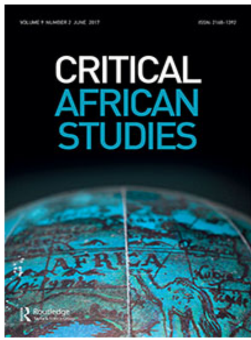

Critical African Studies

ISSN: 2168-1392 (Print) 2040-7211 (Online) Journal homepage: http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rcaf20

Vital instability: ontological insecurity and African urbanisms

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, Peter Kankonde Bukasa & Lorena Núñez

To cite this article: Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, Peter Kankonde Bukasa & Lorena Núñez (2017) Vital instability: ontological insecurity and African urbanisms, Critical African Studies, 9:2, 141-151, DOI: 10.1080/21681392.2017.1341082

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1341082

Published online: 20 Jul 2017.

Submit your article to this journal

Article views: 108

View related articles

View Crossmark data

Full Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at
http://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=rcaf20

Download by: [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] **Date:** 11 August 2017, At: 03:05

Critical African Studies, 2017
Vol. 9, No. 2, 141–151, https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1341082

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
Check for updates

EDITORIAL

Vital instability: ontological insecurity and African urbanisms

This special issue aims to trace the manifold insecurities and responses to these, enfolding ontological concerns, in geographically diverse African urban spaces. The papers in this volume reveal the multiple forms of insecurity characterizing African urbanisms: violence; joblessness; indeterminate legal regimes; infrastructural fragility; continual persecution by state and private actors; epidemic disease and metaphysical disorders, among others.

However, while these insecurities are violent and corrosive, they are also generative. Responses to insecurities have multiple forms: evolving and diverse systems of healing, religion and ritual; the production of new technological and media-scapes; and emergent forms of civic resistance, mobility and conviviality. Our concern with African urbanisms is not limited to the geographic continent but also includes and extends to diasporic spaces. Furthermore, our aim is not to essentialize African urbanisms or ontologies, but rather to situate them in their colonial and post-colonial contexts and within historical and contemporary lines of migration.

A focus on Africa has been widely by-passed in the so-called and recent 'ontological turn' in the social sciences. This special issue aims, in part, to address this neglect. However, more than just an application of trends in North American and European thought to the African continent, we wish to show in this introduction, and the special issue more widely, that concerns around ontology have been immanent to African anti-colonial and post-colonial intellectual traditions. Without this, there is a danger of re-enforcing Africanist scholarship itself as a Westernized way of reading African beliefs and lived realities rather than one that gives accounts of people's realities for what they are and mean according to the people engaged in local contexts. Nonetheless, we will argue here that elements of the new 'ontological turn' have relevance to African scholarship because they draw attention to reflexive modes of being, knowing and thinking.

Critical to our approach here is an analysis of African conceptions of being and personhood as they evolve in relation to urbanization, new materialities and transnational migrations. The special edition encompasses a range of case studies both on the African continent and in diasporic communities in Europe, including: the generativity of new communications technologies in Nairobi; the insecurities of motorcycle taxis in Kampala; the precarious lives of communities living in the shadows of an oil refinery in Durban; the outbreaks of fire and infrastructural fragility in inner-city Johannesburg; and the emergence of new religious forms in South Africa and Spain; along with exploring migration both within and beyond Africa. Guiding these explorations is a concern with the instability and generativity of African urbanisms; unstable and evolving relations of being and personhood; along with the corporeality and the materiality of the urban form.

The 'ontological turn' and its relevance to the study of African urbanisms

The discussion of ontology, in spite of the recent hype, is of course not new in the social sciences and this sociological tradition is important. Giddens (1991), in a prominent exposition, drawing

© 2017 Centre of African Studies, University of Edinburgh

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

on both phenomenology and psychoanalysis, has argued that ontological security requires the stabilization of the self and 'reality' through a trusting network of social and existential relations. However, whereas Giddens views pre-modern traditions as providing stable ontological frameworks which are corroded by modernity, we propose here that ontological insecurity arises from a proliferation of synchronous, disjunctive and evolving ontological frameworks that exist in spatial proximity. Nonetheless, the recent 'ontological turn' has brought about a more sustained and explicit debate around ontology in the social sciences. As Kelly (2014, 359) has argued on the ontological turn, 'the politics of difference and the politics of power, the actual range of human realities and the modes of science that can apprehend, and perhaps intervene: anthropological questions now configure ontologically'. Hence, we can widen the concern regarding ontological insecurity to encompass an array of political and material relations.

