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Performing Popular Culture and Public Memory: Tales of Three African Cities

This often surprising and original set of essays, addressing orality and performance along with that untidy concoction of elements we now call visual culture, begins and ends with museums: Danielle de Lame on the new National Museum in Nairobi and Ciraj Rassool on the closing of the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum in Cape Town. The focus of the thirteen other chapters ranges across music, theater, museums again, word/image relations, sport as ritual, public (*matatu*) transport, conviviality in eating establishments, and Sheng, a popular street language in Nairobi—that is, on the performative aspects of popular culture. While there is more on Nairobi (five essays) and Cape Town (six essays), the three contributions on Lubumbashi are each extraordinary and give the book much more than their share of its weight.

De Lame's introduction, "On the Popular, the Public, the Fixed and the Vernacular," is meant to provide the theoretical underpinnings for the book as well as to position its author relative to the three cities of the subtitle. An anthropologist associated with the Royal Museum for Central Africa, Tervuren (RMCA, in French MRAC), the world's biggest museum devoted exclusively to Africa, she found herself observing museums well outside the Belgian colonial-postcolonial ambit, on a much smaller scale, and often far more specialized than the vast RMCA which, like the Met, occupies the equivalent of a large city block made even larger by its surrounding formal gardens. She acknowledges her indebtedness to Johannes Fabian with regard to the conceptualizing of pop-

ular culture and to Bogumil Jewsiewicki for introducing her to Lubumbashi after she had conducted research in rural Rwanda. In keeping with her own European cultural landscape, she also looks to Peter Gerschiere, Birgit Meyer, and Peter Pels and their 2008 *Readings in Modernity in Africa*. Beyond them there is Ulf Hannerz on cosmopolitanism, Jean-François Bayart on extraversion and displacement, Pierre Bourdieu's *habitus*, A. Gupta and James Ferguson on the "fixed" and the vernacular, M. Simone on humans as infrastructure, and many more.[1]

The difficulty with the introduction of so many theoretical viewpoints, however interesting, is that they create a very complicated understructure on which to build a clear, sustained argument. The result is a *flâneur's* stroll up several fascinating side streets rather than an easy-to-read map of the book's main thoroughfare. But a few of these asides are very much worth remembering as the book is read. For example, de Lame notes that, given all the contestations about what is popular culture, elites in fact have their own "popular culture" which is rarely acknowledged or written about (p. 19). A corollary to this might be the recognition that only elites write about the performance of popular culture because, typically, only elites write and publish, so it can rarely be an experiential theorization. Furthermore the boundaries between elite and popular culture are constantly in flux, as Denis-Constant Martin demonstrates in his essay on the creolization of Cape Town. He observed that *La Bohème* played to a full house of a wide mix of Capetonians on the same day in 2001 that he observed "marimba, rap

and techno musicians” at Monwabisi Beach south of the city and the All Stars and other troupes rehearsing comic songs in Afrikaans for the New Year’s Carnival (p. 183).

As a frequent traveler to Nairobi I was especially interested in de Lame’s reactions to the new replacement for the old National Museum (Coryndon), Nairobi, a gift from the European Union. It stands atop Museum Hill in Westlands, a retreat from the brashness and noisy *matatu* culture everyone associates with the city. The old hominid dioramas are still attracting the curious, though with many parts updated and revamped. This is the heart of the museum, made famous internationally by the excavations of early hominids in Olduvai Gorge in Tanzania, and in more recent years, by such excavations in northern Kenya and southern Ethiopia as Koobi Fora on the eastern shore of Lake Turkana. The old taxidermied wildlife displays, from birds to lions and elephants, are still intact and still attract naughty children trying to touch them. The Kenyan history room has been reinstalled with a number of compelling images from colonial history and the Mau Mau insurgency. What has been greatly reduced and diluted in the interests of “new” museology are the old ethnographic displays, so it is no longer possible for, say, a Gikuyu grandmother to point out old Gikuyu material culture to her grandchildren. Instead the designers seemed determined to cover over ethnic identities in favor of an imported post-ethnic version of the generic modern state, a conscious political strategy in the creation of national citizenship, as we’ll see carried out in Cape Town. Versions of this have been tried in various African countries since the 1970s, for example by the well-meaning Tanzanian socialist government of Julius Nyerere that didn’t stop at removing ethnic labels from museum displays but also tried to make the Maasai exchange their *shukas* for trousers when riding in public transport.

