

THE CITY OF MELANCHOLIA

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HARLEM SHIMMERS (video segment 00:44 – 5:36)

I was born on October 30, 1981 in Mexico City. A day and thirty-two years later, I woke up in Manhattan with a broken heart. A wonderful relationship had come to a sudden end on the 20th, after almost eight years of sharing our lives together. We resided in Mexico City, Marseille, and Nairobi. We traveled Mombasa, Lamu, Mumbai, Kigali, Firenze, Barcelona, Paris, Antananarivo, London, El Paso, and Juarez. Her name was Jeanne. It still is. The Marseillaise. In the fall of 2012, I had gone to Chicago as a PhD student in anthropology, while she was pursuing her own career in academia back in France. Would we still be a couple if I had stayed or if she had come?

These useless thoughts invaded my mind during that rainy morning in New York. Gray sky. I had an appointment at 1:30 with Claudio Lomnitz at Columbia University. And I thought I had enough time to abandon myself to regrets. So I did. But by noon, I left the apartment (I was staying at the temporarily rented flat of a friend, who was in town for work). Distracted as I was, I scratched on a piece of paper the Google instructions to get to campus—but of course, they were all wrong.

I got onto the subway, northbound. By the time I realized how long it was taking, I was already in the Bronx. I exited and asked for directions to Columbia, determined to go on foot. People were unsure, but they guided me. After half an hour of wandering, however, second opinions told me Columbia was back in Manhattan. Frustrated, I got back onto the subway

with no clear aim except to return to the island. And I told myself: if Jeanne were with me, we would be laughing. But she was not, and she never would be again. I scratched the back of my head, rolling my fingers in my hair as my brow furrowed. The bottom of my chest throbbed with slight pain.

Because I knew it would be impossible to make it to my meeting with Professor Lomnitz on time, I decided to find the means to send him an apology. So I stopped my journey halfway. I simply got off the subway at the next stop and went back into the streets. I found myself on the corner of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and West 125th Street, unaware that this was Harlem. I walked into Starbuck's, logged onto the Wi-Fi with my iPod, and sent him an email. I then bought a coffee and asked where I could buy tobacco. "Right next door," the lady at the register said, smiling. I went next door and got a packet of organic American Spirit, rolled a cigarette with no filter, and crossed the boulevard. I didn't light the cigarette, but left it on my lips. I just wanted to walk. I put on my headphones and turned the music on.



A few meters down 125th Street, I noticed a sensation of strangeness and disgust in my stomach as Filastine's "Gendjer2" played on my iPod. I couldn't

understand the lyrics—the track is a reworking of an old Javanese resistance song. Therefore, it would be difficult to say that the song, as speech, was the cause of this sensation. Rather, it was something about the somber tone and sorrowful pitch of the singer's voice, the mournful intensity of the cello, the sedate rhythm of the bass, the drums, and the sudden electronic rasps that which nurtured this strange vibration inside me. My breathing accelerated, as my throat dried and tightened. I felt that crackling static electricity behind the eyes that comes when one is about to break into tears. I sighed. But I held back.

I stopped walking, reached inside my pocket, and took the iPod out. I went back over my steps and activated its camera. I felt a compulsion to document the stimuli around me that, in conjunction with the music, had seemingly triggered the estrangement. It was Halloween, and the street was particularly colorful, loud, smelly, and crowded. I wanted to share this sudden occurrence, this impossibility to feel affectionate toward my surroundings, with somebody—with Jeanne, to be honest; but I knew this would not happen. With Gendjer2 playing softly in my headphones so as not to miss the soundscape of the streets, I filmed my walk, carefully placing the iPod at the level of my eyes and delicately moving it as I moved my own gaze.