The work of Descola provides an important starting point for addressing the implications of the 'ontological turn' for the study of African urbanisms – both in its potentialities and limitations. Descola (2013a, 37) defines ontology as 'the unfolding of the phenomenological consequences of different kinds of inferences about the identities of things around us, inferences which operate by lumping together or dissociating elements of the lived world that appear to have similar or dissimilar qualities'. These inferences are able 'to minimize continuity and difference between humans and non-humans' which result from a 'specific ontology, that is, a guiding principle for perceiving how and with what the world is furnished'. Descola adopts a fourfold ontological schema based on 'animism', 'totemism,' 'analogism' and 'naturalism' – the latter which he associates with European modernity. While Descola admits the possibility of the fluidity and co-existence of these schemas, his outlook still retains, in our view, a problematic division between non-European and European societies. Concerning Africa, taking such an approach risks erasing colonial and post-colonial history, imposing a unitary model of the subject and society and even ontologizing racial difference.

Descola (2013b, 201–202) characterizes African ontologies as forms of 'analogism' which divide 'up the whole collection of existing beings into a multiplicity of essences, forms, and substances' and that the quest for well-being resides on the 'hope of weaving these slightly heterogenous elements into a web of meaningful affinities and attractions that gives the appearance of constituting a continuity'. He invokes ancestrality as a form of analogy – in which relations between substances, objects and supernatural beings are analogous. The flaw of this perspective is an attempt to re-inscribe multiplicity itself into a unified logic. This approach ignores the multiple ontologies operating within African cities and even within subjects and social spaces. His lack of any understanding of the conditions of African urbanisms, and indeed the anthropological literature on Africa more widely, is revealed in Descola's (2013b, 26) sweeping and ludicrous statement that 'the clear-cut opposition between the village and the bush thus reappears as a leitmotif in all Africanist monographs'. In the crude analysis between the village as a site of order and the bush as a 'dangerous periphery', the urban does not even figure (nor the vast scholarship on African cities, post-colonialism, labour relations, aesthetics, Pentecostalism and so on). Descola's position completely lacks any analysis of the ontological plurality of African urbanisms.

Nonetheless, a focus on ontology in the recent 'ontological turn' does allow us to think beyond a culturalist, cognitivist or interpretivist approach to African societies. In such perspectives, every time the problem of alterity takes the form of a disagreement – a cross-cultural disagreement if you like – its anthropological or sociological solution has consisted of explaining the grounds of such a divergence of views (Holbraad 2010). The radical character of the ontological approach is that it undermines the epistemological privilege of such approaches. What makes the ontological approach to alterity different from the culturalist one is that it 'gets us out of the absurd position of thinking that what makes ethnographic subjects most interesting and worthy of quoting is that they get stuff wrong' (Holbraad 2010, 184). Rather, the fact that the people we study may say or do things that to us appear as 'wrong'

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

should just indicate that we have reached the limits of our own conceptual repertoire (Holbraad 2010; Paleček and Risjord 2012). This applies even when our best descriptions of what others think are blatantly 'absurd' or 'wrong' We instead need to take such disagreements as a reason to suspect that there might be something wrong with our ability to describe what others are saying, rather than with what they are actually saying, about which we, a fortiori, know nothing other than the certainty of our own misunderstanding (Holbraad 2010; Venkatesan 2010; Paleček and Risjord 2012).

Furthermore, in Africanist scholarship, an ontological approach is particularly important because of the 'enlightened' silent dehumanizing description contained in much of the 'established' big narratives. As Eduardo Viveiros de Castro observes,

> the language of ontology is important for one specific and, tactical reason. It acts as a counter- measure to a derealizing trick frequently played against the native's thinking, which turns this thought into a kind of sustained phantasy, by reducing it to the dimensions of a form of knowledge or representation, that is to an 'epistemology' or a 'worldview'. (2003, 18 in Candea, 2010, 177)

As Holbraad has remarked, in the same vein, this is a de-centring practice that has cast and kept African forms of knowledge and knowledge production at the periphery.

