuelegba is one of the key transport nodes of Lagos, connecting, via the ubiquitous yellow bus transit, the city’s mainland districts with Lagos Island, Victoria Island and the Lekki Peninsula to the south-east, the busy international port of Apapa to the south and the international airport to the north. It is also a vital connection point for travel within the mainland area itself, allowing Lagosians to commute between the three surrounding districts of Yaba, Mushin and Surulere. The National Stadium, a key venue for large sporting event is just south of the crossroads, a prominent landmark viewed from the Western Avenue flyover. Yaba, due east, is the home of “Yaba Tech” college, and further east along University Road, “Unilag” – the huge campus space of the University of Lagos and one of the city’s few green lungs. Closer by is the sprawling covered market of Tejuosho, just a few minutes walk down Ojuelegba Road. Ikorodu Road heading north from Western Avenue, leads to the huge open-air mall that is Oshodi market, and beyond that, to the wealthy residential Government Residential Area (GRA) of Ikeja, the government secretariat at Alusa and Murtala Muhammad International Airport. Although a map’s eye view presents Lagos as a complex urban morphology of a mainland, an island and a peninsula connected to each other

across swamps and lagoons by a system of flyovers and bridges, and suggests a city without a center, Ojuelegba is in fact regarded as one of the epicenters of activity by Lagosians. From the '60s and up to the present day, Ojuelegba is where recent arrivals from elsewhere in Nigeria and neighboring countries find themselves cast up, searching for the right bus, seeking pleasure, work, or taking a room in one of the numerous "hotels" clustered around the junction. It is the terminus for buses, taxis, "area boys" – who go by different epithets (agbero, alayes etc.) - and trade in drugs and sex. As with other major transport termini, from Euston and King's Cross in London to Grand Central Station in New York, from the Gares of Paris to the Central Stations of Rio, Mumbai and all other large metropolitan centers across the planet, Ojuelegba has its own micro-economy of services, catering to every demand and desire a visitor may have. Lagos has been described as a city of immigrants, with perhaps 150,000 inhabitants and many millions of itinerants perpetually "passing through"; never is this saying more truthful than at Ojuelegba, which functions as a vortex for all the flows within Lagos.

As well as being a central crossroads within mainland Lagos connecting all points within the urban compass, two other factors combine to make Ojuelegba a pulsating core within the city, or what Nigerian President Obasanjo referred to in 2002 as an "urban jungle". First, the near absence of traffic lights throughout Lagos entails that congestion is the norm. Without traffic lights, it takes only one or two cars blocking the right of way of another line of traffic for a jam to form in an instant, creating "go-slow" that ripples back from the center of the blockage like a cardiac arrest. If Lagos were a person, he would be a corpulent smoker, with a big heart and a healthy appetite, but with veins and arteries precipitously insulated with excessive layers of cholesterol. Secondly, the informal sector in Lagos is huge. In Lagos, as elsewhere in the so-called Third World, it is estimated that 50% of urban employment is absorbed by the informal sector. As moneychangers, dressmakers, cobblers, blacksmiths, mechanics, minibus drivers, street hawkers, mobile dispensaries or market traders, this energetic and resilient sector provides services for the urban poor, the pauperized middle classes, and the super-wealthy. The city relies on the black-market's self-organizing ingenuity and zealously. As we shall argue, this bottom-up entrepreneurial spirit needs to be embraced and steered for the betterment of urban spaces in Lagos, rather than flatly rejected by state

intervention. The informal economic activity abundant in Lagos make the city what it is: a grand decaying edifice, vibrating with energy and the homeopathic laughter and levity of those who have little.⁵ Unfortunately, the city fathers, with their sporadic impositions and myopic governance, prey on them like vultures. But this mass of indomitable bodies resist with indefatigable vigor, in a ceaseless evasion of the instrumental reason of the bureaucracy. With no start-up loan available to rent a retail space, traders set up collapsible stalls along the road and make use of the go-slow to weave en masse in and out of the traffic, hawking their wares. This shifting army of sellers contributes to the congestion in an accelerating negative feedback loop, as cars are attracted by goods and goods attracted to cars. Consequently, flows within Lagos are often pulsative in character – movement arrested by congestion and mid-road sales activity suddenly gives way to movement again. And as the core nexus of mainland Lagos, Ojuelegba is literally the throbbing heartbeat of the city, producing and distributing along its arteries clots of information, bodies, desires, knowledge and capital.

We must now adjust our description to the level of lived experience, in order to comprehend Ojuelegba's facticity in the flesh. To capture its genius loci at a more granular level, we need to descend from a map-centric viewpoint, and occupy an embodied perspective on the ground. Here, we can adopt a broadly phenomenological approach – attempting to see and respond to the world from a concrete, embodied perspective, as free from habituated modes of perception as possible. Arriving by bus from Ikorodu road to the north, the first-time visitor is immediately overwhelmed by the visual, sonic and olfactory intensity of Ojuelegba. The stench of smoldering rubbish and the pungent odor of the open sewers in the surrounding streets mingles with the sweet aroma of roasted plantain and the egusi (pepper soup) brewing from the chop-houses of the "Mama put"⁶. People gather in dense knots around cars and the packed yellow "danfo" buses, the moving monuments of the city. The intersecting tangle of roads is stormy black with fumes. Makeshift stalls line the streets, with itinerant hawkers taking advantage of the go-slow, peddling anything that can be peddled: shoe polish, toilet brushes, hankies, mobile phone accessories, newspapers, snacks. Small children sing 'pya wata pya wata', or 'gala gala', offering bags of water or pies through the open windows of the buses to the outstretched arms within. Amidst the non-movement of the cars

