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ARTICLE

African Studies Keyword: "Transformation"

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Abstract

In the African Studies literature "transformation" emerges as a capacious discursive field and project of state power. In this Keyword article, I move from postindependence questions of transformative social change to violence as a transformative project of the nation-state, examining its imbrication with questions of transition and state aftermaths. I analyze transformation as a promise of worldmaking around horizons of the "post": postapartheid, postconflict, and postcolonial. I then consider textures of transformative urbanism in changing African cities, and analyze processes implicated in reclaiming forms of discard, positing transformation as recuperation. Transformation is ultimately a multidirectional conceptual field capable of remaking personal worlds and theoretical orientations.

Résumé

Dans la littérature des études africaines, la « transformation » apparaît comme un vaste champ discursif et un projet du pouvoir de l'État. Dans cet article, je passe des questions post indépendance de changement social transformateur à la violence comme projet de transformation de l'État-nation, en examinant son imbrication avec les questions de transition et les séquelles de l'État. J'analyse la transformation comme une promesse de création d'un monde autour des horizons du « post » : post apartheid, post conflit et post colonial. Je considère ensuite les textures de l'urbanisme transformateur dans les villes africaines en mutation. J'analyse aussi les processus concernés dans la récupération des formes de mise au rebut, en posant la transformation comme une récupération. La transformation est en fin de compte un champ conceptuel multidirectionnel capable de remodeler les mondes personnels et les orientations théoriques.

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Resumo

Na literatura dos estudos africanos, a "transformação" tem emergido como um campo discursivo e um projeto de poder estatal muito abrangente. Neste artigo, em que abordo vários conceitos-chave, parto das questões da transformação social pós-independência para abordar a violência enquanto projeto transformador do Estado-nação, analisando a sua íntima relação com as questões da transição e suas consequências ao nível do Estado. Analiso a transformação enquanto uma promessa de construção do mundo em torno dos horizontes do "pós": pós-*apartheid*, pós-conflito e pós-colonialismo. Em seguida, tomo em consideração as tessituras do urbanismo transformador na alteração das cidades africanas e analiso os processos envolvidos na exigência de formas de renúncia, propondo que a transformação seja entendida como recuperação. Em última análise, a transformação é um domínio conceptual multidirecional, capaz de refazer os mundos pessoais e as orientações teóricas.

Keywords: transformation; postindependence nation-state; transition; African urbanism; revalorization; agency; worldmaking; dialectic

Introduction

Talk of transformation abounds across various fields in the study of Africa. The term has suffused different portions of the academic imagination: from Marxist and economistic understandings of structural transformation of the social basis of productivity, to post-apartheid transformation in South Africa. The constitution of transformation as a conceptual term has shifted over time, its uses embodying a spectrum of self-consciousness as both an analytic and an emic term. Transformation has at times been spoken of but not overtly theorized, as subterranean and hidden from view. At other times, it has been more self-consciously analytic, above ground and in full view. In this "Keywords" paper I trace, theorize, and stitch together appearances of transformation through its incarnations in African studies scholarship, looking at transformative discourse's instantiation as a large-scale form of social change. I also point to the deceptive conjuncture at which discourses of transformation are located—a conjuncture that while focused on promises of newness and novelty, frequently fails to take account of the uneven and contradictory ground of the present on which such predictions rest.

Parsing discursive threads around transformation in the African studies literature is often a question of paying attention to careful reading, and of being conscious of points of convergence or genealogies of thought in which transformative discourse is located. In addition to asking about the essence of transformation as a conceptual space and discursive practice, I am also interested in questions of how transformation is *used* and with what other keywords it finds itself entangled.[1] How does transformation appear in discourse across genres, at what scales, and in relation to which forms of temporal change? I suggest that transformation can be equally a signifier of metamorphosis, the motor of historical transition, and a form of potent personal agency. Yet discourse on

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transformation also makes complex appearances at points of rupture and crisis and amid aftermaths, exposing the nexus between ideas of crisis and transformation, which have been critical to my own thinking. It is hence with attention to projects of remaking at various scales in interdisciplinary African studies literature that this paper proceeds.

Organizing structure

In the initial sections of this paper, I take transformation as a discursive practice situated at conjunctural moments of violence and promises of recreation. I focus on 1994 as a key moment of change that in many ways shaped transformative socio-political processes in two key countries in the ensuing decades: Rwanda and South Africa. I suggest 1994 was a moment of "ruptural fusion" for these countries in different ways (Hall and Massey 2010).[2] Drawing on legacies of earlier national ruptures, 1994 voiced the promise of liberation in postapartheid South Africa and was also marked as a moment of epochal violence and a macabre portent of "transformation" in postgenocide Rwanda. Transformative moments are often embedded in longer pasts and situated in relation to various points of national rupture: in this case 1959 in Rwanda was a pivotal moment, marking the generational exile of Rwandan Tutsis amid the violence of the Hutu Social Revolution (1959–61) that preceded independence.

While the first parts of this paper are grounded in national questions of promise, violence, and its aftermaths, subsequent sections seek to spatialize promises of transformation in the African city. Accordingly, later in the paper I consider transformation as a discourse that operates around the material space of the city by examining questions of Afrofuturism, uneven development, and everyday struggles in cities such as Johannesburg and Kigali, but also Lagos and Nairobi. Quotidian struggles and everyday lifeworlds of African urban dwellers in cities around the continent ground transformation's discursive claims, pointing to the unevenness and inequity that promises of planned cities and green urbanism leave in their wake (Hudani 2020; Watson 2014). Taken as a spatialized discourse that is given form around the city, transformation can also be problematized in urban space by considering the uneven claims of urban dwellers to make claims and "*chache lavi*" or "look for life, to make a living" in a changing metropolis (Beckett 2020, 90)—be it Port au Prince,[3] Nairobi, Dakar, or Johannesburg.