As I returned to the corner of Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard and West 125th Street, the stoplight switched from red to green and sent a beam of light onto my face. With that flash, a stream of images flooded into my head. I traveled to the past. It is August 2012... I see Jeanne sunbathing next to me, lying on the stones and the sand. It's warm. We are in Sardinia, Italy, enjoying what would be our last vacation together. I am busy reading Farah's *Knots*. I look at her and feel overwhelmed by her beauty, lucky to be there with her, just

the two of us. I see our future together, fellow travelers until the end of our days, and I want to tell her about my infinite love. But I tell myself I will do it over dinner or after finishing the chapter. I carry on with my reading, and the urge eventually fades, one page turning into another, pages turning into events, events into plots. I go through the entire book without saying a word. Jeanne and I have a last swim at 6 o'clock, and I think again of telling her. It would have been simple. I could have caressed her face, looked deep into those green eyes, and promised yet again to love her always. But somehow I persuade myself that she already knows. I stay silent. We shower. Over dinner we talk politics and revolution. The usual.

In New York, the green light blazed again. Along with the siren of an ambulance and undistinguishable fragrances in the air, it brought me back to the present. But perhaps not quite. When I turned right on 125th Street, I profoundly regretted my decision not to remind her of my commitment. This inner lament was like a whisper that turned the shrill resonance of the ambulance into the tender ebb of the waves of the Sardinian sea. And again, the past emerged. I see us sitting at the restaurant. I feel the sand on my skin that the shower failed to remove. I taste Sardinian Torbato (a white wine from the northwestern Sella & Mosca estate). I feel the softness of her ears as I caress them and explain to her again why I like to do this. I tell her that when in amicable or romantic love, I touch other people's ears as an expression of my affection. I hear her telling me then that she has always detested this habit.

As I thought of reasons why, my mind returned to the street. I saw trash piled next to its intended container, schoolgirls chitchatting, the ambulance I had just heard. I saw Fedex, Sprint, Payless Shoes. I saw a street stall with little crystal pots and incense,

the source of the fragrances I had smelled. The Bank of America, a cradle missing the baby, bags, beanies, distorted music, a red van. The smell of cumin made me think of the extent of time that I had been moving from Europe to South America, back to Europe, to Africa, and then back to Europe again. Exhausting. A passing truck revealed a store banner across the road. It read "America's Kids." I kept turning my gaze to the left, following the trajectory of the truck, until I had made a 180-degree turn and saw a 10-story building, the Theresa Hotel. In black spray paint, I read this legend tagged on one of its walls: "Harlem." That is where I was. I was in an iconic neighborhood, where exclusion, unemployment, poverty, and racial segregation had, at some point, hypostatized, although a remarkable artistic sensibility at the turn of the twentieth century had originated. I thought of colonial governmentality, Frantz Fanon, and his wretched of the earth. "Regulate the movement of bodies, group populations by skin color, dispossess them: you end up with a ghetto" – I told myself. Harlem, the exemplar of the world that the United States builds with its cities. Harlem. As I walked it, I realized I lived now in the United States, this "country of racists" which Fanon hated so much to the point of refusing to receive medical attention here.

I turned back around again to recommence my walk, catching in passing the word "Place" on the façade of a store. I thought of Michel de Certeau and the personal execution of space. I then read "Signs make \$\$ and sense" on a small billboard at ground level. I thought about commodities and value. I thought about capital and migration. And I saw Sardinia again. I saw Marseille. I saw Jeanne at the airport gate, and I smelled our last kiss. Amidst this remembering, I was once again interrupted. A lady with a party hat and a set of balloons drew my attention back to the street,



and I started looking at shop windows and ongoing sales. Immediately, as I lifted my gaze slightly, I saw in front of me the legendary Apollo's marquee. Some letters that I could not read disappeared, and the word "Unspeakable" emerged against the background of white light.

Place, signs, the unspeakable: these terms seemed an adequate characterization of what my walk had turned into. My walk became an awakening. Spontaneously sauntering through Harlem was a permanent, chaotic stimulation of my sensorium. Through this practice, I faced the materiality of the city. I confronted its aural, olfactory, visual, and tactile qualities. And these dimensions of the urban experience honed some evaluative dispositions outside the purview of my consciousness, dispositions that were present by virtue of a yet ungraspable loss (the end of the most important love relationship that I have had so far). I thus became aware of my irremediable loneliness. And I found unhappiness. My turbulent mobility from Mexico City to Juarez, and then to Marseille, and next to Nairobi, and now to Chicago had repeatedly separated me from friends. It had distanced me from my father, mother, and brother. It had finally made Jeanne and I grow apart. Movement, I realized, had paradoxically left me

lying still. It had isolated me in the United States. And by walking New York, I unexpectedly reckoned with the fact that I was yearning to go back home.

