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UNPACKING: CONGOLESE ARTISTS ON THE MIGRANT EXPERIENCE IN SÃO PAULO

*Abra os olhos (“open your eyes”). Biliwe.
Open them again, and see through the weave
of a hessian sack.*

keywords

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Democratic
Republic
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Performance;
Music.

Photo: Rose
Satiko G. Hikiji



New localities, old prejudices. Foreigners, etrangers: *our ideas and our thoughts are less welcome than our bodies.*

Photo: Rose
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Exploring these social realities are two individuals, two Congolese, one a musician, one an artist, Yannick Delass, and Shambuyi Wetu. Having only settled in Brazil in recent years they were introduced to each other in SP by us, as part of an activist¹ movement. Voices and silences. Muted mimesis and sung *saudades* are moments and spaces of empowerment, subtle shifts in the visibility and “auditory space”² of migrant politics³.

1. Activism, as discussed in Raposo (2015), is an unstable concept to deal with the connections of art and politics, when art is an act of resistance and subversion. Yannick and Shambuyi’s first encounter was during a meeting at the Cambridge Occupied Artistic Residence which aimed to discuss art, immigration and work, and to bring together Brazilian and migrant artists, members of the housing movement which occupies Hotel Cambridge in São Paulo and anthropologists.

2. Feld (1996) and Born (2013), calling attention to sound - against the hegemony of the visual in social sciences - mention the expression “auditory space”. Our performers work with both visual, sound and corporeal expressions, making it necessary to go beyond visual anthropology or ethnomusicology, or at least, to put them together.

3. São Paulo, the most populous city in the Southern Hemisphere, is also home to the largest Arab, Italian and Japanese diasporas. African migration to the city (and to Brazil) is not huge in numbers, but, in the last years, it has increased significantly. In 2000, 1054 regular African migrants from 38 countries lived in Brazil. In 2012, they were 31.866 regular citizens coming from 48 of the 54 African nations. In the city of São Paulo, in 2016 there are 2055 regular migrants from Nigeria, 1830 from Angola, 431 from DRC (source: Polícia Federal).

Watch *Bagage* at: <https://vimeo.com/220968672>

Making complex realities tangible, the artists attempt to translate their perspective of international politics and consumption for their new audiences in São Paulo's public spaces. A silent figure on stage, coltan-covered, bloody-dripping cellphones taped to his body, an audience bemused, a distant war and nearby refugees.

Photo: Rose
Satiko G. Hikiji



Yannick's guitar and Shambuyi's *chimera*⁴ aren't alone. A settled-migrant, Luambo Pitchou, an activist lawyer from Democratic Republic of Congo in São Paulo, tells the São Paulo public his understanding of his country's situation through his words. All three of these Congolese migrants represent these stories in subtly different ways, reconfiguring how conflict, consumption and identity are part of the same problem.

4. We call Shambuyi's art works chimeras, associating them with two concepts: montage and utopias. If this indicates hope, dreams, fantasies and a privileging of the imaginary, it also implies "multiple images that, through associating visual indexes emanating from different beings [...] provoke a visual projection which gives rise to an image that at the same time implies the presence of these different beings" (Lagrou & Severi: 2013; our translation). Shambuyi creates creatures from different things and beings, as a way of externalising what comes out of his head. The final form of the performance is unclear before he makes it, and so too are the exact forms and meanings of his creatures/chimeras. Many of these meanings are produced *a posteriori*, deriving from the effects provoked during the performance when Shambuyi's mind meets the audience.

But our fictive chronology - the movie we're making⁵ - retells this by welding a later voice, Yannick's, to Shambuyi's performance and Pitchou's discourse. Why? Are we closer or further from the reality of what all want to communicate? This montage - our edited reality - plays with the voices, images and discourses of that day, of its different performative moments and protagonists, to approximate something of that fleeting reality.

What is the artist-migrant's mimesis? What exactly is he copying? The shamans of anthropology tell us that mimesis embodies and subverts colonial power (Taussig, 1993), and for Shambuyi this appears to be true. Yet, theories don't always translate, they don't always skip continents as easily as bodies do. Shambuyi's chimera mimetises the minerals market that promises riches but brings war to his country.

Watch *Biliwe* at: <https://vimeo.com/220968843>

He needs to save his life
He needs to save his life
He needs to save his life
("Ele necessita preservar a sua vida")

The film echoes the tragedies of being a refugee. And sometimes to "save one's life" you have to keep silent about certain traumatic experiences. But, after all, what is left from the inconsistencies of our conscience? How does this affect a Brazilian audience? Is the artist making overt connections between colonial and post-colonial powers, and contemporary African and Brazilian realities, or is he perhaps making it more simple for this audience, who do not know his context?

