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## Disrupting self-censorship, inventing public space through interactive performances in Luanda, Angola

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This article analyses a series of cultural events organised in Luanda, Angola, in 2021–2022 by an artistic collective called the Vosi Yetu Project. These open-mike sessions promoting freedom of expression are analysed as carnivalesque moments redistributing the norms of who can be visible and what can be said (and heard) in public. By doing so, they implicitly challenge the hegemonic workings of the ruling party and open political breaches through which new scenes seem possible. Based on three-year fieldwork in Luanda and mobilising immersive film-recording, the article explores the meaning of these interactive performances both at the individual level and in terms of collective momentum towards systemic change. How are we individually touched to the point of becoming a part of something bigger? It also questions the conditions of possibility of ethnographic encounters in a city marked by high levels of surveillance. What does it mean to hold a camera in the middle of people voicing their discontent? How far can the bodily experience of a foreign white woman help unravel the subjectivities of young Angolan men? The article does not respond unequivocally to all these questions but uses them to reflexively engage the multisensory emergence of public space.

Este artigo analisa uma série de eventos culturais organizados em Luanda, Angola, em 2021 e 2022, por um coletivo de artistas chamado Projeto Vosi Yetu. Estas sessões de microfone aberto promovendo liberdade de expressão são analisadas como momentos festivos que reorganizam as normas sobre quem pode ser visível e o que pode ser dito (e ouvido) em público. Ao fazê-lo, desafiam implicitamente os procedimentos hegemônicos do partido no poder e abrem brechas políticas através das quais novos cenários parecem possíveis. Com base em um trabalho de campo de três anos em Luanda e mobilizando a gravação imersiva de um filme, o artigo explora o significado destas performances interativas tanto em nível individual quanto em termos de uma força coletiva rumo a uma mudança sistêmica. Como somos tocados individualmente a ponto de nos tornarmos parte de algo maior? Questiona também as condições de possibilidade de encontros etnográficos em uma cidade marcada por elevados níveis de vigilância. O que significa segurar uma câmera no meio de pessoas que expressam seu descontentamento? Até que ponto a experiência corporal de uma mulher branca estrangeira pode ajudar a desvendar as subjetividades de jovens homens angolanos? O artigo não responde de forma inequívoca a todas estas questões, mas as utiliza para adentrar reflexivamente a manifestação multissensorial do espaço público.

**Keywords:** activism; Angola; carnival; performances; sensory ethnography

“Todo o ódio é pouco! Todo o ódio é pouco! Todo o ódio é pouco!” [All the hate is not enough!]. The small crowd is now shouting and jumping together. Smiles are large. Energies are high. We are pressed against one another and somehow forced to move in rhythm. From time to time someone pushes us back a little bit to make sure the musicians who are sitting in the middle of this improvised circle have enough space to keep playing. But apart from one man who is visibly too drunk to be in full control of his movements, everyone is highly respectful of this temporary occupation of the pavement. Free live music shows are not common on the streets of Luanda, Angola’s capital, especially not in the densely built peripheries where little to no space has been reserved for recreational use.<sup>1</sup> Although public gatherings are protected by the Constitution

(art. 47), the mundane occupation of public spaces in Angola is often a bone of contention between law enforcement and the citizenry.

Tax inspectors [*fiscais*] and police officers regularly chase away those who use the street as a source of income. Whether working as street vendors or wheel-barrel operators, ambulant manicurists, mechanics, moto-taxi drivers or car washers, the majority of the inhabitants of the peripheral suburb of Cacuaco, located about 15 km north from the city centre, is self-employed and works in what is commonly called “the informal sector.” The concept of “informality,” however, has long drifted away from its original meaning. It has become attached to urbanity at large. Scholars use it to speak of the built environment itself (Roy 2005; Koster and Nuijten 2016), of the precariousness of associational life (Simone 2004; Croese 2015), of urban governance and of popular politics more broadly (Roy 2011; Bénit-Gbaffou 2015; Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield 2014; Simone and Pieterse 2017). For ordinary Luandans, it is their entire existence that is marked by the stamp of informality: their physical presence on the street always carries a subtle sense of illegitimacy. It negates their entitlement to the most basic human rights and commands obedience to “superior orders” (Lima 2013; Lázaro and Silva 2015; Tomás 2022). From not being part of the formal economy, ordinary citizens become not entitled to claim rights. Their material precarity hides a broader vulnerability that affects their sense of self-value and these symbolical equations are dialectical. If being on the street is synonymous of unworthiness, then one should avoid hanging out in public spaces to safeguard one’s dignity.