Initially I thought I was hankering after a return to Nairobi – that city of red dust and *matatus* (public transportation minivans) in which Jeanne and I had been so happy together. But it soon became obvious to me that I was longing for an elsewhere that had suddenly vanished. My happiness was not in Malakal Courts, apartment 2b, in the expatriate neighborhood of Westlands, Nairobi. Because my residence for the past eight years had not been fixed, I understood that “home” was none of the spaces that I had occupied. I had inhabited instead the warmth of Jeanne’s arms along our trails of movement. She had been my abode and therefore, now I was homeless. Down in the streets of Harlem, I abruptly awoke into the melancholy of migration.

In other words, by seeing, smelling, and listening to the city, the affective—that strange force that I felt in my stomach when I started walking—mutated into a propitious condition for the experience of my sad transnational wandering, a discursively mediated emotion.



Concretely, in the moments of slowly trudging over wet tarmac along the sidewalk of Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Boulevard, painstakingly trying to forget Jeanne, my memory, stimulated by the green luminescence of the stoplight, subverted the order imposed by the infrastructure of New York—the zebra crossings, bus stops, and traffic signs—and transformed this city into the most woeful site I had ever visited. New York metamorphosed. It became the saddest *place* I had ever *made*. I thus related to its materiality as a signifier of my wretchedness as an unwilling migrant. In this sense, the materiality of the city participated in the constitution of my own subjectivity. It had an effect on me by virtue of the agency that my emotional circumstances granted; emotional circumstances, in turn, which were themselves made possible by the sensuous intervention of surrounding objects in my affective state. The traffic light ceased to be simply a directional instruction in the city. It became a triggering agent of the work of memory and its subsequent labor on space. It transformed into a place through the practice of a sorrowful walk. And allowed melancholia to imbue it with meaning. The traffic light became a mirror in which I saw myself as a lonely intellectual migrant.

“New York metamorphosed. It became the saddest *place* I had ever *made*.”

But all these were, of course, afterthoughts. That day in New York, the last thing I could do was theorize. My eyes welled up. Spasms in the back of my neck reminding me how much I longed to go home, pushing me to face my surroundings not as the cosmopolitan dreamworld that I had chosen to construct, but as a nightmarish manufacture, as someone else’s world confronting me and impelling me to reckon with the fact that back in Mexico I could not sell my intellectual labor, that I was somehow forced to migrate. No. I could not think calmly, let alone theorize. All I could feel was that these desires no longer seemed mine. I felt alienated.

Filastine’s “Gendjer2” stopped at this point of my walk. I had to cut the video recording and play the track again. Then I saw a stall selling pirate movies from around the world—some seemed to come from India, others from West Africa. As I turned on my axis, an old man wearing a black mask, personifying a monster, used his cane to dance to the rhythm of a song playing from the next stall. He roared at me and moved his hand in a catlike way. I misconstrued the gesture and apologized for recording, but he was just being playful. My next vision was of a small girl wearing a ladybird outfit with flimsy black antennas that ended in round red tips.

I continued walking uphill and arrived at Columbia University, three and half hours late for my appointment. Dr. Lomnitz had left, of course, so I sat on the central square in front of the library and lit my cigarette. iPod still recording, trembling, I dialed Jeanne’s number. I told her that I would go to Paris during the winter—“for what?” she asked. “There is nothing left



to be done,” she said. I covered my sadness with lies: I told her I was going for tourism. The truth is that I wanted to be available to her if she wanted to talk. I was giving myself as a gift, aware that this offering would not be returned. I was loving her, still. An hour later I went back to the apartment. That night I barely slept. And if I did, I do not remember.

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The text that you are reading is a discursive reconstitution of my walks in New York. It stands alone as an essay. But it is part of a collation of mosaics. Along with a video that I edited a month later using the iPod footage that I gathered in Harlem, Manhattan, and Brooklyn, which is fully available online, it integrates a collage that serves as epistemological mediator.