The same post-ethnic strategies seem to have been applied in closing the Bushman Diorama in the (now Iziko) South African Museum in Cape Town, which Ciraj Rassool writes about in another essay. In contrast with South Africa, where this resulted from prolonged public debate on the issue, in Nairobi it happened, presumably, in closed curatorial meetings. De Lame’s suggestion that the shops surrounding the plaza of the new complex are full of souvenirs imported from Asia is a bit unfair. This may have been an early stop-gap measure. Certainly today a great many of the articles are Kenyan, and in the official museum shop inside, filled with books and splendid up-market crafts, everything is from Kenya or Uganda. The most disconcerting aspect of the new museum is that

four years after reopening, it is still very empty-feeling, as if built for a huge exhibition that never materialized.

The most theoretically comprehensive essay is Bogumil Jewsiewicki’s “Building Social Selves through Images and Sounds: Post-scriptural Creativity in Congo,” which masterfully brings together his years of research on music, language, and image-making as part of a discourse, both broad and deep, on Congolese postcolonial popular culture. A hedgehog among the foxes here, he is still a philosophical (though far from doctrinaire) Marxist. He sees the social imaginary as a product of image and written/spoken word, both of them activated by the desire to construct a modern self. At the same time his reading of that local self, affected by global conditions, asserts that both are reminiscent of the conditions Marx claimed existed between human beings and production relations (p. 40). Out of this mix he sees his project as understanding how cultural sovereignty is constructed—under colonialism’s domination in the past and globalization’s inexorable sweep today.

Reasons of space make a full presentation of his arguments impractical here, so I limit my comments to those of greatest interest to scholars of orality and visual culture. These arguments involve, necessarily, both collective subjectivities and a person’s individual experience of the world. A key point for this volume is that, in the Congo at least, Jewsiewicki (like Johannes Fabian) sees performativity as having overtaken and encompassing narrativity with the “primary mode by which the imaginary circulates [being] post-scriptural orality” (p. 41). By this he means that the spoken word must be positioned constantly and communicated in relation to the written one that may emanate from hegemonic bureaucracy, the church, elite culture, and so on. Orality is thus not about the reproduction of “tradition” because the spoken word constantly refers to the written one. As to the role of the image in relation to both, it (the magazine photo, the painting, etc.) works to complete the configuration of the imaginary, either to be learned (as in school), or subverted, as in the work of urban painters whose word/image combinations are circulated as orality. A simple illustration of how this works can be observed in any African city. Around a sidewalk newspaper vendor there is usually a cluster of people, reading the news for free. When they leave, the words and images they carry with them are transformed into orality—a circulating discourse of fact, allegation, and rumor.

Jewsiewicki goes on to consider music, dance, and what he terms “post-photographic urban perfor-

mance”(p. 47). Music’s particular social power comes from the fact that it is typically experienced in groups, which in turn amplifies its ability to transgress social boundaries. He notes further that music, sometimes under cover of religion, is found in every public space, where it “succeeds informally in a way that Mobutu’s political organization (party and state propaganda), with all its power and money, did not” (p. 46). As to the fixed image, there are many points raised, some familiar from previous writings, others new. Perhaps the most important is what he calls the “collective phenomenon of produced and consumed images” which are exchanged and read as society’s memory (p. 49). A familiar example here from his earlier writings is that of *bula matari*, “the one who explodes rocks,” a name given originally to the explorer Henry Stanley and then to white colonizers in the “Colonie Belge” paintings, but now to their corrupt postcolonial heirs who have usurped power.

Sometimes I ask myself what their writings would look like if Ciraj Rassool and Leslie Witz worked in Lubumbashi and Bogumil Jewsiewicki (and to complete the symmetry though he does not appear in this book, Johannes Fabian) worked in Cape Town. According to Jewsiewicki, Lubumbashi has no art criticism or exhibition spaces other than the marketplace. Instead, he argues, a cluster of shared tastes develops into a semiotics of language about what is beautiful and/or relevant, giving artworks their heuristic value (p. 50). For Witz and Rassool, the crucial concerns are the exhibition and performance spaces themselves, what their existence tells us about South African society, how and by whom they are deployed and evaluated as effective institutions for remembering (or forgetting) the past. Since such lines of questioning are not usually focused on aesthetic objects, the issues of shared taste and aesthetic value which matter so fundamentally in Lubumbashi lie outside their respective projects.

