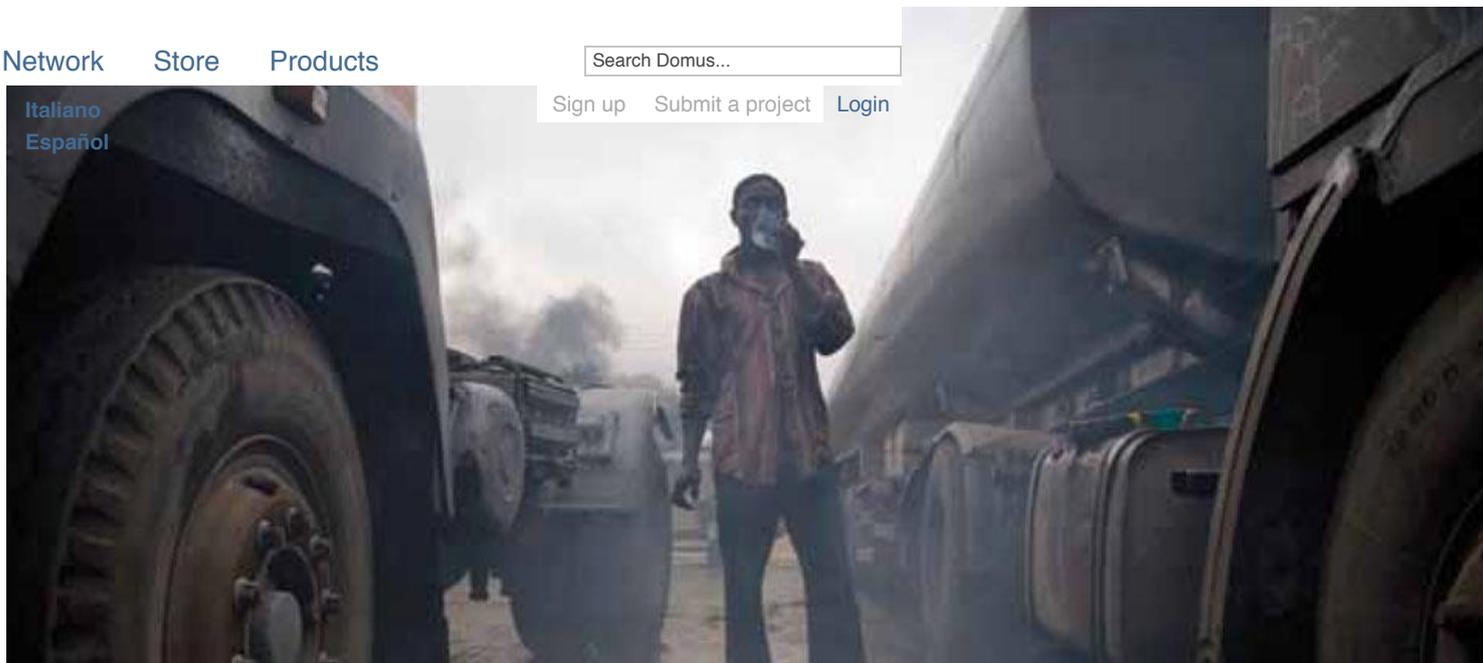


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African Cities Reader II—

This multidisciplinary installment of this reader from the African Centre for Cities recounts recent urban transformations that affect the continent. A book review by Iolanda Pensa

Mobilities and Fixtures is the second issue of *African Cities Reader*, an annual publication produced by the university research center, African Centre for Cities, and the journal of culture and politics, *Chimurenga*. It is practically a scholarly literature journal that narrates African cities.

Narrate is the right word. 2/3 of the authors are writers, artists and journalists, and the rest are academics. This disparity reflects the need to give visibility to those situations and processes that academic literature does not seem to be able to represent. This is tied to the "saboteur" approach adopted by the journal's curators, Edgar Pieterse and Ntone Edjabe.

