KINSHASA
TALES OF THE INVISIBLE CITY
AND THE SECOND WORLD

AN INTRODUCTION

The ancients built Valdrada on the shores of a lake, with houses all verandas one above the other, and high streets whose railed parapets look out over the water. Thus the traveler, arriving, sees two cities: one erect above the lake, and the other reflected, upside down. Nothing exists or happens in the one Valdrada that the other Valdrada does not repeat, because the city was so constructed that its every point would be reflected in its mirror, and the Valdrada down in the water contains not only all the flutings and juttings of the facades that rise above the lake, but also the rooms’ interiors with ceilings and floors, the perspective of the halls, the mirrors of the wardrobes.

Valdrada’s inhabitants know that each of their actions is, at once, that action and its mirror-image, which possesses the special dignity of images, and this awareness prevents them from succumbing for a single moment to chance and forgetfulness. Even when lovers twist their naked bodies, skin against skin, seeking the position that will give one the most pleasure in the other, even when murderers plunge the knife into the black veins of the neck and more clotted blood pours out the more they press the blade that slips between the tendons, it is not so much their copulating or murdering that matters as the copulating or murdering of the images, limpid and cold in the mirror.

At times the mirror increases a thing’s value, at times denies it. Not everything that seems valuable above the mirror maintains its force when mirrored. The twin cities are not equal, because nothing that exists or happens in Valdrada is symmetrical: every face and gesture is answered, from the mirror, by a face and gesture inverted, point by point. The two Valdradas live for each other, their eyes interlocked; but there is no love between them.

[Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities]

1 image 

1 im.ij n [ME, fr. OF, short for imagene, fr. L imagin-, imago; akin to L imitare to imitate] 1: a reproduction or imitation of the form of a person or thing; esp: an imitation in solid form: Statue 2 a: the optical counterpart of an object produced by an optical device (as a lens or mirror) or an electronic device b: a likeness of an object produced on a photographic material 3 a: exact likeness: SIMILANCE (God created man in his own—
Standing at Beach Ngobila, along the shores of the Congo river, I try to worm my way through the mass of bodies that engulfs me. Beach Ngobila is one of the only points of straight access to the Congo stream in this city which lives with its back turned toward the river, and in which one is only occasionally reminded of the river’s existence by the sight of an orphaned boat, hauled up and stranded deep inside one of the city’s sandy back streets. Upon entering Beach Ngobila, the first, violent, impression is that of a cannibalistic space which swallows everyone, and which sucks one down into a swirling maelstrom of soldiers, vendors, custom officials, traders, fishermen, street children and travelers. Beach Ngobila also spits people out. Crossing the river from Brazzaville to Kinshasa, Beach Ngobila is a place of warm welcome and homecoming for some. For others who leave Kinshasa’s shores and cross the river in the opposite direction, to Brazzaville and beyond, it is a place of promise, the exit from a city they always dreamt of leaving behind. For others still, the Beach is a place of painful rejection, of expulsion, of the impossibility of returning to a city that once incarnated all their hopes and formed the only imaginable stage of their lives. This is the city to which they are now forced to turn their backs, in bitterness, in tears, with regret or, a distinct possibility, just glad to have caught the ferry and have gotten out alive. And all that remains of this previous life is some insignificant reminder, some shirts, a pair of Nikes,
wedding pictures, a cooking pot or a Bible, picked up at random and hastily stowed away in pathetic plastic bags.

And for those who live in tune with the world of the river and the rhythms of its activities, Ngobila offers a livelihood.

Beach Ngobila is Kinshasa’s time and space compacted, a place with which it is easy to develop a love–hate relationship, a place in which there is no room for the middle-of-the-road, only for extremes. And like Kinshasa itself, it too constantly assaults one’s senses: the smell of the river’s warm humidity blowing into one’s nostrils, the feel of dampness sticking to one’s skin, of heavy air that somehow has become liquid and feels like a fluid, oily blanket of warm water wrapped around one’s body; the noise of boisterous laughter, of people shouting, screaming, giving orders, begging, pleading; the touch of complicated hand shakes, of worthless money changing hands; the expressionless gaze of bystanders; the feverish activity of arrivals and farewells, of buying and selling, of nervous movement. And simultaneously of stillness and timelessness.

Imagine yourself set down, surrounded by all your gear, alone on a tropical beach close to a native village. I remember being disappointed when I came here for the first time, many years ago now. The word “beach” had conjured up the promise of an exotic setting of golden sun, pristine sand and palm trees softly swaying in the evening breeze. Instead, Beach Ngobila, once a flourishing industrial port, turned out to be an industrial wasteland, by then a grey concrete strip with rusty hoisting cranes, outlined by a graveyard of moored decaying boat carcasses, the dark brown color of which contrasted sharply, or so I remember it now, with the crisp colors of the neatly folded six and twelve yard wax hollandais cloths, all spread out on the ground by the market women along the entrance to the Beach’s docks.

When I try to recall this first visit to Beach Ngobila, there is also another color that comes to my mind’s eye: the green of old army uniforms. With this memory of tired green comes the hint of lingering, unpredictable danger, the image of muscular men with imitation Ray Ban sunglasses, Mike Tyson haircuts and nonchalant machine guns, asking for cigarettes with broad smiles and with white hand palms turned upward, a gesture that acts out innocence. And then the contrast with the river itself: calm, silent, slow and yet full of swirling movement and underwater currents. It must have been during the period of rain for, in my memory, the water does not have the muddy brown color it takes on during the dry season, but it is dark and black, with tufts of green upon its gliding surface, little miniature forest islands indifferently drifting past the city on their long downstream journey from the equatorial forest. Hard not to think of Heart of Darkness, although I distinctly remember being angry with myself for allowing this cliché to take over.
Looking out over the river, with the crowded docks behind me, and behind them the vast anthill of this city named Kinshasa, Léopoldville, Lipopo, Kin-Malebo, I remember, also, being overwhelmed by a sense of perspective, of distance, of horizon. To the right, the upstream side, where the river widens into the Malebo Pool and rather successfully tries to imitate the vastness of an ocean, the distant line which divides water and sky is blurred by the heat. The horizon is lined with the shimmering silhouettes of trees, drawn with black Chinese ink by an unsteady hand against the sky, hinting at the existence of islands in the stream, or merely suggesting the idea of islands, shapeshifting sand banks, with names nonetheless: Mbamu, Mimosa, Kandolo, Lumbu, Mabanga.

Straight ahead, across the river, west of Kinshasa, one makes out the modest skyline of Brazzaville, with its landmark Elf skyscraper. To me it was the silhouette of just another city, back then. Now it has become a skyline which has lost its innocence, for it is still pockmarked and scarred by the months of war and violence which reduced the capital of the other Congo to a shadow of itself in 1997. Poto-poto mboka monene, solo Kinshasa poto moyindo, “Brazzaville is a big city, but only Kinshasa is an African Europe,” the proud inhabitants of Kinshasa used to sing. But then they also sang ata ndele mokili ekohaluka, “sooner or later, the world will change.”

Along the river, close to Kinshasa’s shores, a fisherman glides by in a small dug out canoe, oblivious of change, his image reflecting in the water, a double broken and fragmented by the waves.

In 1997, while Brazzaville was busy bombing itself out of existence, and while rockets fired from the city’s presidential palace in the direction of Kinshasa fell on Kintambo and other riverine neighborhoods, leaving tens of Kinois dead, historian Ch. Didier Gondola published his *Villes miroirs. Migrations et identités urbaines à Kinshasa et Brazzaville 1930—1970*. Gondola’s book is a history of the twin cities of Kinshasa and Brazzaville, mirroring each other across the Congo river, like an imperfect materialization of the city of Valdrada which Italo Calvino describes in *Le città invisibili*. This other book, *Invisible Cities*, tells the story of a Venetian traveler, Marco Polo, who diverts the aged Tartar emperor Kublai Khan with tales of the cities he has seen in his travels around the empire. Soon it becomes clear that each of the fantastic places that Marco Polo describes is really one and the same place, the city of Venice.

Our book about Kinshasa, a joint project between an anthropologist and a photographer, is not a historian’s history of Kinshasa. Nor is it a demographer’s or an architect’s. All of them would have written radically different portraits of Kinshasa. The Kinshasa described here resembles Calvino’s invisible
Venice, for it contains many cities in one as well. It is at once a city of memory, a city of desire, a hidden city, a trading city, a city of the dead, a city of signs, a city of words, an oneiric city, a city of utopia. And like Calvino’s Venice and Gondola’s twin cities, this Kinshasa too cannot be understood without reflecting upon reflection, upon reflecting realities, mirrors, images, imitation, imagination, and (self) representation. This book presents Kinshasa as a vast mirror hall. Starting from but drastically expanding Gondola’s notion of mirroring cities, we seek to analyze the various levels of mirroring which fracture Kinshasa’s urban world into a series of kaleidoscopic, multiple,
but simultaneously existing, worlds. Each of these micro cities constantly reflects the others, though this reflection is not always symmetrical. Some of these cities, and some levels of mirroring between them, are more visible than others.

Above all, this book tries to capture Kinshasa’s constant urge to move beyond the tarnish left upon the surface of its mirroring realities; the ways in which this city, sometimes playfully, sometimes desperately, but always with tremendous vitality, tries to break through the layers of dust and dirt, the palimpsests of colonization, de-, re- and neocolonization that have settled upon its surface and have dulled, sometimes even destroyed, its luster. Living in an urban reality stained by a film of increasing poverty, by the tears and blood drops of physical and symbolical violence, as well as by a pervasive sense of societal crisis and loss, Kinshasa’s inhabitants struggle to reach beyond the fractures inflicted by the postcolonial world and the disjunctions at play in the myths of modernity and tradition. This is also where the metaphor of the mirror is pushed to its limits. Kinshasa does not merely reflect. It is not merely represented in the mirrors held up by precolonial pasts, colonialist modernities or nationalist myths. Certainly, to an important extent it is animated by the reflecting images of these imposed representations. Simultaneously, however, it resists, shatters, transforms and moves beyond all of these in often unexpected and surprising ways.
Paradigms of resistance against the hegemonies of state, money and market fail to fully capture the complexities of the realities lived by many in Congo today. Nor do they manage to seize the dynamics of subversion by means of which the metaphor of the mirror becomes alive in the urban world of Kinshasa. Both literally and figuratively, Congo’s capital constantly smashes its own mirrors. At the same time, it never stops piecing itself back together. In ways that often leave the observer perplexed, the city constantly activates and undergoes the effervescent push and pull of destruction and regeneration. The incessant and chaotic crossing of the borders between these two forces somehow seems to generate the energetic source from which Kinshasa taps the power to embody, animate and sustain its own eidos, its own ongoing attempts at societal creation. In its most essential form, this power is operated by a frontier logic of mutation. It is, in a way, the power of the fetish. Like the fetish, the city of Kinshasa is a constant border-crossing phenomenon, resisting fixture, refusing capture. And like the fetish itself, like the magic activated through the mirror in the bellies of Congo’s power objects, the city’s moving force of mutation is generated in “the slippage between the dominance and the subordination of the surface.”¹ Mentally and materially, the city emerges in unstable space. It is a product of a profound mixture between different cultural itineraries and sites. Its content is composite and is generated through
crossing various borders and mediating between different opposites. As such, it is also extremely well adapted to carrying this mutant message, for it presents in and of itself a space of confrontation, mutation and movement. Out of the breccia of broken glass, the debris of its own pasts, the city thus feverishly transforms and goes on. In a sustained effort to recreate and institutionalize itself, the city tirelessly energizes an ever-growing web of plural meanings and social imaginary significations.

