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There Is a There There: Place in African Cityscapes

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Abstract

This essay proposes a theoretical framework, based in the philosophy and aesthetics of Yoruba people (Nigeria), for interpreting urban photographic series. To do so I look at *oríkì*, a form of Yoruba oral literature, and the ways in which it resonates and intersects with Western philosophical conceptualizations of place and urban and literary theory to engender a rich and complex sense of place. I argue this by exploring two series of cityscapes: Akinbode Akinbiyi's "Lagos: All Roads," which depicts Lagos Nigeria, and Mouna Karray's "Murmurer," depicting Sfax, Tunisia.

Keywords: Akinbode Akinbiyi, Mouna Karray, oríkì, Lagos, Sfax, photography

Gertrude Stein may not be the first person one thinks of when considering photographic representations of African cities, but she is relevant nonetheless. Stein is known, among other things, for her skilled language play, her textured writing with layering of phrases, her refusal of linear progression, her attention to the rhythms of speech, and her insistence that one part of the composition is as important as another. Similarly one might describe the experience of a city as nonlinear and textured, where various elements layer one against another, where one might notice the play of the rhythms of the city, and where each space has its own significance. Moreover, Stein's writing is productive; it manifests relationships between an individual and the world (Nicholls 2009: 198). An example of such a relationship is evident in Stein's oft-quoted remark, made upon returning to Oakland, her childhood home, and finding it no longer existed as she had experienced it: "There is no there there" (Stein 1937: 289). The title of this essay references it because Stein's approach to the written word reflects perspectives that resonate deeply with the two photographic series I explore here: Akinbode Akinbiyi's "Lagos: All Roads" and Mouna Karray's "Murmurer." Like Stein, both of the photographers I discuss here return to their homeland: Akinbiyi from Berlin and Karray from Paris. Their

images, like Stein's writing, are productive and revealing of their relationships with the cities they photograph. This essay considers how through their photographs (both as objects and images) one comes to know their subjects: Lagos, Nigeria and Sfax, Tunisia. I also invoke Stein's comment, because although a simple sentence, it has a complex subtext that speaks to the interweaving and overlapping of theoretical approaches that I propose here. Finally, because "there" is a spatial term, it underscores the significance of place, the concept animating this study.

At the same time as I consider how the individual photographs and the series collectively communicate senses of place, I suggest a theoretical framework by which viewers might come to access the meanings that these photographs communicate. I approach this topic as an Africanist art historian. Studying the art of other cultures provides us with opportunities to know a new subject, but also to encounter new theoretical perspectives and models for understanding the world around us and the roles that art can play in that world. In the course of what follows I am going to propose that philosophical beliefs and aesthetic conventions of the Yoruba people of Nigeria offer a model to approach and analyze photographic cityscapes.[1] At the same time I am going to play with ways the Yoruba model intersects and overlaps with European urban and literary theory. The choice of Yoruba philosophical beliefs may seem random, but one of the points I want to make with this argument is that it is no more random than choosing to work through the lens of cultural geography, say, and that one should be using the best tools available, no matter their origins. In fact, the series themselves possess components that render these frameworks appropriate. This is as true for Akinbiyi, who happens to be Yoruba, as it is for Karray, who is not. The path I take in interweaving these various bodies of knowledge is not a linear one, but it will lead to the final destination. Indeed, the methods I put forward possess elements that make this nonlinear approach appropriate, hence my beginning with Gertrude Stein.

Philosopher Jeff Malpas (2008) parses Stein's statement "There is no there there" as a way to understand what place is and what it means to have a sense of place. In this sentence "there" signifies: existential ground, significant locale, and physical location. The "there" of "There is" suggests being present. To state "There is" is to state existence. In order for us to be—to exist—we must *be* in some place. The second "there," the one that follows "no," references a location to which significant meaning has been associated.[2] Here we recognize the unique character of a place, that which makes it different from other places. The Oakland of Stein's youth means something to her—it has significance that other places do not. Because the Oakland Stein remembers no longer exists, it can no longer be a place to which she can assign significant meaning. And finally, the last "there" suggests simply the physical location—Oakland. Stein returns to Oakland (a physical location) to experience her childhood home (a significant locale), and finding it lacking, summarizes her experience with the sentence: "There is no there there." In this she gives us her sense of place, her sense of *being* in a place. Understanding place, then, as an existential ground opens up the complexities of place. It marks it as relational in that we relate to the world around us from the place that we "are," and it is from that place that we give meaning to a locale. The notion of place as existential ground thus undergirds the other two senses of "there" that Stein's sentence marks. In short, through this parsing Malpas argues that we experience and articulate our existence through place (Malpas 2008: 205).

The places Lagos and Sfax, like Oakland, are physical locations. The attention that Akinbiyi pays to Lagos and the consideration that Karray gives to Sfax suggest these cities are significant locales for these photographers, just as Oakland

was a significant locale for Stein. These physical places have meaning for these photographers, though those meanings cannot be characterized simply. I do not claim that Lagos means "X" to Akinbiyi and Sfax means "Y" to Karray, for these cities have multiple meanings, meanings that change with time. They are textured and layered. What is important, rather, is that they are meaningful, and that the photographers are choosing to explore and express those meanings photographically. Thus, in what follows, I argue that Akinbiyi's and Karray's photographs evidence an understanding of place as existential ground, and I propose a theoretical framework through which this becomes evident.

