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Shrinking or exploding, worlding and wilding: Lagos, Detroit, and a (re)consideration of elsewhere global cities

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Abstract: A long-standing debate in the urban studies literature emphasises the place of cities in the global cultural, financial and political economy. Traditional approaches to the study of world cities have typically left little room for the cities of the South or the more ‘marginal’ cities in the West. In this essay, I argue for a more inclusive theoretical and conceptual space that incorporates a broader range of urban situations through a comparative investigation of two cities: Lagos and Detroit. Though they are in some ways peripheral to the functioning of global capitalism, they remain central to its narrative. I therefore suggest that even as Detroit and Lagos undergo experiences of ‘wilding’ these processes represent an often unacknowledged aspect of ‘worlding’. The paper represents a preliminary attempt to center African and post-industrial cities in the wider critical narrative of contemporary global urbanism.

Keywords: Detroit, Lagos, global cities, post-industrial, capitalism

Late in the afternoon of July 18, 2013 Kevyn Orr, the newly appointed emergency manager of Detroit, filed a sixteen page document in U.S. Federal Court announcing the financial insolvency of a city that was once the United States’ fourth largest. The following day, Orr and Michigan’s Governor, Rick Snyder, stood at a podium to explain the bankruptcy decision, asserting Detroit was upwards of nineteen billion dollars in debt and that the current fiscal crisis now presented the ‘opportunity to stop 60 years of decline’.¹ The oft-repeated statistics and stories used to describe Detroit’s ‘decline’ are grimly familiar. Any recounting of Detroit’s predicament typically notes the tens of thousands of vacant lots and blighted structures, a dwindling population, per capita incomes half the national average,² and dysfunctional, underfunded emergency services. In these stories, Detroit’s the place where fact and black comedy are one and the same. Where, for example, the year 2012 saw both the city attain its highest homicide rate since the early 1990s³ and the hometown Detroit Tigers sign free agent first baseman, Prince Fielder, to an annual salary higher than the operating budget of all but one of Detroit’s police precincts.⁴

Given the violence found on the streets or in the city's bleak accounting forecast, it is perhaps not surprising to observe macabre descriptions creep into discussions about Detroit and its future. Jonathan Chait observes that Detroit 'is the residual wound of the rise and fall of postwar America'.⁵ Charlie LeDuff, author of one recent book, declares the city fit for 'An American Autopsy',⁶ while another explores the 'Afterlife of an American Metropolis'.⁷ In a recent *New York Times* interview, the longtime mayor of Boston, Thomas Menino, suggested in an unfortunate moment of candor, that he would 'blow up the place and start all over'.⁸ More measured commentary on the near-term trajectory of the city is also tinged with anxiety about what comes next in Detroit, a city 'battered' by circumstances largely out of its control.⁹ Belying these concerns is the worry that even if a grand recovery is possible, what form might a 'comeback' take given these decades-in-the-making problems? And perhaps more importantly, whose comeback are we talking about?

Residents of Lagos are similarly apprehensive about the status of a city Matthew Gandy has described as 'simultaneously growing, dividing, polarizing and decaying'.¹⁰ As in Detroit, the anxieties reflect concerns over a wide array of municipal challenges, unstable urban geographies and governance failures. Weaving together cinematic descriptions of Lagos with the lived experience of the city, Onookome Okome argues that people are not only concerned with the city's emplacement in the 'global flow of goods, services, and other kinds of exchange', but also with the vast increase in inequality between the rich and the poor fueled by wealth that is mysteriously, if not magically, acquired.¹¹ Daily uncertainty further presents itself in the fact that 60 per cent of the city's five million children don't attend school¹² and that land tenure for the residents of Lagos' 200 slums¹³ remains precarious.¹⁴ These factors combined with generalised infrastructural collapse, widespread poverty, environmental degradation and rapid

growth that far outpace the managerial abilities of the State, calls into question the sustainability of Africa's largest city in the years ahead. What can be done to prevent a future in which Lagos is more than a 'mega-slum of despair'?¹⁵

Both Lagos and Detroit, like all cities, have experienced tumultuous pasts and confront uncertain futures. Yet, as I outline in the following pages, the cases of Detroit and Lagos, despite their obvious differences, offer an exemplary vantage point from which to explore processes of global capitalism and the changing face of urbanism around the world. It is not for nothing that one observer has gone so far as to declare that due to its past industrial glories and current post-industrial abjection, Detroit has become the most 'representatively American place on the planet'.¹⁶ At the same time, the experience of Lagos has been used by some scholars and journalists to generalise about the intractable predicaments confronting the cities in the developing world, foreshadowing an ominous urban future from which few locations will be immune.