Despite the huge differences between South Africa and the Congo, they had “a dream” in common. In the Congo, it was *bula matari* who broke the promise of independence, which was “to offer the life of white men to all” (p. 46). In South Africa the ending of apartheid, however unrealistically, held out the same promise. Ordinary people, with or without their cultural memories (the Congo) or spaces of remembrance (South Africa), are still waiting for that dream to materialize.

The other two essays from Lubumbashi—Donatien Dibwe’s “Let’s Laugh It Off: Mufwankolo’s Theatre and the Quest for Morality” and Richard Kabeke Lube-

mbu’s “Fetishes in the Wrestling Ring: Sport as Ritual Twilight”—are also intricately argued. I will defer the discussion of Mufwankolo’s essay in order to compare it with Oby Obyerodhiambo’s critique of “popular” theater in Kenya. Lubembo’s analysis of professional wrestling in Lubumbashi likens it to other types of ritual performance. To anyone who has watched Friday night wrestling in the United States—also broadcast in Kenya and other African countries, this would sound immediately familiar. Not only does the high level of theatricality before and during the match regularly challenge the spectator’s credulity, it is carried to the next level here by the invocation of sorcery by one contestant against another, complete with an array of “fetishes” displayed and guarded prominently at ringside (p. 171). These are made the old-fashioned way from kaolin, animal skins, magic *nsote* snakes, fragments of old cloth, masks, candles, prickly pearls, powders, and small flasks containing magical substances such as water gathered during the first rains.

A brass band plays songs appropriate for the occasion such as *Baya Kalunga: Les Habitants du Cimetière*, which puts wrestlers in touch with their masters, the spirits of the dead. Lubembo notes that “haunting cemeteries and visiting diviners and fetisheers put a wrestler’s life on a tight schedule” (p. 177). When they are not wrestling, they often capitalize on their expertise in the supernatural and work as diviners, traditional therapists, or sorcerers. Stepping back from all this, the author makes the claim that the re-emergence of traditional ritual, in this case in sport, is caused by “a devastating modernity, which, as it spreads, can impoverish, metamorphose or enrich social practices that have been repressed by colonization” (p. 179). Modernity here emerges as a kind of virus, incapable of being successfully controlled, but also having a tonic effect on the imagination.

One element very visible in several essays on Nairobi and Lubumbashi is that of the conviviality of bars and eating establishments as a staging for popular culture. Jewsiewicki describes how in Lubumbashi they function as places of identity formation as well as entertainment and for Nairobi, Mercy Gakii and Martin Tindi go a step further in exploring the sharing of food, especially roasted meat (*nyama choma*), in the experiencing of affordable social pleasure across a wide range of social classes and levels of wealth. In Kenya this usually goes hand in hand with beer drinking and the chewing of *miraa*, a mildly stimulating plant known as *khat* or *chat* in neighboring countries and grown locally on the slopes of Mt. Meru.

The essay “Meeting in Bars and Grills: Nyama Choma as a Place [*sic*] of Differential Conviviality” is unusual within the collection in that it focuses on elite and tourist as well as popular taste, with a detailed description of Nairobi’s premier meat-eating establishment, the Carnivore, a nightclub-cum-restaurant specializing in game meat and name musicians, located well outside the city center and requiring a car (and plenty of money) in order to frequent. Shared meat-eating, a type of conviviality not available to the really poor except on rare occasions such as weddings, can symbolize everything from fellowship and male bonding to political and economic “big man” clout (William Ruto, the politician and presidential aspirant, held a meat-eating fundraiser reported recently on television news) depending on the type of establishment in which it is consumed. Even in the least expensive kiosks and hole-in-the-wall eating places throughout Kenya, the customer can select his cut of meat to be roasted, a privilege not extended in classier European-style restaurants. It is this participatory aspect that makes meat-eating more than a simple business transaction and elevates it to a form of sociality.

Nairobi’s quintessential popular culture symbol is undoubtedly the *matatu*—rude, noisy, and fast—where your wallet or mobile phone can disappear in seconds, and, if you are a woman passenger, you (your figure, your clothes, your supposed reputation) are likely to be evaluated in Sheng by the tout and surrounding males. Mbugua wa-Mungai writes of these ubiquitous minivans with names like *Ground Missile* and *Road Warrior* in “Dynamics of Popular Transgression: the Speed Culture of Nairobi Matatu.” The admonition to passengers boarding or getting off, “*fasta fasta wewe* [Sheng: Faster! Faster you]!” not only refers to the required alacrity of movement but to the larger desire, he argues, for the crew to transport and thus transform a speeding vehicle into a trope for transgressive popular Kenyan youth culture.