Recognizing Lagos

Akinbode Akinbiyi's "Lagos: All Roads" was begun over thirty years ago. This series evidences his ongoing relationship with the city and the various changes it has undergone; at the same time it depicts the myriad relations that take place within it. Born in the United Kingdom to Nigerian parents, and currently living in Berlin, this artist has made his home in several different places and among multiple cultures, and his work reflects his interest in myriad ideas and visual vocabularies. To photograph, he moves through city streets, sometimes in vehicles, but more often on foot. As he walks, he notices something of interest, stops, and photographs it. Or he stands in one place waiting for the image to come to him. Then he continues on his meanderings. While his artistic practice and the title of this series highlight movement along paths, I do not take up this aspect of his work here. Ultimately the myriad places connected through Akinbiyi's walks and through the photographs are all one place—Lagos.[3]

Akinbiyi's photographs engage the viewer in conversations about the city, but they do not necessarily explain it; instead, they probe and question. For example, one enters the pictorial space of a photograph of Maroko—a section of Lagos—through the presence of a broken cinder block, aligned almost vertically in the center foreground (Figure 1). Following its edge back, the eye encounters the broken body of what appears to be a Christ figure strewn at a diagonal that crosses the far end of the block. This diagonal leads the eye back to the edge of the road that zigzags at an opposite angle across the picture plane in the middle ground. The relative smoothness of the road is emphasized by the rough texture of the rubble on either side of it, and is echoed in the cloudy sky at the top of the pictorial space. There is a repetition of patterns: rough, smooth, rough, smooth; strong diagonals; the dark line of the edge of the road and of the tree line in the background; the light and shadows of the rubble. These elements keep the eye moving over the various elements of this image, an engagement Akinbiyi strives for in each of his compositions (Akinbiyi 2010a). There is no one single visual or narrative focus. This photograph does not tell one complete and contained story. Nor does it offer concise conclusions to the stories it does tell, for the questions that come immediately to my mind when viewing this photo are not answered by looking at it: What circumstances produced all the rubble? What structures used to stand in its stead? Where was the figure once housed? Why was it abandoned?

Such questions indicate that this photograph invites storytelling. It also highlights the storied nature of this landscape, for it is through stories that this place is imbued with significance and becomes more than just a physical location. Maroko was settled in the late 1950s by people who had been moved there so that Victoria Island and Ikoyi could be developed for Europeans and upper-class Nigerians. In yet another action to allow land development by and for the economic elite of the city, the government forcibly removed Maroko's inhabitants in 1990. With just seven days' notice, and with no arrangements made to compensate or relocate the residents, the government bulldozed the area,

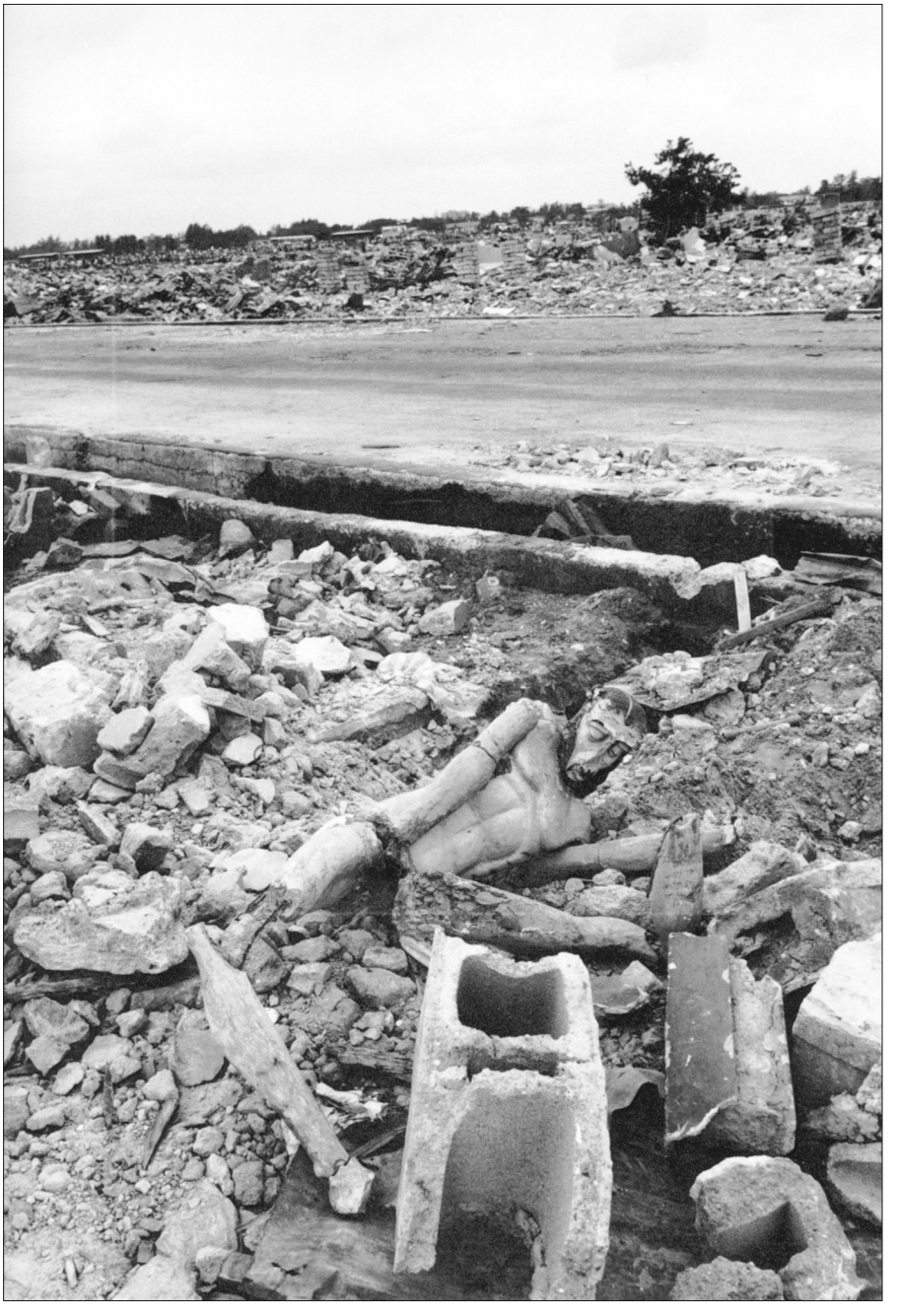

Fig 1 Akinbode Akinbiyi, *Maroko*, 1990. From the series *Lagos: All Roads*. Silver gelatin print. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

displacing an estimated 300,000 people (Agbola and Jinadu 1997; Frontline Defenders n.d.). Akinbiyi's photograph, taken in the aftermath of this event, points to these stories. Akinbiyi, in fact, sees himself as a storyteller of sorts, though, as he is quick to note, his stories are without "beginning, middle, and end" (Akinbiyi 2010b). Rather, the story is about what a place *is*. The stories of this place, Maroko, are the stories of real life, stories that have multiple beginnings and no single denouement. Even as the dislocation of the inhabitants suggests a discrete ending, it points to several new beginnings: for those who were displaced and for those who will come to inhabit this place.