stranded in the jam, one can still detect forms of motion. Drivers pull in their side-view mirrors to squeeze through unimaginably tight spaces, hawkers move between stranded yellow buses and taxis and private cars. The *okadas* (motor-cycle taxis) weave magically through the gaps, their passengers holding on and praying. The sporadic appearance of a convoy of S-Class Mercedes cars with police in attendance signals that a government minister is on his way. Frustrated passengers leave the buses to walk the last leg of their journey. Fuji music, the dense fusion of Islamic melodic prayer patterns with Yoruba polyrhythms, pulses out at full volume from speakers hidden from view, competing with the alternative sonic flavors of Juju, makossa, high-life, American R'n'B, hip-hop and the incessant klaxoning of car horns, transforming the space into an unpaid concert minus conductor, with polyrhythmic structures competing against each other to produce an unfathomably cacophonous totality; a guttural symphony for the senses. And, floating gracefully through the surface of this intensity like swans on stormy water, individuals go about their business, on their way to church or the mosque, to work, to the market or to nowhere in particular. Ojuelegba appears to our astonished visitor as 360 degrees of chaos; a Babel's Tower where seemingly all the languages of West Africa criss-cross each other in a mezzoforte flow of phonemic counterpoint. Exchanges also take place fast and furious on the material level: blocks of naira are converted to dollars, pounds and francs and back again with the alchemical flick of a hand. People wear "traditional" clothes (made in Africa, Korea, Holland, designed by Dutch designers), carry Louis Vuitton bags, or wear Nike, Adidas, or Italian shoes (bought in Italy, made in Nigeria and sold with "Made in Italy" on the sole), or they wear the latest garb from Brooklyn, London or from the "cut-and-sew tailors" all inflected with urban sophistication and elegant poise. Here, like elsewhere in Nigeria, the categories of "real" and "fake" have little purchase on existential reality; each object, whether it is monetary, cloth, food or a "logo centric" western good, is laden with fetish-value to be hawked and exchanged. Matter and spirit interweave in a frenetic conjugal transaction.

The unforgettably heady complexity of Ojuelegba was celebrated by Fela Anikulapo Kuti, the king of Afrobeat music. In his symphonic hymn to the infrastructural nightmare of Lagos and the

continued hegemony of the West in all aspects of African life, “Confusion”, he captures the essence of the area:

Dem be three men wey sell for roadside-o
Dem three speak different language-o
Dem speak Lagos, Accra, and Conakry
One white man come pay them money –o
He pay them for pounds, dollars and French money-o
For the thing wey he go buy from them
He remain for them to share am-o
Me I say, na confusion be that-o
[...]

Ojuelegba, Ojuelegba
For Ojuelegba
Lagos city, Surulere, ogoro center
For ojuelegba, for ojuelegba
Moto dey come from south
Moto dey come from north
Moto dey come from east
Moto dey come from west
And policeman no dey for center
Na confusion be dat-o⁷

Beyond song, in Lagos, as elsewhere in Nigeria, the spirit of place is revealed most strongly by the totemic power of the name. For example, the surrounding district of Surulere literally means “patience has virtue”; Fela’s middle name, Anikulapo, translates as “he who carries death in his pouch”; again, an area in Lagos Island called Ebute Ero, which translates as “the river of crowds”, was, from the 17th Century a bustling area functioning as a landing place for traders and travelers, just as it still is 400 years later. In the same potent fashion, Ojuelegba literally means the “eye” or “shrine” of Elegba. It is the site where sacrifice was made to Eshu Elegbara, the Yoruba divinity and trickster figure carrying messages between this world and the celestial sphere. As with the other examples, Ojuelegba is therefore testimony to the unique role names and naming have in the Yoruba metaphysical schema. Place names and human names describe attributes, destiny, moral ideals, norms of behavior and activities associated with and expected of that which is named. Naming is therefore structured as a palimpsest or trace structure, layering into each other historical events, the spirit world and the community of those who

have passed before. It is therefore significant to explore how the existential experience and programmatic structure of Ojuelegba resonates with its namesake, Eshu Elegbara.