By mounting images and sounds with music and narration, my work intends to emulate my personal execution of the city. It seeks to stage my own emotional inhabitation of international mobility as it became revealed to me while I sorrowfully wended my way along the sidewalks. It performs, as it were, a particular contemporary mode of wayfaring: the

melancholic wandering of the intellectual migrant (See Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2012). Through this montage, I pursue a twofold objective. I hope to supplement De Certeau’s project of describing the operational combinations by which city dwellers appropriate urban space (1990) and to examine a possibility for contributing to the theorization of affect by elaborating on Navaro-Yashin’s work on materiality and subjectivity (2012). And in this sense, my project, standing as a foil to the exhilarating skyscraper view of the city, joins the enterprise of studying the mutability and hybridity of the streets (Mbembe and Nuttall, 2008; Quayson, 2010; Simone, 2004).¹

The theoretical argumentation of this essay, therefore, relies on the montage itself. It does not utilize the video or the narration as illustrations of the points made. Rather, it only became possible with hindsight, as suggested above. To be sure, the video and my own written recall of events served as data. Together, they functioned as a mnemonic device, my fieldnotes. However, I was only able to reclaim the meaning of my experience as a melancholic place-maker as I collocated the recording of one walk after the other, as I pasted Filastine’s tracks on the images, and as I resided in narrative space—all in a manner as similar as possible to how I inhabited the physical space of the city. In other words, the purport of retelling my walks through images and narrativity lies not in the story that is recounted. It rests instead on what these media do. With De Certeau, I believe that to acquire the silent labor of memory by which my walks were executed and to intimate the affective capacities of my body and the sentimental inclinations made thereby possible, the telling of a melancholic walk through the streets of New York should not try to describe the personal operations of the walking subject. It must perform them. Retelling

consummates theorization by emulating practice (See De Certeau, et al., 1990 *passim*). Narration, on paper or in video, must carry out the walk to allow theory-making to surface.

Moreover, while this work might seem to be the product of an extremely singular episode in my life, it is far from a return to the individual as unit of social analysis. Its object of study is a number of modalities of social relations, namely, the relations that the subject is able to establish with materiality (Navaro-Yashin 2012), absence (Ho 2006), mobility (Ingold 2007), imagination (Mittermaier 2011), and hoping (Miyazaki 2004).

This essay thus makes two submissions. First, while De Certeau effectively juxtaposed a concept of the city as the tactically engaged, artful place-making of its inhabitants against received ideas about an improbable passive consumption of architecture and urban planning, his account pays insufficient attention to the sentimental state of the walking subject. As is well known, De Certeau simultaneously deployed and questioned Foucault and Bourdieu. After Foucault unveiled the heterogeneous and unexpected power effects of institutional logics, De Certeau deduced that to the disciplinary production of space there must be corresponding practices of place (De Certeau, et al. 1990, 101-107, 178). De Certeau, upholding the proviso that the procedures of an entire society not be reduced to the framings of surveillance, utilized Foucault’s analytical grid to examine the instances of everyday life that seemingly lie outside of institutional space (14, 107). Furthermore, he rejected the hypothesis of a *habitus* on account of the fact that practice, because of its improvisational character, continuously refuses the essence of structures as *locus* for the genesis of people’s ways of doing (108-123). Instead, De Certeau aimed to

discursively theorize that which individuals themselves are unable to grasp through discourse (139-140). He intended to acquire the know-how that lies—imperatively and invisibly—in the travelling from the knowing to the doing, a judgment (142-147). To account for place-making, De Certeau was after the study of an *art of doing*.

For De Certeau, the image of a circular movement captures the elementary aspects of practice. A space independent from the subject appears as point of departure. Movement starts not with what the space dictates, but from what the memory of the subject recalls. The lesser the time memory has to predominate over action, the more radical its effects will be in observable practice, thus revamping the distributional properties of space. De Certeau: “*Memory mediates spatial transformations. Under the ‘opportune model’ (kairos), it produces a restorative rupture. Its strangeness makes possible a transgression of the law of the place. Out of its undiscoverable and mobile secrets, a ‘coup’ modifies local order*” (161, my translation).