In contrast, and to underscore this, I turn to a photograph of Lagos Marina from 1995 that speaks to the locale's calm beauty at that moment (Figure 2). It too has stories to tell. Despite the stillness of the marina, the

Fig 2 Akinbode Akinbiyi, *Lagos Marina*, 1995. From the series "Lagos: All Roads." Silver gelatin print. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

photograph implicitly attends to the labor that possibly takes place aboard these ships. It is mindful of the larger context of Lagos as a major port, a significant factor in its growth to a mega-city. That Akinbiyi's photographs narrate places but do not offer self-contained stories of them aligns his visual storytelling practice with *oríkì*, a form of Yoruba oral literature. Like Akinbiyi's photographs, oríkì offer contemplations on moments in a person's, place's, or thing's life, rather than linear narratives of it; they offer insights into the way things *are* more than "how they came to be" (Adéèkó 2001: 183, 188). Indeed, oríkì utterances are aimed at encapsulating what are thought to be the essential qualities of their subject (Barber 1991: 12; Adéèkó 2001: 183). Similarly, Akinbiyi asks of himself, "Is every picture of mine relevant to the current situation?" ("Akinbode Akinbiyi"). This question indicates his desire to be true to the nature of the photograph's subject and its larger context. Significant too is the fact that Akinbiyi works in series, for doing so enables the amassing of hundreds of photographs of Lagos in much the same way that the subject of an oríkì's praise amasses a variety of oríkì; these oríkì, like the content of individual photographs within the series, are not linked to one another inherently (Barber 1994). Each unit of oríkì stands on its own, and is given meaning both by its utterance and the specific meanings of its content but also through the reception of the utterance (Barber 1991: 22, 27, 36). This sentiment recalls a Yoruba saying that translates as "Recognize existence in respect of the one existing" (Abiodun 2001: 21). Such recognition of character is evident in oríkì and in Akinbiyi's work.

Oríkì and Photography

To better understand how oríkì work and how this form is related to Akinbiyi's photography, I turn your attention for a moment to a few lines of oríkì that praises the Yoruba deity Ẹṣu.[4]

> Eshu slept in the house—
> But the house was too small for him
> Eshu slept on the verandah—
> But the verandah was too small for him.
> Eshu slept in a nut—
> At last he could stretch himself.
> (Pemberton 1975: 25)

For those unfamiliar with Yoruba culture, these statements might seem absurd or incongruous, as in fact they are. But those who know Ẹṣu know that incongruity is appropriate for characterizing his nature; Ẹṣu is a trickster. With this oríkì, one does not learn the history or exploits of Ẹṣu nor the events whose success he enabled or of those he hindered. One does learn who he *is*. He is a paradox. And, uttering the words of the oríkì in his honor is what is important here, not that an audience to the performance of it understand them in their entirety.

An oríkì that praises the carver Fakeye (*ca.* 1870–1940) elucidates these aspects of oríkì further.

> The son of one who uses
> large vipers for sacrifice.
> It is foolish to disregard a snake.
> Sweepers in Apa, do not
> sweep away the leaves.
> Today a python may slither through Apa,
> While tomorrow the cobra will
> appear with its young.
> It is foolish to disregard a snake.
> (Pemberton 1994: 128–129)

Although the oríkì is performed in honor of Fakeye, the verses' content is oriented toward the town of Apa, a place. Residents of Apa will most likely understand the significance of the viper, python, cobra, and the larger meanings they allude to in this stanza, whereas outsiders may recognize only that the town of Apa is significant as it relates to Fakeye. This stanza comes from the most powerful type of oríkì, *oríkì orílẹ* (Barber 1994: Places of origin). These oríkì deal with the

idea of origin, and in them origin is conceived of through place.[5] Indeed, oríkì oríle bring forth the ways people and places intersect with and constitute one another (Barber 1991: 138). The above verse establishes the place, Apa, as an integral part of Fakeye's identity. Here one can see how oríkì oríle might generate understandings of place that resonate with the idea of existential ground to which Malpas refers; this oríkì articulates Fakeye's existence through place.

As an enunciation of place and as a distillation of its complex character, the photograph of Maroko can be understood as one might a unit of oríkì. The photograph has meaning because Akinbiyi visually speaks this place. As with the preceding examples, where concise phrases indicate much broader perspectives (Barber 1994: Landscapes in text), the story of this single photograph expands to encompass myriad interactions and events. And, as with the other examples, it is not important that all viewers know this history or know the events that led up to the destruction of the buildings that once stood there. The important thing is the recitation (Drewal and Drewal 1987: 233; Barber 1991: 12). Informed listeners to oríkì will fill in what is missing from the partial message of its performance, but the absence of an informed listener does not diminish the utterance itself (Barber 1991: 19). As with oríkì, an informed audience can put the fragment of the story that Akinbyi's photograph offers into a broader context (as I have just shown), but the absence of an audience that is able to bring this context to the photograph does not diminish the photograph itself. Likewise, an informed reader will fill in the spaces around Stein's words. In all three instances, it is the act itself, the evoking of the subject to make its potency present for an audience (listener, reader, viewer) that is significant. Spoken word, written text, and photographic object all offer means to access the "experiential fragments" comprising the stories cultural producers communicate (Seremetakis 1993: 2).