The following sections offer an introduction to the major themes that run through the chapters of this book. In part, they provide a summary of the different mirrors in which Kinshasa is captured and authored by external gazes and representations. More importantly, however, they also set the stage to move beyond such identity play which reduces Kinshasa to the mere role of “significant other,” in an attempt to start understanding Kinshasa’s originality, its internal struggle to contemplate and create its own identity.

MIRRORS AND MODELS: THE COLONIAL SPECULUM

One level of reflection through which Kinshasa is made to exist is quite obvious: it takes place in the European mirror of colonialism which invented and created the primitivist idea of the Congo and its counter-image, the urban landscape. The history of the creation and evolution of the city that is called Kinshasa today, from its origins as a small trade station, established by King Leopold’s envoy Stanley upon his arrival in Ngaliema Bay on the first of December, 1881, its subsequent rebirth as Léopoldville, capital of Belgian Congo, between 1908 and 1960, to the large city of at least 6 million people it has become now, is a trajectory that cannot be appreciated without taking into account the military, monetary, medical and moral dynamics of the colonizing context in which it emerged.

1961. Lumumba murdered, Congo in crisis. I was born in 1961, a postcolonial subject. I was born not in Congo, but in Antwerp, in a street named Beschavingstraat, Civilization Street. Standing in the shadow of the Church of Christ the King, our house was one of many similar houses in a new suburban housing estate, erected after the Second World War. A couple of streets away, on a little square and opposite my grandparents’ house, stood one of the only two houses that Le Corbusier built in Belgium. In 1961, this house, a 1926 realization, was still inhabited by its original resident, Mister Guiette, an Antwerp painter who, so my father tells me, also had two beautiful daughters. The house still exists, the daughters have gone. The postwar modernism of my childhood neighborhood, a modest reprise of Le Corbusier’s architectural ideals, reflected the optimism of that period.
Our own street ended on the Tentoonstellingslaan, Exhibition Avenue, close to what then was still the Kolonielaan, the Colony Avenue, which has undergone a name change since. The port of Antwerp was the umbilical cord which connected tiny Belgium to its giant baby of a colony. Yet, this was not the reason for all the colonial references in the street names of my early childhood neighborhood. Only recently did I realize why the streets were so full of colonial memories. Going through some personal papers and documents of my grandmother’s after her death, I found some photos of the World Exhibition that was held in Antwerp in 1930. No doubt the photos had been made by my grandfather, who worked in a small photo-shop in Antwerp in that period. An important section of the 1930 World Exhibition was dedicated to Flemish Art, appropriately housed in the Church of Christ the King. On a plot next to this church, in the area where my childhood neighborhood would be erected two decades later, stood an imposing, resolutely modernist, Congo pavilion in which Belgium’s colonial oeuvre was proudly put on display. In line with a tradition that started with Universal Exhibitions at the end of the nineteenth century, including Tervuren’s famous example of 1897, the 1930 Congo display also included a village africain, a “negro-village.” This “African Village” was built in a way that imitated the style soudanais, a vague pseudo Arabic architectural style which never really existed as such in precolonial Congo, but which referred to a crucial element of the Leopoldian colonial mythology. In this mythological construction, the colonizing drive that was set in motion by King Leopold II and that swept through the Congo in the last decades of the nineteenth century, was invariably legitimated as a humanitarian struggle against “Arab” slave traders such as the legendary Tippo Tip. The adobe style of the 1930 African Village provided an invented architectural commemoration of this era, which culminated in the campagne arabe of 1892–1895 and similar events of the time, including that other, equally famous but slightly surreal, colonial founding myth, Stanley’s rescue of Emin Pasha. Throughout the colonial period, the pseudo Arabic style remained popular in the Belgian Congo as well. The architecture of the colonial prisons that the Belgians erected throughout the country and which continue to be used today still bears witness to this colonial orientalism.

The 1930 African Village conveys the complexities and ambiguities that are inherent in the notion of “place” as it existed in the colonial discourse and imagination. The image of Congo which was created in this Antwerp display, next to a Le Corbusier house of the same period, calls into being a completely imaginary reconstruction of an equally imaginary traditional Africa. Within the Exhibition display, this colonial reflection is mirrored in and juxtaposed by the “modern” imperialist Congo pavilion and the Flemish Art in the equally imperialist Church of Christ the King. The Congo has, of course, always
fascinated the western imagination, from Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* to Naipaul’s *A Bend in the River* and de Villiers’ SAS pulp fiction airport literature, with titles such as *Panique au Zaire* and *Adieu Zaire*, spectacularly racist cocktails of exoticism, sex, violence, intrigue and betrayal, with an African pin up girl on the cover. In varying degrees, “Congo” appears in these works of fiction as a powerful negative image of the Western Self, in which the West constantly projects all of its fears and fantasies. For example, in the wake of the 1995 Ebola outbreak in Kikwit, 500 kilometers south east of Kinshasa, a leading Belgian newspaper characterized the virus as symptomatic of a wild and undomesticated country. In the same way, Hollywood has associated the outbreaks of AIDS with the Central African forest and phantasmagoric constructions of the ways in which the virus jumped from monkeys to Africans. The great discrepancy which is generated in the mirroring process between this topos, the Congo of the imagination, and the topicality of the physical Congo, seems to go unnoticed by most. The strength of the imagined place renders invisible the reality of the African site. What the African Village of the 1930 World Exhibition revealed is precisely this rupture, this fault line between representation and reality which is so characteristic of the problematic place of “place” in the colonial and postcolonial contexts. As Edouard Glissant explains: “On voit
beaucoup l’Afrique à la télévision—le sida, les massacres, les guerres tribales, les misères... Mais en fait, on ne voit pas l’Afrique. Elle est invisible.” [We see a lot of Africa on television—AIDS, massacres, tribal wars, misery... But in fact we don’t see Africa. She is invisible.]² In the recent ninth edition of the Lonely Planet travel guide, *Africa on a Shoestring: Discover the Rhythms of Africa*, “Kinshasa,” and the lives of its millions of inhabitants, is thus totally obliterated and rendered invisible in half a page: “The rest of Congo (Zaïre) may be pretty wild and untamed but Kinshasa, the capital, sprang from the jungle into the fast lane a long time ago. It’s huge, muggy and very dangerous but, despite the widespread destruction, there are still a few decent shops, restaurants and hotels. [...] Kinshasa is a dangerous city at any time of the day. Thieves and muggers abound, violent crime is common and police and army personnel constantly target travellers for bribes. When you arrive in Kinshasa by air, you’ll be surrounded by gangs of military personnel in civilian clothes who will hold you, your luggage and your passport hostage until you give them money. If at all possible, have someone who knows the ropes meet you at the airport.”³ Similarly, the limits of the city are defined by its geographic invisibility. No map that I have ever seen of Kinshasa reproduces the city in its integrality. Hundreds of thousands of lives that are lived in those areas which
expanded after independence are quite literally not “on the map.” Every city has its elsewheres, geographically (for example through its diasporic networks) and through its local imaginaries, but Kinshasa often strikes one as a city that is, in and of itself elsewhere, invisible.

It was not a coincidence that the World Exhibition of 1930 was organized in the same year that Belgium celebrated its hundredth anniversary as an independent nation state. The works of colonial imperialism are intimately linked to the rise and consecration of the western nation state, for which the colony served as its external expansion. Within eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe, the changing nature of internal mechanisms of state control was based on processes of what Foucault has called “sequestration.” This term refers to the creation of new technologies of (state) supervision within new types of institutions: the prison, the asylum, the labor camp, the colony, the hospital, the cité... The genealogy of such spaces of social control illustrates changing conceptualizations of normality and deviance within western society and within the expanding model of the modern nation state as unifying moral project. These new institutions, as spaces of organized repression, thus became the depositories of new social categories of the irrational, the marginal and the deviant.

People who, in these emerging definitions, no longer occupied an unproblematic niche within society, who found themselves on the wrong side of the new lines of fracture of social acceptability, were readily subjected to the state technologies of power and control. In addition, the nation state, as a panoptical, rationalizing project, developed new “geographies of perversion.” These “othered” the criminal, the madman, the beggar, the vagrant, the laborer, the prostitute and the homosexual. They redefined these categories of people into readily identifiable targets for the nation state’s programs of social engineering, education, civilization and reeducation. Paradoxically, then, the state, as homogenizing project and as upholder of (the illusion of) unity, continuously produced difference as well, a difference which it simultaneously and systematically excluded, stigmatized and pathologized. It is indeed interesting to see how, together with the rise of the European nation state, new images and theories of atavism, degeneration (dégénérescence) and sociobiological decline emerged in European culture and politics.

Within the hegemonic discourse of the state, the notion of degeneration was often linked to the sociocultural sites of those whom the state defined as deviant. Culture, in other words, became centrally implicated in forms of both physical and social disease. This also implies that medical intervention, at that point, became a form of moral sanitation. As a result, many of the techniques
of state control did not hesitate to penetrate deeply into the lives and daily sociocultural locales of citizens. Very often, these techniques centered on the body, and aimed at imposing new norms of hygiene, at controlling sexual behavior, at changing the ways in which people were dressed and housed, and even at redefining kinship relations. As such, the structures of the working class family, this basic building block of the nation state, are thus reoriented towards a more acceptable nuclear form, which can then function as the nation state’s image on the local level. The nineteenth century proletarian was thus perceived to be a kind of western “nigger” avant la lettre, the state’s internal precursor of the later colonial subject.