In the remainder of this essay, I seek to embed the experiences of Detroit and Lagos in the context of theoretical work done on and about global cities. Much has been written about the characteristics of and relations between the members of this exclusive group of urban centers. The current research however, possesses a static, fossilised feel, telling us little about how an urban setting might become a world city,¹⁷ the social, cultural or political processes underlying industrial decline,¹⁸ or the manner in which a city might move *from* this acclaimed status of world cityness. Post-industrial or de-industrialised cities such as Detroit, for instance, while perhaps no longer key nodes in the world's economy bear the physical and physic scars of their former industrial 'glories'. Meanwhile, research on the cities of the Global South describes urban environments as the central sites in which the processes of globalisation, (in)securitisation

and inequality unfold. These stories culminate in the pronouncement that it is in the slum megalopolises of the developing world that the battles of the twenty-first century will be fought.¹⁹ Taken together, these diverse urban milieus offer a fuller geographic and temporal perspective on the contemporary making and meaning of a global city. This paper contributes to such a dialogue.

Lagos and Detroit: worlding, wilding

In spite of their different political, economic, cultural and historical experiences there exist compelling reasons for a Detroit-Lagos comparison. Consider their size. Within Detroit's city limits it would be possible – with room to spare – to house Boston, Manhattan and San Francisco, while by 2020 Lagos is projected to grow three times larger than Paris.²⁰ Despite the comparable geographic scale, the cities have experienced divergent population trends since the 1950s. As of the 2010 census, Detroit's population was just over seven hundred thousand residents and still dropping, falling from a peak of 2 million half a century earlier. The escalation in Lagos has been even more dramatic than Detroit's decline. In 1970, Lagos' population reached one million people.²¹ Recent estimates however, place the city's total population at upwards of twenty million residents. These trajectories are reflected in the population density of both cities. Whereas in the 1990s, Camilo Vergara suggested that Detroit's shuttered downtown landscape be preserved as an 'American Acropolis', approximately 20,000 people reside in each square kilometer of Lagos, nearly twenty times Nigeria's national average.²²

One trait common to the two cities, however, is the pervasive insecurity permeating the lives of the people who live there. Although differing in the details, these insecurities manifest themselves across all levels of governance, infrastructure, economic opportunity and quality of

life. Mark Binelli notes that half the children residing in Detroit live in poverty while nearly half the adult residents are functionally illiterate.²³ In Lagos, inequality is perhaps even more pronounced: although 60 per cent of Nigeria's economic activity is generated within the city limits,²⁴ 70 per cent of the population live in slums and 50 per cent live on less than a dollar per day.²⁵ Dire statistics such as these form the backdrop to a second shared characteristic. Both Detroit and Lagos stand in for the two extreme possible outcomes of global urbanism in the coming decades. These cinematic, dystopian descriptions posit Detroit's post-industrial withering alongside Lagos' exploding, as harbingers of a coming disintegration destined to affect everything from the spaces of the cities in which we live to our long-held expectations of modernity. I allude to these narratives not to mindlessly repeat them, but to begin to reflect on why they might resonate and how they might matter.

Part of the answer may be located in Jean and John Comaroffs' recent assertion that 'the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes'.²⁶ The Comaroffs' critical reading of the present echoes earlier work on neoliberal urbanism. Theorists of 'actually existing neoliberalism' conclude that the persistent crises of neoliberalism operate with a 'particular intensity at the urban scale' and produce 'deep regulatory failures and highly dysfunctional, disruptive consequences'.²⁷ If the future of capitalism, urbanisation, or citizenship is located on the so-called margins this calls into question the presumption that places like Lagos or Detroit represent a form of deviance. Instead, normalising their experiences situates them very much at the center of these economic and spatial processes. To consider dystopic narratives in conjunction with the well-known story of world cities allows us to bring them 'in' to the discussion not as exceptions, but as exemplars. In much the same way James Ferguson suggests that the 'inefficiencies' of extractive capitalism are anything but,²⁸ characteristics like oppressive

infrastructures and urban instability are not symptoms in need of a cure, rather they are outcomes to be expected.

The above claim disrupts underlying assumptions of world city literature. Because the world cities approach is widely familiar I note only two relevant points. First, Saskia Sassen asserts that movements of capital, information or technology are necessarily anchored in specific urban locales, especially those with extensive infrastructures, bureaucratic, and financial resources at their disposal.²⁹ Sassen further identifies an increasing discrepancy between those cities possessing the ‘strategic resources’ to be competitive in the global economy, and those cities that find themselves excluded.³⁰ Implicit in such assertions is that only certain (urban) locations drive the machinery of globalisation. And while a critic like Jennifer Robinson advocates for a ‘de-centred’ approach to financial and knowledge circulations,³¹ offering a significant critique of the tendency to privilege a handful of metropolitan powerhouses, her proposal, like Sassen’s, remains embedded in a perspective that emphasises economic relationships and productive capacity. Lagos and Detroit challenge these modernist either/or understandings by presenting alternate forms of global connection, urban spatial development and economic practice.

