

## BOOK REVIEW

## African Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility

Goldstone, Brian, and Juan Obarrio. 2017. *African Futures: Essays on Crisis, Emergence, and Possibility*. University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Shakirah Hudani

This collection of essays by prominent African scholars centers familiar themes of continuity and emergence, as well as rupture and disruption, but filters them through new light. To think of African futures here is to engage with the diverse contexts through which these accounts reimagine visions of futurity and connections to the past—from the macro scale of urban construction in Kinshasa to the micro dynamics of a prayer meeting breaking up—and to view their interconnections. Drawing from new material and earlier pieces of Africanist scholarship on crisis and change by these scholars,<sup>1</sup> the contributions in this collection are grouped thematically and speak to one another through a framework, which describes the construction, imagination, and deconstruction of temporality and, in particular, futurity in Africa. The editors, Brian Goldstone and Juan Obarrio, offer a textured introduction and foreground the collection as a relational reflection on the “motley ensemble of verdicts and diagnoses” proffered by previous writing on African contexts (1). The volume thus avoids the binary of despair and triumph in representations of the continent, and provides a valuable addition to scholarship on temporality in relation to refiguring Africa’s futures. As the editors write, the volume aims “not so much to iron out the contradictions nor to disprove the verdicts (though such disproving will at times be necessary) as to think within the paradoxes, perplexities, and apparent certitudes Africa is taken to insinuate” (3).

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1. Examples include Roitman’s 2014 ‘Anti-Crisis,’ Geschiere’s earlier work on urbanization in Africa in the 1990s, Michael Ralph’s emerging work on the ‘forensics of capital,’ and inspired by Charles Piot’s earlier work on social modes of imagining the future in-Cold War Togo (2010).

The first section, “Rethinking Crisis,” is centered as much on theorizing crisis in the context of continuing emergencies on the continent as on analyzing crisis as prolonged temporal state, thereby entering into conversation with Reinhardt Kosselleck’s (2006) theories of rupture and transformation. Janet Roitman, for instance, positions her earlier work on “anti-crisis” as a liquid and metaphorical antidote to crisis in Cameroon, circa early 1990s. Roitman describes crisis as a persistent condition that eviscerates earlier notions of connection and post-independence nationalism. She builds on existing theorizations of crisis as a productive “blind-spot” for thinking of emergence such as operates through “legitimacy crises, fragmented or partial sovereignties and ‘no war no peace zones’” (36). In an ensuing essay, Brian Larkin reflects on her theorization, reading crisis in its affective terms in relation to different forms of exigencies, states of emergency, and the continuation of disruption. Using similar themes of temporality and rupture in the face of the rapid change of modernization, he calls for re-readings of narrative theory in African contexts where African futurity is presented as demanding simultaneity and coincidence. Larkin comments on the temporal scale of the vast nature and speed of Africa’s transformation in the recent past: “paying attention to the temporal frame of crisis and categorization allows us to move beyond the specificities associated with each particular state of emergency and lay bare its structural coordinates” (50). Connecting his reflections to earlier work in Nigeria, and in particular the opening of the Abeokuta Steel Mill in 1983, Larkin calls attention to the

affective role of modernization not as a failed or frustrated project alone, but as “a form of congealed desire” (48). He argues that it is important to recognize “the affectual, fantastic side of modernization” that is repeated and rendered anew in contemporary infrastructure projects: “All over the world, highway projects, corporate headquarters, the laying of fiber optic cable networks, and so on, occupy that messy conceptual boundary where the economic and rational meet the symbolic and fantastic” (48).

“Emergent Economies” serve as the focus of the volume’s second section, drawing attention to nexuses of debt, financial circulations, and extractive and militarized economies. Michael Ralph’s reflective, journalistic account of “the forensics of capital” links ‘good state’ subjectivities in Senegal with hopeful outcomes of debt forgiveness to which this diplomatic capital is tied. He recounts international disciplinary orders of good state behavior that, for Senegal, have created diplomatic credibility through embracing discourses and practices of Western security and governance. As a consequence, the Senegalese government actively and disproportionately participates in peacekeeping missions. These processes of politically and fiscally conditioning the West African state tie a history of colonial and post-independence cooperation to international political capital. Ralph indicates,

The way that a nation’s profile is tethered to mobility in the world of nations—what I am calling the forensics of capital—involves managing evidence within a distinct temporal regime. Privileged nations arrive at a consensus about a country and then establish a narrative suitable to that conclusion. At the same time, they omit, or carefully recalibrate, evidence contrary to their claims (93).