The relations to the working and peasant classes which the colonial forces exported to their colonies differed greatly from one colonial context to the other. Consider the contrast between the British, who exported few workers, and the Italians, who used colonies as plantations to absorb excess peasants from home. In the Belgian colonial context, where an attempt was made to create an indigenous working class, the formula used seemed to replicate many of the strategies and trajectories that the Belgian state applied at home vis-à-vis its own working classes and other problematic groups. Once that internal other was domesticated, his alterity defined, labeled and then eradicated, the state embarked upon the same homogenizing sanitizing and environmental project in its colony.

In colonial Africa, writes Jean Comaroff, “as an object of European speculation, Africans personified suffering and degeneracy, their environment a hothouse of fever and affliction.” Although this statement, in its sweeping generalization, disregards the multiplicity of ideals that motivated missionaries and other agents of colonialism, certainly when viewed in the Belgian colonial context, it undoubtedly also captures something of the Belgian sentiment with regard to its colony in the early decades of its colonial endeavor. Therefore, after a first period in which medicine aimed primarily at the protection of the expatriate colonial agents and military, the major imperialist interventions were often both medical and moral, in a joint venture between the cure and the cross. They focused on issues such as disease control and, especially in the early mission medicine but also afterwards, on the regulation of the colonial subjects’ unruly minds and bodies. These bodies had to be clothed, educated, housed and fed in drastically new ways. During the heyday of colonialism, nutritional studies in Africa, for example, were often prompted by colonial efforts to deal with the “problems of African native diet.” As such, they were designed to provide ways of altering local attitudes to food production and consumption, in an attempt to reduce malnutrition, disease and poor health, and heighten the “effective performance of individuals and communities.” More generally, and again for a variety of combined reasons ranging
from moral and medical to economical, one of the major aims of colonial medicine was to control and diminish indigenous morbidity and mortality. This occurred while, on another level, the colony clearly functioned as an exploitative “space of death.” On that level, the colonial negrophile often turned out to be Africa’s necrophile and necrophore. For the same reasons, the Belgian colonial administration interfered drastically in local modes of residence, sanitizing the spatial layout of villages, creating new types of settlement, and controlling and restricting the movement of its colonial subjects.

Colonial medicine was also seen as “the greatest force for conceptual change, compelling Africans to abandon their unscientific worldview.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, colonialist modernity—of which medicine was an outspoken icon—intervened in the most intimate aspects of the colonized’s culture, through its attempts at domesticating and controlling indigenous sexuality. It worked at imposing new concepts of space, time, causality, production and accumulation upon the colonial subject in an attempt to reconfigure the colonial mind, and even at genetically engineering a new race of ideal workers.\textsuperscript{13}

Many studies of colonial medicine have taken the medicine as social control approach which I briefly outlined above. In such approaches, the politics of the state, both at home and abroad, is perceived, in a very real sense, as biosocial eugenics, a body politics, an “anatomy of power” which, as an implicit or explicit system of power, knowledge and coercion, defined the relations
between ruler and ruled: “Medicine and imperialism in nineteenth century Africa are seen to be inseparably joined in practice and in concept. The evolving field of biomedicine, introduced by missionary healers, provided images of an ailing human body that would justify the intervention of a colonial state as it imposed its own order of domination [...].” As hegemonic discourse and practice closely related to the ideology of the state, or more generally as a tool of empire, biomedicine was—and still is—centrally concerned with difference. As a metaphor for a more general colonial ideology and praxis, it is thus illustrative of many of the mechanisms that contributed in the creation and development of the urban colonial landscape, and of Léopoldville in particular.

Throughout its emergence and gradual development, Léopoldville, as colonial speculum and as a large scale project in social engineering, grafted upon its urban geography and ecology many of the evolutionist oppositions that also underpinned the cultural construction of difference in the medical colonial intervention. The difference between metropolitan Prospero and colonial Caliban, between Self and Other, Culture and Nature, Rationality and Irrationality, Man and Woman, writing and speech, knowledge and ignorance, modernity and tradition, or peace and war, is constantly generated in this European speculation. It is also the same mirror that gives birth to Léopoldville’s two reflecting halves, the western Ville and the indigenous Cité. In these complementary but opposing spaces qualities such as “public” and “private” acquire radically different meanings.

The colonial triumvirate of sword, cross and money, that is, of the colonial administration and its military arm, the church and its proselytizing activities, and the colony’s powerful trade and industry circles, often had different and sometimes even contradictory agendas. They did not necessarily hold the same views on the development of the urban landscape and its inhabitants, and their actions were not always concerted. Nevertheless these three pillars of Belgian colonialism in Congo shared the same underlying, although often vaguely defined, ideal of colonialist modernity as outlined above. It is this shared ideological configuration that underpinned to a large extent the ways in which the city was shaped and designed.

During the postwar period in which the modernist suburban housing estate of my childhood years was built, Belgian modernism was also given a second life in Congo. In 1940, Léopoldville was home to some 50,000 inhabitants. At the end of World War II the number of inhabitants had doubled, reaching 200,000 in 1950, 400,000 at independence and well over a million in 1970. In the early decades of the twentieth century, Léopoldville developed itself along the axis Kintambo–Kalina. Kintambo developed out of Stanley’s early trading
post and consisted of the city’s oldest industrial and residential sites. Kalina, currently Gombe, developed into the capital’s administrative area, housing the colonial administration’s offices and residential villas. Gombe has very much kept that function today. Kintambo and Kalina were soon connected by a railroad. Around this axis gradually developed commercial centers and several cités indigènes, native quarters and settlements inhabited by Congolese workers. On the Kintambo side, the labor camps arose along the river, in proximity to the industrial activities of that part of the city, its shipyards, metallurgy and other activities such as the confection industry of Utex Léo. On the Kalina
side, a considerably larger space was set aside for the development of several indigenous neighborhoods, most notably Kinshasa, Barumbu and Lingwala. Consisting of a large number of small parcelles, plots and compounds, these neighborhoods were laid out according to a well ordered grid which continued the original ground plan of an army camp that had been located there previously. These indigenous neighborhoods, camps and, after the Second World War, cités jardins, garden cities, consisted of houses that were either individually constructed and owned (and there existed a Fonds d’Avance, a lending agency to encourage such individual ownership) or were built by colonial employers and companies. Here too, these neighborhoods existed in close proximity with the administrative and residential centers of Léopoldville. Yet, they were consistently separated from these central areas by stretches of no man’s land, by the main railroad (which also connected the city to the port of Matadi in the Lower Congo), as well as by a number of other buffer zones, such as the city’s botanical gardens, commercial zones, an ethnographic museum displaying indigenous lifestyles, a zoological garden, mission posts and army camps.

In terms of its spatial layout, the extended booming urban conglomerate that Léopoldville was rapidly becoming thus emerged from the very beginning as a racially segregated city, with a strict demarcation line between a central white Ville, with its administrative and residential areas (Kintambo, Ngaliema and the current Gombe, later expanded into the residential neighborhoods of Limete), and a “peripheral” African city, the cité indigène.

On top of the racial lines of segregation that structured the city of Léopoldville, or Lipopo as the city was called by its Congolese inhabitants, the colonial economic demands and necessities also occasioned a demographic, strongly gendered, segregation. In the early decades of the Belgian Congo’s existence, the colonial population mainly consisted of men. It was only very slowly that families, wives and children became an established fact of Léopoldville’s urban social make-up. Hesitantly, they started to emerge in Léopoldville during the interbellum period, but it was only after World War II that wives and family became a standard part of the colonial city’s social make-up. This demographic imbalance, however, was not a reality that characterized the lives of the white colonials alone. Before 1930, the male–female ratio in Léopoldville’s indigenous neighborhoods was three to one. At the end of World War II men still outnumbered women two to one, and special taxes were imposed on single women who were living in the cités indigènes. This reflected not only the colonial endeavor to control the city’s growth rate, but also the simple fact that these indigenous quarters mainly functioned as depots of cheap African labor, in which there was room for neither women nor the unemployed. Especially after the war, in a vain attempt to diminish and contain
the mounting social and political tensions in the city, the colonial administration developed a strict policy of cleaning up the streets. Those without jobs were rounded up by the colonial armed forces, the *Force Publique*, and sent back to the interior. Paralleling the city’s segregated spatial and demographic development, the *Force Publique*, strategically located in army garrisons throughout Léopoldville, was built along equally strict segregated lines, with a superstructure of Belgian officers on the one hand, and a body of Congolese recruits, mostly Bangala from the Congo’s Equateur province, on the other. It was mainly these soldiers who became the driving force behind the development of Lingala, their native language, as the city’s major *lingua franca*.

Despite a vast array of far reaching colonial measures which aimed at restricting and controlling the rural migration to the city, Léopoldville kept expanding. In 1949, faced with a demographic explosion and the increasing social unrest it engendered, the Belgian colonial administration started to implement a large urbanization program through the newly created *Office de Cités Indigènes de Léopoldville* (OCIL). One of the office’s projects was the Renkin neighborhood (named after Belgium’s first Minister of Colonial Affairs), which formed the heart of what would later on become Matonge, the vibrant core of Kinshasa’s nightlife.

In 1952, the OCIL was succeeded by the *Office de Cités Africaines* (OCA). This office was created to coordinate better the government’s response to the increasingly pressing needs of a rapidly growing city. The goal OCA set for itself was ambitious: the construction of 40,000 new “quality homes” throughout the colony over the next ten years. Twenty thousand of these homes would be built in Léopoldville alone. Between 1952 and 1960, the city thus expanded drastically, giving birth to an impressive number of new satellite *cités* such as Bandalingwa, Yolo Nord and Yolo Sud, Matete, Lemba, Ndjili and, finally, Kinkole. Still, OCA’s housing program and urban planning efforts, impressive as they may appear today, fell short of providing a satisfactory solution to the city’s enormous demographic expansion and increasingly chaotic character. The colonial government concentrated all of its efforts at urban expansion in OCA while barring all nongovernmental housing programs and initiatives. The government refused, for example, to sell land to private companies to construct new homes for their employees. And yet, the rate at which the much needed new houses were constructed within the OCA program was far too slow to match the population growth. Even worse, many of the new houses remained empty because they were too expensive for Kinshasa’s commoners. As a result, shantytowns started to spring up everywhere across the city. The situation worsened during the first years after independence. At first, the unfulfilled OCA plans continued to be realized, though at a much slower pace. This effort at continued urban planning was coordinated by the *Office*
National de Logement (ONL) and financed by the Caisse Nationale d’Epargne et de Crédit Immobilier. Gradually, however, the government abandoned all efforts at urban planning. No longer restrained by government supervision, the shantytowns started to expand into the endless and still growing sprawl of popular neighborhoods, the vast peripheral city, the zones annexes of which Kinshasa consists today. In the process, the capital grew far beyond its colonial borders: towards the Lower Congo in the western direction, and in the eastern and southern directions, over the hill range that once contained the city, towards the Bateke plateau and the Kwango. As a result of this unbridled growth, the city has
grown away from its old colonial heart. This evolution was recently consolidated by Laurent Kabila’s decision to order the building of a new major market square in Masina, in an attempt to alleviate the pressure on the old central market area near the Rue du Commerce. Its construction confirms the fact that the colonial city center, which was also the geographic center of the city during colonial times, long since ceased to be either, and had become peripheral to the daily experience of the majority of Kinshasa’s population.