Viveiros de Castro (2014, 10–12) has argued 'ontological questions are political questions insofar as they come into existence only in the context of friction and divergence between concepts, practices and experiences within or without culturally individuated collectives' without 'any exterior and superior arbiter'. Furthermore, it is 'politically vital to describe ontologies as intractable sets of presuppositions that are aggressively contradictory with other similar sets, and/or as crossing one another in the pre-space of chaos without any mutual interference whatsoever'. Ontologies in this view can be viewed as 'the product of human interpretive interactions with one another and with their environments. These interactions are often very different, constituting different ontologies' (Paleček and Risjord 2012, 18). Graeber (2015) has argued against Viveiros de Castro, and the ontological turn more widely, that this approach is a form of philosophical idealism which underestimates the uncertainty and scepticism operating within particular societies (for instance regarding attitudes towards magical objects or healers). We share Graeber's concern with contradiction, scepticism, uncertainty and politics. However, we keep the language of ontology to refer to conflicting, dynamic and incomplete presuppositions regarding being and existents. These have both phenomenological consequences (cf. Descola 2013a) and are also constituted and constrained by particular material and power relations. Rather than a philosophical idealism, these concerns point us towards an immanent critique which traces the political implications of these frictions and ruptures (cf. Holbraad, Axel Pedersen, and Viveiros de Castro 2014; Povinelli 2014; Viveiros de Castro 2014). However, neither are ontologies merely mediators of other categories such as social stress, colonialism or capitalism (Thornton 2017). Hence, in this issue, we aim to locate plural ontologies in urban spaces as always open-ended, historically located and in tension. Our understanding of ontological pluralism is hence not only between societies and spaces, but also within them. This approach requires situating the study of African urbanisms and ontological insecurity within the context of the post-colonial city.

Ontology and decolonization

Questions of ontology have an ambiguous though significant status in the post-colonial thought. In particular, this is because both the Western philosophical tradition, along with colonial practice, have ascribed to Africans a condition of ontological lack, of non-being. In his diversion from Hegel, Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* ([1952] 1986, 82–83) writes,

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

> Ontology—once it is finally admitted as leaving existence by the wayside—does not permit us to understand the being of the black man. For not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false. The black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.

In his reading of this passage Sekyi-Otu (1996, 72) argues that, for Fanon, the particularity of the colonial situation cannot be inscribed within a Hegelian dialectic of reciprocity: 'the colonized subject is politically disempowered from playing the game of human agency'.[1] There can be no redemption through reciprocity nor recognition. In particular, this division is spatially inscribed in the colonial city (Fanon [1961]1991), and it is precisely in urban space where this ontological erasure is most acute.

Hence, for Fanon decolonization is an affirmation, a radical (and violent) generativity, that emerges outside the dialectics of recognition: 'There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born' ([1952] 1986, 2). For Fanon, this zone of non-being is not simply the lack of recognition by the colonist, but also experienced directly: 'A feeling of inferiority? No, a feeling of nonexistence' ([1952] 1986, 102). Nonetheless, Fanon resists this amputation of being and remains committed to political praxis, humanism and the creation of a 'new man'. Fanon views this space of 'occult instability' (Fanon cited in Pithouse, 2016, 131) as a site for political possibilities which are at once not 'ontologically determined' but 'historically constrained' (Pithouse, 2016, 131). The ontological instability of the post-colonial moment provides both the potentials for an emancipatory politics, and for the re-establishment of oppression. The ontological instability of decolonization is both generative and not dialectically determined by pre-colonial or colonial conditions. Framing anti-colonial and post-colonial dynamics on the ontological plane is not unique to Fanon. Archie Mafeje (2000) has argued, for instance, that 'combative ontologies' are required by oppressed groups in response to colonial or racial oppression.

While Fanon's humanism has influenced and has a strong affinity with other anti-colonial humanist traditions, his position puts him in tension with other strands of anti-colonial ontological thought and theology. Fanon does not attribute pre-colonial ontologies as a foundation for his humanism nor anti-colonial struggle and often appears antagonistic to indigenous African religions (Settler 2012). Fanon describes in moments indigenous religions as a 'magical superstructure' aimed to reduce the power of the colonist, but which he envisions will disappear with the liberation struggle ([1961] 1991, 18–19). In contrast, others have viewed pre-colonial or indigenous African ontologies as providing a foundation for anti-colonial thought and mobilization.

In this vein, there is another theological tradition of anti-colonial and post-colonial thought. Mbiti's seminal study African Religion and Philosophy is illuminating here. Mbiti makes the claim that religion 'for Africans is an ontological phenomenon; it pertains to questions of existence or being'. He argues that 'Africans have their own ontology; but it is a religious ontology' (15). He expresses this ontology as follows:

> God is the Originator and Sustainer of man; the Spirits explain the destiny of man; Man is the centre of this ontology; the Animals, Plants and natural phenomena constitute the environments in which man lives, provide a means of existence and, if need be, man establishes a mystical relationship with them

and notes that 'this anthropocentric ontology is a complete unity or solidarity which nothing can break up or destroy' (16). Mbiti, himself a Christian minister, saw mission Christianity as a source of both colonial oppression and potentiality:

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

> it bears not only the stigma of colonialism, foreignness, westernism and paternalism, but also the potentialities and strength of organization, institutionalism, links with the historical tradition of Christendom, financial resources, personnel from overseas, an increasing ecumenical concern, and a deliberate attempt to relate Christianity to modern problems in Africa. (230)

The ambivalent role of Christianity in relation to indigenous African ontologies and anti-colonial and post-colonial struggles has concerns around ontology (in both a reflexive and phenomenological sense) at its core.

