The Future of the African City as Seen from Kinshasa.

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(Filip De Boeck, Institute for Anthropological Research in Africa (IARA), University of Leuven, Belgium)

'The Hole of the World'

In the prologue of one of Sony Labou Tansi's earliest theatre texts entitled 'The Hole', the celebrated novelist and playwright from Congo-Brazzaville writes:

> There is the 'hole': so as not to fall into it, one has to enter it. The hole of life, the hole of the others. The hole of the world. The hole of hopes. The hole of reality—and the hole of dreams. The hole of religions and the hole that your own flesh is making inside yourself. (…) And then there is the hole that we call TOMORROW: tomorrow is set up as if it were an explosive. But with its foot, 'today' traces 'tomorrow' in the sand (Labou Tansi, 1998: 61–62; *my translation-FDB*).

Similar to the literary universe of Sony Labou Tansi, where the *topos* of the hole is used as a central trope to meditate about space, temporality, body and the general human condition, in the megalopolis of Kinshasa, the capital of the Democratic Republic of Congo and one of the largest and most quintessential postcolonial cities of the African continent, the figure of the 'hole' has become a local master trope, a key concept to express the dismal quality of living in today's post-colonial urban context.

In its very design, Kinshasa has often come to resemble a black hole that seems to be more corrosive than the life forms it engenders and hides. In a collaborative form of 'photo-writing', Sammy Baloji and I have used the topos of the 'hole' to generate an epistemology of the city through topography, in order to reflect upon 'cityness' in this part of the world, and upon the (im)possibility of the city as a place of inhabitation where people attempt to live, live together, and chart out a life in a context that is itself in constant need of stabilization and predictability. [1] There seems to be something about

[1] Congolese photographer Sammy Baloji and Belgian anthropologist Filip De Boeck carried out several months of field research in the DR Congo between 2013 and 2015. So far this collaboration has resulted in a book publication (De Boeck & Baloji, 2016) and an exhibition, *Urban Now. City Life in Congo* (2016), which was

the city that refuses such inhabitation; something that makes all possibilities of inhabitation suspect; that eludes any attempt to moor the city, tie it down and make it act in a predictable way, as if the city were indeed an explosive device, set to go off at any moment.

The Mountain

Historically speaking, the physical reality and the metaphor of the post-colonial hole is preceded by another topological figure with which it stands in sharp contrast, namely that of the mountain, which is a figure that embodies older historical layers, both colonial and pre-colonial, that have contributed to the formation of the physical and mental landscape of Kinshasa, today home to at least 10 million inhabitants and growing at an alarming speed.

The actual starting point of the colonial city was a mountain—Mount Khonzo Ikulu. Located along the Congo river, it was chosen by Henry Morton Stanley, the emissary of the Belgian king Leopold II, to set up camp in 1880, three years after the epic transcontinental journey that brought him worldwide fame. Soon renamed Leopold Hill, Khonzo Ikulu was a salubrious and easily defendable site that overlooked the small bay of Kintambo, a short distance from one of the most important pre-colonial Teke villages along this part of the river. In Stanley's wake, missionaries established a station at the top of Leopold Hill in July 1882. A year later, in 1883, Stanley concluded an important treaty with a confederation of local chiefs, including the powerful Teke chief Ngaliema, who lived on the slopes of Khonzo Ikulu. From then onwards and for many years to come, the colonizer's flag would fly from the summit of Leopold Hill on important occasions, while Ngaliema and all the chiefs from the surrounding villages were ordered to hoist the same flag on Sundays, signaling their obedience to the new colonial rule. After Independence, President Mobutu re-baptized Leopold Hill as Mount Ngaliema, in a symbolic gesture to erase Belgian colonialism and to reconnect with Congo's precolonial past.

Similarly, many of Kinshasa's surrounding mountains underwent profound transfigurations during colonial and post-colonial times. The histories of the autochthonous Teke chiefdoms, the Belgian colonial enterprise and Mobutu's post-colonial state project of Zaire were to a great extent connected by the fact that they all 'thought like a mountain' (cf. Pandian, 2014). All these actors (chiefs, colonizers and post-colonial nationalists) turned the topos of the mountain into a powerful metaphor to convey and give form to how each of them understood governance, sovereignty, domination, control and coercion. And today, the mountains surrounding Kinshasa continue to embody these various sedimented pasts and palimpsestual meanings.