Enter The Trickster

Amidst the multidimensional profanity, Ojuelegba also functions as a shrine dedicated to the spirit of Eshu-Elegbara (translating as “Eshu the powerful one”), commonly known as either Eshu or Elegba. As the guardian of the crossroads and custodian of the *àshe* (the power of words), he is the original semiotic worker, the transductional machine whose work is to interpret divine messages and confer (or disguise) them to mortals and immortals. Eshu is the orisha of the mixed message, distant cousin (across the ocean) to Hermes, the Greek god of garbled meaning, potentiality, plurality and paradox. Sometimes, he takes the form of a creature wielding a large stick. At other times, he is a tiny being that needs to “tiptoe to put salt in the soup”. At all times, he embodies exchange and paradox: he is both the first-born and the last born; at once an old man and a child, and both cunning and capricious.⁸ At times, Eshu appears as an aggressive copular god. Elsewhere, he becomes a beautiful woman, or a bisexual figure. For the German Africanist Uilli Bier, Eshu’s bisexuality ‘symbolizes a basic principal of Yoruba wisdom. [...] Nothing is final, nothing exclusive; everything is in a continuous state of flow; every image is subject to change; any symbol is subject to constant new interpretation’.⁹ He is at home with both truth and deception, forcing others – humans and the gods alike – to accept both when he deems it necessary. He is a thief, a trickster and a transformer: turning nonsense into sense and back again; transforming blockages into flows; impasse into passage; order into chaos; he ‘rearranges hierarchies, and changes relationships’.¹⁰ He is capable of showing the stranger the right direction to the market place and then ensuring that they lose their way once they are there. It is said that Eshu

tricks men into offending the gods, thereby providing them sacrifices. It is said that without Elegba the *orisha* would starve [...]. Elegba’s two-way involvement prompts men to offend the gods on the one hand and aids the gods in their vengeance on the other. He is the force which makes men turn to the *orisha* both in expiation and propitiation[...]. The Yoruba say, “Eshu is the

anger of the gods”, and that Eshu is the first to visit the victim of an orisha. When men are quarrelling Elegba is said to be present; when a man has done wrong, he is asked if Elegba prompted him; and when[...]a man’s house is struck by lightning, the Yoruba say that Eshu provoked the sin that resulted in the man offending Shango [...]. He is thus the *agent provocateur* and, in a sense, a messenger of the gods[...]. He is superior to the others in cunning, and many myths tell of the battles he has at their expense¹¹

Eshu therefore embodies indeterminacy; a lover of contradiction, he hovers in the interstices between the world of the gods and mortals. His shrines are to be found at the entrances of compounds (*esuona*: “Eshu of the way”), at crossroads (*eshurita*), and in marketplaces (*eshuoja*). At festivals, he is given the first sacrifice.¹² He is the master of the in-between, tirelessly testing and pushing at the limit of human relations and relations between the gods. Eshu therefore vehemently contests certainty, complacency and vanity; ‘he is the arch enemy of sanctimoniousness and self-righteousness’;¹³ he challenges us to reflect constantly on our lives and not to get too blinded by habit. He is cocky and masterful, but against cockiness and mastery. At the first sign of complacency, Eshu keeps us in check by introducing chaos and confusion. For this reason, he is sometimes referred to as the “devil”. This is not because he is spiteful or the devil, as the Christian mistranslation of his characteristics would have us believe. Rather, he wants us to always be alert, vigilant, and to make active choices by questioning our sense of certainty and unexamined faith in the world.

As the receptacle of movement, exchange and paradox, it is no surprise that Eshu is also reputed to be a marvelous dancer. His *oriki* (praise-song) describes him as a “snail-shell dancer” who loves to dance so much that he does not need the accompaniment of drums, nor does he wait for a great festival to come before he dances. Instead, Eshu dances daily, despite the limp he maintains from having one foot in the spirit world and the other on earth. His dancing is flamboyant and athletic, displaying calculated agility and playful eroticism, often provoking adultery and seduction.¹⁴ According to Pelton, in Eshu, the Yoruba have managed to combine ‘in one single figure anger and playful dancing, disruptive

and creative sexuality'.¹⁵ As the ultimate mercurial spirit, Eshu demands respect rather than avoidance or ignorance. This respect in turn leads to respect for the unavoidable complexity and contradictions inherent within the world.

For all these reasons, Eshu deservedly lends his name to the area under study, where the chaos of plural frequencies and multiple semiotic codes abound. But how did Ojuelegba receive its name? Here, we need to dip into the complex history of migrational flows that have constituted Lagos from the beginning. Prior to the military conquest by Britain in 1851, Lagos had attracted waves of migrants, ensuring social, cultural and linguistic heterogeneity was the norm. The earliest inhabitants of this 'sandy and insignificant island'¹⁶ were the Awori fishermen from the nearby coastal islands, who settled there in the 15th Century. They were later joined by the Egba, Ijebu traders, Edo-speaking peoples from Benin City in the east and refugees from the Dahomey Kingdom to the west. When the Benin Empire entered into an expansionist phase around 1700, Lagos had also become subject to external control. However, as the earliest settlers, the Aworis 'claimed primordial rights to the land and chieftaincy'¹⁷ – a claim which lingers to this day. It is often said that the Lagos ruling dynasty, as well as the Akarigbere, their most senior chiefs, still acknowledge direct descent from the Benin royal family. Nonetheless, the equally important "white cap chiefs" (*idejo*) claim descent from the Aworis who are regarded as the landowners. As well as the powerful presence of the white cap chiefs in the political and economic life of Lagos, the Aworis' cultural values continue to the present through the figure of Eshu, their principal deity.