It is in Camp Luka, Masina, Kimbanseke, Kingasani, Kisenso, Ngaba, Makala, Selembao, large parts of Mont Ngafula, Malweka and the many other similar annexed areas and communes urbano-rurales of postcolonial Kinshasa that the failure of modernist urban planning, as conceived by the colonial government and the early postcolonial state, is most clearly illustrated. It is here, also, that Kinshasa began to reinvent itself into the city that it has become today. The growth of this new Kinshasa (and it is growing fast: Kinshasa has currently a yearly deficit of 200,000 houses)\(^{17}\) has also marked a mental move away from the “place” of colonialism (and this place is both a spatial
reality and a language, French). It has, in other words, moved away from the mimetic reproduction of an alienating model of colonialist modernity, imposed by the colonial and the Mobutist state upon the city’s population through a wide ranging arsenal of physical and symbolic forms of violence. For the past four decades, the city has also moved away from the secular time of the (post)colonial nation and the official religious time of the Catholic Church which accompanied these efforts at nation building. It is in these increasingly numerous informal urban areas, with its complex patchwork of multiple local ethnic identities, that the city’s inhabitants have started to reterritorialize and reclaim the urban space, develop their own specific forms of what De Meulder has called “proto-urbanism,” and infuse the city with their own praxis, values, moralities and temporal dynamics. This process, which is perhaps better referred to as a form of “post urbanism,” began at Kinshasa’s margins and has now engulfed the city as a whole. Unhindered by any kind of formal industrialization or economic development, the city has bypassed, redefined or smashed the (neo)colonial logics that were stamped onto its surface. It has done so spatially, in terms of its architectural and urban development, as well as in terms of its sociocultural and economic imprint. Reaching across the formation period of high colonialism and its modernist ideals, Kinshasa is, to some extent, rejoining its earlier rural roots. Today, aided by an unending political and economic crisis, the city is undergoing a large scale process of informal villagization, in which a new type of agrarian urbanity and even a new type of ethnicity is generated.¹⁸

For an external observer it is not always easy to read this new urban landscape. Related to the western failure to reach beyond its blurred vision of a largely fictitious Congo is the development of a second form of cataract, which is becoming increasingly apparent in the incapacity of much academic discourse to grasp fully and make visible the changing realities in contemporary Congo and Kinshasa. Faced with worlds and interactions that no longer correspond to the social interweave as we tend to conceptualize and experience it, one becomes acutely aware that it is futile to explain some of the processes currently taking place in Congolese society by means of the standard vocabularies used by social and political scientists, economists, demographers and urban planners. Terms and concepts such as state, administration, government, governability, democracy, army, citizenship, law, justice, or even education and healthcare no longer seem to apply unequivocally to the realities usually covered by those terms.

Why is a building called a national bank, university, state department, hospital, or school when the activities which take place in it cannot be given the standard meanings and realities usually covered by those words? In January 1995, for example, Belgian newspapers reported that the national bank’s total
stock of foreign currency amounted to US$ 2,000 and a handful of Swiss francs. Similarly, university professors today earn US$ 200 a month—that is, if they are paid at all—and most departments of Kinshasa’s national university have not bought books, or produced a single doctoral dissertation since the Zaireanization in the early 1970s. What does it mean to be a city with an estimated six million inhabitants in which there is hardly any car traffic or public transportation, for the simple reason that, at frequent intervals, there is not a drop of fuel available for weeks or even months? Why continue the social convention of referring to a banknote as “money” when one is confronted daily with the fact that it is just a worthless slip of paper? The withdrawal, in November 1993, of the IMF and the World Bank from the country attested to the fact that Congo was no longer partaking of the formal world economy. But what is the use of distinguishing between formal and informal or parallel economies when the informal has become the common and the formal has almost disappeared?

For years now, Congo’s second or shadow economy has become the first and virtually only one. For Kinois it has long since become a cliché to say that no economic model can explain how a city like Kinshasa survives. For the pousse-pousseurs (the pushcart persons), the quados (informal car-mechanics), the khaddafis (illegal vendors of fuel), the cambistes (money changers), taxi drivers, shoe shiners, night watchmen and ligablos (street vendors) who daily experience in the flesh the continuing deterioration of their standards of living, and whose lives unfold in Poverty Street, the common discourses of political, economic and other analysts and “experts” are therefore totally devoid of sense. To them, Kinshasa-la-belle has long since become Kinshasa-la-poubelle, referred to as Kuwait City rive gauche, Sarajevo or, more recently, Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan or Baghdad.

Mirroring the constant attempts of Kinshasa’s inhabitants to rename and thereby reclaim their city, the colonial and postcolonial authorities invested a lot of energy in the construction of their vision of the urban space. The colonizing dynamics of naming and renaming the city and its composite parts are typical of the colonial, the Mobutist and the Kabilist period. During colonial times, not only the city’s name, Léopoldville, referred to the colonial master but so did the names of many a neighborhood: Belge I, Belge II, Bruxelles. Similarly, Mobutu stamped himself onto the city’s map by renaming streets, buildings (Mama Yemo hospital, Stade Kamanyola), military camps and neighborhoods (Cité Mama Mobutu, Camp Mobutu). These acts of name giving illustrate the constant attempts at mastering the city, at producing domination, at defining place and encapsulating it in language. And yet, the names themselves immediately become sites of opposition against the official order.
The breakdown of the colonial city model and its local appropriation, transformation and cultural reterritorialization had already started during the colonial period itself. In 1959, more than half of Léopoldville’s population was under the age of eighteen, and of this large group, only half was schooled. In 1960, the capital, already overpopulated, was flooded by another wave of youngsters who were fleeing from the rebellion and warfare in the interior (a process that is currently repeating itself). It is against this background of a decade of rising insecurity and socioeconomic and political unrest that street gangs of youngsters without schooling or salaried job started to make an appearance in the streets of Léopoldville.  

Between 1957 and 1959, in the same period in which the administrative reform took place, six movie theaters in all opened their doors: SIBIKA in the Kintambo neighborhood, and ASTRA, MBONGO—MPASI, MACAULEY, MOUSTAPHA and SILUVANGI in the popular neighborhoods of Lingwala, Kinshasa and Barumbu. These movie theaters, which flourished all over the city except in the “European” neighborhoods of Ngaliema, Léopoldville and Limete, soon became favorite meeting places of Léopoldville’s youth, especially those youngsters at the margins of the colonial urban order, at risk of being expelled by the authorities. Hollywood westerns, in particular, had a tremendous impact on the way in which the urban youth subcultures of that time chose to express themselves, and were a decisive factor in the creation of Billism. In particular the image of the buffalo hunter and culture hero Buffalo Bill, alongside other cowboys such as Pecos Bill, left a deep impression. These cowboys provided ideal role models for the young Kinois, who imitated the appearance (blue jeans, checkered shirt, neckerchief, lasso) and the tics of the Hollywood actors. After each movie, these young urban cowboys circulated on their “bicycle-horses” to announce the message of the western (mofewana, Lingala deformation of Far West), crying loudly Bill oyee!, upon which the bystanders would reply with serumba!  

Billism appropriated and transformed the image of the cowboy-hunter to make it its own. Most of the members of these ludic groups of young urban “terrorists,” more generally known as “The Spongers of the Far West” (Les écumeurs du Far West), lived on the margins of colonial society. The movement produced various competing youth gangs. Around 1957, most of these gangs, such as the “Yankees of Ngiri-Ngiri,” shaped up around a few leaders. Amongst these early “ancestors,” “priests” (prêtres), “sheriffs,” or grand maîtres of the street gangs figured predominantly two persons known as William Booth and Gazin. Others followed soon: Grand Billy, Ross Samson, Néron (Monerona, author of a popular song, Wèle Kingo), Tex Bill, Mive John, Mobarona, Khrountchev, Long Li Su, Azvedo, Eboma, Vieux Porain Zanga-Zanga, Libre, De Goum, Moruma, Demayo. Most of these were well known local delin-
quents. Initially, the youngsters circling around these leaders lived together in houses (called “ranches” or “temples”). Later groups hung out in what became known as nganda, a meeting place around a bar-restaurant. Well known ngandas included Dynamic and Mofewana in Ngiri-Ngiri, or L’Enfer and Okinawa in Ndjili. These groups organized themselves in little territorial fiefdoms throughout the city (in Ngiri-Ngiri, Saint-Jean, Camp Luka, Bandal, Kintambo, Bandalungwa, Barumbu, Kinshasa and later Lemba, Ndjili, Matete, Yolo) and like sheriffs, they “made the law” (kondondwa) and “created order” (tobongisa, one of the Bills’ slogans) in their neighborhood, while stealing for a living and fighting over territory with neighboring gangs. Each territory, with its ranches and ngandas, thus had its chiefs and subchiefs, its ritual specialists known as professeurs, its own laws and rules, declared by the master of each particular gang, its own systems of taxation (making other citizens pay for a safe passage through gang territory), and its own passtime rituals, such
as weight-lifting, gangbangng neighborhood girls, or smoking marijuana. Billism also strongly focused on music and guitars. The movement itself was at the origin of the birth of multiple local orchestras, some of which evolved later on into well known bands, such as Zaiko. Billism mobilized and channeled the social forces from the margin, and greatly contributed to the establishment of one of the most powerful forms of expression in Kinshasa’s flamboyant popular culture.

Furthermore, each of these street groups had its own rituals of initiation. They usually consisted of a period of seclusion in the bush (thereby imitating the older rural model of the mukanda circumcision camp). There, one was trained into a specific style of ritualized combat, called bilayi, in which one had to learn how to butt one’s head into a person during a fight. Overall, the Billies placed great value on violence, endurance, physical strength and courage (qualities which are stressed in the nicknames the Bills bestowed upon each
other such as “hard wood” (bois dur or bois fort); the same stress on violence recurs in popular slogans of Billism: azongaka sima te, “a Bill never retreats,” tokende liboso, “we go forward”).