As Dan Magaziner notes (2010, 86) the diffuse African indigenous theological views voiced by Mbiti and others were influential in the formation of the black consciousness and student movements in South Africa, as a vision of the inter-dependency of human relations and 'religion was society'. As Magaziner (2010, 90) argues, the religious worldview became a tenant of black consciousness, with a central ambiguity: 'In African Theology, it was being, relationships; here [in the black consciousness movement] it was further refined as something strongly held, something believed in by a historical community in a particular moment.' Although this is not the place to further trace these histories and the complex theological debates within in them, what is significant here is that debates around ontology in its multiple senses – as a given reality, as a phenomenological experience, and a philosophical domain of reflection – have played a significant role in anti-colonial and post-colonial thought in different ways.

It is clear that emphasizing plural ontologies emerging in Africa and forms of continuity within the continent and diaspora does not require reifying or essentializing African ontologies. African ontologies themselves are multiple and incomplete. As Francis Nyamnjoh has proposed, drawing on the Nigerian writer Amos Tutuola,

> both reality and the universe are imbued with endless possibilities of being and becoming, thanks to the multiplicity of consciousness available to inhabit them. Things, words, deeds and being are always incomplete, not because of absences but because of their possibilities. (2015, 4)

In a related vein, and with reference to the relationship of justice to temporality in African communal life and the concept of Ubuntu law, an African ethics of inter-relationality, Ramose (2001) argues that the Ubuntu is not a static set of laws or rules for behaviour but rather is 'contained in the flow of life' – it requires historicization and a relation to political justice.

Ontological questions have also been implicit in debates around personhood in Africa. Indigenous notions of personhood are closely tied not only to metaphysics but also to embodied and spatial contexts (Thornton 2017). In his work on modern personhood in the Lowveld in South Africa, Niehaus observes how the body continues to be perceived and experienced as 'not totally bounded' (2002). Niehaus refers to the persistence of the 'so-called dividual modalities of personhood, characterized by the conception of the body and its boundaries as permeable and partible' (2002, 205). Far from being vestiges of the past, the unboundedness of the body and its openness is evidenced in the work of Niehaus (2002) and Ashforth (1998), who document how in contemporary urban settings, the fear of witchcraft and the observance of taboos are aimed at preventing contamination, related to sex, birth and death. Yet, it would be inaccurate to pose a notion of an African personhood opposed to a Western one. Englund and Leach (2000) observe composite selves in Malawi that emerge in the second birth of a person undergoing Pentecostal conversion, one that 'separates the person from those who have not been born again' (235) and create different affiliations with new brothers and sisters in the Holy Spirit, termed by the authors as 'signs of composite selves' (235). Such disconnection and constitution of 'composite selves' is never absolute and requires constant prayers and rituals of disconnection. Furthermore, these composite selves formed through ritual are intimately gendered and tied to experiences of

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

social control and patriarchy (Mukonyora 2007). The notion of composite selves speaks to the ontological pluralism that may exist within particular subjects.

The dead body, in particular, allows for an understanding of the persistence of non-Western notions and experiences of personhood in the modern African milieu. Attributes given to the dead body are critical in defining the limits and contours of personhood. The ontological power of the dead body (Lee and Vaughan 2008) is manifest in conceptions that provide the corpse with power to affect the living. Death rituals to collect the soul of the deceased are very common in both rural and urban South Africa. By talking to the soul and guiding it in its return to the place where the body will be buried, the family of the deceased aim to give peace to the dead and to the living. Failure to do so might condemn the soul to remain anchored to the place where the body encountered death, something that is tantamount to spiritual disconnection and metaphysical itinerancy. The risk is for the soul to remain ad infinitum in the place of death (Núñez and Wilhelm-Solomon 2013; Moyo, Núñez, and Leuta, 2016). In Johannesburg, as noted by Núñez and Wilhelm-Solomon (2013) and Núñez and Wheeler (2012), this fear gives rise to extensive economies of death, 'economies based on the need to deal with bodies and their spirits' (Moyo, Núñez, and Leuta, 2016, 279). These speak to the ontological force and vitalism of material and corporeal substances (cf. Fontein 2010; Fontein and Harries 2013; Major and Fontein 2015). Ontologies may be viewed neither as essences nor as historical epiphenomena, but as sources of vitality and orientation amid the flux of life. This has particular import for understanding African urbanisms.