As the principal crossroads in Lagos, Ojuelegba soon became the consecrated site for the worship of Eshu. Prior to urbanization, Ojuelegba had the "stone" of atonement, made of lateritic earth with cowrie shells marking the eyes and mouth of Eshu in 'which cult officials pour daily offerings of palm oil to maintain's Eshu's problematic coolness'.¹⁸ With increasing congestion at Ojuelegba, Elegba cult officials decided to move the shrine to its current site on Apapa road, where the worship of Eshu continues to this day in relative peace, and the descendants of the Awori fishermen remain at their trade. Till the present time, each Sunday, devotees of Elegba (no longer purely Aworis) congregate to worship the god of threshold.

We should be careful not to project western individualistic notions of sacred space onto the Eshu phenomenon. Although Eshu has many shrines, he cannot be confined to any particular space or event. He is nowhere and everywhere: he is in the debris blocking the gutters, the blood cruising through the veins of the Area Boys, he is amongst the women plaiting their hair under the bridge at Ojuelegba. Just as Fela Kuti's Shrine was not bound to a particular location (moving from place to place throughout his life), so spaces dedicated to Eshu are not fixed to any specific geography – his movement defines space, rather than space defining his movement. Eshu therefore lends his name to a sacred *movement* rather than a sacred *space*. His limping mobility is why we find him in the cultures of the Yorubas in Africa and in the New World, appearing as Legba among the Fon in Benin, Exu in Brazil¹⁹, Echu-Elegua in Cuba, Papa Legba in Haiti and Papa La Bas in the USA.²⁰

More significantly still, for the purpose of our argument, Eshu proffers an alternative form of rationality, indicating a different model of existential health and navigation through the world. The only way to stay sane in Ojuelegba is to embrace the polyrhythmic and contradictory complexity of the whole, moving within and between its different rhythms by balancing one rhythm against the other in a form of apart playing.²¹ A pure, mono-rhythmic rationality, born of the myth of Western linear causality, would simply wilt and perish in the face of Ojuelegba. For new arrivants, Eshu is the one that allows them to make sense of their situation and safely navigate their passage. He also delivers the unsuspecting visitor into the obliging quicksilver hands of the Area Boys. Eshu therefore functions as a resolute refutation of the modernist desire for mastery and a grounding principle or arché. Instead of rationality being built through formalism, a universal platonic idea that installs a monolithic architecture from top to bottom through rigid structures and fixed categorizations (the kingdom of the planner), Eshu intervenes with an anarchic, acephalous rationality. However, it is crucial at this point that we avoid construing anarchy as pure chaos. We need to think beyond our platonic operating system to appreciate that this model of anarchy has its own regulatory logic and internal consistency. Eshu's contradictory web of communication and deceit does not suggest contingency or the sheer arbitrariness of a whimsical king; rather, he functions to undo any emergent stasis or stratification, maintaining a higher order that resists transcendental closure.

Eshu ensures that none of the Gods will become tyrannical kings or queens, and that any form that building may take will be subject to a counter-force of “anarchitecture”.²² Beyond the Law, Eshu institutes the law of the between, the spinning compass of uncertainty, inducing and transducing respect for the groundlessness of all grounds and the possibility that something new might emerge at any moment within any apparently fixed structure.

We shall argue that for these reasons, as the shrine of Eshu, the name given to Ojuelegba functions as a palimpsest. Partially erased from living experience like yesterday’s lesson on the blackboard, we can learn from the orderly chaos that Eshu announces. Different forms of intervention, and alternative models of control are invited by his monkey logic. First of all however, we need to understand in more detail the forms of production and consumption at work at Ojuelegba.

Transductive rhythms

Beyond the formal, phenomenological and spiritual dimensions, we now therefore need to look at Ojuelegba as a micro-economic, self-organizing system that embodies the spirit of Eshu. The sensory chaos of the space conceals a plethora of highly efficient productive circuits of consumption and exchange. In economic terms, Ojuelegba functions as a transductive vortex: a machine for living and dying and all the spaces in between. Ojuelegba can be re-described as a perpetual, intense 24 hr event within Lagos. And unlike other zones of intensity within the city – such as Koolhass’ Oshodi, and Alaba electronics markets, Tejuosho market and Isale Eko, Ojuelegba never sleeps.

In order to examine the micro-economics of Ojuelegba, we shall employ two methodological concepts borrowed from Henri Lefebvre, the French Marxist geographer. First of all, a “rhythmanalysis” of the space across the course of a day reveals different sub-events of exchange drifting in and out as the hours pass.²³ This method refuses to accept that what is to be analyzed is first of all a *spatial* entity (subject to formal analysis) and, on the other hand, rejects the historicist move of approaching phenomena as primarily temporal. Instead, *rhythmanalysis* posits a primordially *spatio-temporal* dynamic to the phenomena to be analyzed. Second, we shall adopt and develop Lefebvre’s

methodological tool of “transduction” – a non-linear approach to social and spatial organization.²⁴ Beyond being an iterative methodology, whereby the theoretical construct is constantly updated via empirical observation, for us, transduction challenges and goes beyond the semiotic reductivism of post-structuralist analysis. In post-structuralism, the dominant methodological themes are that of the translation and interpretation of signs. The problematic absence is that of a material dynamic – that of the body and an irreducible sensuous exchange. In contrast, transduction *requires* materiality and embodiment – an object is *transduced* when it passes from one state to the other, just as water is transduced when it passes from its liquid state into water vapor. In this way, transduction also involves the idea of a surplus or excess; an exchange only takes place at the limits of the system, just as non-linear dynamics only occur at “far from equilibrium” states in chaos and complexity theory.²⁵ As we shall see, the pressure involved in pushing a system to its limits always generates a transformative dynamic; as the system is pushed beyond itself, a collective creative response maps out new terrains of exchange and production.²⁶