Several other characteristics of oríkì are relevant to the analogy I am drawing here, not the least of which is the way the past is made present through oríkì performance (Barber 1991: 4). At the same time, this making-the-past-present has been understood historically as an ontological feature of a photograph. The subject that one sees in a photograph existed, as one sees it in that photograph, in the present. Yet as Ariella Azoulay (2011) argues, one would do well to attend not just to the ontological nature of the photograph, but to the ontological nature of photography itself. The camera and the resultant photograph(s) affect the way we *are* with others, affect the way we *are* in a place. Moreover, the space opened up by the temporal, and often geographical, separation between the taking and viewing of a photograph is filled by innumerable and variable encounters, each of which affects the participants. Azoulay's theorization emphasizes this performative aspect of "the event of photography"—the actions that occur around the taking of, viewing of, or the talking about a photograph, and how these enable endless possibilities for renewal of the meanings that are generated. In this, photography is like oríkì through which boundaries are opened allowing for the past to make and remake the present (Barber 1991: 14). Engaging with Akinbiyi's photograph of Maroko enables such renewal by bringing the complex history of that place into the present. Moreover, the political, economic, and social forces that combined to result in the displacement of 300,000 people are not unique to Lagos, nor to the past. They are in many ways increasingly inherent to the conditions of urban areas around the world, where population growth outpaces the capabilities of existing (and new) infrastructures to support their needs. Thus, the qualities of this place that are enunciated in and by this photograph have relevance to times and places beyond Maroko in 1990, beyond Lagos even today.

This relevance of the past for the present highlights another characteristic of oríkì that is germane here: they create relationships that can be made and remade (Barber 1991: 1, 14). This relationship may be between the subject of the utterance and the larger context (Maroko as it relates to Lagos, as it relates to world cities). Or the relationship may be between the various parts of the oríkì (here, it would be the relationship between the various photographs in the series, a point to which I return). Or it may establish a relationship between the speaker of the oríkì and the listener (between the photographer and the viewer) or between the spoken words and listener (between the photograph and viewer). The significance of "the event of photography"—its performativity—that Azoulay remarks upon is similarly underscored by Elizabeth Edwards's work, which insists on attending to the materiality of photographs because of its abilities to reveal the "relational qualities" of those photographs within the social contexts in which they are engaged (Edwards 2009: 33); photographs "connect people to people" (29). So too do oríkì. The relationships are emotional, affective, experiential. Finally, although oríkì are frequently characterized as praise poems, they are not always flattering; they instead speak to the subject's nature (Barber 1991:13). The photograph of Maroko demonstrates that point. Akinbiyi's photographs attend to the nature of Lagos and its contradictory rhythms of discord and harmony, its arrhythmia and eurhythmia (Opondo 2008).

These rhythms are the result of one's uses of the city and frame urban experiences (Amin and Thrift 2002: 17). Whereas the photo of the marina suggests eurhythmia, the photo of Maroko enunciates the arrhythmia of Lagos. As an utterance of suffering, it suggests the various and conflicting forces at work on the lives of Lagos's inhabitants: the government, wealth, poverty, disempowerment, religion. It exists as part of and alongside other eurhythmic utterances. A photograph of Lagos mainland from the same year as that of the one taken in Maroko underscores this multifaceted and often conflicting nature of urban life. It illustrates that while some parts of the city are destroyed, others go on without major interruption. A convertible Volkswagen Beetle fills the right bottom foreground; three male passengers are visible. The two in the back are sitting on top of the back of the seat, suggesting a casualness to their outing. Houses and cars are visible in the middle and background; this neighborhood still exists physically. These two photographs reveal two different experiences of Lagos that year. There is discord and harmony. By attending to the disjunctive nature of everyday life in a city, and by being attuned to the forces and tensions that coexist, one is enabled to better make sense of one's world (Opondo 2008: 72). Akinbiyi's photographs can be seen in this light. They suggest the conditions of being in the city both on the level of content, and on a structural level, compositionally and materially.

What I hope is apparent here, is that other than speaking the nature of the city, there is no inherent continuity, no inherent relationship, between the three photographs from "Lagos: All Roads" that I have discussed so far. Just as the taking and viewing of photographs are discontinuous acts, the general structure of oríkì also tends toward discontinuity (Adéèkó 2001: 128; Azoulay 2011: 78). One utterance may not directly relate to the next. But oríkì are not the only Yoruba context in which this rhetorical structure is evident. As Margaret Thompson Drewal and Henry Drewal (1987) note in a discussion of "seriate compositions," a tendency toward discontinuity between representational units exists across media, from verbal and written texts to visual objects and performances. This tendency is, for them, a defining feature of Yoruba aesthetics. The units in a seriate composition appear in an orderly fashion—one next to another, or one

after another—but not in any inherent order; nor do they have specific relationships to one another. Each unit stands on its own, and has equal value to the other units that form the whole. All, however, refer to a larger referent; they point to the larger context. Each of these photographs stands on its own as a photograph of Lagos, yet all refer to the larger context of the city and to Akinbiyi's experience within it.

Seriate Compositions

To elucidate seriate compositions more fully, and in visual terms, I return us, for a moment, to Eṣu, the deity whose lines of orîkì are presented above. Eṣu is stationed between the realms of humans and the divine and is the first one contacted in divination rituals. Given this, he is almost always depicted on divination trays—a tool the diviner uses in the diagnostic process; his face appears here in the top center (Figure 3).

Fig 3 Attributed to Areogun of Osi-Ilorin. African, Nigeria, Ekiti Region, Yoruba People, *ca.*1880–1956: Divination Tray, 1930s, carved wood, 17 1/16 × 17 3/8 × 1 9/16 in. (45 × 44.2 × 4 cm). Ackland Art Museum, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Ackland Fund.

His face comprises the largest unit of the units that surround the tray in this seriate composition. The figures that are depicted in separate units on this tray include: three *àrùgbá*—"the one who carries the calabash"—in the upper left, upper right, and bottom center units; a soldier/hunter with a crossbow in the middle left; a chief in the middle right; a couple making love in the lower left unit; and a seated figure (probably a second representation of Eṣu, given the hairstyle) in the lower right.[6] These sections do not relate to one another in any narrative sense, though when taken as a whole, the divination tray represents the universe: political life, wealth, marriage, children, and victory over one's enemies.