After examining larger questions of temporality and scale, I end by looking at questions of personal change, transformative agency, and projects of dialectical relationality in reclaiming meaningful narratives of individual, social, and intellectual transformation transversally and from the bottom up. I aim to make clear throughout that pervasive talk of "transformation" in its various guises is both colored by the conjunctural present of expectation and disaffect on the continent and *exceeds* this presentist orientation. Transformation is shapeshifting as a conceptual space and as a trajectory of change.

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It calls forth its own "Keyword" for tracking these epochal, social, and morphological shifts that move across scales and reconstitute lifeworlds.

Governing through transformation on the national scale

I first write on transformation as a form of epochal terminology, as a keyword for our times. African studies scholarship has shown that transformation is an *active* verb, albeit one that is multiply valent with different meanings and forms of change. Transformation on a societal plane is not predetermined: it can be both promising and detrimental, a dynamic force with ambiguous intentionality and outcomes. Transformation is a dialectically driven process that positions itself as a panacea to social ills and societal troubles. James Ferguson's prescient writing on representations and narratives of contemporary Africa as "rising" or as crisis-ridden and failing, demonstrates the intertwining of questions of transformation and those of real or perceived "crisis" (Ferguson 2006; Roitman 2013). In this case, discussion of transformation is often seen as a necessary rejoinder to diagnosis of crisis in social and spatial terms. In its temporal dimension, transformation frequently signals the move from the "old" to a deceptive phase of "new" beginnings. This often-illusory use by state leaders and elites leads us to ask: is transformation a *unidirectional* marker of change, moving onward, from one state to another, or might it also account for temporal variation and difference? How does the promise of generative rupture obscure the *multidirectional* nature of transformative projects and the various durations of temporality in which they operate? Moving beyond policy discourses of the possibilities of social transformation, we see here that change works bidirectionally, both pacing forward and churning backward.

Transformation has appeared in scholarship on colonial and postcolonial Africa as folded into questions of power, governance, and the nation-state. It is also a question of what happens amid aftermaths, after the supposed chimera of the "post" of colonialism, apartheid, or conflict. Transformation is often a term enveloped in discourses of presentism, where transformation is a social program speciously tied to promises of change at the level of governance structures and the nation-state. Yet looking beyond the scale of the nation-state and using historical analysis and oral traditions are also useful means to reconstruct varying uses of transformation in precolonial pasts (Vansina 1985), through and beyond the *longue durée* (Braudel 1982). For the purposes of this paper, and as an urbanist occupied with postconflict transformations of various types, I locate myself more in scholarship on discourse, space, and scales of power.

Discourses and spatial practices of transformation are frequently seen in postindependence questions of social engineering and spatial reworking, where scale itself is presented as interconnected across levels: tying together scales beneath and beyond the nation-state. For example, Priya Lal's (2015) scholarship on *Ujamaa* villagization in postcolonial Tanzania links modernist social planning to change that connects local ideas of the family to the scale of the nation. Here,

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transformation as social reengineering is a question of working *on* something through indigenizing modernist ideals. Questions of transformation at this juncture also involve promises of productive membership in the community of nations, raising expectations of postindependence renaissance—even as these visions began to go off track in ensuing years.

In the immediate postindependence period, "transformation" additionally signified an attempt to "catch up" through social and economic programs of change enacted upon local populations, following postindependence modernization paradigms to achieve speeded up growth. At the same time, transformative change aimed to reinvent viable idioms of local "authenticity" to generate the legitimacy necessary to enact large-scale projects of political rule and social transformation. Emily Callaci's (2016) analysis of the role of local adaptations of top-down planning in Dodoma, Tanzania works on similar stakes, examining urban change and the transformation of space. Detailing the construction of Tanzania's new capital city from 1972 onward, Callaci discusses *Mwalimu* Julius Nyerere and the TANU Party's search for a model of an authentic African modernist city. Dodoma was hence designed to blend idioms of rural village life with the modernist urbanism of a newly planned capital, as the "Chief village in a nation of villages (Callaci 2016, 96)." Emphasis was placed on the role of a newly invented "authenticity" as the pivot on which the legitimacy of the new capital turned, so that as Callaci explains:

> The Dodoma vision and the debates surrounding it offer a lens into the contradictory work of the idea of authenticity. In discussions surrounding the planning of Tanzania's new capital city, narratives of African history and authenticity were not only matters of philosophy and culture, but were also part of an interpretive logic through which to make sense of everyday urban life and governance. Ujamaa's central metaphor of the African village —a metaphor that had multiple global intellectual genealogies—became meaningful in new ways in the context of decolonization, pan-African Renaissance and socialism, simultaneously informing visions of liberation and practices of urban social control. African authenticity was a language that allowed those who used it to recognize some claims as socially legitimate, while denying others as illegitimate. (2016, 115–16)

The ideas of authenticity referenced in Callaci's work, as well of what Ali Mazrui (2005) terms "retraditionalization," were particularly significant in the early years after independence, where national political legitimacy was often claimed through cultural forms.

Mazrui's critique of "retraditionalization" extends to the focus on political indigenization, but also engages questions of alternative paradigms of African cultural identity. Drawing on V.Y. Mudimbe's influential work, *The Invention of Africa*, both Mazrui and Mudimbe discuss modes of identifying authentic forms of African cultural knowledge amid colonization and Westernization. As Mudimbe writes of the quest for authentic African knowledge forms, "retraditionalization

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does not mean returning Africa to what it was before Europeans came … But a move towards renewed respect for indigenous ways and the conquest of cultural self-contempt may be the minimal conditions for cultural decolonization" (Mudimbe 1988, 169; also in Mazrui 2005, 80). Reclaiming knowledge forms and tracing their transformation over time are thus core parts of the work of "cultural decolonization," required to excavate Africa's past and reclaim its genres of narration in the present. Rather than being viewed as political projects of decolonization involving an invented authenticity or claiming to rediscover pristine traditional forms of practice (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012), modes of knowing require careful interrogation. In this context, Mudimbe's philosophy of African gnosis emphasizes knowledge of Africa's traditional and indigenous pasts amid the dominant colonial and Western epistemic systematization of knowledge about the continent.

