

ARTICLE

The Art of Disruption: Decolonial Potentiality in Fatou Cissé's *La ville en mouv'ment*

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Abstract

African contemporary choreographers increasingly delink from Eurocentric performance conventions and work toward establishing local conditions of production and consumption by performing in public spaces. Although the labor undertaken to shift power asymmetries does not always result in structural changes, their art may be considered decolonial creative expression. Based on ethnographic research at the third and fourth editions (2022 and 2023) of Fatou Cissé's street performance festival, *La ville en mouv'ment* (The City in Movement), in Dakar, Senegal, the author argues that decolonial potentiality extends beyond the precarious economic conditions to encapsulate the artists' return to public space and futurist aesthetics.

Résumé

Des chorégraphes contemporains africains se détachent de plus en plus des conventions de spectacles eurocentriques et travaillent à l'établissement de conditions locales de production et de consommation en se performant dans des espaces publics. Bien que le travail entrepris pour modifier les asymétries de pouvoir ne se traduisent pas forcément par des changements structurels, leur art peut être considéré comme une expression créative décoloniale. Basé sur une recherche ethnographique lors des troisième et quatrième éditions (2022 et 2023) du festival de performance de Fatou Cissé, *La ville en mouv'ment*, à Dakar au Sénégal, l'auteur soutient que le potentiel décolonial s'étend au-delà des conditions économiques précaires pour englober le retour des artistes dans l'espace public et leur esthétique futuriste.

Keywords: contemporary African dance; performance art; live art; street performance; Fatou Cissé; African futurism; queer futurity; decolonization

Mots clés: danse africaine contemporaine; performance; Fatou Cissé; futurisme africain; futurité queer; décolonisation

Introduction

As the sun is beginning to set, a group of approximately twenty people, covered in multicolor balloons and carrying signs with inscriptions demanding access to oxygen in French, English, and Wolof, descend upon the median of a busy street in Dakar. Just a few blocks from the Place de la Nation, a popular site for political protests in Senegal's capital, they perform recognizable protest gestures and chants alternated with improvised dancing that spills out into the street, stopping traffic and prompting pedestrians to pause and watch the colorful commotion. Their fictional protest takes place in an imagined future in which the earth's remaining oxygen is confined to a single location, accessible only to those with a coveted breathing certificate. The concept refers to the global climate change crisis and uneven access to international mobility with a nod to the COVID-19 vaccination requirement for international travel at the time of the performance, while critiquing the perpetual construction, diminishing outdoor space, and polluted air in Dakar specifically. As they pump their fists, chant, and whirl through the street, the balloons distend and disfigure the performers' bodies while saturating the street with colors that could be interpreted as symbolic of LGBTQ+ pride, adding a layer of utopian possibility to an otherwise dystopic concept. The performance is both real and imagined, concrete and abstract in its enactment of the familiar form of protest, defamiliarized through bodily transformation and a fictional scenario. It disrupts and activates the present moment while imagining and critiquing a possible future (see [Figure 1](#)).

This improvisational performance, titled "Oops! We are in deep shit without a breathing certificate" by Congolese choreographer Andréya Ouamba, opened the third edition of Fatou Cissé's street performance festival, *La ville en mouv'ment: Les arts dans la rue* (The City in Movement: Art in the Street) in May 2022. Cissé, a renowned dancer, choreographer, and artistic director of *Compagnie Fatou Cissé*, created *La ville en mouv'ment* following her decades-long career as an internationally touring artist. Like many others, she grew increasingly frustrated with the lack of local resources available for contemporary dance, its reliance on European sponsorship, and its use of the proscenium stage for insular audiences of theater-going individuals. When international funding became increasingly difficult to obtain in the late 2010s, Cissé conceptualized an alternative strategy to artmaking, one that became even more urgent when theaters went dark during the COVID-19 pandemic. *La ville en mouv'ment* moves away from the inherited proscenium stage and brings performance (back) to the streets, forging a connection with the familiar occurrence of rituals, ceremonies, and quotidian activities that regularly take place outdoors in urban African settings. The program is connected to similar efforts across African cities, from Kampala to Bamako to Yaoundé, where contemporary artists increasingly bypass enclosed theatrical venues and perform in public spaces.¹ Although not entirely delinked from the Global North, *La ville en mouv'ment* asserts that experimental performance is a local formation, both reflective of a specifically Dakarois sensibility and constitutive of a broader pattern across the African continent. It exemplifies ways in which urban African artists attempt to reconfigure power asymmetries in the contemporary arts market by generating increasingly local conditions of



Figure 1. Ouamba’s “Oops! We are in deep shit without a breathing certificate.” Andréya Ouamba (center) and collaborators. Photo by the author.

production and consumption, even as the local remains intrinsically tied to the global. Initiatives like this require significant labor and are frequently met with failures, setbacks, and contradictions—under-recognized and often invisibilized aspects of decolonial artmaking that I highlight at the end of this article.

I argue that the decolonial potentiality of *La ville en mouvement* extends beyond its precarious conditions of production and consumption to encapsulate the performers’ return to public space and their aesthetic of categorical ambiguity in which binaries are broken down and possible African futures come into view. The artists blur the lines between elite and popular art, performing and visual art, man and woman, human and nonhuman, and real and imagined. They build upon genealogies of African street performance while destabilizing a colonial logic of dualities, embracing categorical ambiguity in a critical move away from the proscenium stage to the urban street. Their disruptive bodies in public space offer glimpses of possible African futures, or, in the words of Felwine Sarr, “configurations of possibles” (2019, 103). Sarr’s conceptualization of Afrotopos, a future-oriented “space of the possible that has not yet been realized” but is “sketched out and configured” by artists, comes to life in performances that exceed the present, the real, and the known (2019, 102 and 109). *La ville en mouvement* is at once actively in the here and now and evocative of African futurities.