More specifically, memory works on practice through singular mobile alterations of perception (163-165). Its labor imprints details of an elsewhere onto a place that is not its own. It adds particular fragments and pieces that draw harmony over the eventful. And it takes these details from one object to the next without letting any one of them stand permanently for what they seem to be. The labor of memory comes through a stream of fluctuating particulars in the mind that makes that which is seen turn into other. Silently and surreptitiously, the certain “something else” that emerges through the effects of memory returns in the retelling of practice. To study the labor of memory on space, in sum, a narrator must recount the intimate memories that made the corner of Adam Clayton Powell Jr.

Boulevard and West 125th Street a place where he experienced sadness.

Nevertheless, this analysis must reckon with the fact that the emotional circumstances in which the walker finds himself or herself prefigure the work of memory on tangible and intangible objects (objects in the phenomenological sense, meaning, all entities which can be subject to predication; see Husserl 1907). And thus, with the potential of these emotional circumstances to function as conditions of possibility for the serendipitous encounters and unexpected itineraries that constitute the enunciation of urban space. Put differently, the significance of shop names and colors in advertisements and marquees; of neon and sunlight; of horns, bells, and sirens; of the tarmac and cement; of other people’s bodies, voices, and walking; of the cold wind; and the greasy taste and smell of a Times Square hot dog—in short, the significance of the materiality of New York—was made possible through the flow and labor of certain memories rather than others. And this flux depended largely on the emotions that I felt during that particular period of my life. Sadness, despair, frustration, anger, and anxiety set a particular mood that allowed the memories of breakup, of my ex-partner, and of the Italian beach to stream down into my consciousness. Now, these emotional states were triggered as a deep force made me feel each organ in my body. This force was an excess. It was an impersonal, ineffable threshold. A transition. Frightening. It was a vibrating incoherence. It was the feeling of a nascent feeling.

A posteriori, I realized that recent social science literature refers to this palpitation as “affect.” Arising from the specter of Spinoza and his concern with the aptitudes of the flesh; from the Durkheimian interest in sensuous social effervescence; from the fascination that Tarde, and after him Simmel and Benjamin, had

with the mimetic faculty which attains its zenith in urban life; from a less acknowledged debt to Mauss’s and Jousse’s respective attractions to bodily techniques and socially shared corporeal rhythmic motions of storytellers and reciters; and from a non-Cartesian tradition in philosophy well exemplified by Deleuze—arising from all these sources a body of research has developed around a certain pre-subjective, yet social, terrain of human potential. By the term “affect” many scholars designate a momentary circumstance which precedes semiotic and linguistic mediation, a space where forces inscribed in the flesh set the body in an *in-between-ness*, i.e., an undetermined capacity to act or to be acted upon (Gregg & Seigworth 2010). Seigworth and Gregg, in the introductory note to a useful collection of essays, write: “...*affect can be understood...as a gradient of bodily capacity—a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations—that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the troughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to compartments of matter of virtually any and every sort*” (2).

It is true that the deployment of the notion of affect must be wary of melodrama. All too easily the thinking of affect may slide into a romanticized desire to touch upon the seemingly un-mediated essence of our selves, an essence that must be—so this desire dictates—either uncorrupted by the signifying logic of culture and/or an embodied but unconscious social vitality (Mazzarella 2009). Theorizing this bloom-space of indeterminate potentials, the analyst thus faces a dilemma. Either he admits the impossibility to go beyond the “wounds inflicted by language” on us and accepts that affect must be conceptually mediated, or he deals with the implausibility of discursively mapping the silent traces of the

social on our flesh and falls for the illusion of affective immediacy (Mazzarella 2009, 293-4). Theorizing affect may place the analyst between Scylla and Charybdis. But, according to Mazzarella (2006), the fantasy of the non-existence of mediation—what he calls “the politics of immediation”—can be avoided if the analyst remains alert to the fact that mediation inherently poses its own masking; it masks itself (Mazzarella 2009, 303). The autonomy of affect, he argues, is an illusion of our own folklore. Therefore, the study of the “affective fact” must focus on the oscillation between the appearance of immanence and the discursive and cultural qualification by which it is expressed (304).