Transformation amid aftermaths

In material terms, transformation as a keyword is also germane to genres of resignification and repertoires of politics that unfold in the aftermath of political change. The next sections—on Rwanda and South Africa—examine two different manifestations of the intersection of moments of crisis and cataclysm with that of state-directed transformative discourse. If, in Rwanda, 1994 was a moment of implosion of the project of "transformation" as violent social engineering and state-led remaking, in South Africa it seemed to herald an *end* to violent struggle—promising new horizons of democratic representation and redistribution. These two national moments of change occurred in the same temporal horizon, in separate African geographies, and in terrain painted by destructive projects of colonization and state reengineering, but heralded vastly different material and affective expectations. For Rwanda, 1994 signified cataclysm: a violent ending that had to be reimagined as a transformative beginning, and the latest rupture in a long history of violent dispossession (involving political violence in 1959, 1961, 1963 and 1973) aiming to "transform" the contours of the body politic. For South Africa, 1994 was instead a new democratic dawn, with its own uncertainties and structure of promising. "Transformation" as a discursive framework hence meant different things during this temporal moment, as markers of transformative discourse reinscribed space and its meanings evolved over time.

Rwanda

Ideas of "transformation" in the aftermath of violence have been germane to my own research on urban transformation in postgenocide Rwanda. Considering the multiple meanings and manifestations of the transformative project, my work analyzes urban transformation in Rwanda in the context of the country's postgenocide transition (Hudani 2024). Far from being a term only about green urban change in Kigali, transformation in contemporary Rwanda reaches beyond urban veneers to deeper questions of dispossession over time, in and beyond the city.

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Transformative discourse also leads us to question the imbrication of the keyword's genealogical threads with that of another concept: transition. Transition operates here both as a Gramscian "interregnum" (Gramsci 1971) and in relation to local forms of transitional justice after genocide and conflict (Shaw, Waldorf, and Hazan 2010). In this way, the relationship between "transition" and "transformation" provides a deepened context for thinking through complex webs of post-conflict aftermaths.

Transformation and transition

Rwanda's context of seemingly miraculous transformation in the aftermath of the "genocide against the Tutsi" in 1994 demonstrates that transformation is bound up with other contexts and keywords—in this case "transition." Transition marks in-between or interregnal periods, between the ostensible culmination of overt violence of genocide and the continuation of logics of coercion, uneven development, and violence by other means. In this case, violence persists across the border in the Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), where civil war has been extended and expanded through other extraterritorial means and rationales (civil war persisted in 1996–97, 1998–2003, and the Kivu conflict continues to the present day) (Stearns 2023). Transition also brings into focus programs of "transitional justice," initiated primarily after the 1980s in the context of transitions from authoritarian rule in countries in Latin America (Arthur 2009). Models of transitional justice at the time focused on specifying human rights paradigms as well as planning for transitions to democracy in the context of postconflict authoritarian regimes, such as those in Chile, Argentina, and later, Uganda, the former Yugoslavia/Bosnia, and Rwanda. Saliently, Arthur offers a deeper critique of transitional justice, calling into question its primacy as a framework for guiding transitions from conflict to a supposed liberal democratic outcome, and exposes the power relations undergirding such purportedly "transformative" trajectories. Transitional justice had been bound up with "a specific political project (democratization) and by the support of specific institutional actors (US democracy-promoting organizations)" (Arthur 2009, 363). Rather than being a pathway toward "an easily identifiable, sequential path toward a new political regime," by the mid-1990s, the political change envisioned by the transitions paradigm empirically proved to be poorly founded (362).

The consequences of such political experimentation have been apparent in the African political context, confirming that political transitions do not always culminate in liberal democratic outcomes. Since the 1980s, the political horizon of democratic opening and "good governance" have been successor ideas to the structural adjustment period and the state-funded enterprises that preceded it. Here questions of good leadership, low corruption, and high accountability were seen as centerpieces of a good governance paradigm and as preconditions set by the international aid apparatus (Grindle 2012). As Grindle notes, good governance and democratic opening did not always twin: economic growth in East Asian countries provided a foil for development in many countries in Africa, where democratic transitions and poor governance co-occurred. In a similar

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vein, Rita Abrahamsen argues that the transitional agendas of good governance and democratization from the 1980s to the 2000s drew on development discourse to reproduce relations of power over Africa in the international arena, so that "by constructing African countries as undemocratic and lacking in good governance, the right of the democratic countries of the North to intervene and set conditions for development aid to Africa is reconfirmed" (Abrahamsen 2000, 147).

These observations on transitions to democracy after civil conflict are largely applicable to Rwanda's transition after genocide and civil war in the 1990s. Seen through the transitional programs and processes implemented in Rwanda since the end of the genocide in 1994, Rwanda's current developmentalist transformation is underlain by the continuity of unfinished dilemmas of transition, birthed through a long and ruptured history. Scholars highlight multiple points of rupture, with the genocide of 1994 embedded in earlier anti-Tutsi pogroms of 1959, 1961, 1963, and 1973—as formative moments of national political violence (Geraghty 2020; Mamdani 2001; Nsabimana 2023). According to this view, the political violence of 1959 set the grounds for the genocide of 1994. The violence that attended the Hutu Social Revolution (1959–61), which preceded the moment of Rwandan independence (1962), was foundational for the narratives that held together the Rwandan Patriotic Army (RPA) in exile in Uganda before they invaded Rwanda in October 1990. All time since 1959 is hence, according to Nsabimana, "extended retroactively" as "genocide time" (2023, 764).

Rwanda's postconflict transitional projects and processes have included *inkiko-gacaca* transitional justice courts (Chakravarty 2016; Ingelaere 2016; Longman 2017), *ingando* solidarity camps (Purdeková 2015), and attempts at rewriting national narrative and official history with a "master-narrative" of change (Mwambari 2023). Despite the multiplicity of attempts to reinvent transitional justice through purportedly traditional forms, as well as to reinscribe historical narrative, these processes have been at best incomplete (Meierhenrich 2024). It is in part this incompleteness and the partial success of Rwandan programs of transition that set up "transformative" programs of structural change as envisioned panacea for enacting change in the country (e.g. the Vision 2023 economic blueprint and ambitious National Urbanization Plans, including the Kigali 2050 master plan). In this case, I suggest that projects of socio-economic transformation are a response to incomplete political transition after prolonged conflict and its attendant authoritarian forms. Transformation hence does not necessarily follow *after* transition, but is imbricated with it in a temporally complex web.