Configuring the future through categorical ambiguity may be considered decolonial creative practice. By breaking down binaries in alternative embodiments of the human, the performers unsettle what Sylvia Wynter (2003) describes as the overrepresentation of the Western bourgeois conception of Man that has come to define the human itself as a symptom of coloniality. Wynter suggests that the universalization of this conception of the human is wrapped up with European colonialism and constructed through the drawing of

binaries. The artists disrupt the colonial logic underlying universalized understandings of the human through their embrace of categorical ambiguity. Their performances imagine alternative futures and critique our present-day impact on the future, mirroring Achille Mbembe's description of decolonization as "a kind of relation to the future" (Mbembe 2021, 44). *La ville en mov'ment* offers insights into the ways in which African artists imagine and pursue decolonial futurist aesthetics together with the limitations, failures, and exhaustion that inevitably accompany attempts to restructure the contemporary arts market in neoliberal Africa.

The artistic genre put forth by *La ville en mov'ment* is most often evoked in the French language as *performance*, a term that does not neatly translate to English. *Performance* differs from staged performance, or *spectacle*, due to its improvisatory ethos, use of public space, and engagement with pedestrians. *Performance* best aligns with English language terms such as performance art, live art, and street performance, all of which have been well documented in Western Europe and North America but have seen little scholarly engagement in Africa, apart from South Africa where a robust live art tradition is the subject of several recent articles and books (e.g., Pather and Boule 2019; Sizemore-Barber 2020; Katrak 2021). This imbalance contributes to the false notion that the white West is the provenance of experimental performance whereas Africa—with the exception of South Africa—is merely a source of the folkloric, traditional, and spiritual. Such a binary opposition disregards the "precolonial and decolonial African genealogy of ritual, ruptures and experimentality" that Jay Pather and Catherine Boule importantly point out as precursors to African live art (2019, 3). By building on the nascent body of scholarship on African performance art, live art, and street performance and extending beyond South Africa, this article aims to contribute to understandings of artistic experimentation as an African formation that derives from local sociocultural conditions, aesthetics, histories, and geographies, even if embedded within transnational performance circuits. Further, it builds on an existing body of scholarship on concert dance, theater, and visual art in Senegal (e.g., Harney 2004; Castaldi 2006; Neveu Kringelbach 2013; Valente-Quinn 2021), all of which provide insights into the artistic disciplines that come together in multidisciplinary street performance.

Research for this article stemmed from a larger ethnographic project that examines queer aesthetics in contemporary dance in Senegal and its entanglements with the transnational contemporary dance circuit.² Having followed Cissé's career for more than a decade and having learned about the first two editions of *La ville en mov'ment* from afar, I returned to Senegal for the 2022 edition, during which I participated in workshops, attended all performances, and interviewed Cissé and some of her collaborators. This led to an invitation to perform in the 2023 edition, further integrating my participation as not only a researcher but as an artist as well. As a white North American woman, I was mindful of the optics of my role as performer and how it might detract from the festival's goal of localizing the arts. I recognize that my invitation to participate, along with a small handful of other white artists, cannot be fully separated from the enticing resources that connections to centers of global capital might bring to a program struggling to obtain sponsorship, particularly in light of the Senegalese

state's negligence to provide meaningful support and in the absence of a robust private arts market. At the same time, our presence reflects the imbrication of the transnational as a naturalized element of the Senegalese contemporary arts scene. The international makeup of performers in *La ville en mouvement* debunks essentialist ideas of African localities as discreet, homogeneous, and purely "African." In cosmopolitan Dakar, localizing the arts does not necessarily imply eradication of outside influence.

The slippage throughout this article between the qualifiers Dakarois, Senegalese, and African is meant to both ground the performances in the specificities and histories of the locations in which they take place while situating them as part of broader cultural practices across the continent. While I draw connections between elements of the performances and the particular sites across Dakar in which they were located, I also refer to their futurist aesthetics as "African." This framing is meant to connect the artists' creative choices to patterns across contemporary cultural production that scholars and artists have referred to as Africanfuturism (Okorafor 2019), Afrotopos (Sarr 2019), Afropolitanism (Mbembe 2021) and other categories that affirm the centrality of Africa. I recognize that in using the label "African," I risk reiterating the injurious tendency to generalize and reduce a vast and extraordinarily diverse continent, but I also find it a useful qualifier in relation to practices that span various locations across the continent and that excavate, sustain, and evolve aesthetics, approaches, and modalities with roots on the continent. My use of "African" also recognizes the international scope of the artists, many of whom were visiting Senegal from other African countries.

The next section elaborates on the background of *La ville en mouvement*. I then analyze the artists' occupation of public space and their futurist aesthetics as two overlapping tenets that demonstrate the festival's decolonial potentiality. Lastly, I discuss the festival's economic precarity and the contradictions that arose from working within neoliberal conditions of economic instability.

The Making of *La ville en mouvement*

La ville en mouvement was officially inaugurated in 2019, but it stems back to earlier site-specific performance projects in Dakar, and its *raison d'être* emerges from longstanding entanglements between contemporary dance in Africa with institutions in the Global North. Contemporary dance took off across the continent in the 1990s, a decade after several African governments eviscerated public funding across numerous domains in compliance with the conditions imposed by lending agencies including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. As Hélène Neveu Kringelbach writes, contemporary dance artists knew "from the start that individual success would have to come from increased engagement with global artistic circuits" (2014, 38). In the wake of neoliberal reform, the genre emerged across African cities from Dakar to Kisangani to Antananarivo in large part due to French foreign policy. It was largely a coproduction of France and Africa, in which French cultural institutions administered and sponsored the art form while African artists were the creative force (see Amselle 2005; Despres

2016). Despite their creative agency, African artists' modes of experimentation risk being circumscribed by the centers of global power where their funding bodies reside. Dance scholar Ananya Chatterjea suggests that European and North American gatekeepers including curators, funders, and presenters "make decisions in identifying what passes as 'innovation' and anoint artists as contemporary choreographers, which then propels dance-makers onto a global circuit of touring and making work" (2020, 11). Non-white artists from Global South locations necessarily navigate a touring circuit that is consolidated elsewhere, where what counts as experimentation does not always map onto their own experimental provocations. These power asymmetries continue to underlie the genre today, though artists continually debate and recalibrate their terms and conditions.