Second, the accretion of vast amounts of wealth and resources in some urban areas comes at the expense of other metropolitan regions both in terms of the competition between (would-be) global cities and those largely excluded from the struggle over ‘command and control’ of the global economy. For Sassen, this discussion often hinges on a neutered analysis of urban ‘hierarchy’ or division of labor between cities.³² Writing over fifteen years ago, Neil Brenner identifies the urgent problem. He observes,

The consolidation of the world urban hierarchy dominated by an archipelago of upper-tier global cities has also produced new geographies of exclusion stretching from the

economic “deadlands” of the older industrial core states into the marginalized of the global periphery that contain almost seven-eighths of world population.³³

The situation has only worsened in the years since. The key point is that the source of marginalisation, inequality or structural violence is not found in specific locations – at least not entirely – but rather, originates from the architecture of the neoliberal political economy.

Wacquant’s elaboration of the new urban precariat argues that ‘far from representing a peripheral by-product of a “Third-Worldization” of rich countries or regressions towards premodern forms of sociopolitical conflict’, current structures of advanced marginality ‘must be understood as the result of the uneven, disarticulating development of the *most advanced sectors* of capitalist societies’.³⁴ The failure of theories on global cities to account for this new demography and the conflicts they engender limits their explanatory power.³⁵ James Ferguson’s account of the Zambian Copperbelt demonstrates that the story of poverty, peripheralisation and deindustrialisation are an integral part of the story of globalisation; these processes are not exterior to global capitalism, but are its underbelly.³⁶ Neglect of this fact reflects both the more triumphal aspects of world cities theory and the perception that successfully worlded cities are those who occupy spots at the apex of the information and innovation economies.

To designate as irrelevant the urban experiences of much of the world obscures the fact that at the cusp of an urban identity crisis, the usual exemplars of the previous two centuries increasingly resemble ‘anachronistic by-gones’.³⁷ Where do you locate cities such as Lagos, Gaborone or Kinshasa, which are very much globally plugged in, let alone locales such as Detroit or Flint, traumatised from their time as epicenters of global industrial capitalism? These locations, furthermore, undercut the binary notions of the world cities approach – that urban centers are designated by defined borders, dotted by vertical forests of steel and glass, housing citizens engaged in formalised economic and social relations. Thinking through the

consequences of these analytical constraints is thus especially urgent in light of the current trajectories of urbanism across the globe.

Advocates of post-colonial urbanism, such as Ananya Roy and Jennifer Robinson, contend that far more is happening around the globe than mere replication of Western forms and practices.³⁸ Or, put another way, more is occurring than a degradation of an ideal Western form. To better study African cities such as Lagos, then, the objective becomes to ‘critically assess how cities in Africa actually work’ rather than measuring their ‘failure’.³⁹ Similarly, for Detroit, the challenge is to move beyond both the tired fascination with stories of ‘ruin porn’, as well as the newer, more triumphal discussion of the city’s impending Comeback in order to examine what actually happens within Detroit’s borders. Concerning both places, this shift is important for two reasons. First, it allows us to observe life within these cities as it is, rather than the ways which it is not. Second, through the consideration of the presence of these cities, rather than their absence, it is possible to glean insight into wider trends in contemporary urbanism unacknowledged by work on global cities theorists, and to a lesser extent, their critics.

In an important book on urban theory and the Global South, AbdouMaliq Simone seeks to connect far-flung cities of the Global South to ‘invented latitudes’ in recognition of the common histories, colonial legacies, problematic economic predicaments and social relations experienced by cities from Dhaka to Lagos, Jakarta to Dakar.⁴⁰ In Simone’s reading, exposing the relationality between these cities expands the scope of our knowledge about what these places are, or might become. Building on this approach, I extend the comparative opportunities suggested by Simone to note a line of latitude between Detroit and Lagos in the hope of clarifying their connection to processes driving the organisation and of contemporary world cities. As an alternative to dominant understandings of worlding outlined by theorisations of

global cities, Aihwa Ong adopts a more organic approach that maps the flow between the global and the local.⁴¹ The worlding of cities in this ‘sense is linked to the idea of emergence’, in which the city gathers fragments from beyond and ejects others outward.⁴² This back and forth, across and between different scales, is suggestive of the fact that the ‘21st century metropolis is a chameleon. It shifts shape and size; margins become centres; centres become frontiers; regions become cities’.⁴³