From 6am, Ojuelegba’s transductive circuitry is already in a far from equilibrium state, approaching overload. Buses and taxis from various parts of the city drop commuters off, to connect onto their onward journey. Like Elegba himself, most people moving in this space have one foot touching the ground and another foot elsewhere. The bus conductors stretch out their limbs as they sing in chorus – “CMS, CMSsssss”, “Yaba Yaba Yaba”, “Obalende”. The Area Boys on morning shift rub away last night’s sleep from their eyes and put on the mask of menace ready to begin their day. They deposit their dues of around N2000 to the “chairman” and are then ready to do the rounds of collecting money from the bus drivers. Drivers and conductors gather yet again to devise strategies to outwit the Area Boys next time. Unlicensed traders set up their stalls, whilst the street hawkers are already selling morning snacks and drinks to those waiting for their bus to fill, or to others who even at this hour, are helplessly stranded in the go-slow. At a nearby eating joint, the morning breakfast of sweet potato, fried or boiled yam with fried stew is simmering on the fire of the Mama put. The tea seller moves in and out of bus lanes, selling his milky broth and washing the cups in immediate readiness for the next customer. Newspaper vendors blow their trumpets to remind all of their existence, shoving the daily

newspapers into unexpecting faces. The roadside mechanics are already up, waiting with tools laid out, whilst the “yellow fever” (traffic police) stand alert, ready to direct the traffic. The esoteric melody of Elegba’s children begins to build into a crescendo.

As morning segues into afternoon, the edge-of-state pulse of Ojuelegba intensifies its rhythm, and approaches hypertension. Area Boys finish their shift and go to sleep under the flyover, before waking up for their leisure time or yet another shift. Meanwhile, the next shift seamlessly takes their place. Like the ubiquitous yellow buses and taxis, the Area Boys are the mobile street furniture of the crossroad. Their distinctive characteristics are marked out in the following extract from the Lagos daily, *The Vanguard*:

Their ages range between 20 and 50. They can easily be recognized by their gruffy voice, bloodshot eyes and sometimes incomplete set of teeth obviously lost in street brawls. At almost all the bus stops in the metropolis they could be seen racing after commuter buses that have just arrived or are about to leave. They normally charge at the drivers or conductors and demand for money. Once the driver pays what is expected of him, the windscreen of his vehicle is marked with a felt pen of a certain color. If the driver fails to comply either his side view mirror or his petrol tank cover is instantly grabbed and the tout melts into the crowd. Any driver or conductor who challenges a tout would surely receive some slaps sometimes in full view of the enforcement officers.²⁷

In order to reinforce their demands, the Area boys drag out logs ominously spiked with nails, like medieval torture equipment, to deter any drivers refusing to acquiesce. However, in addition to their ‘tax anybody that is taxable’ code of practice, the Area Boys also render services to the community. Overflowing gutters and neglected potholes are attended to by teams of Area Boys, allowing them to collect from car drivers as they pass. This informal tax activity is particularly noticeable on a Sunday afternoon, when Ojuelegba is relatively calm and other means of income in less frequent supply. Although drivers consider them a nuisance and menacing, they are held to be no more an irritation

than the policemen with their outstretched palms in readiness for a twenty naira “dash”. Many console themselves with the fact that at least the Area Boys render some services that the police and local councils simply avoid. In this respect, the Area Boys command of the informal economy often has more order and regulatory rigor than the official sector. The complex of their activities has resulted in an organizational structure not dissimilar to capitalist modes of production, in particular, that of the assembly line. Transductive engineers, the Area Boys direct and redirect material flows of information and goods within the microcosmic hive that is Ojuelegba. They are the angels of mischief, like Eshu, creating chaos in order to return to control it.

Continuing our rhythm analysis, in the early afternoon a danfo driver negotiates terms with an Area Boy, whilst the conductor in the back hurries passengers into the van, at the same time as he ogles a woman passing by, transducing desire through vision. The “tax” settled, with naira in his pocket, the Area Boy now buys a pie, looking forward to resting his stomach for a few hours and “gisting” with his comrade about the day’s business. Meanwhile, minus another pie, the pie vendor re-adjusts her stock and moves on through the crowd. A few metres away, the Area Boy decides to select one more prey before resting – yet another crumpled and battered yellow bus. A few minutes later, in mid-dispute, a policeman appears from nowhere, and commands money from the Area Boy. Suitably remunerated, the policeman then browses for lipstick for his girlfriend. Not confident of his power of judgment, he asks the stallholder for her advice, but decides to buy a “lovecard” (greeting card) instead. Nearby, the food seller with a large pan laden with lunchtime offerings announces her presence with a gruff wail, and serves the conductors and drivers their lunch. She does the rounds to the road mechanics and then returns to her starting point to collect her plastic plates and cutlery. As with avant-garde environmentalists, her motto is “reduce, reuse and recycle.” Reduce the amount you put on the plate, then reuse and recycle the plate. At the side of the road, a group of women are negotiating with stall sellers, trying to get the biggest discount for a second hand bra that takes the fancy of one of them. Fuji pumps out at a phenomenal speed from the mobile record stall, competing with jovial noises from the beer parlor and the anonymous bustling susurrus of the street. At the same time, a pickpocket meticulously slices the trouser leg of an unsuspecting pedestrian with a razor blade, assiduously following Proudhon’s motto that all property is