While they regularly encounter misrecognition overseas, contemporary dancers from Senegal also confront tensions at home due to their connections to Europe and their ability to travel internationally with relative ease. Their mobility contributes to the assumption that their art is elitist, differentiated from Senegalese patrimonial culture and lacking popular appeal. Cissé describes a disturbing gap between artists like herself, who participate in the European touring circuit and perform at the local French Institute for insular audiences composed of other artists and expatriates, and the broader Senegalese population, including those in charge of local budgets for the arts, who have little familiarity with and understanding of contemporary dance. She explains:

People do not know the work that we do and even when you go to the Ministry [of Culture], when you go to the town hall to make requests for sponsorship, they do not really understand the importance ... This motivates me in fact. I told myself that it's good to have traveled everywhere, to do a lot of things, but people at home do not really know you. (Interview, Dakar, June 9, 2022)³

The lack of exposure results in denied or ignored funding requests, perpetuating a cycle of dependence on external funding. Cissé's desire to shift this structure and create a more sustainable local arts market became more urgent when budgets determined overseas were reduced after the 2008 recession. By the late 2010s, artists in Senegal faced unprecedented challenges to obtaining increasingly limited funding sources, a pattern that was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Rather than waiting for often inaccessible funding, Cissé explains, "maybe it's up to us to change things and find new audiences, to move toward what [the Senegalese population] is used to seeing and reconstruct it through our vision." By creating public performances that directly connect to residents—their lives, their activities, and their events that already take place outdoors—and by defamiliarizing the habitual through the experimental ethos of contemporary dance, Cissé aims to expand exposure, interest, and ultimately local patronage for the art form.

The decision to deploy street performance as a mechanism to reconfigure the local arts market was inspired by earlier artistic projects in public spaces. These included *Les Scénographies Urbaines de Ouakam/Dakar*, a collaboration between

Andréya Ouamba's Association 1^{er} Temps and François Duconseille and Jean-Christophe Lanquetin's collective, ScU2. For three weeks from December 2012 to January 2013, interdisciplinary artists created performances and installations throughout the village of Ouakam, a predominantly Lebou neighborhood in the north of Dakar that houses a traditional village configuration within its interior. As an artist and coordinator for the project and a habitant of Ouakam herself, Cissé saw first-hand how residents who had little previous exposure to contemporary performance shifted from feeling reticent to excited as they witnessed the artists work over the course of the residency. Cissé recalls her neighbors stopping her on the street long after the event took place and asking when it would next happen. Their positive reception and openness, some even allowing performances to take place in their living rooms, motivated her to establish a regular street performance structure that would further inculcate performance in Dakar's public spaces.

In 2019, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) put out a call for artistic projects geared toward spreading awareness about clandestine migration. Cissé saw this as an opportunity to reinstate public performance in Ouakam and reach new audiences. Having already conceptualized *La ville en mouv'ment*, which at the time she called *Ouakam en mouv'ment*, she reoriented it to fit the framework of the IOM. As a selected artist, she worked primarily with a group of *grandes dames* (dignified women) who were members of a Ouakam-based traditional dance company, and invited young female artists of various disciplines to participate. With approximately sixty female intergenerational performers, Cissé produced "a big artistic procession with installations" that took place on March 8, International Women's Day (Cissé, interview, Dakar, June 9, 2022). The procession addressed clandestine migration through the lens of women, two recognizable themes that drew people in, while deploying a contemporary approach that was largely unfamiliar to spectators. Cissé describes the project as highly successful based on the attentiveness of audiences ranging from schoolchildren to adults, who asked questions and discussed the work with her and the performers at length.

Fostering collaborations between artists of different disciplines, and between artists and a non-artistic intergovernmental organization, were particularly powerful aspects of the inaugural edition of *La ville en mouv'ment*. These exchanges expanded participation, interpolated new audiences, and anchored the experimental art form in recognizable themes, helping counter contemporary dance's insularity and assumed elitism. For the second edition in 2020, Cissé collaborated with a youth association in the Medina neighborhood of Dakar and a recycling association in nearby Grand Dakar. Occurring during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when theaters were closed, this edition was particularly poignant given the dearth of cultural events and the necessity of performing outdoors. Artists spanning the performing and visual arts created collaged installations with recycled wire fences, window screen mesh, and photographs of fragmented body parts. The pieces, many of which were wearable, extended the theme of social distancing into a commentary on barriers separating individuals, cities, countries, and continents. The ensembles distorted the performers' bodies, departing from contemporaneous artistic endeavors in Dakar

that took a more pragmatic approach to educating the population on preventative measures against the virus (Ndiaye and Rowley 2022).

Beginning in 2022, Cissé emphasized collaboration in new ways by inviting international artists with expertise in public performance. They worked collaboratively with local participants, facilitating a pedagogical model through the co-construction of improvisational performances. The invited artists taught open workshops each morning at the government-funded Blaise Senghor Cultural Center, which became the headquarters of the festival. Workshops were attended by approximately twenty-five young Senegalese artists with backgrounds spanning hip-hop, circus, capoeira, traditional dance, and contemporary dance. In the afternoons, the invited artists performed with participants from their morning workshops, animating public spaces across the city with their multidisciplinary acts.