Following from the above, I would like to suggest in the remaining pages of this essay that processes of worlding at work in places like Detroit and Lagos – these laboratories of intensified neoliberal urbanism – are often accompanied by processes of wilding. In Detroit, wilding has affected the physical lived spaces of the city, as large swaths of the city have been abandoned to blight, scrappers, and the unfortunate majority of poor residents unable to leave. For Lagos and other cities in Africa, ‘wild’ urbanism is located in the chaotic, constant, tangled circulations of everyday life in which ‘movement becomes place’.⁴⁴ Whether referring to the shift in Detroit’s urban form in the past few decades or the confusing connections that exemplify informalised economic and social life in Lagos, the rise of these new urban jungles (and the new urban explorers they engender) is no relic of the past or characteristic of a few marginal outliers. Rather they unmask an often neglected part of global urban capitalism’s present. These sites are, thus, more than ‘absent objects’ failing to live up to the idealised expectations of proper spatial form and appropriate behavior. Their presence disputes narratives of inexorable progress and of urban lifestyles that are available to fewer and fewer people. To further pursue the exploration into wild urbanisms, our initial foray begins in Detroit, with another, much earlier journey.

Detroit re-natured?: worlded urban ‘jungles’, pt. 1

In the early 1830s Alexis de Tocqueville toured the United States with his traveling companion Gustave de Beaumont. One segment of their journey, later published as *A Fortnight in the Wilderness*, detailed their travels westward into the interior of the United States to locate what was then, the outermost boundary of the western frontier. Departing from New York City the two travelers sought to understand the ‘Indian Question’ – hopefully running into a few along the way – while also trying to reconcile the fact that even though the boundaries separating ‘wilderness’ from ‘civilisation’ were ambiguous at best, wild spaces in America would be increasingly less so, eventually disappearing completely following the ‘triumphant march of civilization’. Yet, at the same time, Tocqueville eulogised the ‘natural and wild grandeur that is going to end’ and noted ‘bitter regret about the power that God granted us over nature’.⁴⁵ A good portion of their explorations during this period were spent in the areas of southeastern Michigan. De Beaumont, writing of Detroit, then a city of a few thousand residents, echoed this easy elision between wild and city spaces. He offers the following anecdote:

How do you find the inhabitants of Michigan who give themselves the styles of Paris? It’s a fact that in the last village of America the French mode is followed, and all the fashions are supposed to come from Paris.

From this anecdote you will believe that Detroit is very civilized. It is, however, not very far from the wild forest and the latter’s inhabitants. At half a league you see woods which begin and do not end. ...[Yet, last year] a bear, bayed by the hounds near the forest, came into the main street of Detroit and ran down its whole length, to the entertainment of the Americans, whose gravity probably did not betray them.⁴⁶

In Tocqueville’s time, such collisions between nature and the city were thought a novelty whose frequency would inevitably diminish over time. Indeed, as if in confirmation of Tocqueville’s expectations, Oliver Zunz has described early twentieth century Detroit as ‘a total industrial landscape’.⁴⁷ For decades afterwards Detroit remained the epicenter of the US manufacturing juggernaut, culminating in it being labeled the ‘Arsenal of Democracy’ during the Second World

War. Detroit was, for a time anyway, to appropriate an early 1990s ad campaign for General Motors, the industrial ‘Heartbeat of America’.

Detroit’s time at the top however, was relatively short-lived, its economic successes masking the early conditions of its later decline. David Harvey, for example, emphasises macro-economic processes punctuated by the gradual shift from Fordism to what he terms ‘flexible accumulation’.⁴⁸ Thomas Sugrue complicates this explanation, arguing that what happened in Detroit was more than an ‘inevitable consequence of market forces at work’.⁴⁹ Added to the loss of jobs and the shift in manufacturing was racial discrimination and poor city governance. These three factors, Sugrue suggests, together contributed to the city’s failings. Even so, the job losses in Detroit, prompted by the relocation of production facilities, were staggering: immediately following its ascension as the Arsenal of Democracy, the city shed 134,000 jobs from 1947-1963.⁵⁰ Kevin Boyle notes that these losses were compounded into the 1990s, as Detroit lost 5 per cent of its jobs each year from 1972-1992.⁵¹ And today, two of the Big Three, Chrysler and General Motors, employ less than 10,000 salaried and hourly workers in Detroit, of which, fewer than half live within the city limits.⁵²

Jobs left, the population dwindled, houses stood vacant or fell apart, and businesses shuttered. Tocqueville’s narrative of progress’ triumph over a vanishing nature came to a halt. In a profile of a raccoon hunter in urban Detroit, Charlie LeDuff notes recent years have brought beavers back to the Detroit River for the first time in nearly a century, while bald eagles glide through the city’s skies.⁵³ Although re-posted on blogs and popular news aggregators (like Gawker.com) as something of a novelty, perhaps the story is indicative of a larger trend in both Detroit and elsewhere. As one observer notes in a discussion of the controversial slum photography of Camilo Vergara, ‘in large swaths of the new American ghetto, nature has severely corroded the

built environment....Sections of Detroit that were the scene of [the] city's 1967 uprising are now de facto urban prairies'.⁵⁴