Hence, I have used the materiality of New York as the focal point to analyze this oscillation. Following Navaro-Yashin (2012), I take materiality and self as co-productive of the emotional “taming” of affect, which shaped the memories that in turn shaped my walking experience. Let me explain. Navaro-Yashin, against the assumption of a subject/object divide, in her latest book investigates the phenomenological bridge linking together Nicosia residents with their previous neighbors who were forced into exile in Northern Cyprus in 1974 following the partition of the island between Turkey and Greece. The houses, buildings, and collections of personal belongings left behind as well as the streets in downtown Nicosia standing near the wall built to materialize partition, bear an enormous affective charge for current dwellers. In the experience of everyday life of these people, the presence of such things vibrates. It consequently has effects on the modes of self-identification that they exhibit and allows them to attribute to material objects a certain capacity to effectuate the apparition of their ex-neighbors (13-17). In this way, materiality pushes Nicosia residents into translating affective vibrations into feelings of guilt and regret by

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facing them with the lingering presence of those who have left.

Similarly, for me, it was the materiality of the city that detonated my conscious effort to fuse the pains in the back of my neck, the uneasiness in my gut, and the static in the back of my eyes into an articulate emotion. Materiality, that is, sparked what I have called “the taming” of affect. As it became sensible data, it allowed me to subsume the intensity of affect into a discursively formed repertoire of possible sentimental states. Materiality helped me to force affect into sadness, melancholy, despair, longing. It stimulated the awareness of my own becoming, the awareness that immanent intensities of the flesh gave themselves to perception through the discursive qualification of their potential; they were given, thus, through the negation of their own apparent ineffability, without foreclosing the emergence of new intensities as my walk progressed.

I am not suggesting here that I tamed affect into a culturally specific way of suffering, into a “Mexican” way of suffering as it were. Rather, my discursive taming of affect elaborated on the entirety of my socialization. Neither am I intimating that the potentiality of my affective state preconditioned the experience of certain feelings and not others. Perhaps a different material disposition of the city could have elicited happiness and joy from the same interior force. This is to say that while both my discursive repertoire of emotions and the inscriptions of social forces on my flesh were dependent on the milieu in which I grew up—educated in Mexico, France, and the United States, professionalized

in Kenya and Mexico—neither determined the ultimate experiential outcome of my walk in New York.

Instead, both were the medium for materiality to act upon me and for my memory to act upon the material. Both emotion and affect were the groundwork for my relation to objects in the city, such as stoplights and marquees, and to objects experienced *through* the city, such as imaginings of absence, migration, and hope. To sum up, through an apparent immediacy of affect which I mediated conceptually by virtue of the agency of materiality, I grasped my becoming: I understood neither my “true” inner affective self, nor the symbolic social inventory by which I qualify the world, but rather, the co-productivity of the material and self in the experience of practice, in this case, in the invention of a stroll.

It is in this sense that affect seems to accomplish a bridging. By laying bare my sensations of alienation and non-belonging to a world (i.e., the world of traveling and studying abroad), it linked the “exterior” surroundings to the constitution of my “interior” self. In agreement with Navaro-Yashin’s findings, it seems that neither a roughly psychoanalytic view nor a Latoureaan agent-less assemblage of objects could fully account for this phenomenon (See “Introduction” in Navaro-Yashin 2012). To cap this aside then, the second theoretical submission of this text is that affect, in theory, could be construed as the fluid cementation of the connection between subjecthood and materiality—a theme that is already being explored in current anthropology (Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005; Mittermaier 2011).

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OUT OF TIMES SQUARE (5:36 – 25:30)

The next morning I showered. But I couldn't recognize myself in the mirror, so I spent some time doing my hair. I was looking for me. I was alone again, my friend having left early in the morning for a professional breakfast. Headphones on, I hit play on Filastine's "Circulate False Notes" and started recording again. I left the apartment, went to the pharmacy. Aloof, I looked at the headlines of the *New York Times*. Syria was on fire. Selfishly, I thought of my own problems, my own petty bourgeois problems. I was on the east coast because of an exchange program with Harvard. Although I had never been happier in a classroom, the thought of returning to Cambridge suddenly felt as alienating as being in New York or Chicago. I was out of place.