Genealogies of Disruption

Although *La ville en mouv'ment* to some extent represents a turn in contemporary dance, a new direction outside the confines and conventions of works choreographed for the proscenium stage, it is not entirely novel. Contemporary street performance is linked to multiple genealogies of performance in public spaces in Senegal and Africa broadly. In their work on South African live art, Pather and Boulle refute the notion that live art is a Western import, a seemingly logical assumption given its commonalities with performance art movements of early twentieth-century Europe. Instead, the authors assert that South African live art “derives from a mode of performativity and political radicalism that is integral to African tradition and protest culture” (2019, 3). Public performative acts, particularly those that eschew the disciplinary silos that have come to characterize artistic genres in recent decades, have been embedded into the social fabric of numerous African cultures for centuries. *La ville en mouv'ment* builds on this historical lineage as much as it connects to present-day popular street performance idioms.

Rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, and protests animate Dakar’s public spaces daily. Outdoor performance is ubiquitous there, from celebratory *tànnébéers*, or late-night *sabar* dance and drumming events, to Sufi prayer gatherings (*dhikr*) that enliven street corners with durational chants, to masked and costumed performances, such as the *kumpo* or *simb*. Senegalese are habituated to the transformation of courtyards and sandy clearings where children play soccer during the day into bawdy dance circles at night where women of all ages show off their most fashionable *boubous* and swivel their hips to the piercing beating of *sabar* drums. They get interpolated into the spectacle of the *simb* or *faux-lion* (mock lion) when men dressed as lions with intricate face paint and elaborate costumes, accompanied by lionesses—men in drag—take over public spaces and dance to the accompanying tam-tam while taunting spectators (Modak 2019). They are used to the rhythm of religious songs and circular dances by groups (*dahiras*) of Mouride Muslims who perform late into the night during weekly *dhikr* sessions (Kibbee 2022). They are familiar with the disruption to traffic and everyday

activities when organized youth march in the streets as part of a long genealogy of student strikes and political protests in the city (Bianchini 2019; Demarest 2016). Embodied acts ranging from the sacred to the secular are regular occurrences in public spaces across Dakar. *La ville en mouv'ment* refers to, extends, and transforms these familiar practices through a contemporary lens; artists draw inspiration from elements of everyday life and imbue them with an experimental ethos. It was not uncommon for a *La ville en mouv'ment* performance to cross paths, and sometimes momentarily merge with, a religious procession or a *simb*. These collisions—both physical and theoretical—illustrate the porosity, mutability, and contemporary relevance of practices marked as traditional or religious and thereby assumed to be static, unchanging, and fixed in historical time.

La ville en mouv'ment not only connects to a variety of existing performance traditions, but it also mirrors previous moves away from artistic institutionalization and toward the reindigenization of experimental art. Specifically, the *Laboratoire Agit-Art*, directed by Issa Ramangelissa Samb, and the *Villages des Arts*, founded by El Hadji Moussa Babacar Sy, both established in 1970s Dakar, centered interdisciplinary collaboration and experimentation as a response to the codified art aesthetic championed and patronized by the newly sovereign state. Elizabeth Harney (2004) details the 1970s artists' critical perspective of the Senghorian *Ecole de Dakar*, the label for the visual art aesthetic and structure of patronage undergirded by President Senghor's Négritude ideology in the 1960s. Although the *Ecole de Dakar* promoted a rhetoric of African expression, Samb, Sy, and their contemporaries were critical of this early generation of artists' reliance on European materials, techniques, and criteria and the *Ecole's* cultivation of a limited art aesthetic. Senghor's exceptional patronage for the arts in the absence of a private arts market created a cultural monopoly in which a certain artistic approach was rewarded and able to flourish while others were essentially excluded from the field of production altogether.

Senghor's monopoly over the visual arts permeated the performing arts sector. In 1966, he commissioned the *Théâtre Daniel Sorano*, a French-funded venue that would house the national dance, theatre, and music companies, paving the way for theatrical performances in European-designed theaters as a naturalized convention of dance performance in Senegal. Ndiouga Benga (2010) suggests that Senghor put in place an artistic hierarchy that elevated the *arts nobles*, or institutionalized, academic arts, as superior to *arts populaires* (popular art). As part of the lineage of performing arts created for enclosed theaters, contemporary dance was from the start firmly positioned in the *arts nobles* category, differentiated and supposedly superior to popular art. Senghor "developed a value judgment that no longer facilitated encounters between art and citizens and created de facto inequality in access to art," which the 1970s avant-gardists, a "group of opposants constituted of artists, writers, and actors" strove to challenge (243).⁴ Those involved in the *Laboratoire Agit-Art* and the *Villages des Arts* worked across disciplines in the creation of paintings, sculptures, concerts, and theatrical performances—often improvisational—that were "provocative and critical, disturbing in imagery or political in content" (Harney 2004, 109). They offered workshops, performed outdoors, used recycled materials, and involved the community, diminishing boundaries between artist and audience.

Although Cissé does not explicitly refer to these earlier artistic movements as an influence, there are several striking commonalities between their work and that of *La ville en mouv'ment*. Both to some extent reproduce an earlier mode of West African “total theater” that employed multiple performance modalities “as integrated parts of the entire whole of the dramatic performance” (Valente-Quinn 2021, 56). By working across artistic disciplines, performing outdoors, utilizing recycled materials, and centering improvisational performance, the 1970s avant-gardists and those involved in *La ville en mouv'ment* attempt to move away from artistic institutionalization and European involvement. They shrink the distance between artist and audience, blurring the line between elite and popular art. Whereas the 1970s artists sought to dismantle a disturbing link between Senegalese state patronage and European influence by working outside the state apparatus, Cissé seeks a return to local sponsorship, particularly that of the state, as an alternative to reliance on European patronage in the wake of structural adjustment. In the 1970s and half a century later, artists deploy multidisciplinary experimental performance in public space as a modality of deinstitutionalizing the arts. By disrupting everyday life with imaginative performances, they aim to also disrupt cycles of dependence on a singular patron, placing control back in the hands of artists.