On their own, anecdotes such as the above are insufficient in describing the magnitude of Detroit's transformation. Due to this multi-faceted implosion, the conventional depiction of the city is one of calamity, oscillating between nightmare and tragic comedy. Indeed, a recent article in the *New York Times* opened by referring to Detroit as 'this gritty, left behind city'.⁵⁵ In the same vein, a series of articles in the *Detroit News* made national headlines, accentuating the strangeness and (in)humanity of this once bustling urban center. Of the more widely circulated stories, are pieces describing the urban raccoon hunter or the discovery of the body of a homeless man found entombed in a block of ice at the bottom of an elevator shaft in one of the city's countless, empty buildings.⁵⁶

Repeated for their shock value, as an extreme example of urban decay, these spectacular headlines and eccentric characters tend to mask a story much less dramatic but no less damaging for American cities buffeted by the economic effects of globalisation, the collapse of industry and infrastructure, rising crime, and a shrinking population (unlikely to return). What do all these indicators mean in practice? To give some sense of the magnitude of the problem, out of the 139 square miles that comprise the city of Detroit, approximately seventy square miles stand vacant or are occupied by buildings – around 80,000 – that need to be torn down. The effect of this is that while some areas of the city thrive or at least maintain a certain level of functionality, there are large chunks of the city in which municipal governance is ineffective or at the breaking point or simply have been left to decay. Indeed, much of the current (over the past decade or so) urban policy talk about what to 'do' with Detroit has revolved around the idea of "shrinking" the city, in which residents in failing or near empty neighborhoods would be relocated to form

higher density areas. Empty areas would then be demolished, rehabilitated and turned into green space or set aside for urban agriculture.⁵⁷

What are we to make of this process of urban re-naturalisation? Certainly, stories of coyotes or deer or the occasional California mountain lion making a home in urban spaces are well documented.⁵⁸ But the case of Detroit, in which the raccoon hunter, Gemlie Dean Beasley, can earnestly state that ‘this city is going back to wild’, seems to suggest a deeper transformation in the life and meaning of the city.⁵⁹ For if a city can go ‘back to the wild’ it seems clear that existing models of city-ness are inappropriate. Further, as I have suggested earlier, perhaps this rhetorical shift is suggestive of something more than a definitional concern.

Detroit’s current predicament raises a host of questions about the future of the post-industrial urban environment, and perhaps more fundamentally, about the meaning of urbanity itself. The conventional wisdom tells us that urban environments are sites for conviviality, the dense meshing of diverse populations, in which there is a strict separation between the country and the city. In Detroit, none of these criteria for what makes a ‘proper’ ‘Western’ city hold true any longer – or, at least, in the manner in which urban theory tells us to expect. However the process by which places like Detroit, Kinshasa, Lagos, or Flint have arrived in their present circumstances, they share similar patterns of poverty, uncertainty, fear, a lack of capacity to provide basic services or urban governance, and are subject – and perhaps equally powerless in the face of – global economic and social forces (which, of course, make any ‘re-naturalisation’ not of nature’s making).

African cities and dystopic pastorals: worlded urban “jungles,” pt. 2

The thinking about urban wildernesses in Africa has emphasised both form and practice. Here, it is not the presence of literal trees, but rather that spatial instability and economic insecurity

produce a sense of foreboding or chaos at odds with modernist world city notions of predictability and standardisation. The typical narrative describes a deformed urban-scape bursting forth from, or collapsing beneath the weight of its amoeba-like gigantism. This urban Junkspace, Koolhaas reminds us, is ‘what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress’.⁶⁰ This, according to observers like Robert Kaplan and Mike Davis, is a portent of our own bleak urban future.⁶¹

Indeed, George Packer opens his 2006 *The New Yorker* piece with a nightmare vision of Lagos, surveying the landscape traversed by the Third Mainland Bridge:

Smoldering hills of sawdust landfill send white smoke across the bridge, which mixes with diesel exhaust from the traffic. Beyond the sawmills, the old waterfront markets, the fishermen’s shanties, the blackened facades of high-rise housing projects, and the half-abandoned skyscrapers of downtown Lagos Island loom under a low, dirty sky. Around the city, garbage dumps steam with the combustion of natural gases, and auto yards glow with fires from fuel spills. All of Lagos seems to be burning.⁶²