theft. Another has lowered his hand inside a woman's handbag. Swarming like flies, the Okada maneuver past everything. Pedestrians circumvent the potholes and the large swaying pan of the Akara (bean ball) seller that threatens a sartorial oil slick at every moment. Nearby, money traders attend to huge piles of money in the relative seclusion of their own kiosk or back room. Customers carefully flick through their own structured wedges of faded, thousand-fingered fortune, trying to determine that the money is not fake and keep count at the same time. Meanwhile, the prostitutes quietly slumber in the hotels nearby, waiting for the call of the crepuscular.

A few hours later, around 6pm, commuters start returning from work in Lagos Island and other places on the mainland in search of a connecting danfo back up to Mushin, Onipan or any of the other residential districts west, north and east. They pick up fruits and snacks for their kids, or buy soap for the household. Then they settle into the bus, and urge the driver to hurry up. Both driver and conductor ignore their pleas, waiting to fill to busting maximum. By now, Ojuelegba is a pressure cooker hissing steam, threatening to explode. Music from everywhere vibrates and threatens to tear the fabric of a hundred speakers. Dusk is settling in. The police presence has increased. This warns both the commuters and the danfo drivers that there will be a roadblock ahead, and yet another spontaneous tax in operation. The crammed in passengers are increasingly desperate to leave and avoid the nocturnal hour that is rapidly approaching. Soon the beer parlors will be swinging, the night shift Area Boys will be on guard, and the drugs and sex trade in full flow. Already, a drug addict spins about, with bloodshot eyes, listlessly soliciting naira from the faces in his path.

Eventually, the commuters manage to leave, and the energies of the night swarm in. Ojuelegba simmers with expectancy, particles of excess buzz about, seeking satisfaction or retribution in Brownian Motion. By 4am, another crowd arrives to sample and transduce in Ojuelegba, turning the heat back up to boil. Students drift in from the Unilag campus to the east, after the midnight oil has burned out, or to continue the party that started in one of the dorms. They come to eat, to go to the hotels in search of illicit action, or to continue their drinking session in one of the beer parlors. 4am in Ojuelegba is when the liminal itself becomes liminal, a transitional space for transitional beings – in this case, students, eager to test each other's capacity for adventure.²⁸ In a

few hours, the day will begin again; another shift for the Area Boys will emerge, guardians for another day of selling pure water or getting high. Waiting to orchestrate yet another round of transduction.

Releasing the multitude

In this final section, we will assess the implications of our analysis of Ojuelegba for more effective interventions by the state and other official bodies. We shall see that the issues facing Ojuelegba are issues of global provenance. Our argument speaks both to the specific situation at Ojuelegba, and beyond it to the status of the informal economy of the wretched of the earth, in the face of the vicious negation by the forces of corporate capitalism. These Untouchables crowd the city each morning, repairing leaky pipes, carrying cement and sand, excavating the grounds of a building site ready for another skyscraper, sorting out the garbage to turn waste into wealth.

In general, we should note that Ojuelegba, as with Lagos as a whole, has long since acted as a magnet for Africans across the continent, constructing a uniquely African cosmopolitanism in its wake, as well as a uniquely African set of traffic issues. As Fela Kuti intimates in “Confusion” with the line, “before before Lagos traffic na special –ah”, Lagos’ traffic problem has been a marked feature of the city. This problem has also been subject to a long history of responses from the state government. In Ojuelegba, the specific diagnosis was that traffic along the north-south axis should be as unimpeded as possible by the horizontal flows moving between Yaba and Itire. The solution was the construction, between 1975 and 1980, of the flyover, running along the north-south axis connecting Western Avenue with Ikorodu Road. Although this project did indeed allow for some separation of horizontal and vertical flows, there were unforeseen consequences. The flyover created its own uniquely useful space for the informal economy - that of the shadowy space underneath the road. This space was quickly converted into the non-legal bus station for the danfos we have described in the rhythm analysis above. The bus station in turn has acted as an attractor for many of the informal “services” we have also described. Under the current administration of State Governor Bola Ahmed Tinubu, two further measures have also been undertaken which will directly affect Ojuelegba; first of all, the dualization of the horizontal axis road (from Yaba in the east to Itire in the west), and secondly, the

clearing of side traders and blocking off of access to the space under the flyover by erecting barriers. This second project is still at the planning stage. The aim is to turn the zone under the flyover into a communal park, and make business activities in the area illegal.