I later met my host at the corner of 42nd Street and 2nd Avenue to give her the keys. After our encounter, I walked down 42nd Street. I knew that my trajectory would take me to the New York Public Library, where I would spend a couple of hours reading, and further down it would set me at the gate of Times Square, that fortress in the heart of Manhattan. For this walk I played Filastine's "Spectralization."

After the first few steps, I realized how impossible it had become for me to generate an atmosphere of artificial solidarity in the company of strangers. I looked a taxi driver straight in the eye and I felt the same indifference from him as from the tops of the towers guarding the sidewalks on both sides of 42nd Street. The windows of buildings and the eyes of people acquired a disturbing similarity. At 3rd Avenue I awaited the crossing signal, looking at other pedestrians, trying to engage their gaze with very little success. I kept going. I walked past Grand Central Station, remembering my father, my mother, and my brother. I heard the music



of the mariachis that had played at my dad's last birthday party almost two years ago. I missed them, and I felt profoundly lonely.

I tried to find calm by smelling the perfumes of passing ladies. The sweet scent of peaches and melon coming from a girl wearing a pink beanie was particularly soothing. She was standing a few meters away from my provisional destination: the library. But the peace that her aroma provided was momentary. My last attempt to fight back isolation was a quick approach to a policeman sending texts through his cellphone and an old man in a brown raincoat standing next to him, looking at the traffic. Neither seemed to notice my presence. Instead, I decided to seek refuge in the silent order of academic articles. I stepped inside the library, stopped the music and the recording, sat down, and read.

About three hours later, I left the building. When I exited I pressed play on my iPod and switched the camera on once again. The song was "Juniper," a joyful track that suited the extremely bright light of New York's afternoon sun that reflected on the building windows down 42nd Street. The combination of the sound and the light injected me with hope and optimism. If my decisions thus far had brought me here, it would be my decisions that would bring me back to the kind

of life that this trip to New York had me longing for. I thought about the precariousness of academic employment in the United States and the similarity of that situation in France. There seemed to be no advantage between struggling to find a job here and struggling to find a job there. At that instant, I looked straight down Americas Avenue as I was crossing it and caught the beams of the sun right in my eyes. I would rather face competition for a teaching post over there—I thought—closer to her. I was surprised by the powerful presence of Jeanne's absence.

My thoughts then absorbed me. I was so engaged with introspection that now I cannot remember why I stepped down off the sidewalk after crossing Americas Avenue. I have the memory of the smile of a girl who looked at me with curiosity. But if it weren't for the video, I would not be able to recall how I got to the south entrance of Times Square. I can only remember thinking about how privileged I was to have the material guarantees to pursue the kind of life of my choosing, to fight back isolation and alienation, to select the continent and the city in which I wanted to live. The turbulence of my migration was nothing compared to that of those many Mexicans I had met in the United States working in supermarkets, kitchens, and bars. I

felt ashamed of my initial impulse to compare myself to them.

A siren wailed loudly and I found myself at the gate of Times Square. The sound connected almost naturally with the next track in Filastine's album, "Informal Sector Parade." For someone seeing Times Square for the very first time, the track was perfect. The number of advertisements, screens, and neon lights is such that no thoughts are allowed in that space. There is no room for them. And the song was equally frantic with percussions, trumpets, and electronic beats. I entered the square by walking through a makeshift hall made out of wire fences. Public works were taking place and a series of smaller sized fences in orange delineated my path. On them hung huge printouts of twisted eyes, which stared at the passing crowd. I stopped and looked up. In case I needed a reminder, a luminous sign told me the name of the place again: "Times Square." I stopped, taking a few seconds before crossing the next street. I looked to the left and saw a huge screen with images of the city: dozens of people crossing the sidewalks, taxi-cab roofs, and Christ the Redeemer in Rio de Janeiro. Cities represented for the city, reminding everyone of the inexorable urban future—and present.

The joyful moments I had just experienced after leaving the library faded. Times Square was excessive. It thrust me again into the realization that I would have to keep moving from country to country until I could secure a tenured position. How could I have a solid relationship with anybody if I was condemned to move around all the time? I remembered a fellow anthropologist at Columbia who described us as sailors—renounce a sedentary life, have a love at each port, she said. I felt a surge of adrenaline in my stomach as I came across Elmo, Minnie, Mickey Mouse, Iron Man, and Woody. I felt asphyxiated. The track on my headphones added to



the torture. It glutted my environment with sound as though I was listening to two iPods at the same time.