This is evidenced four ways (in addition to the literal speed and recklessness with which these minivans weave through clogged city streets): first, through a steady stream of verbal abuse and commentary from the conductor, in a combination of Sheng, Kiswahili, and Gikuyu; second, by the choice of loud and often transgressive music played over the *matatu*’s speakers (such as American or South African rap in which crew members mouth the words, usually without understanding what they mean); third, by the fashion statements made by the crew, which reflect international youth culture, especially that of African American hip hop; and fourth, in the designs and slogans on the *matatu* as artifact, drawn

from film, TV, sports, comic book characters, and icons of criminality in pop culture. Periodically the government cracks down on *matatu* excesses by passing regulations that prevent such freewheeling expression. However, *matatu* owners comprise a powerful political lobby and these attempts to subdue the exuberance of *matatu* culture always wane after a couple of years of enforcement.

While it was beyond the scope of the essay, it would have been interesting to contrast Nairobi city *matatus* with those that ply between Nairobi and upcountry towns which are themselves outposts of a more provincial modernity. The slogans tend to be more old-fashioned (“No Hurry in Africa”), the vehicle itself is usually dilapidated from the torturous roads, and the tout is usually only on board at major stops where his job is to sell every seat before embarking. His demeanor, though certainly not friendly, is usually short of transgressive, partly because speed is no longer the operative metaphor. Rather it is toughness, the ability to get through difficulties.

There is an unspoken contract that the driver will deliver the passenger safely at a destination which often involves the real possibility of encounters with danger: the North Rift (Valley), once the tarmac ends, is plagued with cattle rustlers who moonlight as roadside bandits, lingering herds of elephants, impassable rainy season quagmires requiring long detours, and so on—familiar to me since I live there for several months a year. The tires are usually threadbare and the driver may or may not carry a spare, so much time is spent on road sides waiting for help. All of this changes the ambience from that of Nairobi’s rude sexual banter and loud music on board to subdued conversation overtaken by an uneasy silence during the bad stretches, as passengers pray nothing will happen as they approach well-known danger zones.

The author makes frequent reference to the use of Sheng in *matatus*, which he sees as not only a way of self-identifying the speaker with current youth culture, but also as a form of evasiveness which “acts as a quasi-private space for the young, enabling them to shut out outsiders at will” (p. 131). This places them in command of “immense cultural capital.” By now Sheng has been the subject of numerous studies, as “code-switching,” as “conscious heteroglossia,” and as a “hidden transcript” (pp. 130-131). In this book it is also the subject of a separate essay by Kiprop Lagat, “The Sheng Generation: Language and Youth Identity in Nairobi.”

Lagat’s Sheng essay is more historical, noting how

the language developed through early twentieth-century urban migration, which under British colonial patterns of segregation, created a potpourri of languages spoken in Eastlands, the African residential side of Nairobi. These rural migrants, confronting Kiswahili as a lingua franca and English as the language of officialdom and higher education, adopted the former. In turn, this caused Kiswahili to lose status locally since it became associated with the urban poor of Nairobi.

The following generation, born in Nairobi, began mixing Swahili and English (hence Sh/Eng) while retaining the grammar and syntax of Swahili. This new class of urban youth rejected their parents' rural cultural values but retained their ethnic identities (Gikuyu, Luo, Kamba, and so on), partly through speaking a rural language at home. Out of this, Sheng emerged as a hybrid language, short-circuiting the three language spheres and developing its own jargon and onomatopoeic renderings.

Lagat attributes the rapid spread of Sheng originally to street hawkers in Eastlands but more currently to *matatu* touts, FM radio stations, street children, and the music industry. I can add one more source: the enormously successful comic book *Shujaaz*, distributed free throughout the country, in which the principal characters are a handful of Sheng-speaking teenagers from Kabera, a vast Nairobi slum similar to the neighborhoods where Sheng originated. Perhaps inevitably, just as "Valley Girl" speech of southern California ("Like, I was walking down the street? ") has become ubiquitous youth speech in the United States, Sheng has moved across geographic and class boundaries, fracturing and re-emerging in affluent Nairobi suburbs as Eng'sh, with a stronger English component. At the other end of the economic spectrum, it is the language of Nairobi street children, who have their own version of Sheng, and as (some of them) grow into adults, it may remain their primary language.