What distinguished the Bills above all was the use of a particular argot, known as Hindubill, a mixture of French, Lingala, English and local vernacular languages. In a counterhegemonic inversion, “Hindu” refers to “Indian,” the cowboys’ natural enemies (that is, the state agents). It also makes reference to the “Indian” marijuana the Bills smoked. “Hindu” possibly also betrays the influence of Hindi movies shown in the theaters of Léopoldville during that period. This Indian cinematographic influence is partly responsible for the way in which the emerging figure of the mami wata—half woman and half fish, who promises access to wealth in return for human lives—began to dominate the city’s imagination in the 1960s. In Kinshasa’s popular paintings, mami wata invariably appears as a white skinned “Indian” lady (and this in spite of the West African origin of the mami wata figure).

As the language of youth, Hindubill formed the hidden transcript of the youthful underdogs of Kinshasa who were excluded from education and salaried jobs and thus from the world of “adults.” With Hindubill, the urban cowboys created their own modes of inclusion and exclusion. At the same time the persona of the Cowboy emerges as emancipatory figure, representing the spirit of the coming independence. The Bills played an important role in the lootings and the uprising that spread through Kinshasa in January 1959. They also reterritorialized the city in yet another way, by renaming various areas, markets, schools, bars and other public spaces of the city. On these they bestowed names such as Texas, Dallas, Casamar, and Godzilla. This reterritorialization was an explicit criticism of the Belgians’ insufficient and segregationist urbanization of a too rapidly expanding Léopoldville. Undoubtedly, the Billies’ practice of reclaiming and renaming parodied the colonizer’s imperialist obsession with mapping and labeling, while at the same time playfully commenting upon the claims of the emergent nationalist movement.

From November 1960 onwards, with the mounting “Congo crisis” and the increasing unrest throughout the country, many new youth gangs appeared. These still made use of the vocabulary of the Bills but at the same time they increasingly shifted from the figure of the Cowboy to that of the Soldier, with references, for example, to the United Nations Blue Helmets, thereby reflecting in their vocabulary and organization the changing context of the period in which they emerged.

Billism laid the foundation for much of the contemporary urban youth culture. Kinshasa’s movie theaters have long since disappeared. Instead, movies have become available through television, or they are watched in small neighborhood video theaters, where one usually pays for a full evening pro-
gram including clips of the latest Congolese hits and concerts, a movie à la Ninja or Rambo, some soccer and, to top it off, a porn movie. Yet, the way in which western action movie hunters/warriors are captured and localized by Kinshasa’s youth, but even more by the military, is reminiscent of the Billies in the 1950s. Zorro, Rambo, Superman, Terminator, Godzilla and the Power Rangers have become common role models for Kabila’s kadogos (child soldiers) and for urban youth in general. Kinshasa’s youth, a major focus throughout this book, share with their forebears the same capacity for fracturing and reinventing urban public space. Street children in Kinshasa sing: “It is said that water that sleeps does not move. The sleeping water only moves when one throws a stone into it.” Often, Kin’s youngsters are like such a stone, shattering the water’s reflecting surface and sending ripples and waves through the pool in which Kinshasa beholds itself. They inscribe themselves in new temporalities. They also recycle and generate surprising, oftentimes embodied, cultural vocabularies and aesthetics. Now, as in the past, these feverishly reflect Kinshasa’s social history while providing a subversive comment upon the banalization of violence, the militarization of society, the apocalyptic gale-force sound and fury of the city’s constant religious transfiguration, and the material hardships in today’s urbanscape.

THE VILLAGE AND THE FOREST CITY

The growing ruralization of Kinshasa is a strong reminder of the fact that the capital has not only looked into the mirror of modernity to design itself, but that it has always contained a second mirror as well. This mirror is provided by the village, the rural hinterland that constitutes Kinshasa’s demographic and ethnic make-up. The countryside feeds Kinshasa, forms its natural backdrop, and exists in the city by way of contrast. It is this contrast that allowed the city to fashion itself as city, to define itself as centre extra-contumier, outside of tradition, and, as marker of difference in opposition to the village, to place itself outside of the normative order of a rural and more traditional world that was, and often is, considered to be backward and primitive. And yet, at the same time, the construction of Kinshasa’s urban space and identity has always remained a contested and dislocatory presence, a reminder of an artificial breach. In reality, this urban identity has constantly been invaded and formed by, blending with and depending on the village’s traditions, moralities and pasts.

Three decades ago, someone like Henri Lefebvre, in his acclaimed work *The Production of Space*, could still, somewhat naively, write: “Much as they might like to, anthropologists cannot hide the fact that the space and tendencies of modernity (i.e. of modern capitalism) will never be discovered either in Kenya.
or among French or any other peasants.” Lefebvre thereby continued the same long modernist tradition which underpinned the creation of difference in the colonial period, and which is characterized by its conceptualization of the world within a polarized framework opposing, for example, modernity and tradition, city and countryside, center and periphery, “warm” and “cold” societies, culture and nature, male and female, the “hard rationality” of liberal capitalism generated in the urban space and the “soft irrationality” of a rural “economy of affection,” and so forth. However, the distinctions between urban and rural realities, between modern and traditional worlds, or between what is situated locally and what is considered to be global, can no longer be taken for granted. It is no doubt a perceptual error to concentrate exclusively on the center, or the city, in order to understand the production of modernity (or the construction of, for example, “modern” male African identity.) Rather than scrutinize the processes of modernity’s construction from the metropole’s perspective, this book also looks at the fringes, at the periphery, at those sites, whether located in the rural countryside or in the city itself, where “modernity” has not solidified but is a fluid and negotiable reality, an unfinished hegemony.

In the postcolony, moreover, categories such as center and periphery, or city and village, and the string of qualities attached to them, have often themselves become states of mind rather than objective qualities of space. The way in which the urban and the rural are constantly deconstructed in the postcolony necessitates an imaginative theorizing of that reality. For example, whereas the space of the city has not only undergone a marked ruralization, it has also, and increasingly, become, in the collective social instituting imaginary, the space of the forest. The hunter’s landscape, which is one of the potentially dangerous, frontier like margin, is thus constantly mapped onto the urban, and thus “central” landscape. Hence, Werrason, the current uncrowned king of Kinshasa’s popular music scene, refers to himself as “the king of the forest” (le roi de la forêt) and the “chief of the animals” (mokonzi ya banyama). It is no coincidence that the bar, a most crucial site in the urban landscape, is often redefined as village, such as Village Syllo, with its pastoral setting, along the Avenue Lumumba, or Limete’s Village Bercy. In the latter, the light bulbs are put inside Aladdin lamps, which function as pars pro toto for the local, conjuring up the rural and the village. At the same time the notion of the village blends into an interesting palimpsest through a reference to an icon of the global western world, the Stade de Bercy in Paris, where a number of Kinshasa’s orchestras have given concerts in recent years. Often also, the bar is conceptualized as a forest. Werrason’s headquarters is an open-air bar called zamba playa (zamba meaning “forest” in Lingala). In the social imaginary, the nocturnal environment of the bar is no doubt one of the most important locales.
in which the city most fully displays its urbanity and modernity, and in which “diamond-hunters” and others who have access to dollars track down and capture, through ostensive consumption of beer, women and consumer goods, their interpretation of the good life as promised by and defined in their notion of modernity.

Similarly, the city/forest has become the site of the hunter’s female counterpart, the gatherer. Once a week, huge bus-trucks called CITY-TATA (“City father”) leave Kinshasa to transport passengers to Kikwit, 500 kilometers
southeast of the capital, along a ravaged and dangerous road that once used to be a smoothly asphalted highway. Analogous to these trucks, the name CITY-MAMA has been bestowed upon small baskets that are used by an increasing number of urban women, the *mamas miteke*, who are without an income or a garden or field to till. These women take to the bush and swamps around the city to collect what little roots and grubs they can find there. Like the passengers in the CITY-TATA bus, the roots are then transported back to the city in the “basket-bus” on the women’s heads. (Ironically, Kinshasa is being redefined in terms of the sylvan margin at a time when woods and forests around the city are rapidly disappearing, a fact that has even changed its microclimate.)

It thus seems that, in Kinshasa today, modernity as exemplified by the city is contested or unfinished not only at its fringes, that is, the rural hinterland, but also in its very heart, the polis. There the local logic of hunting and gathering has infused the urban world, both metaphorically and practically, with its own moralities, its own ethics of accumulation, expenditure and redistribution, and its own specific pathways of self realization. Especially for the urban young, the hunter provides a model for identification and a figure of success and eminence. It is no coincidence that it was Buffalo Bill precisely, a buffalo hunter, who became a culture hero for Kinshasa’s youngsters. Even today, the image of the hunter continues to have a strongly epistemic power. It offers the possibility of remaking both identity and place, and generating, to some extent at least, a social environment in the midst of chaos and change. For the *bana Lunda* (“children of Lunda”) or *basali ya mbongo* (“those who work money”), the numerous youngsters who leave Kinshasa and other urban centers to travel hundreds of kilometers to the Angolan diamond fields of Lunda Norte, hunting diamonds and dollars constitutes a crucial part of the active capturing of the urban space. It allows them to refashion the city (and thereby modernity, the West, the *mundele* or white man) in their own terms, which are those of longstanding moralities, rooted in local rural pasts. Congolese youngsters’ engagement in more global economies of diamond export and dollarization is thus often shaped from an utterly local perspective and out of a memory that is rooted in the *longue durée*. It is this enduring long term reality that forms the tain, the tinfoil, the lusterless back of the mirror in which Kinshasa beholds itself today. Without this gritty surface, without the past lingering
on into the present, the mirror wouldn’t reflect anything.\textsuperscript{26} Although memory and history in the urban context are of a specific kind and have undergone some radical transformations over the past decades, the expanding peripheral city is thus not without history, unlike Koolhaas’s notion of the “generic city.”\textsuperscript{27} To conquer the city and shape their own moral and social economies in this urban space, the urban young tap into sources and routes of rural identity formation, thereby negotiating and reinventing the content and architecture of the intermediate world in which they find themselves. The passage into Angola is thus a contemporary version of a much older strategy of self realization, as hunters and warriors. It constitutes a veritable rite of passage, modelled upon the old \textit{mukanda} circumcision ritual which is still practised in the countryside, and to which youngsters explicitly refer when they share and discuss their experiences in the Angolan diamond fields. It is important, however, to stress that the past (represented in the form of hunting logics, the village morality of capture and redistribution, the ultimately rural modes of self making as hunter and/or warrior) which is thus carried into the urban present is \textit{not} a static model. On the contrary, for the urban youth the past becomes, if not reflexively at least in practice, a source for active engagement with the present, in ways that give shape both to very creative and outgoing forms of collective imagination and to a constant invention of a future for tradition, as imagined, for example, by Kinshasa’s musicians in their video clips. There the persona of the “traditional chief” is frequently reenacted and recreated as a potent icon of power. More generally rural “folkloristic” music has been continuously recycled by urban bands such as Swede-Swede and its lead singer Boketshu Premier since the 1980s.