Transformation as violent remaking

Transformation in the Rwandan context is a capacious concept that additionally encompasses the state ordering of the population and multiple ways of governing *through* transformation. During a research visit in 2018, a retired scholar near Kigali reflected with me on the meanings of top-down transformation as a historical project of the nation-state. He said: "When someone says I'm going to transform, what do you want to transform? Who are you to transform? What is

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a *durable* transformation? … The genocidal project [was] a transformation project in a bad way … so was the colonial project. So, when we talk about a transformation, we must be careful, we need to understand it properly" (Hudani 2024, 92). As Rwanda's cities are transformed on the surface and the political project of the nation-state continues as one of using transformation as a strategy of governmentality, this view of transformation as a state project at the intersection of violence, regulation, and coercive modernization remains salient. Here transformation references the generative capacity of the state to mold social space and subjectivities—as top-down societal transformation, variously imposed. In this way, transformation is far from benign: neither representative of popular imaginaries of the future, nor a pragmatist marker of gradual social change, transformation is bound up with the dictates and often absolute visions of leaders, institutional vanguards, and social elites.

As Christopher Taylor (1999) demonstrates in his scholarship on the transformative power of violence in Rwanda's 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, terror's violent apparatus has its own communicative potential. The excess violence unleashed on the body of ethnic Tutsis and the body politic of the nation was itself "transformative" in this macabre way, in certain ways similar to Achille Mbembe's (2019) "necropolitical" rewriting of Foucauldian biopower. As my interlocutor near Kigali intimated, the ongoing "aftermath" of the colonial period became *layered* onto newly reconfigured processes of transformation: forms of ethnic cleavage that had been solidified during Belgian colonial rule were hence refractured by the violence of extreme nationalism. Discourses of transformation are accordingly layered onto Rwanda's terrain as a series of ruptural moments: a "ruptural fusion," to recall Hall (2010). This layering renders 1994 a conjunctural moment in projects of social engineering and state violence.

As Rwanda rebuilds itself after 1994, moving from the problem space of postgenocide "transition" in the early 2000s to that of "transformation" by the 2010s, state elites reprise and aim to resignify the meaning of "transformation" as a national promise of renewal, rebirth, and regeneration. Reconstructing the capital of Kigali and building new green cities around the country, I suggest, are means through which discourses of transformation take on new configurations in national renewal. In the space of postgenocide reconstruction, the meaning of transformation pivots the direction of national change: from transformation as violence and unmaking, to transformation as a promise of renewal through developmentalist practice.

South Africa

In the South African case, the contours of change since 1994 have in many ways been set up by the violent context of the apartheid period. Apartheid also set in motion the modes of resistance and alliance from within popular society so that taken together, these forces continue to structure space and social expectations in the aftermath of democratic transition. The Group Areas Act (GAA) of 1950 was imposed to curtail the movement and landholding of Black South Africans and

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people of color under the apartheid government, creating racial segregation and controlling mobility. It operated in constellation with a host of other regulations to fix and dispossess in the context of urbanization and increased demand for labor (including the earlier 1913 Natives Land Act and the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act). The GAA enforced racialized containment and control, with effects on the sociality of urban space to the present day:

> The guidelines proposed that group areas be drawn on a sectoral pattern with compact blocks of land for each group, capable of extension onwards as the city grew. Group areas were separated by buffer strips of open land at least 30 meters wide, which were to act as barriers to movement and therefore restrict local contact ... Links between different group areas were to be limited, preferably with no direct roads between the different group areas, but access only to commonly used parts of the city, for example, the industrial or central business district. (Christopher 1994, in Steingo 2018, 321)

Gavin Steingo comments on the effects of apartheid regulations on the morphology of contemporary Soweto so that, "The original apartheid layout of Soweto can still be clearly felt, where a distance of one mile as the crow flies often requires that one traverses several miles" (2018, 322). Popular demands and expectations hence operate within the structuring framework of the present.

Much of the discourse on transformation after the transition to democracy has taken place in the space of the city, where political protest and expectations for change unfold. Antina von Schnitzler's (2017) scholarship on water and protest politics in Soweto keenly observes similar questions of infrastructural activism and social protest through the working of water politics in the postapartheid period. Von Schnitzler argues that the meanings of protest politics after apartheid have changed over time, so that while at first a material politics involving the sabotage of water pipes and leakage may have been seen as part of the structure of apartheid-period resistance, it soon became interpreted differently as the postapartheid period wore on, and water became privatized amid neoliberal reforms in Johannesburg. Von Schnitzler's work hence aids in parsing the changing meanings of transformative discourse in South Africa, as time wore on and the high expectations of 1994 began to fade. Seen in retrospect, 1994 was not only a moment of national liberation but also a barometer for testing and reckoning with liberatory expectations for the future in substantive, social terms. Zachary Levenson's (2022) work on contemporary squatter evictions in Cape Town puts forward state policy as a multivalent site for contestation over housing delivery. Rather than transformative change in favor of greater substantive rights, political processes brought forward a selective politics of dispossession and affected how rights could be claimed after democratic transition.

Thiven Reddy's analysis of political change in South Africa interrogates the longitudinal effects of upheavals on the body politic (in Shepherd and Robins 2008). The move from old apartheid structures to new promises and political demands of the postapartheid period creates new expectations as well as novel

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contradictions. As with the "end" of all violent epochs, transformation promises a move to a radically altered future: from colonialism and apartheid to a "new" period of moving onward: the "post" of the "postcolonial" amplified by the "post" of the "postconflict" or the "post" of the "postapartheid." As Reddy comments, in such terms how can one "be against transformation?" (2008, 209). At the time, national transformation was wrapped in the triumphalist narratives of the nation-state and of national progress—it seemed unassailable. Reddy argues that attention to *reversals* in promised trajectories of progress must attend the work of interrogating transformation, from the ground up.