Street performers emplace their art in public settings, utilizing and transforming the specificity of non-theatrical spaces as an integral component of their performances. Congested intersections, crowded markets, and sandy lots between houses become the scenography for unanticipated works of art. As the name suggests, *La ville en mouv'ment*, or *The City in Movement*, emphasizes the vivacity and kinesthetic feel of moving through Dakar. Performers and spectators are immersed in the city, experiencing its energy and dynamism as inseparable components of a performance. Felwine Sarr uses the same language as Cissé when he describes Dakar as “a city in movement that is constantly in the midst of creating itself” in his meditation on African cities in the book *Afrotopia* (2019, 106). Characterized by its palimpsestic nature and “a circulating energy, an overflowing vitality, a dynamism and buzzing creativity,” moving through Dakar is an experience of constant change and sensory hyperstimulation that requires a sense of perpetual readiness and a willingness to improvise (Sarr 2019, 105). The artists embody, expand, and explode these features of Dakar. They valorize the feel of the city and its particularities, embedding their experimental, improvisational works as integral to the city in opposition to the separation imposed by conventional theaters.

Fatou Cissé and Bamba Diagne’s “*La mine urbaine*” (*The Urban Mine*), the culminating performance for the 2022 edition of *La ville en mouv'ment*, is particularly illustrative of the ways in which artists embed themselves within and transform Dakar’s energy and sensibility. The artists took over an entire block in Niayes Thioker, also known as Reubeuss, a downtown neighborhood and center of Dakar’s metalwork labor. Welding and forgery machines are visible on almost every street corner and the reverberations of metal being fused and reshaped infuse the daily soundscape. The conceptualization of the performance drew directly from this defining feature of Niayes Thioker. Dancers in metallic silver face paint, work suits, safety goggles, and hard hats improvised



Figure 2. Baidy Ba, Naby Touré, and Bamba Diagne in Cissé and Diagne's "La mine urbaine." Photo by Karo Zen.

movements culled from popping, locking, and krumping while hoisting installations composed of recycled aluminum and scrap metal fragments on their backs. Their staccato movements and stoic facial expressions embodied the industrial feel of their surroundings. While they danced in the street, musicians and slam poets performed from rooftops and open windows in matching costumes and face paint (see Figures 2 and 3). They shattered the physical and conceptual conventions of performance while drawing out the specificity of Niaye Thioker's architecture and emphasizing the labor carried out there. Sides of buildings became screens onto which moving images were projected; horizontal and vertical spaces were integrated as dancers performed in close proximity to spectators—the sharp edges of their installations at times sweeping daringly close to audience members—while the sounds of an electric guitar and saxophone, the voices of singers and poets, resounded from both sides of the street above our heads. The large crowd of Niayes Thioker residents who gathered to watch were able to see the recognizable act of metalworking transformed into art that was at once eerie and beautiful, provocative and futuristic. Perhaps they were able to glimpse decolonial potentiality through the aesthetics put forth by the artists performing in their streets.

Aesthetics of Decolonial Futurity

Disruption not only encapsulates the ways in which performers occupy public space, disturbing the flow of traffic and everyday activities, but it also signals the capacity of performance to break through normative assumptions about bodies



Figure 3. Oumou Kalsoum, Babacar Mbacké (saxophone), and Joseph Malack in Cissé and Diagne’s “La mine urbaine.” Photo by Karo Zen.

and conjure images of decolonial African futurities. Entwined with their use of public space, the artists’ aesthetic choices signal the decolonial potentiality of their work, wherein possible futures are made visible through performances of categorical ambiguity. The artists embody “new modes of being human” (Mbembe 2021, 21) that unsettle “the terms of our present descriptive statement of the human, Man, and its overrepresentation” (Wynter 2003, 268). By collapsing naturalized binary oppositions in embodiments of gender-bending, more-than-human figurations that elude the present, *La ville en mov’ment* artists prefigure a decolonized future. My discussion in this section focuses on a handful of examples from the 2022 edition of *La ville en mov’ment*, but the artistic approaches that I discuss below were certainly not limited to these works alone.

In Ouamba’s performance described in the introduction, an imagined future world was the starting point for the conceptualization of a fictional protest. The performers used text—both spoken and written—to render this oxygen-depleted scenario more or less comprehensible to spectators. Whereas Ouamba’s futurist concept was explicitly depicted, other artists gestured to futurity in more abstract ways. For example, the Cameroonian artist known as Zora Snake undulated and stomped across a congested intersection while covered from head to toe in dark green body paint. He wore a shimmering transparent cape, bright pink underwear, feathers that extended the reach of his hands and feet, two large plastic jugs that hung across his chest like breasts, and a tray of bananas with feathers protruding upwards balanced on his head (see Figure 4). Snake’s performance resonated with the animalesque aesthetic of *simb* performers and their cross-dressing accompanists while exceeding recognizability. This



Figure 4. Zora Snake and collaborators. Photo by the author.

figure was neither male nor female, human nor animal, but staked claim to an elusive in-between space. As he traversed public space with a group of dancers covered in white plaster, he not only disrupted traffic but equally disrupted assumptions about what makes a body masculine or feminine, a being human or animal.