We predict that this second project of clearing away the informal economic activity around Ojuelegba will almost certainly fail. This is because it is an attempt to impose a linear rationality approach to urban planning onto a system which, as we have seen, is non-linear and polyrhythmic. The informal economy will simply route around whatever blockages are placed in its way. What will not go away is the desire to continue to scratch a living where none in the official sector is available. Ultimately, what will not be erased is the liminal spirit of Eshu-Elegbara, enabling chaos and then controlling it through the myriad of transductions he oversees. Declaring an activity “illegal”, zoning off areas, and the creation of communal spaces will therefore not be successful measures for restricting the self-organizing efficacy of the black-market. The problem is that the power of the state to impose legal restrictions and police black-market activity is very weak, in the face of a multitude facing the issue of daily survival. As at present throughout Lagos, where byelaws and other legal codes are many, but their successful enforcement few, so too will any new restrictions fail in the face of the exigencies of the multitude.

For all these reasons, our analysis strongly suggests that the intended linear logic of formal city planning will meet with very limited success, if any. Lagos, as must be clear by now, does not obey the logic of geometry and the orthogonal directives favored by western city planners. The informal economy that governs most of Lagos has its own internal rationale and mechanisms of conduct and discipline, all of which will continually undermine the desire for straight lines and flowing boulevards throughout the city. What seemed initially to our visitor as uncontrolled and uncontrollable chaos at Ojuelegba, turned out to be a finely balanced non-linear rationality at work, optimizing processes of self-organization and occupation. We suggest that the state needs to learn to work in sympathy with these self-organizing forces, rather than simply try to oppose or eradicate them. Rather than external, formal impositions, such as the erection of barriers and the outright banning of informal trade, regulatory bodies should adopt a more organic approach, embracing the spirit of Eshu,

rather than fighting to replace a carefully balanced anarchy with an impossibly futile arché. A successful intervention for the good at Ojuelegba and other dense clusterings of informal activity in Lagos, and elsewhere in African urban spaces, would first of all try to understand the complex processes at work. We suggest that a micro-economical analysis of the place in question, developing some of the themes of this paper in more detail, would be an ideal place to start. In this way, planners and policy makers can learn to work *with* the transductive flows of the city rather than perpetually and unsuccessfully against them.²⁹

We believe that once this shift in perception and approach can be made, there are revolutionary possibilities available for a better life for the citizens of Lagos, in harmony with progressive policies emanating from the State, the Federation, and at an international level of governance. Although the ruling elite effectively abandoned Lagos to its fate in the move of the capital to Abuja in the 1980s, we cannot forget that Lagos remains the *de facto* capital of Nigeria, the most populous country on the continent. In contrast, Abuja remains an expensive westernized fantasy, without any grounding in the patterns of existence of the multitude, and with nothing to say about being a model for sustainable development elsewhere. However, we are not in any doubt about the residual power of the forces that will continue to resist a more progressive approach to the informal economy that rules in Lagos, as elsewhere in the Africa. These forces are ultimately the forces of corporate capitalism, or “late capitalism” in its former guise. As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt in their celebrated book *Empire*, have pointed out, capitalism continues to feed off the informal economy at the same time as it tries to destroy it. In this instance, they introduce a distinction between “the people” and “the multitude”:

The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogenous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it. Whereas the multitude is an inconclusive constituent relation, the people is a constituted synthesis that is prepared for sovereignty. The

people provides a single will and action that is independent of and often in conflict with the various wills and actions of the multitude. Every nation must make the multitude into a people.³⁰

The resistance that we face in trying to embrace and steer the informal economy is therefore twofold – that of corporate capitalism, in tandem with the political economy of the nation state. Both insist that the heterogeneous multitude are disciplined and transformed into a people, so that multicultural differences are ultimately orchestrated by and reduced into the semiotic demands of a formal market economy. Although both corporate capitalism and the nation state are relatively recent incarnations in world history, and have, in recent times, become increasingly unstable, the forces of reactive retrenchment at work have been severe, as have the fundamentalisms that have responded to them in their wake. There is indeed a new form of Empire at work, which, at the microcosmic level of what takes place at Ojuelegba, will continue to apply intense reactive pressure for change and homogenization. This pressure will, for the moment, continue to meet with fierce resistance: it is hard to imagine a branch of McDonalds or Starbucks installed at Ojuelegba just yet. As Negri and Hardt argue, the degree to which corporate capitalism, working with the repressive forces of western nation states, is successful, is the degree to which the creative, self-organizing energy of the multitude is drained away, and the problems of our generation are passed silently to the next:

The multitude is the real productive force of our social world, whereas Empire is a mere apparatus of capture that lives only off the vitality of the multitude – as Marx would say, a vampire regime of accumulated dead labor that survives only by sucking off the blood of the living.³¹

Here, in nascent form, we can outline capitalism's road map for transformation beyond Empire: the opportunity to turn the exploitative nature of corporate capitalism into non-linear adaptivity, plugging into the self-organizing transductive energy of the multitude. Without the attempt to travel down this road, spaces such as Ojuelegba, and all those who pass through it, will continue to contribute to the entropy of wasted lives.