Seriate compositions share certain design components (Drewal and Drewal 1987):

1. Opening and closing elements that mark a unit as a unit.
2. Shifts in perspective or proportions between units.
3. Simultaneity and discontinuity between units.
4. Density of meaning.

On the divination tray, for example, the beginning and end of each discrete scene is marked by patterned bands showing each unit. Varying proportions between units can be seen with the àrùgbá and the chief; note that if the kneeling woman were to stand she would be much larger than the chief. There is no inherent connection among the units; they are discontinuous, even though they share simultaneous existence on this divination tray. The àrùgbá offers the calabash in supplication to the deity and thus could also stand in for the client seeking guidance through divination, and at the same time can be read as a woman giving thanks to a deity for a gift she has already received, a gift such as the child on her back. These components combine to result in enunciations that have no singular focus; we pay no more attention to one unit than the others. These units manifest the diverse and competing

powers that comprise the world. Physical acts and desires (the couple making love, a hunter) exist alongside of and compete for an individual's attention to spiritual (àrùgbá) and political (chief) realms. The Yoruba philosophical and social beliefs that underpin the creation of seriate compositions provide room for such expression of life's simultaneities, discontinuities, conjunctions, and contradictions. I am extrapolating to suggest that analogously structured expressions can evoke the similar experiences of *being* in a city. That is, Yoruba oríkì and seriate compositions offer a visual language by which to understand or express those experiences.

To that end, I am proposing that "Lagos: All Roads" be viewed as a seriate composition. In this analogy, a gallery in which this series' photographs are displayed is like the divination tray; both offer discrete compositional units for contemplations. Additionally, the photographs comprising this series are thick with meaning, as I noted with the discussion of the photographs of Maroko and the mainland from 1990. They offer the simultaneity, discontinuity, and the contradictions of the city. Within the series there are shifts in perspective between each photograph, and there are elements in individual photographs that mark them as discrete units. The buildings framing each side of the street in Figure 4 both open and limit the pictorial space for us. The diagonals of the rooflines, balconies, and awnings move the eye deeper into the pictorial space

Fig 4 Akinbode Akinbiyi, *Untitled*, 1990. From the series "Lagos: All Roads." Silver gelatin print. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

and simultaneously deter it from moving outside of it. The buildings in the back similarly stop the eye, forcing it back to the foreground and middle ground. Patterns repeat: the rectangular signs, buildings, windows, flags. The flags' alternating light and dark echo the alternating light and dark on the buildings, and the stripes in the outfit worn by the woman in the foreground. The strong verticals (from the light and telephone poles, buildings, and people) counter the many diagonals (buildings, cars, wires), both facilitating and arresting the eyes' movement. Though these diagonals may lead viewers into the image, they do not direct them to a narrative focus. As with the photograph of Maroko, there is no one story to be told with this image. Rather, there are multiple stories. The bags and buckets of goods on peoples' heads, along with signs advertising businesses, tell stories of the commerce of the city. Wires speak to communication, both within the city and to places beyond. Both commerce and communication connect this one street scene to the larger city; connect Lagos to a larger context of the country, and/or the world. On a structural level, each photograph is a distinct unit; at the same time, all the photographs taken in any given year can be taken as a discrete unit within the larger series. Other photographs taken in the same year as Figure 4 are more components of the unit "1999." And all point to the larger context of Lagos and urban life, even as they depict specific sites and convey particular, though varied, experiences within the city.

In all these ways, Akinibiyi's work manifests attributes of seriate compositions. As I intimated at the beginning, I do not want to suggest in this assertion any essentialized reading. That is to say, my idea is not that we must use Yoruba cultural perspectives to understand these photographs because Akinbiyi is a Yoruba man. Rather, like the Drewals, who offer the idea of a seriate composition as a model for understanding Yoruba aesthetics and beliefs, I contend that considering the characteristics of oríkì and seriate compositions here offers terminology and frameworks that can help deepen an understanding of Akinbiyi's photographs and practice. Both Yoruba aesthetics and beliefs and Akinbiyi recognize and engage with the complex, multifaceted, and contradictory nature of their subjects. In fact, their terminology and frameworks are appropriate for understanding the images of other photographers as well—photographers such as Mouna Karray, whose work I address shortly. I would argue also that the photographers need not be African, that these approaches might enrich the way we understand any urban photographic series. It is the serial nature of such work that gives life to this theorization. Because we can engage with multiple objects we can consider the ways they interconnect and resonate with one another, giving insight into the place they represent.

Speaking the City Visually

Indeed, while thinking about seriate compositions offers access and insight into certain Yoruba beliefs, the ideas that are manifest in them are not ones that are exclusive to Yoruba peoples, even if there are conventionalized ways of expressing those ideas within Yoruba culture. One does not need to be Yoruba to recognize that life is full of complexities; that good, bad, positive, negative, beauty, and suffering exist all at the same time. Michel de Certeau, in his book, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984), offers a different model that exposes similar perspectives. Taken together, these models can enrich one another by nuancing the complexities at work in photographs. In this book de Certeau argues that walking in the city spatializes it; the movements of pedestrians as they go from one place to the next connects those places, weaving them together. He further analogizes walking and speaking, asserting that walking "is a space of enunciation" (1984: 98). Both are relational acts. Walking creates a here (the place the walker is) and a there (the place the walker is going), just as speaking implies a

self (the one uttering the words) and an Other (the one to whom the speech is directed). In these interconnections, it is the act—the walk, the utterance, the connecting—that is significant, as it is in Stein's writing, as it is with oríkì. Akinbiyi's walking in Lagos articulates the city; it speaks it. His photographs, as part of that practice, are part of the enunciations and connections of and within the city.