Throughout the week, artists altered their bodies with natural and manufactured materials, collapsing perceived dichotomies in works that contained layers of utopian and dystopian possibilities. In Cissé and Diagne’s “La mine urbaine,” for instance, the performers’ use of metallic face paint and oversized installations composed of metal waste reduced the separation between the worker and the material. The artists seemed to *become* part metal, their robotic movements and blank expressions contributing to the effect. They compellingly evoked an uncanny future world in which the human and the machine are melded, affording questions about artificial intelligence and the ongoing excavation of raw



Figure 5. Bigué Ndiaye in Baker-Tarpaga's "We are Water." Photo by the author.

materials in the production of technological goods. In "We are Water," US-based artist Esther Baker-Tarpaga directed a procession of performers in outfits crafted from recycled water bottles, long strips of orange plastic collected from a nearby construction site, and crowns made of palm fronds and bougainvillea. As they processed, they laid claim to the streets, stopping traffic with improvised dancing and stillness. Their bodies became hybrids made up of human, natural, and synthetic elements, embodying the fluidity evoked by the performance's title (see Figure 5). Meanwhile, Congolese artist Androa Mindré Kolo created portable structures of wood and rubber to which he attached pieces of clothing, vegetables, fish, and other items regularly sold in outdoor markets. In "Article 15: Débrouillez-vous!" (Article 15: Figure it Out!), his five female collaborators wore these installations over transparent white dresses splattered with orange palm oil as they traversed three markets throughout the city while carrying chickens. They chanted in Wolof, advertising their items to potential buyers. Kolo accompanied them in a matching dress with strips of bicycle inner tubes around his neck that trailed to his ankles, carrying a chicken on his head and another bound to his wrist. The white dresses with orange palm oil closely resembled the coloring of the chickens, creating the illusion that the chickens were extensions of the performers' bodies, similar to how Snake's use of feathers disrupted the separation of human and animal. Further, just as Ouamba's fictional protest was both real and imagined, Kolo and his collaborators blurred the line between the real markets that they traversed and their fictional performance. Some spectators responded by starting negotiations with them, understandably confusing them for actual market vendors (see Figure 6).

These fleeting acts cut through the known, the accepted, and the tangible, imbuing the present with a future-oriented temporality in which multiple "configurations of possibles" come into view (Sarr 2019, 103). The artists' aesthetic choices offer glimpses of dystopic possibilities in the aftermath of the current



Figure 6. Androa Mindré Kolo in “Article 15: Débrouillez vous!” Photo by Martin Petitjean.

state of climate destruction, as well as queer, utopian possibilities in which gender fluidity is embraced and the human itself is decentered. The artists “stake their claim to Africa’s future,” what Jane Bryce (2019) considers a defining feature of the literary genre of African futurism (16). Overlapping with categories including Afrofuturism, speculative fiction, and magical realism, African futurism revolves around key themes such as ecological and environmental change and diverse portrayals of gender and sexuality through “techniques of defamiliarization such as ‘distortion, exaggeration, or caricature’” (Bryce 2019, 4).⁵ The Nigerian-American novelist Nnedi Okorafor (2019) distinguishes “Africanfuturism” from Afrofuturism based on the former’s rootedness in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view. Whereas Afrofuturism centers African American themes and concerns, Africanfuturism does not privilege or center the West. It “complicate[s] understandings of African women and men, past and present, fictional and real,” as Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué writes (2021, 3). These themes, techniques, and outcomes appeared across *La ville en mouv’ment*. The artists embodied radical visions of African futures in ways that exceed the limitations of text and speech, most often considered the domain of African futurism. Resisting the fixity established by colonialism, neoliberal capitalism, and heteronormativity, these artists anticipate—and invite spectators to anticipate with them—worlds that foreground porosity, fluidity, and ambiguity. They equally critique the ways in which our current lives have an effect on the future, “not letting the future ‘sit in peace,’” as Minna Salami cautions (2021, 94).

Drawing on Amílcar Cabral, Achille Mbembe (2021, 43–44) describes decolonization as “a promise whose main mode of existence was its futurity.” If the West “put a stranglehold on the idea of the future” through the colonial

imposition of epistemologies, representations, and aesthetic discourses, then decolonization, “as an act of refusal turned into an act of assertion, an act of rebellion turned into an act of refoundation ... was imagined as a kind of relation to the future” (Mbembe 2021, 44). Mbembe suggests that aesthetic work, alongside epistemological and psychic work, must accompany the “practical-political task” of decolonization (44). By dismantling rigid categorical markers and embodying other ways of being, by imbuing public spaces with futurist aesthetics, *La ville en mouvement* artists engage in decolonial artmaking, doing the aesthetic work that the decolonization project demands. Theirs is not about offering solutions or educating publics about how to work toward a decolonized future, but rather, in the words of Mwenya B. Kabwe (2019, 290), their art “enables and sustains a space of possibility in a present that is urgent, dire, and historically loaded, in order for a radical future to be realized.”

I saw visions of radical futures materialize across these performances, particularly in relation to contemporaneous events that reaffirmed the repercussions of transgressing strict regulations of gender normativity in Senegalese public space. Just one week before the festival, a video of a violent mob attacking a male in Dakar due to his “flamboyant” attire went viral (Padgett 2022). The victim’s comportment struck a chord in a society engulfed in fear of an encroaching Western LGBTQ+ agenda, largely considered antithetical to Senegalese values, despite the country’s history of open gender variance (see M’Baye 2013; Coly 2019). The attack occurred two days after Idrissa Gueye, a Senegalese soccer player on Paris’s Saint-Germain team, sat out his team’s match after players were asked to wear jerseys with rainbow colors in recognition of the International Day Against Homophobia, Biphobia, and Transphobia (see Frostick 2022). Gueye’s refusal garnered criticism in France, but he was commended by Senegalese compatriots—including former president Macky Sall—on social media. The hashtag #Weareallidrisa trended on Twitter for several days after the match.