At the same time, the rural periphery has (once again) gained in importance. As elsewhere in the world, where processes of globalization are played out in a context of frontier expansion,\textsuperscript{28} the Congolese hinterland has become most central to the capitalist dynamics. Whereas the city has become peripheral and in some respects village-like, the bush is the place where dollars are generated, where the good life is shaped and where villages are transformed into booming diamond settlements, where life focuses on money and the consumption of women and beer.\textsuperscript{29} The little diamond boomtowns of Kahemba and Tembo, along the border between Congo’s Bandundu province and the
Angolan province of Lunda Norte, have become most central to capitalist dynamics and the dollarization of local economies. Thus, the diamond traffic, and the phenomenon of dollarization which has followed in its wake, are also emblematic of a return to the Léopoldian trading post economy that has marked the origin of Kinshasa and so many other cities throughout Africa. The political economy of the comptoir has always been colonial in its very essence. In the past it contributed a lot to the urbanization of the African material and mental landscape. The contemporary comptoir economy in Congo and Angola has continued to contribute a great deal to the frontier urbanization of places such Mbuji-Mayi or Tshikapa (in the Kasai), Kahemba and Tembo (in southern Bandundu), as well as the Kwango river diamond settlements in Angola, or the diamond “ranches” around Kisangani. These local sites have become, in certain ways, globalized spaces, the economic and cultural dynamics of which are linked to many other different places on the globe that play a role in a semi-formal world economy, from Luanda, Kinshasa, Brazzaville, Bangui and Bujumbura, to Antwerp, Mumbai, Beirut, Tel Aviv and Johannesburg. At the same time, these locally generated bush dollars have also engendered the further development, revival, sometimes even (relative) gentrification, of certain areas in Kinshasa: Masina’s quartier Sans Fil, Ndjili’s quartier sept, and some parts of Lemba, such as the more residential areas of Salongo and Righini.

Diasporic Movement and the Mirroring of Modernity

The local creation of modernities leads us to a third mirror in which Kinshasa generates an image of itself, contemplates and reflects upon itself, and projects itself outward. This mirror is situated in the context of the diaspora. Effectively barred from traveling abroad during the colonial period, the Congolese were quick to insert themselves into waves of increasingly intensive migration after independence. This mobility intensified and was accentuated by the gradual economic decline that started to manifest itself in the latter half of the 1970s and that reached mind-boggling dimensions towards the end of Mobutu’s long and disastrous reign. The breakdown of the Zairean state and the increasingly harsh living conditions in Kinshasa and the country at large prompted a huge exodus. From this period onwards, the city also materializes as a huge machine of evacuation. It starts to develop complex (semi)informal economies, involving the production, selling and buying of these rare goods called visa, passport, prises en charge and all the other documents and stamps needed to move out and beyond the increasingly confining horizon of sheer survival that Kinshasa has become. In recent years, these informal economies of evacuation have rotated around Kinshasa’s musicians. Every time
orchestras go and play concerts outside of Congo they travel with an increasing number of “musicians” who, once abroad, “shed their body” (*kobwaka nzoto*) and start an existence as illegal aliens (*ngulu*).  

Almost invariably, the first stop along the often difficult path of diasporic existence was Belgium, and even today the focal point of Kinshasa’s diasporic mirror remains the neighborhood of Matonge, in Brussels. In many respects this Belgian Matonge continues to be the social and cultural nexus of Europe’s Congolese migration. It is named after one of Kinshasa’s most vibrant neighborhoods, the fast-beating heart of the city’s night life and popular music scene, with its effervescent central square, *Rond Point Victoire*, with its night clubs and open air bars and *ngandas*, with its West African *commerçants* in their *suave boubous*, the proud descendants of the Coastmen who arrived in Kinshasa in the 1930s, with its freshly roasted *kamundele* goat meat, and its crowded *Djakarta* market, lit up by hundreds of little kerosene lamps at night.

Both the colonial mirror, the mirror offered by the village and the mirror activated by the diasporic movement constantly echo a deeper level of speculation. This underlying mirror is often a broken and deforming one, a mirror that reflects Kinshasa’s complex relationship with the outside and the beyond of a more global, transnational world, with the real and imagined qualities of modernity and of the wider, whiter, world of the West. Driving along Kinshasa’s Bypass, as the road which leads from the *Rond Point Ngaba* to the *Echangeur* of Limete is named, the observant eye might notice a dry cleaner or laundry (*blanchisserie* or whitener in French), named Modernisation. On the façade of the house, stuck into the whitewashed cement, little shards of broken mirror form the letters of the word *Modernisation*. Filled with irony, mirroring modernity, assimilating to the West, and inscribing oneself in the project of what is, in the end, still a very colonialist modernity, is here shown for the whitewash operation that it has always been at heart. The colonial *évolué*, this prototype of Naipaul’s *mimic man*, or Kinshasa’s *mundele ndombe* (the “Black White”), or Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, or today’s pale youngsters, whitened (*kotela*) by disastrous “beauty” skin products—all of these figures illustrate the processes of imitation and the creation of image embedded in this mirroring. To some extent, the young diamond hunters of Kinshasa have moved beyond the mimetic. But it requires still a complex process to break the spell of this image in the mirror, the image of this “African Europe” that colonial administrators, missionaries, expatriates and the elites of the postcolonial state held up for so long to Kinshasa as a model to which it should aspire.

In Congo, as elsewhere in Africa, the mirror of the West conjures up the property of the marvelous. The collective social imaginary concerning the West (referred to as Putu, Miguel, Mikili or Zwenebele) is rich in fairy tale images that conjure up the wonderland of modernity, and the luxurious, almost
paradisiacal lifestyle of the West. In Lingala, for example, Belgium is referred to as *lola*, “heaven,” and one would do almost anything “to die” (*fwa ku Mputu*) in this Mputuville.31 “The West,” as a topos of the Congolese imaginary, where one enjoys the benefits of endless sources of wealth for free, sums up all the qualities of the good life. The lifestyle of a local rich urban elite and of the expatriate confirms the reality of this Idea of the West. This image of the West is also reinforced by weekly local television broadcasts of *Mputuville*, a program that further mythologizes Congolese life in the European diaspora. Also, rather than deconstructing this myth for the home front, people who live and undergo themselves the often harsh realities of life in the diaspora usually go to great lengths to deny this grim picture and to confirm the exactitude of the collective imaginary. Admitting that life in the West often is a life of poverty does not invalidate the topos of the Western Paradise for those who remained behind on the home front. Instead, it is interpreted as a sign of personal failure and weakness of the *mikiliste* who followed the trail of the diaspora. Rather than revealing that life in the diaspora is not that easy, Congolese living abroad therefore often prefer to send home pictures of themselves in front of a Mercedes, neglecting to mention that the Mercedes actually belongs to the neighbor. Europe (and increasingly the United States, as the ultimate Land of Cocaigne, “the Putu of the *banoko*” [the Uncles, that is, the Belgians]) continues to be framed in these positive terms. Europe is *malili*, cool, whereas Africa is *moto*, hot, full of suffering. For most, the ideal of Putu conjures up a world without responsibilities: “Something is broke? Not to worry. Bring it to the white man and he will fix it” sang feu Pepe Kalle in one of his songs.

Nevertheless this myth of the West is developing holes in it. Another phrase of Pepe Kalle’s goes as follows: *bakende Putu, bakweyi na désert*, “they went to Europe, but landed in the desert.” The phrase conveys the demythologization of the Idea of Europe. Those who are now living in the diaspora have discovered that life in Putu is in reality a desert, a life of poverty filled with problems concerning money, housing, visas, and so forth. Simultaneously, the phrase also conveys a second meaning: “We Congolese started *en route* towards an insertion into a global ecumene of modernity, but we never attained our goal. Somewhere along the way we ran out of fuel and had to land in the
desert.” The world of modernity, with its tempting promises of boundless consumerism embedded in a vision of an expansive capitalism in the service of the nation state, has become the fool’s paradise in which the Congolese nation is no longer capable of living. It is out of reach for all except those who partake in the lottery of politics, have salaried jobs, know how to access international organizations and businesses, or have access to diamond dollars.

Blame for the impossibility of accessing this western version of the good life is not only placed on the excesses of the Mobutu era, but increasingly is also laid on the doorstep of the West itself. “When the Belgians left, they gave us Independence, but at the same time they threw the key to open the door to development into the ocean” is a frequently heard remark in Congo. One shopkeeper of a store which recently opened its doors painted the following motto above the entrance: *A qui la faute? Chez le blanc*, “Who is to blame? The White Man!” As such, the motto translates a growing breakaway from the world of modernity as defined by the metropole, a definition which reduces an increasing number of people in Congo to a subaltern status as part of a swelling Third World proletariat. In *Ma Personnalité*, a song from his 2002 hit album *A la queue leu-leu*, Werrason sings:

**Mundele alobi ye moto asala *dindon*, eeh!**  
Po ye alia mokongo,  
Na Ethiopiens balei mopende,  
Bachinois balei mapapu.  
Ah biso tolei libabe!  

The White Man says that he invented the turkey!  
For he eats the turkey’s breast,  
The Ethiopians eat the drumsticks,  
The Chinese eat the wings.  
Ah! We eat the fat of the turkey’s behind [misfortune]!
Werrason toys with the word *libabe*, which means “misfortune” but in this context also refers to the *tiges*, the small (imported) sticks of roasted turkey fat that have become part of the Kinois’ diet in recent years, mostly because they are so cheap. These lines, which were immediately picked up by Kinshasa’s youth, are indicative of the complex and multi-faceted relation that Congo continues to maintain with the outside and the beyond of a more global, transnational world (from the White Man and the West to Ethiopia and China).