The most important vector for its spread, the author argues, has been the liberalization of radio broadcasting in the 1990s which created many local FM stations in Kenya and opportunities for local musicians to compete with Congolese and American imports. Astute producers saw Sheng as the language of choice for attracting a young radio audience in a multilingual society. It worked, and Kenyan pop music using Sheng lyrics has launched the careers of several local singers, such as Nonini (Hubert Nakitare) and his hit song *We Kamu* [You come]. Another, the late E-Sir Mmari, was among the first musicians pioneering the now popular Kenyan hip-hop. With the aforementioned evasiveness of Sheng

speech, he and other musicians have been able to conceal what their songs were really about, thus fulfilling the desire for their own cultural capital.

Theater is the most ideologically contested of the arts considered in this volume, and the one which begs a closer reading of what is meant by "popular." What has been called "classic popular theatre" in Kenya, Oby Obyerodhyambo argues here, really wasn't, in that it was staged by intellectual promoters and fell dormant as soon as they disappeared from the scene. He refers to the much-lauded but short-lived "Kamirithu experiment" in which the Kenyan writer and political activist Ngugi wa Thiong'o staged two productions in the Gikuyu language (instead of English) at Kamirithu village on the outskirts of Nairobi (instead of in the National Theatre) and in doing so, provided ordinary *wananchi* (peasants and workers) access to and participation in dramatic performances that normally would be available only to an elite audience.

What turned this into an iconic event in political theater was that in March 1982 the dictatorial and paranoid Moi government arrested Ngugi and put him in detention, and destroyed the Kamirithu performance space. In response to an abortive coup attempt later that same year, a government crackdown on both political dissent and artistic expression drove the theater movement underground. From this atmosphere, two strategies emerged among theater activists. One was to stage South African plays by writers such as Athol Fugard which provided "a safe metaphorical haven in which to criticize political repression in Kenya" (p. 111). Since the Kenya government was on record as being anti-apartheid, they could not criticize or prevent these performances.

The second strategy, in which the author was involved, was to adapt traditional oral performance genres, again using symbolism and metaphor to mask their expressions of dissent. His particular genre was given the name Sigana, which described "an interactive and participatory performance of narrative, song, dance, percussive music, chant, riddling and banter" (p. 110). Five years after the destruction of Kamirithu, a renaissance of sorts occurred when two new lecturers were hired by the Literature Department of the University of Nairobi, moribund since the departure of Ngugi, Micere Mugo, and other activists. Opiyo Mumma and Gachugu Makini had both earned Masters' degrees at the famous Sherman Theatre, University of Wales, and their presence re-established the Literature Department as a hub for artists. As a result the Theatre Workshop was established and later linked with

Theatre for Development, which both deployed “process-driven workshopping as the preferred creative methodology” (p. 109).

It is worth comparing this type of popular theater, participatory but overseen by university-trained dramatists, to such popular theater as Herbert Ogunde’s Yoruba travelling theater of the pre-Nollywood era, more moralistic and less political in its footprint, or Mufwankolo’s theater described in this volume by Donatien Dibwe dia Mwemba in “Let’s Laugh it Off: Mufwankolo’s Theatre and the Quest for Morality.” If popular theater in Kenya has always been a top-down enterprise led by intellectuals, in Lubumbashi and Kinshasa its connections with the elite have been different, occurring in the late colonial and early independence period, after which it evolved into a fully popular form. Here a man named Odilon Kyembe, alias Mufwankolo (a nickname meaning “who will die wearing a tie”), from humble beginnings in which he trained as a carpenter, has been organizing his own theater troupes and productions since the 1950s, when he was barely out of his teens.

These performances started in Lubumbashi but as their reputation spread they began touring other Katanga districts and further afield. They won juried drama contests sponsored by the Belgian colonialists which got them invited to the Brussels World Fair in 1958. In 1960 they returned to Congo to stage a play, by invitation, to mark the country’s independence. Afterward Mufwankolo began working in Kinshasa and set up a radio troupe which also toured villages. With the introduction of television in Lubumbashi in 1972 he formed a new troupe that performed weekly on TV. Unfortunately things began to unravel about that time in the Ministry of Arts and Culture and have continued to worsen as each regime has become increasingly dysfunctional; yet Mufwankolo, now in his 70s, perseveres.