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NOTES

¹ Walter Benjamin cited in Mike Davis, *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* (New York: Vintage Book, 1992)

² See Diesel's spoof "Daily African" website, www.dailyafrican.com

³ "This project is as much a study of Lagos as it is a study of more radical possibilities in the discipline of urban planning, and a proposal of new ways to examine the modern city. While the conditions identified in Lagos are extreme cases, such extremity is generally a very rational response to a dysfunctional scenario. We are resisting the notion that Lagos represents an African city en route to becoming modern. Or, in a more politically correct idiom, that it is becoming modern in a valid, "African" way. Rather, we think it possible to argue that Lagos represents a developed, extreme, paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity. That is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos." Lagos (Harvard Project on the City). Rem Koolhaas et al., *Mutations* (Barcelona & Bordeaux: ACTAR and arc en reve center d'architecture, 2001:652-3).

⁴ After his talk at the Documenta11 conference in Lagos, Koolhaas was taken to task by many people in the audience for his "opticalised" representation of Lagos. One respondent pointed to the distorting effect of the aerial photography in the talk. Another remarked on the complete absence of engagement with demographic complexities at work in the city. Koolhaas had acknowledged earlier that for the first few trips he took to Lagos, he had been too scared to get out of the car. When he finally plucked up courage to venture out, he had moved straight into the president's helicopter. The video of his talk can be viewed online at <http://www.documenta.de/data/english/platform4/index.html>). See also Documenta 11_Platform 4 *Under Siege: Four African Cities, Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos* (Germany: Hatje Cantze, 2002)

⁵ The notion of a "homeopathic laughter" is borrowed from Ralph Ellison. See his essay, "An Extravagance of Laughter" in *Going To The Territory* (New York: Vintage, 1986: 171)

⁶ “Mama put” is the colloquial name for the women who cook in the joint house or “bukka” in areas such as Ojuelegba. The name refers to the request by the client for the women to put more stuff on their plate - as in “I beg, mama put more...”

⁷ Fela Kuti, *Confusion/Gentleman* (MCA re-issue 2000)

⁸ Robert, Pelton, *The Trickster in West Africa: a Study of Mythic Irony and Sacred Delight*, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1980)

⁹ Ulli, Beier, *The Hunter Thinks the Monkey is Not Wise...: A Selection of Essays*, Wole Ogundele ed. (Germany: Bayreuth University, African Studies, 2001:31)

¹⁰ Pelton, *The Trickster*, 138.

¹¹ Wescott cited in Pelton, *The Trickster*, 129.

¹² Pelton, *The Trickster*, 128.

¹³ Bier, *The Hunter Thinks*,30.

¹⁴ Pelton, *The Trickster*

¹⁵ Pelton, *The Trickster*,133.

¹⁶ A.B. Aderibigbe, “Early history of Lagos to about 1850” in A.B. Aderibigbe (ed.) *Lagos: the development of an African city*, (Nigeria: Longman, 1975:1)

¹⁷ Margaret, Peel, *Lagos: the city is the people* (London: Belhaven Press, 1991)

¹⁸ Robert Farris, Thompson *The Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (New York :Vintage Books, 1984:21)

¹⁹ Exu made a recent appearance in the film *City of God* (Cidade de Deus), directed by Katia Lund, 2002.

²⁰ Henry Louis, Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988:5)

²¹ Robert Farris, Thompson, “The Aesthetic of the Cool: West African Dance” in *African Forum* 2:2 1966.

²² In this sense, the self-organizing spirit of Eshu connects with many diverse aspects of recent Western thought, from the rhizomorphic theory of Deleuze to the auto-poiesis at the core of contemporary chaos and complexity theory.

²³ See Henri Lefebvre, “Seen from a window” and “Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities” in *Writings on Cities* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1995)

²⁴ “Space – my space – is not the context of which I constitute the ‘textuality’: instead, it is first of all my body, and then it is my body’s counterpart or ‘other’, its mirror-image or shadow: it is the shifting intersection between that which touches, penetrates, threatens or benefits my body on the hand, and all other bodies on the other. Thus, we are concerned, once again, with gaps and tensions, contacts and separations. Yet, through and beyond these various effects of meaning, space is actually experienced, in its depths, as duplications, echoes and reverberations, redundancies and doublings-up which engender – and are engendered by – the strangest of contrasts: face and arse, eye and flesh, viscera and excrement, lips and teeth, orifices and phallus, clenched fists and opened hands – as also clothed versus naked, open versus closed, obscenity versus familiarity, and so on. None of these oppositions and conjunctions/disjunctions has anything to do with a logic or formal system. Henri, Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwells, 1984:184

²⁵ See Ilya, Prigogine, and Isobel, Stengers, *Order out of Chaos: Man’s New Dialogue with Nature* (New York: Bantam Books, 1984)

²⁶ We wish to thank Julian Henriques at this point for his valuable insights into the relations between transduction and the excessive.

²⁷ See

www.vanguardngr.com/news/articles/2001/November/21112001/m3211101.htm

²⁸ We wish to thank Habib Oni-Iere and Ibunkun Fakaeye for recollections of Ojuelegba in their student days, and to the Area Boys who temporarily suspended their transductive practices in order to lend us the gift of their speech.

²⁹ In his Documenta lecture, Koolhaas makes an interesting distinction between a formal analysis of urban space and a “metabolic” analysis of its flows. We believe that moving towards the latter viewpoint is a good place to start making a constructive analysis of urban issues facing Lagos today

³⁰ Michael Hardt & Antonio Negri, *Empire*, (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press 2000:103)

³¹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, 62.