African urbanisms and ontological insecurity

The study of African urbanisms is a powerful lens through which to address debates around ontological pluralism. Edgar Pieterse (2011) has argued that the study of African urbanisms must be attentive to the 'cumulative dynamic of exclusion, impoverishment and deepening inequality' and the political and historical forms of this, but also to the 'lived vitalities of African cities'. Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal (2008) in their seminal work on Johannesburg and the Afropolis have argued that there is a critical need to investigate the ways in which the insecurity of the African metropolis involves both physical and psychic infrastructures and that a characteristic of the African metropolis is the 'dialectic between the underground, the surface and the edge'. Filip De Boeck (2012, 201) has observed that in Kinshasa, 'the spiritual insecurity in the city mirrors the material uncertainties that punctuate the urban terrain'. AbdouMaliq Simone (2008) has argued that shifting forms of sociality and identity constitute the city's infrastructure as much its physical form. With regard to the diversity and plurality of African cities, and Accra in particular, Ato Quayson (2014, 129) has called attention to the diversity of 'discourse ecologies' which 'pertain to the interactions between apparently evanescent local traditions that coalesce into inventively new wholes and the spectral global processes that materialise in commodities and their attendant imagescapes'. Sverker Finnström (2008) points us to understand ontological insecurity as experienced not simply through a framework of social relations but also through a concern with the material surroundings in which social and spiritual disorders may be intimately tied. Elsewhere we have argued how religion becomes inscribed and territorialized on the city in multiple ways (Wilhelm-Solomon et al. 2016).

Adam Ashforth, who based his fieldwork in Soweto, Johannesburg's largest 'township' and now part of its metropolitan region, writes of the epistemic pluralism invoked in spiritual threats: he (1998, 58) notes that explanations of misfortune are 'typically framed in terms of relations with beings, entities, and forces existing in, and extending from, domains beyond the ordinary spheres of human interaction'. An integral part of insecurity is, however, also 'epistemic anxiety' – 'fear arising from doubt about knowledge of the nature and purpose of invisible forces capable

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

of causing harm' (1998, 64). A key issue here is that forms of authority and interpretation themselves are multiple, involving traditional healers, Pentecostal and Apostolic prophets, among others; furthermore, interpretations of misfortune are embedded in experiences of apartheid-era violence and dispossession. A critical point that one can derive from Ashforth is that competing claims for justice and explanation enfold into one another without ever being resolved. Explanations based on supernatural actors do not erase historical or material concerns for justice, but exist in often uneasy relations to these. Nonetheless, there is a significant limitation to Ashforth's lens of 'spiritual insecurity', which is why we shift our focus to ontological insecurity. Ashforth, while obviously concerned with explaining people's existential anxieties, reduces, in the final analysis, the entire African aetiology of evil and theology to the simple issue of 'spiritual insecurity' (see Ashforth, 1998, 2005, 2010). Instead, an analysis of ontological insecurity in relation to African urbanism aims to analyse insecurity regarding wider social, material and metaphysical relations.

This volume addresses the relation between fragile urban environments and the formation of new technologies with forms of urban socialities. An engagement with ontology and urbanism must also be understood in relation to the materiality and corporeality of urban spaces. In this, we develop debates within Critical African Studies dealing with the 'efficacy and vitality of human substances' (see, inter alia, Fontein and Harries, 2013, 117). We aim to develop these debates not only with a concern with human substances (although this remains a focus), but also with a broader concern with the vitalism of material substances and flows and the influence of this on urban theory (Bennett 2010; Ingold 2011; McFarlane 2011). In particular, Latour's (2005, 2010, 2014) actor-network theory - focusing on the 'interagentivity' and rhizomatic forms of human and non-human actants, and the dissolution of the borders between subject and object - has influenced ontological concerns around materiality. White (2013) has critiqued Latour's approach, and others of the ontological turn, as lapsing into an 'atemporal cosmology' (680) and lacking both historicity and a concern with the particular forms of life associated with the commodity form. With this concern in mind, throughout the papers in this volume, we attend to the ways in which forms of capital, commodities, inequalities, and migration generate the historical conditions for ontological insecurity and pluralism. As Elizabeth Povinelli (2014) has argued, a concern with ontology does not imply essentialism or eliding a concern with power and politics, rather 'power is understood as that which enables arrangements to maintain their apparent unity and reproduce this apparent unity over time, no matter that these arrangements are continually creating their own otherwises'. Power requires stabilizing the relations between forms of life and the corporeality and materiality which are immanent to these. We argue here that plural ontologies are invoked in the attempt to order, govern and control urban space.