Recent evaluations of the thirty years after the end of apartheid in South Africa posit the democratic present as a quagmire of disillusionment and broken promises. In an op-ed in the *New York Times*, William Shoki (2024) writes that popular discontent about dashed hopes of democracy and the delivery of substantive opportunity has resulted in disengagement from civic life:

> This process of disengagement—manifest in declining participation in trade unions, civic associations and political parties—is hard to square with the images of the multiracial, multiethnic, cross-class movement against apartheid that led the world to believe South Africans were uniquely endowed with high levels of social consciousness and good will. As that national story loses coherence, the country is reinventing itself … The new South Africa has come of age and is on the verge of becoming something different. Right now, we just don't know what.

As Shoki comments, South Africa is "*on the verge of becoming something different*"—a period with considerable transformative potential and uncertain dividends, that brings with it multidirectional and ambiguous change. In such a Gramscian interregnum, transformation stands as an undecidable point of rupture and an ambivalent portent of things to come.

Transformative urbanism

In the following sections of this paper, I look beyond the governance of social transformation to ask how transformation is imbricated in material and discursive shifts in the fabric of the city. Discourses of transformation in relation to urban space can be seen as remarkably presentist in temporal orientation, tying together promises of current change to predictions of altered futures. Accordingly, I pursue questions of transition and transformation in fictional and nonfictional worlds: the dystopian visions seen in novels and films here are offset by utopian forms of change amid postconflict aftermaths.

In Afrofuturist fiction, the city is itself the locus of material and social transformation—a literal Wakanda, alternating between utopian visions and their dystopian realization (as with Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon* [2015]). Much Afrofuturist writing unfolds by locating the city as a crucible of transformative change in which visions of apocalypse and utopia are equally possible. Yet

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futuristic visions of the city as a locus for transformation must be held with caution. There is much in Afrofuturist literature that equally narrates the chronicity of everyday struggles within the city and the world of ordinary survival amidst its frameworks of fantasy and futurity. Sometimes reality is relativized by the very different experiences of characters in the same city, inhabiting different worlds. For instance, the work of Sefi Atta (2012) follows friends transnationally across time and space, leading to explorations of gender roles in a changing Lagos. Chris Abani's (2005) book *GraceLand* is another example of this disjunctive reality, where genres meld: set in the Makoko informal settlement in Lagos, the book's plot follows teenage Elvis as he moves between different realities in both urban and rural life, seeking to make his way in the crime-ridden parts of the city.

The time and space of the city are rendered with similar disjuncture in nonfictional scholarly work on postconflict transition. In the aftermath of conflict and political change, changes in the city are pronounced. Writing on the spatial after-effects of reconstruction in Luanda, Angola, Claudia Gastrow (2017) observes the materiality of claims of belonging in response to large-scale postconflict urban rebuilding. Ricardo Cardoso (2016) details the extractive flows that underlie processes of reconstruction as transformation above ground in Luanda. In this case, the extraction and transaction of oil is exchanged for concrete futures in Kilamba city and dreams of transforming the façade of the capital through large-scale housing and infrastructural projects of modernization. Such transformative modernization—in many cases extractive in its endeavors—comes with real senses of material and affective disconnection for large swathes of the population who are rendered materially disenfranchised from access to the city and its resources.

As James Ferguson (1999) also reminds us, the underside of transformation is not necessarily stasis but a very real form of *disconnection* from aspirations of global membership and connectivity. Once the terrain for scholarship by Africanist anthropologists from the Rhodes Livingston Institute (RLI), writing on the "detribalization" of natives, the Zambian Copperbelt saw various waves of scholarship on the encounter between a perceived "tribal" rurality with the individuated modernization demanded by urbanization and its varied consumer classes (e.g., Gluckman 1960). In Ferguson's study of urban "abjection" amid local forms of deindustrialization, the international commodity crisis resulted in copper price drops, which disconnected Zambians. Attention to transformation as a *recursive* process of rupture that produces affective and material uncertainty, and to the ephemerality of its transformative promises, is hence also significant. In such cases, transformation often points to the uneven dividends of change in and around the city.

Urban claims to the here and now

Writing about urban marginality and peripheralization for large portions of urban dwellers in the Global South, AbdouMaliq Simone (2022) calls out the limitations of meaningful engagement with projects of repair in certain contexts.

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Tangible projects of repair emerge from a grounding in the here and now, in appreciable understanding of the limits of fixing the city "once and for all" as a totalizing and transformative infrastructural fantasy (2022, 30). Just as top-down state-led projects of transformation emerge from engagement with urban space, smaller-scale projects to reimagine urban space can be considered as alternative enactments of transformation, akin to the small-scale changes that Asef Bayat (2013) calls the "quiet encroachment of the ordinary."

Scholars have written on the effects that infrastructures of exclusion have on urban citizenship and local claims to urban space (Gandy 2014). These struggles over access at "the Gates to the City" for large numbers of urban dwellers have been named as operating in contrast to large-scale logics of urban renewal induced transformation, in favor of those with "Keys to the City" (Hudani 2023). Struggles for access to the city in urban centers such as Lagos and Nairobi splinter forms of mobility for urban dwellers according to socio-economic class, leaving many urban youths who are under- and unemployed waiting for access through toll gates and bridges at mobility chokepoints in the city. Protest movements such as Nigeria's #EndSARS campaign, begun in 2017 to protest police violence against youth, as well as to voice discontent with toll collection and restricted access to the modernizing areas of Lagos, demonstrate that such forms of unevenness portend ill for socio-economic inclusion in Nigeria's cities.