In Packer’s piece – ostensibly depicting the city *right now* – Lagos is literally on fire. Into the smoke-obscured disorder, the tangled jumble of traffic and street vendors, the mazes of slums and shanties – enters a new kind of explorer to make sense of the city. On their first visit to Lagos, Rem Koolhaas and his Harvard team were so overwhelmed by what they saw that they largely stayed in their cars. It was only later, flying in a rented Presidential helicopter over the city, benefitting from the aerial vantage point favored by modernist planners that the city could subsequently be deciphered. The presumed impossibility of knowing Lagos from the ground is summed up in the words of a local official overseeing eastern Lagos Island: ‘[In Lagos], the problem is everything is happening everywhere’.⁶³

In the air however, the problem of decoding uncountable simultaneities melts away. The privileged view offered from above, allows Koolhaas to observe the roads, highways and traffic

in their totality. From here, through the ‘aesthetics of traffic and circulation’ Koolhaas seeks to ‘unearth the logic of how the city functions’.⁶⁴ Lagos is no longer an unknowable chaos, but through its circulations and self-organising/informal logics becomes a city that ‘works’.⁶⁵ In the attempt to rehabilitate Lagos as something more than the sum of its own dysfunctions into a city that ‘works’, Koolhaas resituates Lagos. In this formulation it moves from the margins of global urbanity to its center. The city’s self-organising/informal logics come to represent the leading edge of modernity.

Fredric Jameson notes in his analysis of Koolhaas’s *Project on the City* that Lagos – and other poverty-stricken megalopolises – aren’t puzzles to solve, problems to fix, but exist as a ‘new reality to explore’.⁶⁶ The opening scene of the documentary *Lagos/Koolhaas* confirms this assessment. The forty-five second tracking shot taken from a helicopter shows the viewer Lagos from above, from slums to skyscrapers. Overlaid against what’s happening on the screen, an interviewer asks Koolhaas, ‘Why Lagos, Nigeria?’ He answers:

I wanted to understand how cities were changing and which cities were changing most quickly. At that point it became really interesting to look at the city that was almost disconnected from the global system, so it was incredibly exciting to learn how to capture what is so alien and so distant.⁶⁷

Yet as a place to be explored, a landscape to be conquered, Lagos is reified as an accumulation of processes and flows, an abstraction understood through its traffic patterns. This conceptual framework in its attempt to locate virtue in Lagos’ municipal challenges has been subject to heavy critical interrogation.⁶⁸ Also problematic for this perspective is that myopically exploring the city from the ground or air severs Lagos from its connections to elsewhere, while also neglecting the micro perspective of what actually happens, what people do, and how they do it.

René Devisch and Filip de Boeck, for example, deploy the concept of ‘villagization’. Devisch uses ‘villagization’ in Kinshasa to describe residents’ reaction to the perilous economic situation and the failed promises of urbanisation.⁶⁹ Less an observation regarding built spaces or population density, since as Freund points out, by 1997 Kinshasa was home to approximately 4.5 million residents,⁷⁰ Devisch’s concept relates to the comportment and expectations of the city’s residents. In this case, a sort of voluntary de-modernisation in which city values are rejected in favor of the solidarity and stability supposedly offered by neighborhood communities as a defense against acute sustained poverty.⁷¹ Along those lines, Filip de Boeck has asserted that the ‘frontier logic of mutation’ is at work in Kinshasa, in which mental life, material space and the occult blur together.⁷² These elusive frontier geographies, constitute a jungle of urban life that must be navigated each day. If the space of the city is now ‘the space of the forest’ as de Boeck suggests, the city is dangerous, unfamiliar, the logic of hunting and gathering predominates.⁷³

Amidst these conditions, scholars have increasingly investigated how people use both city spaces and each other. The architecture of social connection has been given different labels: people as infrastructure,⁷⁴ urban charisma,⁷⁵ wild connectivity,⁷⁶ the ‘zig-zag economy’,⁷⁷ and the ‘invisible city’.⁷⁸ These terms depict the manner in which people connect, get by and belong in urban environments where long-term planning is a luxury. The work of AbdouMaliq Simone is especially instructive. Simone focuses on movements, collisions, fissures, intersections, anticipations and/or near misses in order to make sense of what people in do in the city, what people do with each other and how these (non) relationships impact on the individual, the institutions of the state – where they are present – and the making of the city itself.⁷⁹ Of particular importance is the claim that the expectation for cities to function as ‘the key to social integration probably doesn’t mean much anymore, even as a popular myth’.⁸⁰ Simone’s

pronouncement that the city's role as a social and demographic aggregator of disparate parts no longer holds is at odds with a core tenet of Western urban theory. For example, in his epic work, *The City in History*, Lewis Mumford emphasised the role of the city as both 'container' and 'magnet', thereby facilitating interactions directed toward some collective purpose.⁸¹ Mumford distilled the essence of the city: as a stage in which the full array of human actions and characters are gathered, the city is a venue in which 'significant conversations' are made possible.⁸² Failed or dysfunctional cities, meanwhile, are those spaces permeated by an 'absence of dialogue'.⁸³