Yannick Delass sings: "blacks in Babylon without access to quality education, suffering discrimination in public parks, shot by the police, accused of crimes that were never committed".⁶ This is a very familiar description for the Brazilian audience. Cellphones and racism make the transatlantic connections, even if we don't know the wars or the refugee camps.

And our cultural intermediaries are more complex: later they take us into their personal lives and the texture of daily dilemmas. In a performance

5. The short films presented here are part of a wider project of research and filmmaking, conducted by Jasper Chalcraft and Rose Satiko Hikiji, named *Being/Becoming African in Brazil: migrating musics and heritages* (Fapesp grants 2016/05318-7 and 2016/06840-9). In this project we think of filming - as well as taking part in our friends' performances - as *making*, since we agree that some practices of art can suggest "new ways of *doing* anthropology" (Ingold, 2013:21).

6. Our translation of: "os negros sem acesso à educação de qualidade na Babilônia, discriminados nos parques públicos, baleados pela polícia, acusados de crimes que não foram cometidos".

that may mix the autobiographical with social commentary from the streets they interrogate the personal through the political. *Fags and whores*: personal vices, existential props that ease the uncertainties and stresses of movement. Our cultural brokers ask us, are we imprisoned by such vices, or is our common humanity emphasized by their seductive promises on either side of the Atlantic?

But we are brokers too: this performance took place during the launch of the first issue of GIS - Gesture, Image, Sound - Journal of Anthropology itself. Shambuyi, Yannick and also Togolese artists and Brazilian capoeiristas were invited by the editors to perform as part of the celebration. A relevant question is which brokers have power: Shambuyi and Yannick give form and meaning to as yet unfamiliar realities, whilst our words here reshape their relevance for our disciplinary and spatial politics. *Rag-and-Bone Men (Catadores)* was filmed in a space where African and Brazilian (mainly Afro-Brazilian) artists meet, Aparelha Luzia, yet who was really in charge of this meeting? As we broker each other, how do our respective virtues and vices interact?

It is worth noting that the musical interaction between the Togolese and Brazilians was a little rough around the edges - disputing the acoustic space. This contrasts with the silent performances of Shambuyi Wetu and his chimeras (accompanied only by the lamentful song of Yannick Delass), which suspends time: here interaction is shaped by interruption and shock.

In this space of African and Afro-Brazilian art, Shambuyi Wetu walks between the fag-ends of incarceration, in the scandalous silences of the unconscious. He picks up pains, uses them and exorcises them through smoke. Instead of just hiding himself from the danger of non-existence, he decides to go beyond the frontiers that the artworld imposes. And he asks himself for how long construction work will earn him his daily bread.⁷

Watch *Rag-and-Bone Men* at: <https://vimeo.com/220968600>

Shambuyi and Yannick continue to challenge our understandings of the city, and of their migrant experience. After *Rag-and-Bone Men (Catadores)* performances shift to the city's venerable art institutions, the Museo Afro-Brasil and the lived uncertainties of the 32nd Sao Paulo Bienal (title: *Incerteza Viva*). With eight kilos of fish, clay, and vegetables, Shambuyi and his partner Clarisse Mujinga hack the Bienal, their impromptu performance countering the prevailing images of a troubled continent. Inside, they meet a public eager to engage with their representations of

7. Shambuyi and other artists in a debate about art, refugee and migrant labour: <https://vimeo.com/169635430>.

an abundant “Africa”. In one afternoon, the thousand selfies taken with the Congolese artists and then shared on social media solidly placed them in the public spaces of the city, even as they re-exoticised them.

Photo: Jasper
Chalcraft



In the process of settling-in to this city, its localities begin to feel as old as the prejudices that continue to make life difficult for each generation that settles here. Our new *etrangers* continue to negotiate these streets, squares, bars, as well as our art institutions and auditory spaces, always trying to make their ideas and thoughts, their silences and songs, as welcome as their bodies.

You who live safe
In your warm houses,
You who find warm food
And friendly faces when you return home.
Consider if this is a man
Who works in mud,
Who knows no peace,
Who fights for a crust of bread,
Who dies by a yes or no.
Consider if this is a woman
Without hair, without name,
Without the strength to remember,
Empty are her eyes, cold her womb,
Like a frog in winter (...).

*

Primo Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*.

translation
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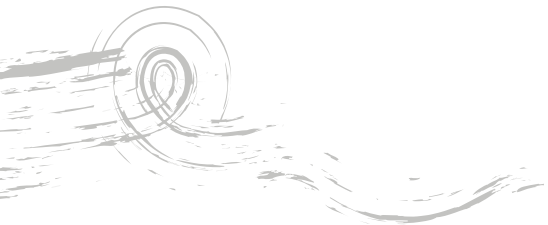


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