Along this line of analysis, urban popular mobilization shows that inclusion and equity, rather than infrastructural transformation, are the greater governance challenges for deepening democracy and human development in national contexts. Forms of horizontal solidarity among federated organizations of the urban poor instead supplement official modes of political representation (d'Cruz and Mitlin 2007, on Slum Dwellers International [SDI]). Observers of African urbanism hence ask how these forms of "people as infrastructure" (Simone 2004) fit into the uneven lineage of dwindling state support in the transition between the structural adjustment of the 1970s and 1980s and the privatization-based neoliberal reforms of the 1990s and 2000s. Is it possible, then, to be "against transformation" in its rapid pace of change as it leaps ahead, erasing the needs of the present? And how might struggles for livelihood and space in cities like Lagos and Nairobi be taken to express grounded investment in claims to the here and now that valorize alternative, smaller-scale forms of change?

Whereas I earlier critiqued state-directed spatial and social transformation at the level of the city, I now examine a different genre of representing transformation: by way of creative projects of worldmaking through local solidarities in Nairobi. Here, questions of comparison across genres highlight different aspects of the representation of transformation across time and space. Images of urban life in film and music media demonstrate the ephemerality of opportunity in the city in Kenya, even as the city endures, in increasingly inaccessible form. This affective disposition is well distilled in Tosh Gitonga's (2012) film, *Nairobi Half Life.* Mwas, the rural protagonist moving to the capital with big dreams, struggles to belong to the city and to have the city accept him. Running between Eastlands and the center of the city, to the Phoenix Players Theater in the Central Business District from the badlands of the capital, Mwas's journeys blend art and life, fiction and facticity, fantasy and reality, the spatial transformations of the city

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and his struggles for personal change. As a long aspiring actor, Mwas returns to the theater to play his role in a production he has successfully been selected for; in the culminating scene he plays a character who has been shot onstage. As Mwas delivers his part in the drama, it becomes evident that he is also suffering from a nonfictional wound in real time. Mwas thus succumbs to his bodily wounds onstage, in the interstices between fiction and reality: the cost of inclusion in the city's ephemeral dreams is sometimes life itself. Although ideas of transformation examined in this section are not necessarily comparative in their frameworks—as they are perspectives produced by differently situated scholars through a range of media—taken collectively, they shed light on a range of discourses of transformation as seen through the prism of the African city.

The work of revalorization

Continuing the focus on urban transformation and changing social relations, I now engage questions of transformation of the person through forms of revalorization, resignification, and reauthoring that involve agency and creative recuperation. If transformation is a marker of societal change, it is also one directly tied to questions of modernity and reformation, and how these implicate the body and personhood. From Christianity, colonialism, and the work of encounter among the Southern Tswana (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), to the generative creativity of Pentecostalism as a form of life and a reworking of the terms of such encounter between the sacred and the political (Gifford 1998; Kalu 2008; Meyer 2004), transformation implicates the formation and fashioning of selves and syncretic lifeworlds. Victor Turner's ([1969] 2017) scholarship on the ritual process is a further reminder that transformation works through movement between states, and the connection of these states to the body and personhood (see also, Livingston 2021's Keyword, "Body").

The work of revalorization is keenly visible in African cities. Karen Hansen's scholarship (2000) on *salaula* and the politics of resignifying used clothing in Lusaka is illustrative here for thinking through exchange relations around transformation as a form of sociality that extends ideas of personhood through the city. Through self-fashioning, *salaula* trade and exchange speaks to the importance of individual agency and interpersonal creativity in the work of revalorization from the discard of the Global North. This approach to transformative agency, in part born of necessity, is also a partial rejoinder to pervading "necropolitical" views of the continent as overdetermined externally (Mbembe and Meintjes 2003). Greater attention can be focused instead on the work of *recuperation*: concentrating on the dynamics of value creation that attend transformation from below, in local lifeworlds and personal forms of change. Rather than appearing solely as an external phenomenon, overdetermined by the state and societal forces, "transformation" here invokes *agency* as a personal phenomenon that stakes its claims at the level of the subject and interpersonal relations. Rosalind Fredericks (2018) takes up this focus in her scholarship on citizenship

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and reinterpretation of waste work in Dakar, Senegal, including of the *Set/Setal* movement.

As both Hansen's and Fredericks's scholarship demonstrates, discourses of repurposing and revalorization from various forms of discard are welded into questions of urban transformation and refashioning subjecthood in Africa's cities: from Lusaka to Dakar. Hansen demonstrates that "worlding" practices (Roy and Ong 2011) are omnipresent in Lusaka, as alternatives to master narratives of Western modernity, so that as individuals repurpose used clothing and refashion registers of urban creativity they challenge "the flow of power entailed in conventional notions of center-periphery relations" (Hansen 1994, 504). More than this, there is a way to reread Hansen's articulation of refashioning used clothing and relations of entanglement in the context of urban transformation, where renewed cities present opportunities for tracing circulating urban forms and changing idioms of personhood so that:

> By simply assuming that clothing has been moved physically from its place of origin, such narratives treat clothing as things without histories and meanings, and above all, hide the power of objects to structure and transform relationships … used clothing and the changing external and local relations that inform its usage offer a rich research context in which to unravel changing meanings of the entangled encounter between the West and the rest. (Hansen 1994, 504; also see Shearer 2017)

The work of resignifying the "waste/value" nexus (Gidwani 2013) and reclaiming narrative agency is embedded in processes of revalorization—whether narrative and conceptual, involving concepts of personhood and agency, or focused on the material work of reclamation. To this end, studies of extraction that name African landscapes as sources of mineral substrates (oil, coltan) that fuel supply chain neoliberalism (Kashi and Watts 2008; Smith 2021), are reframed by work that highlights the nexus of extraction and revalorization, centering social agency across contexts. For instance, Cajetan Iheka (2021) critiques cycles of creative destruction and resource extraction that emerge from such real and fictional ecological representations and draws attention to their temporal entanglements. Here the futurity of *Black Panther*'s Wakanda is premised on an infinite supply of the mineral Vibranium, and oil extraction in the Niger Delta enables further circulations and forms of life premised upon the "limitlessness of resources" rather than an "infinite resourcefulness crucial for ethical living" (2021, 2–3).