He writes his own plays, which are moralistic in their social message (examples: *Watoto Wote ni wa Lazima* [All children are as good as each other]; *Bibi wa Bakata*, [The boss’s wife]; *Mufwankolo Mufumu* [Mufwankolo the healer]). These scripts are much shorter than the performed plays, because he reads each story to the actors who then improvise their lines and must remember them from the rehearsal to the performance. He is in charge of casting and costume design, and constantly has to negotiate ways to pay for his actors’ travel and accommodation. Despite his fame, he has never amassed material wealth. After visiting him, the author reports that he owned neither a working television nor a radio. The

Congolese literati are more interested in foreign actors and theater people than in him. But when he and the author rode a bus into the city together following their interview, the other bus passengers, upon recognizing him from performances, and displaying their loyalty and admiration, insisted on paying his fare—proof, if any were needed, of the meaning of “popular” (p. 145).

If I have spent more words describing the essays on Nairobi and Lubumbashi than on Cape Town, it is because their urban character is much less written about, at least in English-language publications, and this seemed an opportune moment to give them their deserved place in the current scholarly discourse on African cities. For both historical and political reasons, South African scholars have taken a leading role in defining the parameters of cultural studies in Africa, particularly the History Department at University of the Western Cape and several departments at the University of the Witwatersrand. Even wider influence has come from writers such as Athol Fugard in dramatizing life under apartheid. If there is an Africanist scholar alive anywhere who has not yet heard the story of District Six or of Robben Island and their respective second careers as museums, they must have been cloistered in outer space or Antarctica during the past twenty years. Still it is worth pointing out the resonance of the Cape Town case studies with those from Nairobi or Lubumbashi.

A major obsession with national memory has grown up around the experience of the apartheid state and the best ways to deal with a national trauma that lasted half a century. Let me begin with the museums. There were many similarities between the old National Museum in Nairobi and the old South African Museum in Cape Town, both venerable natural history institutions whose ethnographic displays have now been reinstalled or at least modified to reflect current opinion (sometimes public, sometimes elite) on the proper role of ethnography in a multicultural society. Whereas both museums have moved toward a “post-ethnic” style of display, both are also caught in the contradiction created by their support of the Indigenous Peoples rights movement, which is centered around ethnic identity. Playing the correct curatorial card turns out to be much more difficult in South Africa, where indigeneity is a very lively political issue compared to Kenya, where it sits on the civil society/human rights periphery most of the time. For one thing the tall proud Maasai (one of Kenya’s designated “indigenous peoples”) were admired by the white settler aristocracy, who thought they were “like us” while the Khoisan in South Africa were treated as inferior Oth-

ers and actually hunted down at one point by white settlers. There have been clashes over indigenous land use and tourist game reserves in both countries, but there is nowadays very little of the old “disappearing peoples” discourse about the Maasai as there had been throughout much of the twentieth century. The closest parallel to Khoisan in Kenya are the so-called Ltorrobo groups such as Okiek, former elephant hunters and foragers who have now adopted pastoralism and/or farming.

One of the current arguments for closing the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum is the moralistic position that “people and animals should not be displayed in the same museum” (p. 266), an argument that essentially disposes of the traditional natural history museum—whether the National Museum Nairobi, the Smithsonian in Washington DC, the Field Museum in Chicago, the American Museum of Natural History in New York, or, of course, the RMCA in Tervuren, publishers of this book. It is unclear whether the argument would lose its steam if early white settlers were also subjects of display. This seems to be a logical way forward if such museums are to have any future.

I happened to be in Cape Town in 1996 when the *Miscast* exhibition was being shown at the National Gallery across the Company Gardens from the South African Museum’s Bushman Diorama and the various Bushman (as they then were calling themselves) communities were quite divided on the whole idea of being on display. Several spoke favorably of the diorama because it depicted, however sentimentally, “who we were”; on the other hand several spokesmen found the imagery in Pippa Skotnes’s *Miscast* (which included dessicated severed heads and old photographs of lynchings) too painful to look at. Yet again, in the remarks in the *Miscast* visitors book, the (primarily white and educated) audience, including Nadine Gordimer, spoke of the need to reveal the horrific details of Bushman persecution in the hope of a public expression of remorse. Rassool reports the same spread of opinions in 2000, mainly voiced at conferences about heritage activism such as the Khoisan Legacy Project (pp. 266-269). At one venue, the diorama’s closing was supported on the grounds that “it did not depict indigenous people as human,” a somewhat difficult conclusion to reach if one had actually seen it—women sitting around a cooking fire and a man poised to shoot an arrow (p. 266). At a different group’s meeting, the closing was condemned on the grounds that the San past should be preserved. This kind of debate is echoed in every controversial exhibition around the world so is not likely to be resolved any time soon.