The present article explores this dialectics of public space on the periphery of Luanda. On the one hand, streets are where the propaganda of a powerful developmental state crumbles: poverty and derelict public services are openly visible. They can be physically felt (a pothole in the middle of an expressway, an overflowing sewage, cracking walls [Buire 2022a]), heard (think, for example, of the soundscape of a major intersection where the traffic lights are not working) and smelt (see Auerbach [2022] for a reflection on the “fullness of air” in Lobito or Blanes et al. [2021] on “garbage and citizenship” in Luanda). On the other hand, because streets are nevertheless where the law of the strongest is expected to apply, any unconventional use of the street becomes an act of disruption, an implicit challenge to the system at large (Blanes 2017).

Based on a three-year immersive sojourn in Luanda, the article discusses a series of festive events held on the streets in 2021–2022 to question freedom of expression, citizenship and entitlement in a context marked by a strong “culture of fear” (Schubert 2017; Martins 2021; Pawson 2014; Moorman 2008). It is grounded in the critical phenomenology of social space proposed by Kinkaid (2020), which provides original tools to unpack how ordinary embodied experiences might reflect broader modes of being in the world that are likely to disorientate dominant ideologies. Beyond a romantic opposition between an authoritarian ethos imposed from above and a revolutionary momentum from the bottom up, the article explores the grey zone between consent and disruption where the pieces of a world worth living in are starting to be rearranged, to paraphrase Graeber (2011).<sup>2</sup> It contends that the sensorial experience of being at a concert, a theatrical play or a dance performance on the street disrupts tacit expectations of what can be done, said or heard in public — contributing to a slow erosion of entrenched domination but never achieving the formulation of an alternative order.

The article is divided in three sections. The first section provides an overview of what is at stake when we speak of freedom of expression in Angola. It anchors the article in the most recent literature on political dissent in Luanda. First, if I am to understand how the culture of fear can be bypassed, I myself need to experience how it feels to breach the status quo by attending these events as an active participant. This influenced my choice in terms of fieldwork method and writing strategy. Filming the performances allowed me to actively take part in them but also to analyse more finely the spatial arrangement of the street sessions through the use of visuals in the present article. Second, I contend that surpassing one’s own fear does not automatically lead to rewiring the whole system. The horizon of the article is not to map out the contours of an

artistic avant-garde leading Angolan people on to the road to democracy but rather to explore what happens between individual and collective mobilisation. How are we individually *touched* to the point of becoming a part of something bigger?

The second section discusses the curatorial intention of the organisers of these performances, called the “Bungula Street Sessions.” What are they aiming at when offering free open-air performances in Luanda? Their public statements are cautiously centred on artistic claims. Using the street as a stage is, first, a claim for the right to perform in a context where the whole cultural sector is structurally underfunded. However, the temporary occupation of public space for festive performances also contains elements of carnivalesque subversion, as defined more than a century ago by Mikhail Bakhtine. Taking inspiration from an eclectic selection of the literature about carnivals through space and time (Birmingham 1988; Averill 1994; Panopoulos 2011; Arnaud 2022), I contend that the right to perform claimed by the artists I have met in Luanda hides a political aspiration, a claim for the right to take part, to have a voice. The Bungula Street sessions I attended, as offered by the Vosi Yetu Project, indeed provide several examples of carnivalesque reordering of the status quo. Infused fear dissipates and commonality is being experimented with at the most intimate level.

The third section digs deeper into those scripts by convoking not only what is being said and shown but, more reflexively, what is being heard and felt. Echoing Panopoulos’s idea of a “carnival synaesthesia [that] manages, for a fleeting moment, to create a collectively vibrating social body” (Panopoulos 2011, 44), the article provides an immersion in the tactile and sonic experiences of the Bungula Street sessions in order to explore the texture of the interface between personal experiences of breaking the rule of silence and the collective momentum of creating a new “scene” (Isin 2008). I identify these experiences as genuine moments of “change,” borrowing Graeber’s idea that “change” does not equate structural transformation but rather a certain idea of irreversibility: “even if it all were to end today ... you can’t really go back to thinking about things the way you did before” (Graeber 2013, 273).