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The Tower

In colonial times, the topographical framework offered by the mountain also provided the conceptual ground that enabled the birth of the modern colonial city. The mountain not only symbolized the panoptical authoritarianism of the colonial state but its vertical dimension also formed the perfect illustration of the ambitious dreams of colonialist modernity. After World War II the sky was the limit for Léopoldville, as Kinshasa was then called, and the colonial image of the mountain was reinforced by and translated into the vertical propositions of tropical modernist architecture. As Tim Ingold recently noted: 'In the contemporary world the skyscraper model (…) has come to dominate the way in which mountains, particularly of a more iconic or spectacular kind, have come to figure in the popular imagination' (Ingold, 2015: 32). In 1946, the Forescom Tower, Central Africa's first skyscraper, was built at the center of Léopoldville and, epitomizing colonialism's triumph, it came to replace the symbolic importance of Leopold Hill. After independence the Mobutist state constructed another skyscraper, the Sozacom Tower, alongside the Forescom Tower. Higher and more imposing than its colonial predecessor, it became the city's new landmark and symbolized the triumph of Zairean nationalism.

The Hole

However, many of the dreams engendered by these mountains and skyscrapers have become disappointments today. Even though the topos of the skyscraper is recycled by the Kabila regime to embody its aspirations of insertion into a more modern and global world, the raw urgencies of living in the physical and social environments of Congo's capital constantly belie these dreams. There is a large gap between official urban planning projects and management policies and the reality of everyday lives in the shadow of the colonial and post-colonial towers. And Congo's urban residents have long since stopped thinking that their cities are glorious mountains, for the only mountains that appear on the horizon of their urban worlds consist of the garbage piles that urban authorities ceased to collect a long time ago.

Instead, in their attempts to make sense of the life that the city imposes on them, urban denizens have turned to an opposite topographical figure: the hole. In Kinshasa, the concept of hole, or *libulu* in Lingala (which is the city's lingua franca), has come to define the wretched, dreary place that the city has become for many. The 'hole' has become a local conceptual figure to express the dismal quality of urban life in the post-colonial city. The notion of the 'hole' may refer to potholes as generic urban infrastructures, to the giant erosion holes that appear in the slopes of Kinshasa's hills after

heavy rainstorms, to the meagre livelihoods provided by artisanal mining holes and informal markets, or to the city itself as a death-world and a 'cemetery of the living' (Mavinga, 2011).

The concept of the hole thus not only refers to the tangible physical depressions on its surface, but also to the dark matter of the urban praxis itself. Holes are both a symptom of and metaphor 'for an experience of loss that is simultaneously material and moral. Erosion itself signifies not only the city's physical decline; it also informs discourses about the corrosion of wealth and values…' (Walker, 2014, p. 76). Holes, in other words, are potent local tropes to encapsulate the experience of living in an urban context said to be marked by 'multi-crisis'. At the same time discourses of holes are also problematic in their suggestion that urban existence is solely defined by depletion, as if these holes 'were not, themselves, productive in any sense besides the depletive' (Walker, 2014, p. 31). Indeed, the hole is never just a black hole; it is never merely hollow or emptied of content. Holes also have the capacity to metaphorically elide how life continues through, and despite, decline. And even if living the experience of the hole considerably complicates life and often degrades its quality, the hole itself also offers an aperture, an opening, a possibility, at least for those who know how to read an alternative meaning into its blackness.

Holes as Points of Suture

If the hole is the city's ground zero, it also figures as a point of suture, as junction and as seam (cf. Hunt 2018). In *Suturing the City* (2016), Sammy Baloji and I elaborated on this idea and extended the notion of suture as closure to the way in which, often against all odds, the inhabitants of Congo's urban landscapes read meaning into the black hole of the city; the way in which they use material, but also mental and moral holes, as suture points to fill the gaps, overcome the hiatus, design realignments and thereby redefine the zero—that is, the impossible circumstances of living in the kind of urban environment that Congo's cities offer—into a possibility, a something else, a surplus. Taken like this, the notion of suture is always between zero as a lack, as something impossible to conceptualize, and zero as a number, as 'one'. It is in that sense that the hole as suture both represents lack while also placing and 'suturing' it (Miller, 2012, p. 93).

What is important to capture and understand here, it seems to me, is how urban residents do exactly that: how they manage—with varying degrees of success—to turn an absence into presence; how they read potential, promise and prospect into the blackness of the hole; how they throw themselves—their words and their own bodies—into this daily struggle with the city's madness; and how it is the hole itself that propels them to do that. In this sense, tropes of hole and suture tell us something about the changes that have taken place in how urbanity is imagined and lived in the

Democratic Republic of Congo today. It makes us reflect on the infrastructural and social degradation of the city but also on how the closures occasioned by these ruinations are being reworked into something else. To understand how exactly such ‘reworking’ and reassembling take place, what attempts are being made to fill the post-colonial hole, and what possible answers urban residents come up with in response to the challenge it poses, remains one of the main challenges for those who study the city in the context of the Global South.

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