Contributions to the volume

In this special edition, we develop these concerns with detailed and comparative empirical studies but also propose that the relation between the evolving and plural ontologies of African urban spaces and their relationship to the unstable materialities and corporealities of urban life require deeper theorization. In particular, the papers in this volume argue that ontological pluralism must be grasped *within* and between societies, spaces and subjects and with regard to shifting and unstable infrastructural and technological landscapes. All the contributions in this volume aim to historicize within a discussion of post-colonial dynamics and cities. We do not offer a unified view; the papers in this volume are manifestations of the wider issues and tensions outlined above.

A key concern is the continued inequalities of the post-colonial city, and responses to these. Chari explores the dynamics of post-apartheid inequality around Durban by arguing that 'the Black radical tradition provides critical resources oriented at both the ontological and the social, often through a religious register that marks the power of the spectral'. Chari draws on

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

the figure of the blues which provides a 'critical aesthetics of inhabiting the embodied and material fragility maintained by the ontologization of capital and biopolitics'. He documents how the will to survive of the Wentworth community living in the shadows of oil refineries being exposed to continued toxicity requires a resistance of this ontologization. Wilhelm-Solomon explores how the racialized materialities of post-apartheid Johannesburg involve the exposure to scarring, debilitation and death of urban black and migrant populations living in unlawfully occupied buildings. Responses to the 'ruinous vitalism' of the city – manifest in fires and building collapse – involve a plurality of social and ritual responses which involve an 'unstable ontological multiplicity oriented around the fragility of the urban form'. These 'ontological orientations' are often at odds with attempts by municipal government and private developers to contain and regulate urban space. Concerning Kampala, Doherty argues that urban governance renders boda-boda (motorcycle taxi) drivers are 'triply disposable' as members of a floating population at odds with the developmental agenda, exposed to harm and death, along with the industry as a whole being precarious. At stake is the very recognition of their personhood under conditions of disposability. In these papers, the dynamics of recognition and both corporeal and ontological erasure are played out in relation to the insecure infrastructures of the post-colonial city. Continued exposure to harm, violence and inequality poses an existential threat to city dwellers and requires a re-constitution of personhood, politics and resistance.

However, urban insecurities are also generative and evolving with new lines of migration and technological developments. Van den Broeck gives a case study of the planned Konza Technology City on the peripheries of Nairobi. He argues that new technologies and their attendant city planning generate ontological pluralism and uncertainty, but also 'highly productive force as it engenders hope and possibility'. The formation of ontological pluralism is immanent to processes of material change and vitalism in the urban context. Van den Broeck frames this change in relation to the centrality of the home and to tensions between the analogue, and the digital – ontological pluralism is refigured through modes of infrastructural and technological change. Cazarin and Cossa address how in contexts of transnational urbanism in Bilbao and Johannesburg, Pentecostal pastors come to serve roles as 'brokers' – they 'mediate ontological insecurities and bridge the multiple temporalities that coexist in the spatial proximity of migrants' diverse lives in contexts of informality, unemployment, social exclusion, and violence'. In a related sense, Henrietta Nyamnjoh argues that conceptions of personhood and conviviality are central to Cameroonian migrants' ontological security in Cape Town. The difficulty of establishing meaningful personhood in the diaspora threatens the sense of ontological security of migrants and these threats are linked to both economic and metaphysical concerns. Nyamnjoh shows how hometown associations remain critical for helping asylum seekers in negotiating the South African immigration bureaucracies and informal trade, but also that ancestral connections to Cameroon remain an important part of ontological security. In all of these studies, the movements of people and technologies involve both material and metaphysical concerns.

The papers of this volume reveal that African urbanisms characterized by an ontological plurality are a source of insecurity, innovation and generativity. Subjects may constantly shift between various ontological schemas which are only partially stabilized, and which are constituted in and through the circulation of bodies and the construction and denigration of material forms in urban environments. We argue here that an ontological perspective contributes to the emergent debates on African urbanism in several ways. First, it allows us to trace the multiplicity of ontological schema at work in urban environments, and the insecurities and forms of experience these generate, without lapsing into either structuralist or teleological notions of tradition and modernity. Second, it allows us to think of insecurity as not simply in relation to its violent and negative consequences (without omitting these), but as generative of new forms of being and life. Third, we can think insecurity as arising from the fractured and tenuous relations between plural ontological

presuppositions and the vital and unstable flow of materialities, information and bodies characterizing African urban spaces. And finally, this approach allows us to think politics and political struggle on the ontological plane as enacting moments of stabilization, control and resistance. Our approach here is not to essentialize or enclose African urbanisms but rather to show them as being both connected to local histories and ways of being, but also continually changing and open to diffuse voices, perspectives, technologies and mobilities.