Discourses on reclamation as a form of transformation in contexts of urbanization and industrialization considered here show the multivalence of revalorization. Instead of an analytic that considers discard merely as surplus, or instead, as a generic or unwanted imitation of the original in the Global North, processes of transformation creatively resignify forms of discard. Such revalorization raises questions about ethical choices around material transformation, particularly surrounding contexts of extraction where resources are deemed to be infinitely expendable. Transformative processes in this section involving the

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meanings of material recuperation, thus also appear as *personal* forms of remaking involving agency and value creation in complex social worlds.

Transformative worldmaking

From representation in fictional and nonfictional worlds and the work of material revalorization as transformative agency, in the final sections of this paper, I turn to the question of "worldmaking" as a technique of reimagining and constructing reality with new possibilities. Writing on the project of decolonization and possibilities for self-determination and alternative federation as independence was won, Adom Getachew (2019) theorizes independence leaders as worldmakers, central to projects of reimaging solidarities beyond the nation-state as a horizon of possibility. Taking Vijay Prashad's assertion of the Third World as a project and not a place (2013, 1), I consider decolonization and its expectations for a world remade as an instantiation of the discourse of transformation as a project of worldmaking, equally on the level of society as of the individual. In the rest of this section, I provide an account of the politics of expectation during the period of national decolonization.

As a potentially liberatory marker of epochal change, transformation is often also a violent form of worldmaking. Frantz Fanon (1963) is explicit about the connections between transfers of power and the violent remaking of national orders. Writing on the total transposition of power that occurs through projects of decolonization, he surmises: "Decolonization, which sets out to change the order of the world is, obviously, a program of complete disorder" (1963, 36). To remake the world of an existing extractive colonial order is a project that must be conducted wholescale, remaking society from its roots and creating space for both the substitution of colonial social ordering and the fundamental transformation of the subject: "Decolonization never takes place unnoticed, for it influences individuals and modifies them fundamentally. It transforms spectators crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors, with the grandiose glare of history's flood lights upon them," Fanon writes, elaborating that the process transposes an existing world, bringing forth "new men, and with it a new language and a new humanity" (36). Through the mirror of decolonization as an ideal-type, transformation is thus theorized as a project with aspirations of liberatory world remaking at its various scales. Yet attempts at decolonization in theory and practice also leave in their wake questions about the recursiveness of this transformation: for whom is the world transformed, in what forms, and for how long?

Expectations at independence generated a particular structure of postcolonial promising, which foresaw political enfranchisement, social membership, and progressive economic inclusion as popular political dividends to be delivered. Such promises have in many countries given way to more generalized horizons of disillusion, disquiet, and disaffect, as transformation has turned retrograde. In certain contexts, such horizons of expectation have morphed into the rise of ethnicized violence and war, particularly after the 1970s (Hoffman 2017 on Liberia, Matlon 2022 on Côte d'Ivoire). As the once expected teleological motor

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of transformation moved in reverse, eviscerating the civil service, the securely employed working class, and urban health and social sectors through the structural adjustment years and their neoliberal aftermaths, what has been left is a wisp of a middle class grasping at shards of prosperity. The majority of informalized workers and the lumpenproletariat now juggle and hustle to make ends meet, even as they aim to make life possible in places where crisis, according to Greg Beckett, "becomes a shared feeling, a collective mood—an atmosphere" (2020, 90).

For anthropologist Richard Werbner (1998) there exists a need for redress of the crisis of social memory and its relationship to power in the public arena in many postcolonial contexts. Werbner calls for a "right of recountability" which enables social and political transformations to be made intelligible, and their relation to people's everyday lives to be left open to being known in the public sphere. Werbner writes that what needs to be made visible here is "the force of memory, its official and its unofficial forms, its moves between the personal and the social in postcolonial transformations" (2). The role of colonial and post-colonial violence, including state collapse and civil war, leaves instead "dead, unsettled memory" that inhabits the "sometimes stifling, utterly unwelcome fabric" of social relations as it is silenced and then incorporated into the landscape and the body (3).

Considering worldmaking as a postindependence period form here, moving between anticipation and its reversals, has allowed us to contextualize trans-formation's dialectical possibilities as well as the registers of disconnection and destruction with which it is often imbricated. The next section explores projects of *reconnection* that focus on reclaiming such dialectical potential: I harness transformative discourse in the service of constructive reinterpretation in Africana studies.

Dialectical relationality

If transformation can be seen as a project that remakes societies, communities, and the individual, it is also important to consider the uses of transformation in Africana Studies itself, as an active process of resignification, reclaimed from its theoretical provenance in another form: the dialectic. Hegelian dialectics can be seen to be the motor behind transformation's theoretical lineage as a concept in Western social thought; unsurprisingly, it is this very Hegelianism that Africanist scholars have called out for its erasure of African geographies and forms of personhood (Tibebu 2011; Mbembe 2016). Africa operates here as a category of surplus and a substrate that enables the violence of this dialectical world-making (Gray and Johnson 2023; Mbembe 2017). Dialectics from Hegel to Marx, including dialectical materialism, have undeniably impacted Western social thought and theories of socialist worldmaking in socialist and communist worlds, including influencing projects of resistance and nation-building after independence (Cheng 2008). As a concluding suggestion, I position *dialectical relationality* as a means of reauthoring and reconnection, and as an aperture for taking seriously

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the influences of dialectical thought on projects of transformation in African diasporic scholarship.

It is hence to Fanon again we return. In *Black Skin White Masks* (1952), he grapples with his alienation—the alienation of the Black man in French society—when faced with his facticity (his Blackness, his body), in relation to aspirations toward universalism that inhere in the intellectualist promise as transcendent. Writing on Hegel, Fanon narrates, "There is at the basis of the Hegelian dialectic an absolute reciprocity that must be highlighted," yet the white "other" fails to accede equal recognition, creating existential disconnect and internal struggle ([1952] 2007, 191). Reading the acculturation of Antillean intellectuals like Fanon as a type of transformation of the self, Fanon as psychiatrist/political philosopher/revolutionary/poet engages with the dialectic from within: "For the black Frenchman, the situation is unbearable. Unsure whether the white man considers him as consciousness in-itself-for-itself, he is constantly preoccupied with detecting resistance, opposition and contestation" (196–97). At the end of his tome, Fanon proclaims in favor of both opposites of facticity and transcendence, his body and intellect repossessed through the dialectics of transformation: "O my body, always make me a man who questions!" (206).