Yet, under conditions of a generalised 'economy of anticipation' – Simone's phrase – uncertainty and a lack of reasonable knowledge about what might happen next, or why, replaces the intelligibility of common purpose and 'significant conversations' in the public square. Indeed, the only individual plotline we might be able to know for certain is that for most residents of the city, each day unfurls merely as a means of making it to the next one. Where for the poor, 'survival in Lagos is a daily imperative',⁸⁴ the concept of 'people as infrastructure' explains how residents navigate the confusions of urban life. In Lagos, these challenges include the daily pursuit of locating sources of clean water not controlled by organised "water lord"⁸⁵ rackets who charge extravagant prices for water privileges or the identification of sites of (relative) safety or danger amid the 'peculiar regimes of (dis)order and urban governance' that characterise Africa's largest city.⁸⁶

Simone's notion of people as infrastructure is instructive because it looks beyond physical space and infrastructure – the city as 'container of containers' as Mumford puts it – by focusing on the infrastructure comprised of people and their actions. People as infrastructure, 'emphasizes economic collaborations among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life', while also mapping the contingent, the fleeting collisions and

crossings between residents ‘engaged in complex combinations of objects, spaces, persons and practices’.⁸⁷ These conditions require both waiting – keeping an eye out for what others might be doing – and mobility – moving to collect information, get a sense of what is ‘happening’ elsewhere if nothing’s ‘happening’ here. Risks, theories, stories or the actions of others must be assessed at a moment’s notice, decisions take (where to go, who to see, how to move) on the basis of improvisations and hunches. African cities, Simone suggests, become sites of intensified decision-making in which no one really *knows* anything – where even the boundaries between imagination and reality, life and death are indeterminate⁸⁸ – in which ‘experimentation is necessary, but not everything is to be experimented with’.⁸⁹ Whereby the city, for observers like Rem Koolhaas, is a place to explore, a site to describe, for residents however, the city very much becomes a puzzle to solve. To move through the city is to attempt to access, to discern, to grasp the ‘fugitive materials’ floating around and within the ether of the urban jungle.⁹⁰

To illustrate the above point I offer a vignette from an encounter during previous fieldwork I undertook in Botswana. Although geographically distant from Lagos, this, at the time, confusing episode has stuck with me in the years since, but in light of the current discussion I can begin to make sense of this moment from a decade ago. At this time I worked with street vendors in the central Main Mall of Gaborone. In those first days, I was considered a bit of mystery: a random white guy who hung around and wrote things in small notebooks. One morning, a young man in his early to mid-twenties called me over to where he sat. Excited by the rare prospect of someone actively seeking me out to talk, I went straight over. After introducing myself, he asked me where I was from. The United States. He then proceeded to tell me a bit of his background, his education, the difficulty of finding work, all of which led up to his asking me to give him an idea. I was confused; an idea for what? An idea for a business, for something to do.

What kind of business? It didn't really matter. Just something that he could do. Not really understanding what this conversation was about, or what he was really getting at, I told him that if I had a good idea for a business, I would probably be doing it myself. The conversation wound down quickly after that.

Some years later this incident can perhaps now be understood. Here was a guy who saw something out of the ordinary. Living in Gaborone, I injected new, untouched potential into the environment as a person who 'washed up' on the shores of the city. Knowing me, engaging me as a 'fugitive material' was a means by which something new might be created. Maybe I had access to a network to be used or activated, or carried within me some insight or kernel of information that could be recombined with other variables or things this individual knew. Or maybe not. But the thing is, he *had* to ask, to seize this moment when something innovative – the 'next big thing' was possible.

The motivation behind the above conversation might be that African cities remain 'platforms for people to engage with processes and territories that bear a marked sense of exteriority....Cities straddle not only internal and external divides and national and regional boundaries, but also a wide range of terrain and geography, both real and imaginary'.⁹¹ For that reason, Simone further notes that with increasing frequency, Africans are located in 'half-built environments – i.e. under developed, over-used, fragmented and often make-shift urban infrastructures'.⁹² 'Half-built' as people are on the lookout for something else, something new, prepared to act, ready to move at a moment's notice. Livelihoods depend on being able to connect the dots one encounters in the city. To navigate the tangle of wild spaces and relationships in the city, while existing as a magnet for 'fugitive materials' requires trickery and

expertise, vigilance and (in)visibility. Contra Foucault, the challenge is not being caught up in this panoptic web of social relationships, but rather, the use that you make of it.