Edgar Pieterse is the founder and director of the African Centre for Cities, a research centre established in 2007 at the University of Cape Town, focusing on urban transformations. The centre was created essentially to produce new architects, planners and researchers who can intervene and transform South Africa. The goal is a very ambitious one pursued with great determination through research projects, international collaborations and publications. Edgar Pieterse is basically an intellectual holding an eclectic PhD at the London School of Economics. Consultant for three years to the Governor of the Western Cape Region [special advisor to the Premier of the Western Cape], founder of the Isandla Institute in 1997, and referent for sustainable development projects and cultural and regional planning, Pieterse's

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work focuses specifically on participatory processes in urban planning. From this point of view, at the end of apartheid, South Africa became one of the nations that discussed this topic, experimenting with different methods for conducting meetings and discussions and engaging artists and cultural events in territorial transformations.



↑ Photograph by Isaac Julien.

Ntone Edjabe began to write about sports, politics and music, mixing the three topics together. This same mixture of politics and culture distinguishes the magazine, *Chimurenga*, which Edjabe founded in 2001. The impression is that it wants to contradict the harmonious South African rainbow utopia, the rainbow nation that seeks to represent all races, all languages, all incomes. The result is a bold publication that avoids self-censorship, interested in constantly trying out new ways of seeing the world. The choice of defining themselves as "Pan-African" is linked to the visionary period of independence and a clear position in which Africa is placed at the center (of attention, perspective and the world), internationally well-connected through its diaspora. Now that *Chimurenga* is becoming better known and appreciated, African intellectuals, but not only, consider it a landmark. It was presented in *Documenta Magazine* in 2007 and its founder is involved in lectures from the Centre Pompidou to MIT. In addition to the magazine, *Chimurenga* (which is managed by the Kalakuta Trust) produces other editorial projects (such as micro-publications sold by street vendors of cigarettes), research (such as the Chimurenga Library) and a radio station. But above all its strong point lies in being able to put together extremely different authors so that it is considered by some more of an intellectual project—a school—rather than a journal.

AFRICAN CITIES READER II

Mobilities and Fixtures



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Cover of *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*.

African Cities Reader is a collaboration between these two editors and since its first issue entitled *Pan-Africanism as a Practice*, it has declared that it will talk about the African cities from an African perspective.

With contributions from, among others, Sean O'Toole, David Adjaye, Victor Lavalle, Santu Mofokeng, Chris Abani and Mowoso Collective, the second issue, *Mobilities and Fixtures*, focuses on mobility and immobility, almost a classic theme when it comes to Africa: from the continent on the march to the images from above of the chaotic traffic in Lagos to the plight of refugees to migration issues that drive people to Europe and beyond. If all these themes are touched, from the title, *Mobilities and Fixtures*, seems to be almost completely inscribed within the rhythm of the publication. It passes suddenly from one article to another, alternating critical essays, poetry, images, listed phrases, ramblings, real essays that announce their conclusions in an abstract. The coexistence of genres is disorienting and as in Isaac Julien's photographs depicting boats of immigrants on the beaches, immovable and destroyed—mobility and fixity seem to be words used not to explain but to strike out.

"African cities, which should be at the center of attention, are so fragmented into neighborhoods, homes and bars that they lose their 'urban dimension' to become private corners."



↑ Photograph by Ed Kashi.

The tone of the narrative and the involvement of artists and fiction writers in the publication seems then to have two main consequences: the first is to hide the city. African cities, which should be at the center of attention, are so fragmented into neighborhoods, homes and bars that they lose their "urban dimension" to become private corners. The ubiquity of the narratives does justice to the complexity and the personal journey of every person, but makes it extremely difficult, if not impossible, to generalize. The second consequence of including art and literature in an academic publication is that we no longer know what to believe. One wonders if the analysis is historical fiction or if the narrative is analysis.



↑ Illustration of Lagos, Nigeria, from *African Cities Reader II: Mobilities and Fixtures*.

Indeed this seems to be just the effect hoped for by editors Pieterse and Edjabe, which makes *Africa Cities Reader* a bad digest of African cities and the least appropriate primary source for Wikipedia. On the other hand, you finish reading it with the feeling of having new thoughts.
Iolanda Pensa

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