Fanon's proclamation above, on the dialectics of the self, is caught between the expectation of membership and the facticity of exclusion, of an indefinite in-between. Fanon's scholarship has been provocative and widely influential for African diasporic scholars and political leaders from the 1950s onward, expressing both the influence of the Negritude movement and Fanon's teacher, Aime Césaire, and his own position as a member of the indigenous elite "evolué" class under French colonial rule (e.g., see Wilder 2015). Like Du Boisian "doubling" or "double consciousness" (Du Bois 1903), Fanon's duality expresses similar contradictions, hence connecting literature on Africana studies across geographies. Fanon's political writings have also been transformative in the postindependence period for citizen-intellectuals seeking alternative words and worlds to those made available by existing African leaders, many who speciously promised transformative, decolonial change. In these contexts, Fanon is positioned as antithesis to the rusting structures of the independence period's promises and the transformation of incipient democracies into single party states.

The fate of the dialectic in Africana studies and Africanist scholarship does not end here: scholarship from the Black Radical tradition aims to grapple with and critique the dialectic, reclaiming forms of knowledge and reforging lost connection (e.g. James [1938] 2023; Robinson 1983) and relating theory to the politics of Black Internationalism that witnessed liberatory solidarities forged as independence was won. This circuitry through the genealogy of a concept hence brings us back to questions of staking claims anew, to reinvention and repurposing as well as reauthoring and reconnection. Through such a thread one might reconnect Africanist scholarship to scholarship on Black Geographies of the Caribbean and North Atlantic worlds. Such reinterpretation displays a different genealogy: one of transnational connection and dialectical relationality, suggesting new pathways for knowledge formation and analysis (Glissant 1997; Hawthorne and Lewis 2023; McKittrick and Woods 2007).

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Conclusion

In this paper, I have suggested that there is a multidirectionality and dialogism inherent in "transformation" as discourse of progress, as mechanism of narrative revalorization, and as a mode of material reclamation. In demonstrating that the dialectical motor of "transformation" can be contested and resignified through appropriation and reauthoring, I have aimed to show that transformation is a capacious concept for thinking through political, social, and personal projects of change and their ranges of motion over time. Rather than a singular philosophy of history and a single direction of historical change, "transformation" as a conceptual space offers multiple sites for authorial reformulation.

This itinerary of tracing "transformation" as discourse and project of change in African studies scholarship has been winding and generative, revealing itself in multiple guises and iterations, as befits the "Keywords" genre (Williams [1976] 2014; Desai and Masquelier 2018). As much as tracing the term through the literature, I have engaged in theorizing "transformation" through its forms and genealogical appearances as ambivalent and multidirectional, rather than as a teleological process of improvement. "Transformation" in African studies literature can be thought of as a large and shape-shifting conceptual space. I close by invoking the figures of transformation in African folklore, mythology, and literature: from the figure of the trickster, spider Anansi, to the shapeshifting characters in Nigerian Nollywood television series who both represent the fantastical and respond to the tension of inequality on the ground (Ugor 2016). Rather than a morbid teleology of Kafkaesque "metamorphosis" (Kafka [1915] 1986) where the human Gregor Samsa changes irreversibly into a moribund insect, leading to isolation, alienation, and death, I propose instead the multidirectional figure of Anansi as a decolonial form for the resignification of teleological critique. Here, transformation is a potent alchemy enacted from within, or from below, rather than only a schema for social change enacted from above.

It is in the spirit of shapeshifting alchemy that I suggest "transformation" must endure as a narrative thread for individuals and reworked forms of community, seizing horizontal solidarity as a form of *transformative agency*, as an aperture through which to generate creativity in narrating lifeworlds from within and below. Agency is central here to reclaiming transformative processes, as it works to repurpose and transmute decaying forms and revalorize discarded matter in urban terrains and personal lifeworlds. Like the city dwellers on the urban peripheries in Nairobi who reclaim capacities of horizontal solidarity through practices of collective organizing, working to transform the space of their settlements and telling their own stories, "transformation" as told here invokes modes of resignification and storytelling: of framing the narrative anew in modes of personal worldmaking (Hudani 2023). Additional transformative change to interdisciplinary African studies scholarship might include greater emphasis on the work of African scholars and scholars of color, challenging conventional Northern academic centralities and accelerating the existing focus on emerging scholarship from Africa. Moving from the personal to the collective, "transformation" might in such ways be resignified in African studies literature,

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tracing genealogies and tying together histories in conscious, multidirectional motion—writing back still more authorial agency into African histories of change.

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Notes

1. Here I reference James Ferguson's (2010) article on the uses of neoliberalism.
2. Transformation appears writ into Stuart Hall's keenly observed remarks on the nature of crisis and conjunctures. Speaking in an interview with Doreen Massey (2010), Hall notes that conjunctures can be seen as pivotal points at which there is a "ruptural fusion" of various forces and contradictions at work around a particular society or issue. These conjunctural moments often circulate around talk of crisis as a discursive form, so that as he states:

> As I see it, history moves from one conjuncture to another rather than being an evolutionary flow. And what drives it forward is usually a crisis, when the contradictions that are always at play in any historical moment are condensed, or, as Althusser said, 'fuse in a ruptural unity'. Crises are moments of potential change, but the nature of their resolution is not given. (Hall and Massey 2010, 57)

3. Writing on the nature of everyday crisis in Haiti, Greg Beckett focuses on embodied experience so that "crisis has become so all-pervasive that it saturates daily life, envelops it. Crisis takes form in people's bodies and relationships; they live and die by it. It takes shape in their houses, many of which have been leveled by it. It coalesces in the built environment, the deforested hillsides, and the washed-out roads. It becomes a shared feeling, a collective mood—an atmosphere" (2020, 90).

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