Elaborating on the walking and speaking analogy, de Certeau posits a rhetoric of walking. He identifies two rhetorical modes of speech as particularly relevant for the way cities are practiced: synecdoche and asyndeton. Synecdoche serves to conjoin; it connects disparate spaces. Where parts stand for the whole, seemingly disparate fragments come together to create a visualization of that whole. Asyndeton has the opposite effect. By eliding conjunctions, it fragments a sentence or paragraph. It denies access to links; it is disjunctive. Walking also fragments by skipping over and omitting parts. This rhetorical structure is analogous also to the utterances of oríkì and the visual expressions of Yoruba seriate compositions. Each photograph of "Lagos: All Roads" is a fragment which, when joined with other photos, contributes to a more complete visual and mental picture of the place. In such instances one encounters synecdoche. At the same time, each also can be seen in terms of asyndeton, where the connection between the places represented is seemingly inaccessible, and the city seems disjunctive.

What these various analogies and models—a praise poem that is integrally based in Yoruba cultural practices, the compositional decisions of serial representations, the rhetorical structure of how one experiences cities—do, then, is provide ways for conceptualizing these photographic projects, for accessing the storied landscapes presented by the photographs, and for uncovering the myriad layers within the series. All offer ways for thinking about, getting at, and understanding the character of a thing, which in the case of a city means the character of a place. So, now, I want to turn my attention to another place, and another photographer, not of Yoruba origin, and think about how these terms and approaches might be relevant to understanding photographs of place more broadly.

Recognizing Sfax

The photographs in the series "Murmurer" (2007–2009) by the Paris-based, Tunisian photographer Mouna Karray, also evidence the components of seriate compositions identified by the Drewals. In the space of a gallery, each photograph in this series appears next to the other, though there is no inherent order to their appearance or their relation to one another. All refer to the larger whole—in this case, the port areas of Sfax, Tunisia. As with the performance of different units of an oríkì or the discrete marking-off of the units of a seriate composition, each individual photograph is marked as a unit, both structurally and compositionally. For example, in Figure 5, the viewer's eye is drawn in by the strong light on the vertical wall fragment that dominates the left half of the pictorial space. The diagonal of the shadow on this intersects with and leads the eye to the diagonal of the wall on the right. The vertical line that marks the far edge of the wall echoes the vertical on the left, and the fact that the wall dominates the right pictorial space keeps the eye within the space. A small, dark, vertical element on the far left serves as the visual bracket on the other side, and the horizontal of the walls that runs across the lower portion creates a shallow pictorial space and keeps the eye moving within it. The lines within the photographic image, the varying textures of smooth or peeling paint, broken concrete, grass, and sky, and movement between areas of light and dark work, as they did in Akinbiyi's photographs to deny a single narrative focus. Likewise there are shifts in perspective between individual photographs in the series, so where the space is relatively shallow in Figure 5,

Fig 5 Mouna Karray, *Murmurer #14*, 2007–2009, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

in Figure 6, it is expansive. There is a density of meaning in each photograph and in the series as a whole. These various elements combine not to express some aesthetic or worldview that is particularly Yoruba, but, rather, as an affective structure for creating understanding. In this, these components function as they do in Yoruba seriate compositions and oríkì.

Like Akinbiyi, Karray explores photographically the changes that the city of her birth has undergone. Unlike him, she focuses on a particular section of that city—the port. The more than twenty black-and-white photographs comprising her series show the contradictions of the city. They present signs of industrial ruin (the fragmentation of walls) alongside signs that