There are also essays on two other South African museums, the Lwandle and the District Six Museum, both written by authors formerly associated (presumably as students) with the History Department at University of Western Cape. While museums (not just their contents but their strategic importance and how they are deployed in the community) have been a breakthrough site for public scholarship, especially in South Africa, the “public” doesn’t always rise to the occasion. The Lwandle Migrant Labour Museum near Cape Town is a case in point. Public history practitioners undoubtedly want to educate the public about the harsh realities of life for migrant laborers under the former Apartheid Group Areas Act. But as one of the most prominent of them, Leslie Witz, put it, it is very difficult for such museums “to find a place in the international tourist image economy” (p. 257). In the Lwandle essay the authors, Bongani Mgijima and Vusi Buthelezi, make it clear why. The museum, a former migrant labor hostel still inhabited, was built, like all hostels, on the same architectural principles as prisons, with a single, easily watched entrance and exit point. Besides having unpromising spaces to work with, the museum organizers (including one of the authors) had to contend with a paucity of artifacts for display and the ethics of collecting things working-class people are using in their everyday lives. By both intention and necessity it ends up, like the colonial history room in the reinstalled National Museum, Nairobi, being a museum display of old photographs, many without narratives that bring them to life. Or sometimes the opposite happens, a former hostel resident still living in the neighborhood shows up and becomes an impromptu tour guide, upstaging the academically trained official guides in the museum’s employ and pointing out the mistakes in their narrative.

Inevitably the District Six Museum had to make an appearance in a book such as this, and the essay by Zuleiga Adams, “Gazing at District Six: From Fairyland to the Arab Quarter,” performs the task by examining writings on the Holocaust and then Orientalism and the subaltern to find parallels for speaking of the past through the voices of survivors/subalterns. This is a prelude for her discussion of the process used in the creation of the District Six Museum Sound Archives in which ex-residents were charged with recounting their memories of District Six before its destruction. Her key question is, “How does the production of memory in relation to District Six circulate between those who engage critically with its myths and those who celebrate it?” (p. 227). As if in proof of my earlier point that there is no one in African studies who has not heard of District Six, the au-

thor at no point provides any historical background for what happened there. Unfortunately this too contributes to what she herself criticizes: the distancing of it in popular discourse as a magical place, a “fairyland”—the fewer facts one is given about who lived there and what happened to them, the easier it is to substitute mythologies instead.

As a Master’s dissertation chapter written in a department known for its intellectual sophistication, it has clearly reached out broadly into literature on memory and representation to bring insights from Holocaust memories to bear upon District Six as a major piece of the Western Cape Oral History Project, as well as paying respects to theorists Gayatri Spivak and Edward Said, noting that when the latter came to tour the District Six Museum, the trustees commented that it was the apartheid regime’s Arab Quarter (p. 227, n. 12).[2] But heritage studies (which heavily involve memory, presence, and absence) in the rest of Africa have burgeoned since this dissertation’s submission in 2003, and it would have benefited from a look at that literature, much of which involves memories of the slave trade.[3]

While popular culture has been the implicit conceptual framework upon which the essays set in Lubumbashi and Nairobi are hung, those on Cape Town are drawn from a different intellectual position, that of public culture. This is chiefly due to the co-editorship of Ciraj Rasool and the major presence of the History Department at the University of Western Cape. There, the public culture/public history paradigm has been used as a frame for exploring the issues surrounding exclusion and silencing of a non-white majority during half a century of apartheid rule. Many of the tools for writing about this excluded majority have been drawn from theories of visual culture, particularly that of public displays: museums, monuments, and spectacles.