For an ever growing number of “malcontents,” then, the world of modernity as defined and propagated by the West and its agents—the state agent, the missionary, the development worker, the dwindling local urban elites—has indeed become an inaccessible chimera. Some observers have therefore interpreted *la grande fête de Kinshasa*, the wave of lethal and yet ludic lootings which swept through the city and demolished the country’s economy in 1991 and 1993, as a radical break with the West. What was being demolished in the plundering were the icons of western modernity: fancy restaurants, supermarkets and industrial plants such as General Motors. Similarly, in 1997, Congo’s new leaders, who to a large extent were recruited from the diaspora, were contemptuously nicknamed “Europe’s leavings” (*occasions d’Europe*) upon their arrival in Congo. In other words: the members of this new ruling elite were perceived to be like second hand cars. No longer wanted in Europe and the States where they could not obtain a steady position, they returned to Congo like *Bounties* (the brand name of a bar of chocolate with a coconut filling): black on the surface and white at heart. This second rate, hybridized version of the West is the best one can get, but it never quite is the genuine article...

Although the tendency to turn away from the modernist position, in a true spirit of resistance against western domination, is certainly there, this does not
mean that people resist or reject modernity’s promise of the good life itself. A painting by Chéri Samba, one of Kinshasa’s most acclaimed artists, entitled “Woman and Her First Desires” (La femme et ses premiers désirs) shows the painter’s wife, Fifi, sitting in a bourgeois living room in Kinshasa, surrounded by the signs of her and her husband’s status: refrigerator, television set, rotating fan, a cooking furnace. These are the fruits, the bourgeois contents of modernity that everybody, in the end, wishes for. What people increasingly object to, however, is the ideological hegemony of modernity, the fact that the West imposes upon them, from above and from outside, its own definition of “the good life.” Much of the cultural and political struggle in Congo today focuses on control over a politics of identity as self representation, which implies that it is self generated and self constructed. To a large extent the arguments of identity today center round the question of who represents whom, and to/for whom. Who is author, who is subject of representation? Recourse to colonial and postcolonial stereotypes is inevitable in situations where identities are at play.

A SECRET CITY OF PUBLIC WORDS

Behind the garden city, the forest city and the village city lurks yet another city, an invisible but very audible city of whispers, what Kinois call les on dit, consisting of fleeting words, questions, harmful suspicions and treacherous accusations. Powerful and relentless gossip and rumor constantly run through the city. Shamelessly, leaving no subject untouched, it spreads like a bush fire through all of Kinshasa’s communities. Kinshasa’s urban space is very much structured through rumor. It is a city in which the spoken form regularly seems to dominate the built form. Often a weapon of the weak, it enters the scene from the margin and takes over the whole entity, pumping its words like blood through the veins and arteries of this giant urban body. The motor of Kinshasa’s public life, of the city as body politic, the capillary biopower of this Radio Trottoir, Radio Sidewalk, punctuates the city’s heart beat and constitutes its public eye. Uniting and dividing the city through the force of words, it generates the capital’s urban mythologies, its aesthetics of laughter, its cultural repertoires and collective imaginaries; it creates its heroes and damages the reputation of its most powerful and prominent citizens. It amplifies itself in the columns of the numerous newspapers that have started to proliferate since the end of Mobutu’s one party system. These are read and commented upon collectively at several points throughout the city by the “politicians” of the street, the parlementaires debout. Urban rumor solidifies in the paintings of Kinshasa’s artists. It translates into the scripts of its popular street theater and locally produced TV soaps. It is echoed in the lyrics of Kinshasa’s urban trou-
badours. It is spelled out in actions such as Radio Blackboard, *radio tableau*, where international radio news (RFI, BBC, Canal Afrique, Afrique N° Un) is written out on a blackboard in the street and commented upon by the owners of small portable radios. Meanwhile the whole neighborhood contributes batteries to keep the radio working. It is a way of escaping and redirecting interpretations and representations imposed upon them from elsewhere.

In spite of its formidable creative force, Kinois have rarely something good to say about their gossip mechanisms. Franco, the most prominent musician that the city ever produced, bitterly addresses *Radio Trottoir* in one of his
songs: “You sabotaged me, Radio Trottoir, You broke my marriage. With an information that you spread around but did not even bother to verify. You broke my marriage with your gossip!” In a similar vein his contemporary, Tabu Ley, complains in a song: “Gossip kills this city. Friends, you might hear something today, but try to see it with your own eyes before you start spreading illness for nothing.” The invisible space of rumor and gossip constantly fractures and reshapes the composite anatomy of the city’s public and private spaces. It produces the awkward intimacy of a public secrecy, a crowded and promiscuous common living space, shared by all of the city’s inhabitants. In colonial times, the qualities and characteristics of “private” and “public” had distinctly different connotations in the “white” city and the indigenous peripheries. At sunset a curfew banned the Congolese from the European areas of town. Both sides retreated into the privacy of their own living areas, ignorant of and often uninterested in each other’s lives. The neighborhoods and houses where both worlds touched each other geographically were often the literally intermediate and blended worlds of métissage, of those who did not belong firmly to either space or who crossed the social or racial lines that pervaded colonial society and thus had no fixed place in it. Mixed African-Euro-
pean households, mostly set up by Portuguese or Greek traders and shopkeepers, formed a buffer zone between African and European neighborhoods. The colonials retreated to their residences, offices, clubs and restaurants, and restricted their contact with indigenous worlds to a functional minimum, living in ways not much different from the lifestyles chosen by many expatriates in Kinshasa today.

Life in the African parts of town, on the other hand, was played out in the compound, *parcelle*, and in the street. The *parcelle* is a space that is typical of Kinshasa. Often surrounded by a wall and with an iron gate that marks its entrance, the *parcelle*, with its house or houses, and usually with its mango or palm tree and little garden of vegetables and crops, creates a small island of more or less private domesticity, in the shared intimacy of one’s (extended) family and ethnic affiliations. In many areas of the city, though, the *parcelle* has been invaded by and lives in close proximity and symbiosis with the street. As such, many *parcelles* are rather “public” private spaces. Simultaneously, Kinshasa also generates “private” public spaces, such as the recreational places of the bar, the night-club, the hotel and the *nganda* (originally the retreat where fishermen rest after their work, but now the name given to “formally informal” restaurants, often in the backyards of private homes). Here men and women meet their friends, lovers, mistresses and concubines in an atmosphere of privacy and secrecy. And yet invariably this is also in view of all, within reach of *Radio Trottoir*’s tentacles and subject to the gaze of the public eye. The *phonie* is another place where private and public become interchangeable. Every neighborhood has its small *phonie* enterprises, where one can enter into contact with otherwise unreachable friends and relatives in the interior of the country through radio wave communication. Often the *phonie* is also a meeting point for people from the same regional or ethnic background. Money matters, love affairs, marriages, births, divorces, illnesses, deaths and other private family matters are shouted into the microphone as well as into the ears of the neighborhood’s and indeed onto the country’s sidewalks. In Kinshasa, the private life of the individual and the moralities generated by the collective gaze are constantly living in a sometimes uneasy, often contradictory cohabitation.

Like many capitals around the world, Kinshasa has always been a narcissistic city, very much fascinated and preoccupied by the events within its own microcosmos. To an outsider who is unfamiliar with the city’s inner argot, its signs and secrets, Kinshasa’s urban codes therefore often appear difficult to crack. At the same time, Kinshasa constantly displays and puts itself on stage. Just like the city they live in, Kinois are extremely skillful at managing not just one but several identities at the same time. The constant negotiation between these individual and collective identities almost always takes place or is commented upon in the public sphere. Kinshasa exists in the public eye and
through its public appearance. Nourished by the force of pretense, the make believe and “as if,” the faire croire and faire semblant that pervades the urban praxis, Kinshasa is essentially an exhibitionist city or, as Yoka says, une ville-spectacle, a spectacle city. The urban aesthetics of display and public appearance are most clearly illustrated in the city’s most private space, which is simultaneously also its most public theater: the body. Outdoing Proust’s Paris, Kinshasa is a city of flâneurs and idle strollers, a proudly sensuous city where both male and female bodies are constantly dressing up and taking themselves out into the dusty streets and alleys of each neighborhood to be seen, to display themselves in feigned indifference to the public gaze (which is often a predominantly masculine gaze). It is a city, also, where there are always eyes to see and behold. Spectators constantly comment upon the outfit, the kind of pagne or wax cloth a woman is wearing, the bearing of the body that passes by, its kinoiseries: the slow rotating movement of the buttocks (evunda, “the body-work filled with goods”), the shape of the legs, ideally in the form of a beer bottle turned upside down (mipende ya milangi), the placement of the hands on the hips, a sign of assurance, the number of creases in a woman’s neck (kingo muambe), the style of the hairdress, in short the whole bearing, appearance and stature of passers-by, their whole social skin and social skill. In fact, the eyes of the beholders offer a mirror which constantly reflects one’s own social strength. In spite of, or maybe precisely because of its extreme poverty, Kinshasa’s aesthetic regime of the body has turned into a veritable cult of elegance, culminating in the movement of the Sape, an acronym for the Society of Fun Lovers and Elegant Persons, Société des ambianceurs et des personnes élégantes. Begun in the early 1980s around “King of Sape” Papa Wemba, a popular musician, this movement escalated into real fashion contests and potlatches in which youngsters would display their European fashion designer clothes, in an attempt to outdo each other. Today, youngsters ironically refer to their designer gear as “wicked clothes” (bilamba mabe). Recently, also, this spirit of elegance has found a second breath in the flourishing context of Pentecostalist and other Christian fundamentalist churches, in which the city’s new figures of success, its most famed preachers such as Fernando Kutino or Soni “Rockman” Kafuta, show off their Armani and Versace suits to their admiring and ecstatic followers, under the motto that “one has to appear clean before God” (Il faut être propre devant Dieu).