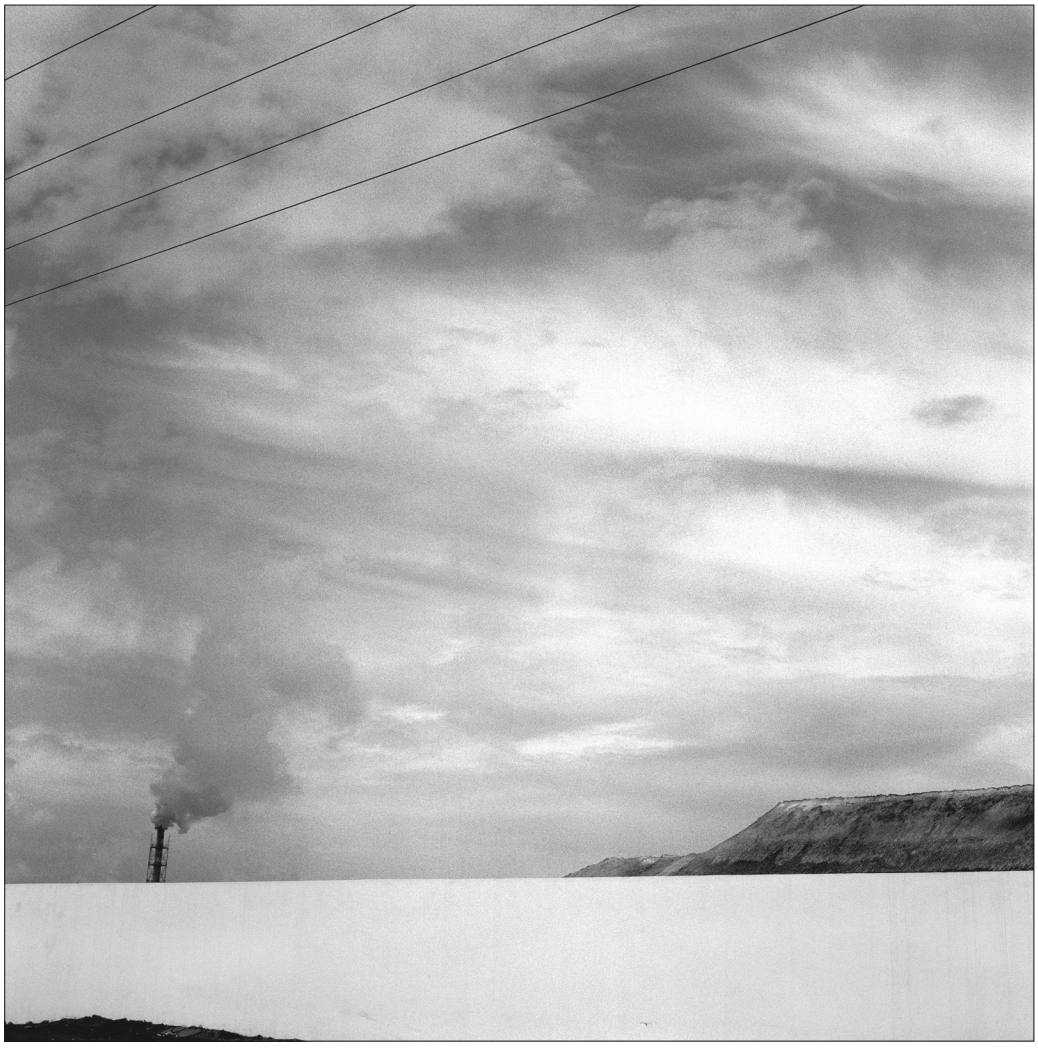

Fig 6 Mouna Karray, *Murmurer #1*, 2007–2009, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

industry continues (the smoke billowing from the stack, Figure 6; the view of the working port, with ships and loading cranes, Figure 7). Here, as did Akinbiyi's photograph of Lagos Marina, the photograph suggests the labor of the city without actually depicting work being done. Additionally, as I will soon address, this series speaks to the industry that both sustains the city's economy and destroys its environmental well-being. Karray, like Akinbiyi, does not offer these comments as explicit critiques, or calls to some specific action. This too aligns their work with oríkì oríle, whose repetitive language structure builds to the articulation of the key phrase—the utterance that encapsulates and evokes the essence of its subject (Barber 1991:

Fig 7 Mouna Karray, *Murmurer #5*, 2007–2009, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

177). The repetitive visual language these photographers employ in their series builds to speak the textured layers of the cities' characters. In the same way that Akinbiyi's photographs of Lagos spoke its past and its present, the photos of "Murmurer" are layered stories of Sfax.

Founded in the ninth century, the city's significance as a port expanded rapidly in the nineteenth century with the export of olives, nuts, and fish and continued to do so into the twentieth century with the growth of the phosphate fertilizer industry. The presence of the sea in these photographs recalls both its strength as a resource supporting the livelihood of the city's inhabitants and its fragility as a natural environment. The directional flow of

the currents in the bay on which Sfax is located resulted in major pollution of the waters by the 1980s, forcing the closure of the second largest phosphate processing plant in the city and a subsequent loss of jobs (Priority in Action Programme n.d.; Goni and Karray 2011). During the late twentieth century, as the economy of the city declined, the city was left with the deteriorating industrial sites that Karray photographs. The decline of an economy affects people as well as places. Karray's photographs speak to this as well by depicting largely empty structures that might have housed workers (Figure 8). This juxtaposition of home and work within the series functions synechdocally to evoke the character of the

Fig 8 Mouna Karray, *Murmurer #24*, 2007–2009, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

port. The absent laborers serve as conceptual links between these photographs. Yet, there are also discontinuities, as there are both in oríkì and Akinbiyi's series. This creates layers of meaning. For instance, one photograph depicts a person walking next to the wall, which calls attention to the absence of humans from the majority of photos in this series, from the spaces depicted in them. Yet they are present also, through their absence, for a city is filled with people.

Karray is particularly interested in and attentive to the tension between absence and presence both in this series and in other works. Photography, as a medium, is an appropriate way to get at such tensions. In looking at a photograph we cannot access the smells wafting through the air or feel the grit of the city on our skin. Where there was motion, there is now stillness. Where there was once sound, there is now silence. At the same time as these things are absent, they are also present. Sound is an absent presence in images such as Figure 9 by Karray, where the white caps evoke the sound of the waves crashing endlessly on the shore, and bring to mind their murmur. In fact, the name of the series, "Murmurer," translates as "to murmur," underscoring the idea of sound. A murmur can evoke any number of associations: an indistinct sound, a soft utterance, a mutter or complaint. Even if one cannot distinguish what is being said, when someone murmurs, we know that something is being spoken. That Karray invokes the infinitive, "to murmur," also suggest that she herself is offering these photographs as her murmurs. The infinitive invokes the performative quality of an utterance; to murmur is an act. In this series, Karray speaks the port of Sfax; her photos are an oríkì that notes its character. And as with the speaking of an oríkì, these

Fig 9 Mouna Karray, *Murmurer #19*, 2007–2009, silver gelatin print. Courtesy of the artist.

photographs bring the past into the present for consideration, and offer multiple meanings.

For Karray, the photographs contemplate what these abandoned sites might mean for the current inhabitants of the city, how they might *be* in this place. She considers the ways that humans shape and use or neglect their environments (Belhassine 2009). The series focuses on walls, as structures and as concepts to crystallize these tensions. Walls enclosing these industrial sites once restricted movement into and out of them. Now abandoned, those sites are still seemingly discouraging use. The spaces have not been employed for other purposes. Walls evoke notions of barriers acknowledging, perhaps, that there are aspects of the city Karray or viewers of the photographs may never fully understand, acknowledging that a city and life are full of contradictions. Such contradictions are visually remarked upon in photos such as Figures 5 or 7, in which the walls neither contain, divide nor protect. The fragmented walls in this series symbolize the textured and layered nature of the city, and speak to its discontinuities. At the same time, the walls in this series link the port's various places. Like Stein, whose careful use of words focuses a reader's attention on them, Karray sends us down this contemplative path with her own play on words, a title composed of two walls side by side—*Mur* is French for "wall."[7]

Over the course of the two years in which she created this series, Karray would visit these sites multiple times, experiencing them at different times of day, different times of year. In each visit she would ask herself "What can I do with this?" (Goni and Karray 2011). She describes this moment of reflection as one of meditation, where she contemplates the place and how best to communicate it visually. In one the harsh, strong light of a clear day spoke to the character of this place, whereas in another it was the shimmer of wet surfaces after rain that felt more appropriate. That Karray asks "What can I do with this?" aligns her practice with Akinbiyi's, as he asked "Is every picture of mine relevant to this situation?" Both questions give insight into the complexity of their photographic projects, yet the precise meanings of the questions are not clear. For instance, is the "this" of Karray's question referring to her experience of the place, or to the act of communicating the significance of the various sites along Sfax's port? So too might Akinbiyi's question address such things. No matter how it is meant, or what answer it implies, the questions themselves signal contemplation. Both photographers ask these questions so that they might do justice, as oríkì should, to revealing the character of a place.