Post-industrial cities, African urbanism and global emplacement

In these concluding pages, I would like to offer a few final speculations about Detroit, Lagos and their global connections and projections. Taken together they represent a ‘proliferation of uncertainties’ wrought by their position in the machinery of global urban inequity.⁹³ In the same way Lagos is representative of some of the most brutal, marginalising aspects of globalisation, Detroit too, is an exemplar of the trajectory of twentieth century industrial capitalism.⁹⁴ As a ‘disaster in progress’ the ongoing economic difficulties in Detroit have been compared to cities that have experienced natural disasters.⁹⁵

If Detroit stands in as the most American place in the world, in which the failings of global capitalism are exposed for all to see, what is laid bare? Where do we go from here? This essay points to the need to move beyond traditional understandings of world cities defined by a particular spatial form that makes possible a narrow range of orders and behaviors. It is not, then, simply a matter of replacing one urban trope – the world city as site of economic ‘command and control’ – with an obverse defined solely by informalisation, poverty or instability. Our options for understanding contemporary urbanisation are not limited to what has become an unhelpful binary consisting of the center and its underbelly. Rather, what is required is a more expansive comparative turn that pluralises urbanisation and considers the experience of places like Lagos or Kinshasa or Nairobi as something more than a deviation from an ideal. The chaotic social infrastructures described by AbdouMaliq Simone along with the depictions of a city going back to the wild offers insight into diverse settings beset by similar conditions of global (dis)connect, insecurity and uncertainty in the context of a state in retreat.

It is of no small consequence for our ability to conceptualise and engage with these sites when the overwhelming popular zeitgeist consists of, for example, dystopic images in Detroit, or a new urban barbarism in the megacities of Africa (and elsewhere). What practices become possible, or which ones are precluded, when a well-known newspaper publishes the following passage:

Approaching the derelict shell of downtown Detroit, we see full-grown trees sprouting from the tops of deserted skyscrapers. In their shadows, the glazed eyes of the street zombies slide into view, stumbling in front of the car. Our excitement at driving into what feels like a man-made hurricane Katrina is matched only by sheer disbelief that what was once the fourth largest city in the US could actually be in the process of disappearing from the face of the earth.⁹⁶

Although the tone is meant to convey somber reflection, its sobriety emphasised by the passage's encirclement by facts and figures denoting poverty levels and falling housing prices, there is an unmistakable undercurrent of barely contained glee in the writing: as the travelers cruise through debris fields, witnessing nature swallowing up a city in a final reclamation project. From the Tocquevillean melancholy of *A Fortnight in the Wilderness* to the exhilaration of contemporary chroniclers of urban crisis, the shift is as pronounced as it is disorienting. As Jameson notes in his discussion of Koolhaas and his analysis of deteriorating Junkspace, at one time the disintegration of reality and the decay of our surroundings was something to fear. Now, however, 'these moments are no longer terrifying; they are in fact by now rather exhilarating; and it is precisely this new euphoria that remains to be explained'.⁹⁷

It is not surprising to observe zeal in writing about the predicaments of Lagos and Detroit, ranging from Koolhaas's exuberant discussion of informal improvisation in Lagos to the eagerness with which some await the arrival of the ten foot tall RoboCop statue in Detroit.⁹⁸ Yet, these representations possess power not just because of their cinematic attachment to compelling imagery, but because they represent an unease with contemporary urbanisation's

status quo. Increasingly, all the things about cities we have previously taken for granted – even if these were also fictions – are increasingly frayed. Detroit and Lagos don't represent a city-in-reverse, but exemplify the extremities of a continuum of permanent to temporary, formalised to informalised, urban environments. From the new 'Hooverilles' in Sacramento⁹⁹ to post-Katrina disaster cities to slums in Mumbai to refugee camps in Kenya, urbanity at the margins reveals the inequality, polarisation, and limitations of neoliberal capitalism otherwise obscured by the glare of world cities' lights.

The invocation of the concept of urban wilding deployed in this essay demonstrates that the characteristics of worlding are varied, unexpected and perhaps counterintuitive. Worldliness is found equally in the decadent ostentation of a place like Dubai – that Donald Trump of cities – as much as it is present in a now forlorn corner of the Brightmoor neighborhood in Detroit or amidst the circuitry of 'bases and junctures' in Lagos. Though much more empirical and conceptual work is needed, it is clear that the consideration of re-natured spaces and relationships is crucial to understanding the dynamics of contemporary urbanism. Following Roy's call for a 'dislocation' of urban theory from its current moorings it is possible to center the so-called margins.¹⁰⁰ On this count, the comparative juxtaposition of these cities gives further impetus to reverse the flow of theory and develop theoretical frameworks from a Southern perspective that can be applied to the cities of the North. Finally, there is an urgent need to foreground the human toll produced by Lagos and Detroit and innumerable other cities with absent, failing or oppressive physical infrastructures. Even if guns are never fired nor bombs detonated, insecurity and structural violence permeate the daily experiences of the vast majority of residents in such environments. Placing wilding in the context of worlding further clarifies the scope of the problem as well as a point of departure from which to engage it.

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