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

Acknowledgements

This special edition was developed from selected papers from the proceedings of the colloquium 'Vital Instability' held at the University of the Witwatersrand, 15–17 October 2014, sponsored by Volkswagen Foundation Knowledge for Tomorrow – Cooperative Research Projects in Sub-Saharan Africa programme which also supported the editorial work on this project. The editorial work was part of the Religion and Migration Initiative hosted at the African Centre for Migration & Society at the University of the Witwatersrand. Special thanks to Professor Hansjörg Dilger of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology at Freie Universität Berlin for his support for this project and commentary on the conference papers. Special thanks too to our colleagues at the University of the Witwatersrand, Dr Hylton White (Department of Anthropology) who gave the keynote address, and to Dr Obvious Katsaura (Sociology) and Dr Alex Wafer (Geography) who were respondents. This editorial reworks elements from the following working paper: Kankonde Bukasa, P. 2015. *A Reflection on the Necessity for an 'Ontological Turn' in African Studies with Reference to the Ecologies of Knowledge Production*. MMG Working Paper (15-06).

Note

1. Thanks to Sharad Chari for this provocation and reference.

References

Ashforth, Adam. 1998. "Reflections on Spiritual Insecurity in a Modern African City (Soweto)." *African Studies Review* 41 (3): 39–67.

Asforth, Adam. 2005. *Witchcraft, Violence, and Democracy in South Africa*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ashforth, Adam. 2010. "Spiritual Insecurity and AIDS in South Africa" In *Morality, Hope and Grief: Anthropologies of AIDS in Africa*, edited by Hansjörg Dilger and Ute Luig. New York: Berghan Books.

Bennett, Jane. 2010. "A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism." In *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*, edited by Diana Cool and Samantha Frost, 47–69. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Candea, Matei. 2010. "Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: For the Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester." *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 172–179.

De Boeck, Filip. 2012. "Kinshasa and its (Un) Certainties: The Polis and the Sacred." In *The Sacred in the City*, edited by Lilian Gomez and Walter van Herck, 191–208. New York: Continuum.

de Castro, Viveiros. 2014. "Who is Afraid of the Ontological Wolf? Some Comments on an Ongoing Anthropological Debate." *CUSAS Annual Marilyn Strathern Lecture*. Accessed 21 June 2017. https://sisu.ut.ee/sites/default/files/biosemio/files/cusas_strathern_lecture_2014.pdf

Descola, Philippe. 2013a. "Presence, Attachment, Origin, Ontologies of 'Incarnates'." In *A Companion to the Anthropology of Religion*, edited by Janice Boddy and Michael Lambek, 35–49. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Descola, Philippe. 2013b. *Beyond Nature and Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Englund, Harri, and Leach, James. 2000. "Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity." *Current Anthropology* 41 (2): 225–248.

Fanon, Frantz. (1952) 1986. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press.

Fanon, Frantz. (1961) 1991. *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press.

Finnström, Sverker. 2008. *Living with Bad Surroundings: War and Existential Uncertainty in Acholiland, Northern Uganda*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Fontein, Joost. 2010. “Between Tortured Bodies and Resurfacing Bones: The Politics of the Dead in Zimbabwe.” *Journal of Material Culture* 15 (4): 423–448.

Fontein, Joost, and John Harries. 2013. “The Vitality and Efficacy of Human Substances.” *Critical African Studies* 5 (3): 115–126.

Graeber, David. 2015. “Radical Alterity is just Another way of Saying ’Reality’: A Reply to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 5 (2): 1–41.

Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Holbraad, Martin, Morten Axel Pedersen, and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro. 2014. “The Politics of Ontology: Anthropological Positions.” Theorizing the Contemporary, Cultural Anthropology website, January 13. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/462-the-politics-of-ontology-anthropological-positions.

Holbraad, Martin. 2010. “Against the Motion (2) in Ontology is Just Another Word for Culture: Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester”. *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 179–185.

Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. Oxford: Routledge.

Kelly, John. 2014. “The Ontological Turn: Where Are We?” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 357–360.

Latour, Bruno. 2005. *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2010. *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Latour, Bruno. 2014. “Another Way to Compose the Common World.” *Hau: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4 (1): 301–307.

Lee, Rebekah, and Megan Vaughan. 2008. “Death and Dying in the History of Africa Since 1800.” *The Journal of African History* 49 (03): 341–359.

