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Urban

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By Claudia Gastrow

In July 2015 a Facebook campaign entitled [selfie lixo](#) (garbage selfie) was launched in Angola. It asked people to pose in front of piles of uncollected garbage in the capital, Luanda, in a bid to put pressure on the government to do something about the situation. The medium and its visuals were a mocking homage to the usual use of social media to display objects and images of desire. Most people posed in front of rubbish piles with no clear evidence of the built environment nearby, their mouths held tight, generally lacking a smile. The flashy high-rises and new leisure areas that had been built in the capital over the last decade disappeared from view. *Selfie lixo's* visuals, however, were not simply about provoking the government into action. In eliding indexes of urban redevelopment, they highlighted the existence of a political system that turned the sparkle of state investments in infrastructure into the muddy waste of toxic garbage.

Following a twenty-seven year civil war (1975-2002), Angola saw peace coincide with the sudden rise of the international price of oil, its primary source of revenue. What followed was an oil-fueled construction frenzy that saw high-rises climb the sky, gated communities devour the southern reaches of the city, and a new promenade with palm trees (imported from Miami) become the posterchildren of the “new Angola”, a potlatch of consumption and wealth. These material objects were presented to Angolans as proof of the success of the post-conflict polity, symbols of progress integral to the country's reconstruction.



Billboard representing a airport built in Uíge province erected in Luanda, December 2014. Photographer: MakaAngola



A billboard in Luanda advertising the redevelopment of the main road of the city's most popular leisure area, "the Ilha". February 2012. Author's photograph.

In the process, the buildings papered over the political and economic excesses of a political regime that is ranked as one of the most [corrupt](#) in the world, has frequently been accused of substantial [human rights abuses](#), and which has produced a vastly unequal country. President José Eduardo dos Santos's thirty-seven year rule, based on a system in which life opportunities are determined through the disbursement of private profits derived from the state, was excused by admirers dazzled by consumption possibilities. However, just as in this collection Pamila Gupta shows that the excessive luxury of Dubai's artificial islands elides the environmental disaster which they presuppose, so the construction spectacle of the new Luanda was being worn away by the political toxicity eating at its foundations. In the wake of the international crash in the price of oil near the end of 2014, rubbish collection had practically halted in the capital. Suddenly the postcard image of the country's decade long oil-based national reconstruction programme appeared to be crumbling. With images of state-sponsored infrastructural development evacuated from view, *selfie lixo* suggested that rubbish was the real "new Luanda", forcing a rereading of the last decade of post-conflict reconstruction. For what followed was not only a rubbish crisis, but a yellow fever epidemic which rewrote the politics of visibility and invisibility that had characterised the state's carefully crafted narrative of prosperity.

Rubbish Politics

The first quivers were felt near the end of 2014, when the international price of oil began to fall. By 2015 it had plunged from over US\$100 to less than \$US60 a barrel. The Angolan government was forced to dramatically slash its 2015 budget and quickly, quite shockingly, the money of the last decade simply appeared to have run out. Nothing, it seemed, had been saved. Diversification had not happened and the oil sovereign fund, established to provide a safety net in case of a crash in the oil price, had no solutions. Run by the president's son, it had invested its money in [hotels](#). Luanda saw its garbage collection budget cut by two-thirds to a mere [US\\$10 million](#) for the entire province. The Luanda Provincial Government (GPL) soon found itself unable to pay contractors, who equally were unable to purchase parts for maintenance as foreign exchange reserves ran dry. By mid-2015 rubbish had not been collected for up to three months in some municipalities. The capital was sweltering under a pile of rot. Refuse clogged roads, impeded traffic, and choked schoolchildren as the [fumes from its burning invaded classrooms](#). In one instance a passenger ferry was [not able to dock](#) because the water was brimming with rubbish. *RedeAngola*, a leading Angolan news site, described Luanda as an "[open air garbage dump](#)". In January 2016, the new governor, Higinio Carneiro referred to the rubbish situation as a

“[public calamity](#)”. By that point, President José Eduardo dos Santos had been drawn into the debate, creating a commission to investigate the problem. It recommended that the [armed forces](#) and police clean the roads. But the efforts were futile, not simply because illness had already gripped the city, but because the government had already partially lost control of the narrative. A new politics of visibility had emerged focused on rubbish, the grotesque and the sick body. Gripping the public imagination, it began to rewrite the meaning of the post-conflict landscape from one of wealth to a symbol of harm.

Grotesque Urbanism

For a decade, the Angolan government promoted Luanda as a symbol of the country’s rapid turn-around from war to economic prosperity. However, the rubbish began to highlight the discarded products of the festivities. Accounts of the postcolony have often highlighted the complicity of ruler and population in revelling in the vulgarity of excess and carnival (Mbembe 2001). In Luanda, not only was the excess was revelled in, but it was promoted as an aesthetic index of modernity. The construction boom and party life were images of a reborn Angola rather than embezzled wealth.

The grotesque effects of a transnational system of looting that underpinned the dazzle, while occasionally disturbing the wealthy city’s celebrations through electricity cuts, burst water pipes, and potholes, were generally contained to the *bairros* (slums), the city’s detritus. The new Luanda formed its image by banishing the sickening effects of its excess to the periphery. As Rafael Marques de Morais, an Angolan human rights activist [wrote](#): “In Luanda, it is only necessary to regularly collect rubbish in the city centre – the reception area of the regime – as a means of exhibiting Angolan sophistication and modernity to visiting foreigners.”