Leslie Witz, in one of the six Cape Town essays, writes of “Apartheid’s Icons in the New Millennium: The Making and Remaking of Settler Histories.” He compares two enactments of a Cape Town public spectacle to commemorate the founding of the settler colony there in 1652 by the Dutch East India Company, the first at the beginning of apartheid in 1952 and the second in 2002, eight years after its official demise and the beginning of the “Rainbow Nation,” South Africa’s version of multiculturalism. Not surprisingly the two events were very different, the 1952 celebration focused on Jan van Riebeeck and his wife Maria de la Quellerie, “iconized as South Africa’s first settlers and imposers of apartheid” while fifty years

later they were barely visible (p. 204). The earlier event included a replica of the 1899 statue of van Riebeeck, a forty thousand-seat festival stadium, choirs, youth parades, and many floats, the most dramatic, “We Build the Nation,” consisting of a huge horse-drawn chariot bearing a young boy and girl with the South African flag.

Cape Town, always the most heterogeneous of South African cities, was by 2002 committed to a display of racial harmony rather than white supremacy. While the African National Congress had by then dropped Van Riebeeck Day from the list of public holidays, an exception appeared to be made that year, the 350th anniversary of the landing, which the Cape Town City Council planned to commemorate modestly with a wreath-laying ceremony and a twenty-one-gun salute. It never happened. The only explanation forthcoming was that the “military command in Pretoria denied permission for the salute.” The *Cape Times*, which supported the commemoration, later remarked that Jan van Riebeeck and Maria de la Quellerie had apparently been “consigned to the rubbish dump of history” (p. 210).

Witz goes on to surgically dissect the motives and shades of opinion comprising respective campaigns and their aftermath, notably in 1952; the dissent in different parts of the white community (Boer versus British) which was papered over, as well as the protests from the unrepresented; and in 2002, the attempts at accommodation brought about by the coalition formed the previous year between the African National Congress and the New National Party to govern the province of the Western Cape. This latter involved the hiring of a media company to “celebrate the country’s long journey from subjugation to liberation,” to be called *Cape Town 350*, complete with banners, T-shirts, a Web site, even a local Businessman of the Year competition (pp. 213-214). History was deleted from this upbeat campaign, there being no mention of Van Riebeeck, “founding,” or “dispossession” (p. 214). What little history was invoked in the media campaign was reframed in a suitably multicultural form as “contact” between cultures.

One could, in fairness, call both the 1952 and the 2002 series of events textbook exercises in the revision of history to match the goals of the sponsors, not unlike the founding myths in many African oral histories. Van Riebeeck’s wife Maria de la Quellerie, for example, has come to be viewed as a “brown” woman by the (mostly brown) Cape Town public. The author concludes that these “contestations of history” are bound to be ongoing, since they are rooted in changing politics.

The book ends with Valmont Layne's "'Refiguring' the Music Archive in South Africa," that serves as the other bookend to Danielle de Lame's introduction. Its inclusion hinges on the issue of music as an important part of national memory, a point also made by Bogumil Jewsiewicki for the Congo. Layne's notion of refiguring comes from a seminar and conference at the University of Witwatersrand which considered the wider issue of refiguring archives as codifications of national memory, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report being a prime example. Its counterpart in music has been the 2001 announcement of the National Indigenous Music Project, since superseded by a much larger project called Freedom Park that "attempts to redefine a new archival grid" for South Africa (p. 278). Implicit in this is a view of the archive as a store of contested knowledge about the past. In traveling through the book, one therefore moves from theories of how cultural sovereignty is constructed (Jewsiewicki) to how it is continuously contested (Witz, Layne). I wish the book had a title more reflective of its complexity, but as it stands it can be highly recommended to anyone seeking to know more of what "popular" might mean in three very different African cities. Through all this, modernity flows like a turbulent river,

churning around obstacles thrown up by the past.

Notes

[1]. Peter Geschiere, Birgit Meyer, and Peter Pels, eds., *Readings in Modernity in Africa* (Oxford/Bloomington: James.Currey Ltd/Indiana University Press, 2008); Ulf Hannerz, *Cultural Complexity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992); Jean-Francois Bayart, *The State in Africa: The Politics of the Belly* (London: Longman, 1993); Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990); A. Gupta and James Ferguson, "Beyond Culture: Space, Identity and the Politics of Difference," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 6-23; and M. Simone, "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg," *Public Culture* 44 (2004): 407-429.

[2]. Gayatri C. Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7/8 (1985); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Routledge & Keegan, 1978).

[3]. Michael Rowlands and Ferdinand De Jong, eds., *Reclaiming Heritage: Alternative Imaginaries of Memory in West Africa* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007).

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