Whereas the gender transgression carried out by the person in the video was violently intercepted, Snake’s gender ambiguous performance was met with peaceful receptivity. Toward the end of his performance, he approached spectators at close proximity. He removed the tray from his head and offered bananas to onlookers who gladly accepted. Similarly, Kolo, a male-presenting performer in a dress, approached pedestrians and held their gaze. Boys exiting a mosque laughingly accepted his offering of eggs that he purchased from a nearby market. Likewise, whereas Gueye’s refusal to don a rainbow-colored jersey illustrated the refusal of support for the LGBTQ+ community, Ouamba’s performance filled Dakar’s streets with multicolor balloons that appeared to coalesce with the global LGBTQ+ rainbow symbol. Although at least one passerby shouted at the performers, “*góor-jigéen*”—a Wolof term referring to homosexual or effeminate men and transgender women that, despite its history of acceptance, has become blatantly pejorative in recent decades—no hostile action was taken (see Coly 2019). Aside from a small handful of exceptions, the performances generated curiosity as passersby stopped and watched, asked questions, and calmly interacted with performers and other spectators. The artists poked holes in the seemingly fixed homophobic and transphobic cultural sphere of contemporary

Senegal for the spontaneous audiences who happened to be shopping at the markets or passing through the intersections where the performances took place. They engendered other kinds of encounters, interactions, and physical proximities than those that violently negate nonconforming persons from the category of the fully human. Their performances rendered visions of queer African futurities that equally recall and revivify more tolerant African pasts.

Decolonial Exhaustion

La ville en mouv'ment, like the contemporary dance scene that it emerged out of, is barely tenable through existing patronage structures. Creating a locally sustainable marketplace for contemporary performance is a primary goal of the festival; however, attempting to single-handedly change a decades-long economic structure—to shift toward local funding and audiences for a form that was from its inception sponsored and institutionalized by France—is highly ambitious. For Cissé, this has resulted in contradictions, setbacks, and mounting stress amidst moments of pleasure, connection, and artistic growth. A look at the funding structures and broader political context during the two consecutive editions of *La ville en mouv'ment* that I attended illustrates that decolonizing the arts is a nonlinear process that demands perseverance and improvisatory problem-solving in the face of escalating uncertainty, and sometimes debilitating exhaustion.

In 2022, Cissé procured just enough funding to implement a low budget festival. The French Institute of Paris covered transportation for international artists from other African countries and funding from the City of Dakar was used to cover expenses for local participants. Money was tight and there was little leeway. When artists purchased materials that were not preapproved, or when dedicated assistants worked around the clock to help organize and implement the program without any guarantee of payment, Cissé dipped into her personal savings to compensate them. With minimal resources, it was a challenging, but ultimately rewarding edition. Morning workshops were well attended, and the performances generated large crowds of spectators who had little previous exposure to contemporary dance. Symbolically, this edition held promise: it was the first time in her career that Cissé obtained funding from the City of Dakar, a positive sign indicating that she was moving in the right direction.

On the heels of three successful editions, Cissé was hopeful that in 2023, generating local patronage would go smoother and allow her to rely less on the French Institute. This seemed particularly plausible when the Ministry of Culture and Communication expressed interest and encouraged her to apply for funding, a gesture suggestive of a potential major shift. But the Ministry's repeated delays, informing Cissé that with two weeks before the start date of the festival, she still had plenty of time and should check back in later, led to escalating uncertainty. As an ethnographer, I saw the toll this took on Cissé who, with minimal assistance, returned to the Ministry's office day after day to check in on her unanswered request for funding, traversed Dakar and its outskirts to discuss the project with town halls and the gendarmerie, and worked to develop relationships with local

associations, all while coordinating the arrivals of international artists, organizing workshops, obtaining authorization to perform in dispersed locations, and publicizing the festival's events. When I ran into Cissé ten days before the projected start of the program, she simply said, "I haven't slept all week." International artists were arriving soon and the festival was about to take off, but she had yet to secure funding needed to pay local artists, purchase materials for the projects that would soon be underway, for video documentation, administrative support, or any of the other numerous expenses needed to run a week-long festival. Understandably, she was exhausted, distressed, and discouraged.

In its fourth edition, *La ville en mouv'ment* remained a precarious program without reliable sponsorship or a stable structure. Working within the neoliberal context of economic instability in the aftermath of structural adjustment without any help from the state leads African agents to undertake what authors, including Jonathon Repinecz (2020), Fatoumata Seck (2018), and Alcinda M. Honwana (2012) have identified as improvisatory methods of making do, of getting by to make ends meet. In Senegal, these sets of strategies are evoked through the French term *débrouillardise* (making do) or the Wolof terms *góorgóorlu* or *liijjanti*: living one day to the next, doing one's best, manning up, or persevering. Cultural producers deploy what Repinecz describes as a "neoliberal aesthetics of survival" as they are forced to come up with self-reliant solutions "in the face of tremendous obstacles" (2020, 907). Although Cissé's career as an internationally circulating artist and her access to (dwindling) international resources distinguishes her from the working-class demographic that these authors largely focus on, the structural conditions and survival methods they describe resonate with her tiresome work organizing a festival in neoliberal Dakar. The daily challenges inherent to navigating unfulfilled promises from the state and perpetual uncertainty, even days before the start of the festival, led to high levels of distress as it became necessary to make do with what few resources she had available.

The uncertainty that engulfed preparations for the 2023 edition intensified when Dakar became the center of a national uprising on June 1, just days before the projected start date of June 5. As part of an ongoing struggle since 2021 between Macky Sall's government and the main opposition party, PASTEF, violent clashes broke out across Dakar following the conviction of Ousmane Sonko, the opposition leader, on charges that many believed to be part of a political scheme to disqualify Sonko from running in the 2024 presidential election.⁶ *La ville en mouv'ment*, like nearly all events throughout Senegal, was put on hold as the country grappled with unrest. Protesters were fueled by anger following years of unfulfilled economic and infrastructural improvements. Mounting disillusionment with the government sparked unprecedented turmoil as protesters set fire to cars, ransacked grocery stores and gas stations, and clashed with police who attempted to quell the protests by use of deadly force.⁷ The longstanding global image of Senegalese democracy as a rare beacon of stability in an otherwise volatile region was all but shattered as frustration with living conditions in neoliberal Senegal and with the government's abuse of power reached a breaking point.