Pushing the mirror metaphor to the limit of reflection and beyond, the religious transformation which Congolese society is currently undergoing has contributed to a reconfiguration, if not an obliteration, of the dividing lines between public and private space, as well as an increasing theatricalization of the city. This process goes hand in hand with an increasing celebrity making (starisation) of those who occupy the front stage, the preachers and musicians.
The new *vedettariat* in the popular music scene has given rise to new forms of violence. Not only do the music and its accompanying dance styles reflect, and reflect upon, the violence that pervades the city and Congolese society at large, but the frequent clashes between avid followers of rival bands have themselves become increasingly responsible for the mounting insecurity in Kinshasa’s public spaces. Home to street children and military, Kinshasa’s main arteries, crossroads, markets, sport stadia, and administrative sites have
often become a social no man’s land, governed by the predatory violence of the street. At the same time, the enchanting space of the church, with its new moral economies and its own forms of physical and symbolic violence, has swallowed and encompassed the space of popular culture. It has also claimed and drastically reconfigured the public space as such. In all corners of the city, and at all times of the day and the night, thousands upon thousands of Kinois gather to pray. In the process, the space of the church has become the city’s main stage, a space of témoignage also where people publicly bear witness of their sins and their conversion, where they display and act out their poverty or wealth, their misery or blessings, leaving no stone of their personal lives unturned, no intimate detail unmentioned. In the process, the religious dynamics in these churches have also impacted thoroughly on private space and contribute to a radical restructuring of the social networks and moral and ethic matrices of the family, of kin relations, and ethnic affiliations. Within the church context, the changed relations between the public and private spaces are indicative of deeper changes in the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity in Kinshasa today. While representing a vast effort to recreate a new, all-inclusive intersubjectivity on a moral basis, the religious praxis pushes aside the intersubjective moral model which has always been provided by the village, with its ethics of kin solidarity, reciprocity, and gift logic. Paradoxically, this effort thus contributes to an increasing demonization of social life as it has been lived until now.

THE FIRST AND SECOND WORLDS OF KINSHASA

While taking into account these various levels which constitute Kinshasa’s ecology today, there is yet another, and more fundamental, mirroring process that impacts on all the previous ones: that between the visible city of the “first world” and of the day, and an invisible Kinshasa that exists in what Kinois themselves refer to as the nocturnal “second world” or “second city,” an occult city of the shadow, as it exists in the local mind and imagination. “If there can be a better way for the real world to include the one of images, it will require an ecology not only of real things but of images as well” wrote Susan Sontag. Throughout this book, the urbanscape of Kinshasa, its activities, its praxis, and its specific meaningful sites (the compound, the bar, the church, the street) will be read not only as geographical, visible and palpable urban realities but also, and primarily so, as a mundus imaginalis, a local mental landscape, a topography and historiography of the local Congolese imagination that is no less real than its physical counterpart, a second world, an “underneath of things” that is collectively shared by all social layers in Kinshasa, uniting its beau monde and its demimonde. In this second world, the dimension of the mar-
velous combines with the dimension of terror to form the tain, the back of the mirror that reflects these qualities back into the daily life experience of the Kinois.

In the autochthonous experience, daily life constantly uses the processes of mirroring and reflecting to make sense of itself. The activities of the day constantly include the world of the night, of the dream and of the shadow. To interpret the world of the living, a diviner opens up another space time, another world, the world of ancestors, through a mirror, or by means of the unmoving surface of water in a gourd. Dreams are beacons in the night but they impact in very tangible ways on decisions one has to make during the day: whether or not to travel today, whether to meet so-and-so, whether to set out on a hunt or postpone it. The material realness of the mask, as image, as double, and as dancing representation of the dead, doesn’t make the existence of the dead any less real. Rather, the mask becomes, is, posits the ancestor while simultaneously being a mask made of raffia and wood. “To consider the obverse and the reverse of the world,” writes Mbembe, “as opposed, with the former partaking of a ‘being there’ (real presence) and the latter of a ‘being elsewhere’ or a ‘non-being’ (irremediable absence)—or, worse, of the order of unreality—would be to misunderstand. The reverse of the world and its obverse did not communicate with each other only through a tight interplay of correspondences and complex intertwined relations. They were also governed by relations of similarity, relations far from making the one a mere copy or model of the other. These links of similarity were thought to unite them, but also to distinguish them, according to the wholly autochthonous principle of simultaneous multiplicities.”

One of the main questions that this book will address, though, relates to the changes that seem to have appeared in the mechanisms operating this simultaneous multiplicity of the two different worlds that exist on each side of the mirror, and thus also in and through each other. In urban Congo, something seems to have changed in the slippage between visible and invisible, between reality and what we can call, for lack of better words, its double, its shadow, specter, reflection, image, or elili, as it is referred to in Lingala.

What is it, then, that has affected the praxis and rhetoric of the image in Kinshasa today? Within the local experiential frame, rendered in Kinois’ accounts of their lives and of their city, the double, this other, nocturnal ghost of a city which lurks underneath the surface of the visible world, somehow seems to have taken the upper hand. Today, mirroring the way in which the second or shadow economy has taken over the first or formal economy, this other, “second world” (deuxième monde), “second city” (deuxième cité), “pandemonium world” (monde pandemonium), or “fourth dimension” (quatrième dimension), that is, one of the multiple “invisible” worlds of what is referred to as kindo-
kinisme\textsuperscript{39}) increasingly seems to push aside and take over the first world of daily reality. “The second world is the world of the invisible,” says one inhabitant of Kinshasa, “and those who live in it and know are those who have four eyes, those who see clearly both during the day and during the night. Their eyes are a mirror. A man with two eyes only cannot know this world. The second world is a world that is superior to ours. The second world rules the first world.” This, and many other, similar accounts, seems indicative of the widespread feeling that what you see is not what you see (unless you have four eyes), and what is there is not what is “really” there or, more important, is not what matters most. The seen and the unseen, it thus seems, no longer reflect, balance and produce each other in equal, and equally real ways. Somehow, the reverse has become more ontological than the obverse. It is no longer experienced as a similar but parallel reality, but, on the contrary, as the reality that has come to inhabit and overgrow its opposite. Symptomatic of this more general change is the invasion of the space of the living by the dead. A term which is currently used in Lingala to describe this new quality of mounting Unheimlichkeit and elusiveness of the world, is mystique. In the postcolonial Afrique fantôme that Congo seems to have become, it is increasingly frequent to designate people and situations as mystique, difficult to place, interpret and attribute meaning to.

This changed nature of the point of inflection between different but simultaneously real worlds, the change in the mirroring mechanisms of reflection and retroreflection that constitute the passage between the obverse and the reverse of the world, has a heavy impact on daily life in Kinshasa. For example, it continuously transforms the qualities and realities of what constitutes life and death, as well as the ways in which they relate to each other. Similarly, as will be illustrated at length throughout this book, the changed relationship between obverse and reverse constantly promotes a religious transfiguration of daily reality.

All of these changes are characteristic of some deeper alterations that Congolese society as a whole is undergoing. Without dealing with the historical roots of these changes here, this evolution may be summarized as a generalized crisis, situated in the Congolese capital’s capacity for semiosis and semiotics, at observing and interpreting the syntax, semantics and pragmatics of the sign as sign. Not that Kinshasa’s inhabitants do not know how to work with signs, or have stopped doing so. Quite to the contrary, one could even argue that Kinshasa is marked not by a lack but by a constant overproduction of leading signs and meanings, and that it is precisely this “overheating,” this excess of the signifier, that leads to the crisis of meaningfulness. But it is also in the nature itself of the transcription of one reality into the other, and therefore in the nature of the representational, that the changes have ensconced themselves. In the process, something has happened to the relationship between
image and reality. A change has occurred in the ways in which the representa-

tion and the represented reality relate to each other.

Applying a linguistic and sociological perspective to the daily scene in

Kinshasa, one could say that the rupture between discourse, representation,

action and structure is total. The urban reality has gradually turned into a

world in which fact and fiction are interchangeable. In Kinshasa today, it is no

ger longer possible to forget or deny the Saussurian arbitrariness of the sign, or

the facticity of the social fact. What Taussig has termed the “mimetic facul-
ty,” the capacity to pretend that one lives facts, not fictions, has often ceased

to operate in an adequate way. To put it differently, there is a strong sense of

what Baudrillard has termed the “precession of simulacra,” thereby pointing

out the changing relations between the signifying “real” and the representa-
tional “imaginary,” or the liquidation of all referentials. The common links

and paths of transfers between signifier and signified, or between predicate

and subject, have imploded or are subverted. What I have previously called

the faire croire and faire semblant have often taken over from reality. In Kinshasa,
as a consequence, more than anywhere else, there is no reality that is strong

enough to resist language. Often, the discrepancies between signifier and sig-
nified allow for the generation of a specific kind of Kinois humor, enabling,

for example, the tenant of an old and decrepit shack to refer to his dwelling

as the palais du peuple, “the people’s palace,” after the imposing parliamentary

building of the same name which was constructed in the heart of Kinshasa by

the Chinese. But in that specific Kinois language, the shifts are often less be-

nign. Very often what poses as true is actually false, the lie becomes truth. As

a result, to give but one example, the boundaries between legal and illegal are

continuously shifting. Such shifts are operated by the widespread mechanism

of reversibility that is constantly at work in the daily lives of most Kinois.

Hence, also, as I noted earlier, the important place which this city attributes

to appearance. Undoubtedly, this crisis of meaning that can be observed at all

levels of Congolese society has profoundly alienating effects on both macro

and micro levels of societal life.

But this sociological level only captures the more obvious effects of the

crisis of meaningfulness that may be observed in Kinshasa. On another, deep-
er, level, one could stand the argumentation on its head and say that Kin-

shasa’s “image repertoire” does not so much suffer from a lack but rather from

an excess of overlap between the signifying and the signified, or between the

structures of the symbolic, the “real” that resists language, and the level of the

imaginary. On this level, the problem with notions such as “fact” and “fiction”
is that they do not take into account the autochthonous experience of the real-

ness of the double, but risk reducing it to something unreal, a mere “fantasy.”

But if, on the contrary, one takes the reality of the thing and its double
seriously, one starts to see that the deeper crisis situates itself primarily in the changing functions and qualities of junction and disjunction (such as the disjunction between life and death), and hence of the role of the imaginary, which operates that disjunction or dédoublement. Much of the current Congolese societal crisis, the subjectivity of which is lived and experienced most strongly in precisely the urban locale, situates itself in this slippage. Put in a different way, the societal crisis in Congo essentially evolves around the containment, the struggle to reestablish control over an increasingly overflowing imaginary. And at the heart of this struggle lies the ever more problematic possibility of positing or “siting” of the double (for example, death as the double of the living, or the double as the living and familiar figure of death). What may be
observed here is, in a way, the liquidation of the double, the unwholesome coalescence of the reflecting sides into one, or the gradual take-over of one by the other. In its more extreme forms, this process of liquidation operates a killing, a destroying of reality, an annihilation or nantisation of the world in its most essential structure. And through this liquidation, which produces Kinshasa as idol and as eidolon, the imaginary ceaselessly creates its own level of autonomy, with all of its excesses, its witchcraft, its diabolization of social life. This new “siting” of the city’s imaginary forms the undercurrent that runs throughout this book.