Uncollected rubbish in a Luanda bairro. Such scenes were rarely encountered in the city centre. September 2011. Author's photograph.



Luanda's new high rises in the centre. The showcase of prosperity. August 2013. Author's photograph.

However, with the crash of oil, the difficulties of life in the *bairros* replaced the city centre as the true narrative of the post-conflict era. As embezzled money, excessive show spending, and consumerism exploded on the sidewalks in the form of uncontrollable rubbish, the extent of the damage done to the city, and ultimately the people who resided in it, was on show. The barrage of images of rubbish that circulated on social and traditional media began to rewrite the narrative of post-conflict Luanda. Images showed rotting objects literally [overwhelming humans](#), a material world out of control.



Uncollected rubbish in Luanda, piled high and blocking a road. 2015.
Photographer: MakaAngola.

In this new visual realm, the city centre now seemed not simply a whimsical dream, but perhaps rather a dangerous one. Piles of garbage now commanded the capital. The dirt, damages and humiliations of the *bairros*, embodied in the uncontrollable rubbish, marked the shining skyscrapers as embodiments of postcolonial grotesqueness rather than post-conflict prosperity. The shiny buildings were not only hiding the political-economic contamination, but, by siphoning off resources, they had reproduced it. The amount of rubbish on the streets had a direct relationship for many to money embodied in the bricks of the centre. Their construction had contributed to the slow poisoning of the city and its residents by starving them of resources and possibilities. The politics of spectacle had all along been accompanied by one of quiet contamination, hidden until transformed into the grotesque of breakdown, and mocked in the *selfie lixo* campaign.

Toxic Bodies

When the summer rains swept the city, the material inequities of rubbish were exacerbated. Some people circulated in 4x4 cars that drove them to their work, windows closed, avoiding contact with water, trash and other people. Others had their houses flooded by the dirty water and garbage. They were forced to breathe in the smoke of burning trash in comparison to those people who lived in areas considered important enough to still enjoy rubbish collection. But it was not simply in the sensual realm, but also in the corporeal and material realms, that something was softly

humming through the waste, the furtive toxic partner to the city's rubbish.

In December 2015, an Eritrean national died of yellow fever in Luanda. By August 2016, more than [300 people](#) had died from the disease and over 8000 cases had been diagnosed. [9 million](#) doses of yellow fever vaccine, approximately a fifth of the existing global stock, were sent to Angola. Panicked articles suggested that the epidemic might go global after outbreaks linked to Angola emerged in [China](#) and the [Democratic Republic of Congo](#). Luanda's public hospitals, which had seemingly been ignored during the boom years, found themselves unable to cope. The grotesque urban had produced toxic bodies struggling to fight the buzzing dangers of mosquitos and disease.

Sick bodies had emerged from the ongoing processes of ruination that reached back to the colonial production of a racialised unequal city, further decayed by the unequal accumulation of wealth in the post-independence period. Political and economic considerations that had directed investments during the boom to the city centre, now shaped the geography of the outbreak. It is tragic but unsurprising that the municipality most affected by the yellow fever epidemic has been Viana, a zone of the city home to many opposition supporters. In Cacuco, a municipality with many recent arrivals to the city that voted against the ruling party in the 2012 elections and whose neighbourhoods lack most services available in the centre, one family [lost three children](#) to yellow fever in one day. The latent political ruination that the shopping malls had pasted over suddenly burst through in toxic bodies that overcrowded public hospitals, desperately hoping that the sedimentations of neglect could be reversed.

The epidemic revealed the surfacing of a toxic political system. Contamination, after all, is often only felt when poisons long lying latent in bodies erupt into illness (Murphy 2013). Similarly, politics has a latency that lingers in bodies and spaces, erupting through to surfaces as an event, when, in fact, the effects of economic exclusion, political mismanagement, and negligence have long been sedimenting. Luanda's yellow-fever epidemic was the product of a toxic political-economic system that had deposited itself into the bricks, water, waste, and bodies of the capital, a toxicity that became evident in the sick bodies that crowded city clinics. The sparkling high-rises were replaced with an explosion of disease and rubbish.

Luanda's yellow fever epidemic asks us to think through how politics can be not only figuratively, but, quite literally, toxic. The visual recasting of the city revealed the interplay of latent toxicity and performances of material prosperity. The balance between the two swung from consumerist excess to political critique displayed not only in the photographs of *selfie lixo* but more significantly in the bodies of Luanda's residents. Illness questioned

the state's narrative of prosperity. However, the surfacing of toxic politics is not simply a tale of despair, it could also be a call to action. It beckons the gleaners and recyclers to make something more hopeful from the shattered parts, the discarded hopes of independence, socialism, and democracy. There is always something to be salvaged. Luanda's rubbish crisis and yellow fever epidemic are surfacing, not an inexplicable event. Their ultimate resolution lies not only in vaccines and cleaning services, but in patching together a political cure from the toxic fragments of a broken city.

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