There Is a There There

Meditation on these places so as to better understand them is also what these photographs and photographers ask of their viewers. It is through sustained looking that viewers can be mindful of the places and attend to their various textures, their contradictory characters, and their layers of meaning. The artists give viewers a series to which they can return again and again. Such repeat interactions elicit careful looking: looking that Edwards asserts "requires strength, calmness and affection" (2009: 37). This was as true for the photographers as it is for the viewer of the photographic object. Such sustained looking is experiential. Indeed, understanding how one comprehends, experiences, and expresses place is, as I mentioned at the outset, a question that drives my inquiry. It is a question that, I would say, also drives Karray's and Akinbiyi's engagement with Sfax and Lagos. Both photographers return home to meditate on the cities of their youth. That Akinbiyi has returned to Lagos year after year, for decades, indicates not only the connection he feels to that place, but also the complexity of Lagos. So too does the fact that although he has photographed in other cities—Cairo, Berlin, Johannesburg, Dakar—it is his work on Lagos that he publishes and exhibits most frequently. It is Lagos that he returns to over and over again. Karray, on the other hand,

has photographed only Sfax in this intensive and focused manner. Although she thought of exploring other cities, she came to realize that it would have been an empty project because it was her personal connection to Sfax that gave life to this project (Karray 2011). The close attention which these photographers pay to the various locales enables them to better recognize and convey the characters of the cities, as an oríkì oríle speaks of an originary place, evoking the relational aspects of the of individual and place as a key component of his or her identity.

By producing photographic series that depict a city, Akinbiyi and Karray offer multiple views through which viewers can come to know it. One can understand, in looking at these two series, that Lagos and Sfax have different characters. In this Akinbiyi photograph of Lagos Island (Figure 10), one physically sees no movement, but the dynamics of the city are present in the multiple

Fig 10 Akinbode Akinbiyi, *Lagos Island,* 1988. From the series "Lagos: All Roads." Silver gelatin print. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

signs referencing commerce, the wires that speak to communication within and beyond the city, the global movement of people that this sign for an India-trained herbalist marks. One gets a sense of the forces at work in this place. At the same time one has a more complex understanding of Lagos when viewing this photograph alongside others. One can see it as a place of poverty and a place of wealth, a place of leisure and a place of work. It is chaotic, but it is also calm. The character of Sfax's port as seen in Karray's photographs is seemingly not as varied. Rather the photographs layer similar meaning upon similar meaning to present the character of the place as one devoid of the regular activity of people. Still, it is not critical that we know about the phosphate fertilizer industry and its poisoning of the waters to understand that the places depicted in the photographs have been abandoned. Each photograph stands on its own to tell a version of this story.

These photos are the material means by which the artists tell the stories of these cities but they do not do so in a linear fashion. Rather, each photograph marks the place represented as important in and of itself. Each place, each photograph, also characterizes the larger city. The individual photographs both work with and push against one another, acknowledging the various rhythms of the city, the tensions between absence and presence, the good and bad, beautiful and ugly. Through textured layering within and mindful looking at, the photographs bring the past into the present, not to tell the stories of how the cities came to be in the conditions they are in, but to consider how these past events relate to and inform the present. I have been arguing that the models of orîkì and conventions of Yoruba seriate compositions, as well as the rhetoric of walking in a city, offer frameworks through which to gain this sense of place. They offer a way for viewers to recognize the nuances and complexities of the series and the cities. Engaging these photographs as objects and images through these various conceptual models facilitates the ability to access their multivalency, thereby enhancing the relationship a viewer can have with the series. In speaking these places visually, Akinbiyi and Karray hint at the relationships these photographers have with the places depicted and offer a perspective on how they experience them. In this, "Lagos: All Roads" and "Murmurer" express the notion of an existential ground. The photographs reveal how Akinbiyi and Karray *are* in Lagos and Sfax. They represent *being* in place. Viewing these photographs, therefore, gives insight not only into the cities, but also into the processes by which an artist might develop and express a sense of place. Applying multiple theoretical and philosophical approaches to an analysis of these photographic series reveals that for Akinbiyi and Karray, and for viewers through these photographs, there is a there there.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 I use Yoruba here as a shorthand to characterize widespread and commonly acknowledged beliefs and practices among Yoruba peoples; I in no way mean to suggest that each of the more than 20 million Yoruba people share the exact same worldview.

2 Malpas elaborates (2008: 203): "If the essence of place is given wholly in the meaning or sense that attaches to a location, and is brought to that location by human engagement with it, then it should be possible to record, reproduce, apprehend and articulate that sense or meaning independently of the actual location as such. What will be important is not the location as such but rather the shapes of practice and ritual, the structures of story and song, the content of idea and concept, that happen to be instantiated in concrete form in and around the location but which could also be instantiated elsewhere."

3 This study is part of a larger book project, and I look at the aspect of roads, paths, movement in that; see also my unpublished manuscript "Lagos, All Roads: Engaging Akinbode Akinbiyi's Photographs Through a Critical Lens." Africa on My Mind: Contemporary Art, Home and Abroad. The Third Biennial Art History Symposium. Savannah College of Art and Design. February 27, 2010.

4 E-ṣ-u is now the preferred spelling over the more phonetic spelling, Eshu. I therefore use this despite the use of the earlier form in the quoted text.

5 Fakeye's oríkì incorporates part of the oríkì orílẹ for the patrilineal origins of the compound where Fakeye resided in Ila-Orangun, the town in which he trained and worked.

6 I would like to thank David Doris for his assistance in identifying the figures and their various meanings.

7 I am grateful to Jennie Carlisle for this particular insight.

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