### **Angola after dos Santos: testing the boundaries of public space**

Since the end of the Angolan Civil War in 2002, literature on Angolan politics has proven particularly stimulating. Described by Soares de Oliveira (2015) as a “magnificent and beggar land,” oil-rich Angola relentlessly convokes narratives of a country either cursed by its natural resources or miraculously resilient after decades of war and destruction. The highly centralised neo-patrimonial state machinery built by President José Eduardo dos Santos (in power from 1979 to 2017) has been described in detail and its tight network of oleo-crats identified (if not punished) (Roque 2011; Soares de Oliveira 2007, 2015; Marques 2011; Maussion 2019). Urban scholars in particular have shown how the reconstruction of the Angolan capital both conditioned and resulted from the reinforcement of the presidency and the banalisation of an autocratic political culture (Gastrow 2020; Croese 2017; Pitcher 2017; Buire 2018). This authoritarian petro-urbanism should not, however, be made a caricature of itself. If post-war reconstruction in Angola was indeed financed by opaque oil-for-infrastructure loans by China, Angola’s ruling elites retained a powerful hand in the negotiations (Corkin 2013). Whilst provincial and municipal authorities are nominated through the internal structures of the ruling party, neighbourhood-based public offices still offer some room for manoeuvre to local leaders (Buire 2018; Croese 2015). In other words, the political hegemony of the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), in power since independence in 1975, is certainly central for an understanding of the general organisation of the country, but it cannot be left unquestioned once we look more closely at the daily life of ordinary Angolans. In fact, open expressions of support of and affiliation with the party state do not impede the rejection of untold social norms (Schubert 2017; Gastrow 2017; Buire 2017). Conversely, the emergence of a vocal network of anti-government activists, locally known as *revús* (an abbreviation of *revolucionários*), has not, so far, led to a profound reordering of the status

quo, despite the public support for the network by pro-democracy institutions such as Amnesty International and Open Society. As Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira summarised after the elections of 2017,

in a country where civil society organizations have been historically weak and with virtually no history of social mobilization, the rise of a new form of political and civic activism among urban youth represented a further challenge to the MPLA. (Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira 2018, 147)

[However,] the very rapid acceptance by opposition parties and, at least until now, youth civic activists, that the boundaries of the exercise of legitimate politics are coterminous with those determined by the electoral process, suggest that the MPLA's social and political hegemony remains largely untouched at the start of João Lourenço's mandate. (Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira 2018, 157)

The elections of August 2022 were marked by record levels of abstention, widespread street protests and an unprecedented oppositional front that brought together the old-guard parliamentary opposition and new figures from civil society. Formally, the polls did not bring any surprise: João Lourenço was re-elected and hopes of a gradual transition out of an entrenched system of political brutality were quickly dashed. Nevertheless, the culture of fear inherited from decades of authoritarian colonialism and so-called socialist one-party state of the 1970s and 1980s<sup>3</sup> is slowing giving way to a much more volatile political ambience. Petrodollars continue to dictate the field of economic possibility, but they bring along a structural instability that challenges the inertia of the political economy more broadly. A generational shift is underway that allows “the rise of protest politics” and makes the “expression of social discontentment and regime fatigue” commonplace (Pearce, Péclard and Soares de Oliveira 2018, 155, 147).

This article sets to explore what these new forms of dissent look like on the ground. More precisely, what are the particular emotions and sensations through which one *feels* the political potential of a particular artistic experience, something that Panopoulos (2011, 44) calls the “synaesthesia” of “a collectively vibrating social body”? It builds on the hypothesis of Bye, Orre and Inglês (2021) for whom Angola could currently be sitting at a “critical juncture,” defined as “moments of relative structural indeterminism when wilful actors shape outcomes in a more voluntaristic fashion than normal circumstances permit” (Mahoney, quoted in Bye, Orre and Inglês 2021, 4). Borrowing Gramsci's vocabulary of the “counter-hegemony,” they insist that transformative change relies not only on President Lourenço's readiness to accept his regime's failing legitimacy and him daring to “creating the new,” but also on the capacity of “civil society and other political forces ... to organise a ‘counter-hegemonic bloc’” (Bye, Orre and Inglês 2021, 4). I contend that focusing on the affective and sensorial realms helps to locate this counter-hegemonic organising in two complementary moments.