The unrest following Sonko's sentencing sheds light on the precarious political economic circumstances in which Cissé is operating. Though their

demonstrations were provoked by what is widely believed as the government's perpetration of injustice against Sonko, protesters were driven in part by poor economic prospects and a broader sense of disillusionment (Hammerschlag 2023). This is a widespread sentiment in the context of neoliberal privatization and state negligence that plays out through innumerable small acts, including the Ministry of Culture's silence and ultimate abandonment of *La ville en mov'ment* despite their misleading encouragement. Without any state support, Cissé was forced to *se débrouiller*: to make do, persevere, and improvise alternative strategies. These included running a last-minute crowdfunding campaign and having a volunteer make in-person requests for small donations from local businesses, neither of which amounted to notable sums. The turbulence in Dakar led Cissé to condense the festival and cancel several of its components, including open workshops with community members and exchanges with local associations. Invited artists from Mali and Burkina Faso were unable to make it at the last minute, due in part to canceled flights in response to the uprising as well as issues related to their own governments' handling of neoliberal reform. Instead of the robust series of events expected to reach diverse communities that Cissé envisioned, this edition consisted of a handful of workshops for a small group of students already studying dance at the Blaise Senghor Cultural Center and a single evening of performances contained to one area of Ouakam.

As much as the outcome of the 2023 edition strayed from Cissé's original intention, I do not consider it a failure. It marks a setback in a long, nonlinear trajectory toward decolonizing the contemporary performance market and reflects the inevitable instability of new initiatives that are not yet institutionalized. Decolonial acts must not be solely understood as radical splits from Europe in which local African agents are entirely in control of the field of production and consumption. This perspective overshadows the numerous attempts to center African epistemologies, aesthetics, and economies that are regularly pursued but not fully realized. It ignores the realities of organizing in the afterlife of colonialism and neoliberal reform. Decolonization is a continual process that plays out through major and minor practices including small-scale, unstable, and nonlinear rearrangements of power in which Africa remains inevitably entangled with the Global North, even as the scale and shape of those entanglements shift over time.

Even if Cissé's ambitious goals were not actualized, the workshops for dance students and the evening of performances enabled a rare respite from the tension engulfing the city in early June 2023. Followed by a large crowd of Ouakam residents that accumulated as the evening went on, the program wound through the narrow, labyrinthine pathways that make up the neighborhood known as Sinthie, pausing as performances sprang up in open spaces. There were moments of quiet reflection, participatory celebration, and shared pleasure amidst the uncertainty and melancholy of the previous week. Even if the hoped-for structural changes were not achieved, the program insisted on the significance of experimental artmaking as integral to the working-class neighborhood in Ouakam, where it took place. Performers took part in a long lineage of public performative acts while gesturing toward possible futures.

Conclusion

Contemporary street performance, as exemplified by *La ville en mouv'ment*, is a space of possibility for decolonial, future-oriented creative expression that is simultaneously fundamentally rooted in the present moment and physical space of instantaneous creation. Delinked from the inherited proscenium stage and its imposed separation between performers and audiences and between everyday life and the world of a performance, street performance is embedded in everyday environments, referring to, valorizing, and transforming the specificities of the locations in which it takes place. Broad, unsuspecting audiences are generated through the artists' guerilla tactic of unannounced public acts that derive from the everyday but rethink and rework its composition. Artists build on long-standing genealogies of African public performance while defamiliarizing the habitual through techniques including distortion, exaggeration, and an embrace of categorical ambiguity.

Although attaining Cissé's goal of decolonizing the material conditions of production and consumption of contemporary dance is still a long way off, the decolonial potentiality of street performance is perceptible in the artists' aesthetics and use of public space. Their anticipatory performances enable glimpses of possible African futures through their configurations of new modes of being human.⁸ The artists unsettle imposed, naturalized binary oppositions by embodying figures that blur the lines between man and woman, human and nonhuman, real and imagined. Likewise, they shatter the distinction between elite and popular art as they deploy an experimental, contemporary ethos to the popular idiom of street performance. Without replicating existing practices, they resonate with them. They transform the known in radical visions of possible African futures. *La ville en mouv'ment* encourages spectators to consider configurations of queer, decolonial, African futurities as latent, subordinated realities in the here and now. The artists gesture to the "innumerable futures" that the decolonization project is moving toward (Mbembe 2021: 4).

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Notes

1. For example, Cameroonian artist Zora Snake established the annual street performance festival MODAPERF in Yaoundé, Cameroun in 2017; Ugandan artist Robert Sempijija creates performances for the street and for film in his hometown of Kampala and internationally; and Lassina Koné from Mali

directs the festival Don Sen Folo, dedicated to the transmission and performance of works in outdoor spaces in Bamako. These are just a few examples of numerous creative practices in public spaces across the continent that intentionally move away from conventional theatrical venues.

2. See my forthcoming book, *Dancing Opacity: Contemporary Dance, Transnationalism, and Queer Possibility in Senegal* (University of Michigan Press, 2025).
3. This and all subsequent interview quotes are translated from the French by the author.
4. Translated from the French by the author.
5. Bryce quotes Gaylord (2005, 266). Also see Jacqueline-Bethel Tchouta Mougoué (2021).
6. PASTEF is an acronym for Patriotes africains du Sénégal pour le travail, l'éthique et la fraternité (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics, and Fraternity).
7. At least twenty-three people were killed and several hundred injured during protests on June 1 and 2, 2023. Amnesty International affirms that these deaths occurred at the hands of "armed civilian personnel operating alongside the security forces" (Amnesty International 2023).
8. I am indebted to Jose Esteban Muñoz's work on queer futurity and the aesthetic realm as "anticipatory illumination" of future social relations (2009, 3).

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