Thus, international apparatuses of debt management and policy restructuring, which are purveyed by institutions like the World Bank, are “not merely a repertoire of fiscal policies but a mode of statecraft” centered around the discourse of good governance and improved business environments (93).

Part Three of the book, which considers “Urban Spaces and Local Futures,” allows for the exposition of Abdoumalig Simone’s phenomenologically thick and dizzying reflections on “uncertainty as an urban resource” in *rough towns* such as Ngaliema, Kinshasa. Simone’s writing produces a picture at the intersection of contingency, self-made visibilities, patterns of

livelihood, and forms of eligibility. This picture acts and intervenes in the spatial and temporal economies Simone analyzes in the city. He speaks of possibilities, which are born of mobilities of varying types, so that “a particular vantage point” is necessary for their apprehension and realization. Challenging singular perspectives, whether God’s eye view from above or master-plan, he cautions that the city can be multiplied and called into question,

It is this very oscillation of inhabitants traveling wide and far, and going nowhere; of substantial amounts of money being accrued and lost, invested and wasted that propels inhabitants not to take any representation, image or view of the city for granted (148).

In the same section, Filip de Boeck’s interrogation of the re-centering of the future of locality puts Kinshasa’s non-linearities of space and narration in full view. On the one hand, the government fantasizes about building a new administrative and commercial Kinshasa in its “*Cite de Fleuve*” project. The project revives colonializing compartmentalizations and oppositions by threatening to peripheralize much of the existing city. On the other hand, people’s lived realities point to “everyday movements” that “often defy such closure and exclusion, and call into question established notions of flexibility and fixture” (62). In response to these binaries, De Boeck suggests “new ways...of perceiving connectedness” and points to ideas of *doubling*, *shadow realities*, and *occultization* that shade local worlds. Here, in deep erstwhile colonial space, this idea of rereading shadow reality is illuminative and productive for de Boeck: “the black hole . . . reveals itself to be the powerful producer of narratives, experiences, various lines, material and spiritual, that produce the surroundings and forms, but also the contents, of these local worlds” (162).

Also in the volume’s third section, Peter Geschiere and Antoine Socpa trace theses of mobility in relation to the city back to colonial processes of urbanization, where the city was considered as forbidden, separated space and mobility was controlled. They argue that far from being truncated, city mobilities that originated during this period form a “crucial element in people’s reflections on the future” (167). Earlier theses on *partial urbanization* analyzed the connections that held urban dwellers to their rural villages of origin. The authors poignantly capture the analytic of shifting funerary modes. The funeral “at home” is characteristic of par-

tial urbanization. It is gradually being supplanted by subterfuges of partial funerary rites due to finance-imposed limitations on mobility, thus “sending only certain attributes of the deceased home but burying the body in the city” (170). Yet, here too the local stands out as being deeply interwoven with the networked circuitries of imagining and mobility. Local elites and urban elites in Cameroonian villages face contests of recognition, and for inhabitants, large houses in the village serve as ornaments of resentment and a misrecognition of local realities. In turn, local residents dream up alternative spatial mobilities, vernacularized as “*bush falling*”: transnational, improvisational plans to Qatar, the Gulf States, and China. These are vantage points from which transcontinental migration appears as antidote to stunted visions of opportunity at home in the village.

A final section, “Possibilities,” includes contributions by Brad Weiss, on the relative temporalities of development in urban Tanzania, and Achille Mbembe’s essay, which centers “Africa in theory” in a changing global geopolitical order. Contributions by Ramah McKay, Danny Hoffman, Jane Guyer, Charles Piot, Jennifer Cole, and Juan Obarrio strengthen a collection that challenges readers to think “Africa otherwise” (12). This collection serves as a corrective through which binary characterizations of the continent can be rethought. Much like James Ferguson’s diagnosis of “Africa Talk” (2006), instead of popular, binary narratives as failing or rising, the essays here offer prisms of nuance and heterogeneity. At the same time, positioning the future as both a materially unfolding reality and potent imaginary, the essays presented here interweave the everyday into the texture of intersecting personal realities—from instances of changing funerary rites in Cameroon to the phenomenology of a prayer meeting breaking up in Kinshasa. Taken together, these essays respond to one another in their varying depictions of continuity and rupture, crisis, repetition, and reordering. They are positioned in conversation with multiplying realities on the continent, and provide a theoretically rich contribution to scholarship on temporality and change in contemporary African contexts.

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