I kept going until I finally heard silence and murmur in the track. I found a hot-dog stand at the exit, as it were, of Times Square. I ordered one for five dollars, quite pricy. I talked to a man as I was eating. He was from Haiti. Fortunately, he told me a joke that calmed me down before I went home to reflect again on the perpetual—and terrifying—nomadic life I had chosen.

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CODA

I left New York the next day. Several weeks later I saw Jeanne in Paris. We sat on a bench on Boulevard Raspail and drank two bottles of champagne that we

had been given as presents by the waiters at a Ecole Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales cocktail who we had helped in setting the tables as they were running late to receive the guests. I told Jeanne my recent thoughts on love. When a partner is lost, I said, he or she is irreplaceable. Because a partner is part of a particular dream of how life should be, when he or she is gone, it is the entire dream that falls apart, a world that vanishes into thin air. Of course one will meet somebody else, and another dream will be built. But this makes love relations a series of unique dreams and not a series of exchangeable partnerships. She interrupted me abruptly. And all she could say was, "I don't imagine ever going back to you." That pain in the back of my neck returned—but this time I couldn't record anything. I turned my head and saw pedestrians running away from a sudden drizzle, as I cried silently.

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ENDNOTES

1 This essay is a history of such mutability and hybridity written from a transnational vantage point. Admittedly, it unfolds in a landscape that differs from those in which the rest of the companion articles take place. And it thus may seem geographically unfit for this special issue on "African Future Cities." However, the tapestry of events and memories that I have woven together with theory to recount my experience of pathos can be construed as a modest contribution towards the writing of a cultural history that relates Nairobi to New York through the formation of my subjectivity [for a discussion of the idea of "cultural history" that I am working with, see Howard Caygill, "Walter Benjamin's concept of cultural history" in Ferris, D. S., ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. pp. 73 - 96].

Being the place in which I lived with Jeanne for three years, Nairobi represents the opening of a horizon from which *my* walks in New York became possible. It profoundly shaped the remembrances of my love relationship. And therefore, it stands as one of the main conditions of possibility for my personal execution of New York. In this sense, Nairobi and New York come to be historically entangled through the workings of my memory onto the materiality of both—they are linked by virtue of the fictive narrative in my own mind which

posits the story of my life as the total inscription of my travels from Mexico to Europe and to Africa. They are both temporary destinations in the raveled mesh of spaces along which my mobility has been occurring.

In making this claim, I move to a Benjaminian view of history which echoes in De Certeau's own understanding of space-time relations. For Benjamin, history is an image that foregrounds the present experience of the past and presents in constructivist forms of narrative a created constellation between past, present and future (See Walter Benjamin, "Edward Fuchs: Collector and Historian" [1937], in Eiland, H. and Jennings M. W., eds., *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935-1938*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002. pp. 260 - 304). Benjamin's historical materialism aims at putting us in contact with a present experience *with* the past rather than *of* it. In other words, the story of New York that I tell in this text is written *with* my Nairobi life.

In a similar vein, for De Certeau the labor of memory, combining with each wanderer's personal style of appropriating the symbolic order and of using the norms of walking, makes each stroll unique and thereby actualizes the present of the city (De Certeau, *et.al.* 1990 *passim*). During a walk, memory writes a history of a present experience with the past. It accomplishes this feat through two processes. It suppresses contiguity and makes discontinuity generative. As we see in this text, memory turns stoplights into sandy Italian beaches—through a rupture of the contiguity between the stoplight and the street. And through motion *per se*, it amplifies detail and prolongs the city, making the walk in Harlem a part of that in Times Square and that in Times Square a part of that which took place in Second Avenue—it ties together a *here* with a *there*. Memory, thus, displaces New York and inserts it in a larger story of which Nairobi is a part.

In a nutshell, the story in this essay sets forth a fragment of the history of contemporary patterns of mobility—patterns which link cities across Africa with the rest of the world—patterns which shape the imagination of what is yet to come, i.e., unwilling migration, redefinitions of "home," and the melancholia that ensues.