Mafeje, Archie. 2000. “Africanity: A Combative Ontology.” *CODESRIA Bulletin* (1): 67.

Magaziner, D. R. 2010. *The Law and the Prophets: Black Consciousness in South Africa, 1968–1977*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

Major, Laura, and Joost Fontein. 2015. “Corporealities of Violence in Southern and Eastern Africa.” *Critical African Studies* 7.2: 89–98.

Mbembe, Achille, and Sarah Nuttall. 2008. “Introduction: Afropolis.” In *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, edited by S. Nuttal and A. Mbembe, 1–36. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

McFarlane, Colin. 2011. “Assemblage and Critical Urbanism.” *City* 15 (2): 204–224.

Moyo, Khangelani, Lorena Núñez, and Tsepang Leuta. 2016. “(Un)rest in Peace: The (Local) Burial of Foreign Migrants as a Contested Process of Place Making.” In *Routes and Rites to the City: Mobility, Diversity and Religious Space in Johannesburg*, edited by M. Wilhelm-Solomon, L. Núñez, P. B. Kankonde, and B. Malcomess, 273–306. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Mukonyora, Isabel. 2007. *Wandering a Gendered Wilderness: Suffering and Healing in an African Initiated Church*. New York: Peter Lang.

Niehaus, Isak. 2002. “Bodies, Heat, and Taboos: Conceptualizing Modern Personhood in the South African Lowveld.” *Ethnology* 41 (3): 189–207.

Núñez, Lorena, and Brittany Wheeler. 2012. “Chronicles of Death Out of Place: Management of Migrant Death in Johannesburg.” *African Studies* 71 (2): 212–233.

Núñez, Lorena, and Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon. 2013. *Body Paths*, *The Chronic*. Cape Town: Chimurenga.

Nyamnjoh, Francis B. 2015. “Incompleteness: Frontier Africa and the Currency of Conviviality.” *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. doi:10.1177/0021909615580867.

Paleček, Martin, and Mark Risjord. 2012. “Relativism and the Ontological Turn within Anthropology.” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 43 (1): 3–23.

Pieterse, Edgar. 2011. “Grasping the Unknowable: Coming to Grips with African Urbanisms.” *Social Dynamics* 37 (1): 5–23.

Pithouse, Richard. 2016. “Frantz Fanon: Philosophy, Praxis, and the Occult Zone.” *Journal of French and Francophone Philosophy* 24 (1): 116–138.

Povinelli, Elizabeth. 2014. “Geontologies of the Otherwise.” *Cultural Anthropology*. Accessed June 17 2017. https://culanth.org/fieldsights/465-geontologies-of-the-otherwise.

Quayson, Ato. 2014. *Oxford Street, Accra: City Life and the Itineraries of Transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Ramose, Mogobe B. 2001. “An African Perspective on Justice and Race.” *Polylog: Forum for Intercultural Philosophy* 3. Accessed June 21 2017. http://them.polylog.org/3/frm-en.htm

Sekyi-Otu, Ato. 1996. *Fanon’s Dialectic of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017

Settler, Frederico. 2012. “Frantz Fanon’s Ambivalence towards Religion.” *Journal for the Study of Religion* 25 (2): 5–21.
Simone, Abdoumaliq. 2008. “People as Infrastructure.” In *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, edited by Sarah Nuttal and Achille Mbembe, 68–90. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Thornton, Robert. 2017. *Healing the Exposed Being: The Ngoma Healing Tradition in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
Venkatesan, Soumhya. 2010. “Ontology Is Just Another Word for Culture: Motion Tabled at the 2008 Meeting of the Group for Debates in Anthropological Theory, University of Manchester.” *Critique of Anthropology* 30 (2): 152–200.
Wilhelm-Solomon, M., L. Núñez, P. B. Kankonde, and Bettina Malcomess. 2016. “Introduction.” In *Routes and Rites to the City: Mobility, Diversity and Religious Space in Johannesburg*, edited by M. Wilhelm-Solomon, L. Núñez, P. B. Kankonde, and B. Malcomess, 1–30. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
White, Hylton. 2013. “Materiality, Form, and Context: Marx contra Latour.” *Victorian Studies* 55 (4): 667–682.

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon
African Centre for Migration & Society, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa
Email: wilhelmsolomon@gmail.com

Peter Kankonde Bukasa
Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen, Germany
African Centre for Migration and Society, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Lorena Núñez
Department of Sociology, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

Downloaded by [Max-Planck-Institut zur Erfoschung Multireligioeser und] at 03:05 11 August 2017