First of all, the diffuse culture of fear that maintains ordinary citizens in a state of passivity and normalises self-censorship has to be brought into question. To capture the discrete and yet powerful breaches in what Blanes (2021, 123) calls “the sense of fatalism ... that seems otherwise to prevail in Angola,” I reflect on an initiative called the Vosi Yetu Project, which took place in Luanda between February 2020 and June 2022. “Vosi Yetu” means “All of Us” in Umbundu. The Vosi Yetu Project is an artistic collective that uses the arts “to inspire people to claim their rights to citizenship and to valorize human rights as a whole” (Central Angola 7311 2020).<sup>4</sup> In its own words, the Vosi Yetu Project seeks to extend the realm of citizenship. As I examine later, it does so by organising artistic happenings that correspond to what Isin (2008, 25) calls “acts of citizenship,” that is, acts that “operate a rupture in the given,” in the sense that they create a time-space for individuals to deviate from the “existing paths” of what is politically acceptable: “By contrast to active citizens who act out already written scripts such as voting, taxpaying and enlisting, activist citizens engage in writing scripts and creating the scene” (Isin 2009, 381).

If I am to understand how Angolans can possibly *write* scripts instead of *acting out* existing ones, my first element of framing is, thus, to share these physical places and temporary moments

of gathering where dedicated individuals champion freedom of expression in its plainest form. The audiovisual materials I gathered when attending Vosi Yetu events provide precious resources to share and reflect on this experience here.

The Vosi Yetu Project brings together a dozen of musicians, slammers and rappers who are closely connected through the hip-hop scene in Luanda. It was created after the internationally known Angolan rapper Ikonoklasta was awarded a grant from the Open Society Foundation to promote human rights across Angola. Active in five provinces (of eighteen), the Vosi Yetu Project takes different forms depending on who is responsible locally. I focus on one initiative developed in Luanda under the tutelage of Helder Faradai, beatmaker and composer who brought together a small band (bass, guitar, keyboard and beatbox) under the name Tubo de Ensaio that became the pillar of what came to be known as the Bungula Street Sessions.<sup>5</sup> These monthly performances took place approximately from June 2021 to June 2022 in different areas across the city (after having been interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic). The objective of the Bungula Street Sessions was to invite slammers, actors and dancers to perform to the music of the band. For each session, Faradai would mobilise people from his own artistic network to programme a few acts but would also invite artists from the neighbourhood where the session took place. The ultimate goal, however, was to give an opportunity to passers-by to express themselves. The Bungula Street Sessions promoted an open-mike principle: anyone from the public could take the microphone and deliver their own poem, song or improvisation.

Jumping and shouting in the crowd, sensing the vibration of a loud bass or feeling dizzy from the insistent beat, sharing the exhilarating energy of defiant political cries are all first-hand experiences that, taken together, provide a window on to the slow construction of individual political subjectivities. They constitute an overlooked intermediary state between consent and opposition, between keeping silent and speaking up. I contend that they are key to seize the invisible labour of young activists who seek to break the status quo in neighbourhoods that are frankly hostile to the MPLA<sup>6</sup> but nevertheless shadowed by the reminiscent culture of fear of their elders.

However, the significance of these reappropriations of the public space goes beyond the construction of individual conviction and daring. They are symbolical ruptures that use the temporary experience of the participants as a platform to experiment new forms of togetherness and disruptive acts of speaking politically. In that sense, they can be described as “scenes” in the sense that Isin uses to speak about activist citizenship: they are the enactment of an alternative order of things. My second element of framing thus seeks to unravel the characteristics of the scenes that are created during these semi-improvised gatherings in Luanda. Following up on Branch and Mampilly (2015, 7), I am less interested in mapping how isolated events “effect formal political change” than in exploring the developments they have “in popular organization, political consciousness, and political imagination.”<sup>7</sup>

I do so by reading them as carnivalesque happenings and by highlighting the degree of self-reflexivity and intentional spectacularisation deployed by the artists themselves and indeed seized by some members of the public during the performances. I take inspiration from Graeber’s critique of the concept of “revolution.” Reminding us that social change does not happen “according to someone’s blueprint,” Graeber (2013, 282) insists that the political depth of a work of art lies not in its overt message but in its capacity of “keeping things open-ended [as it] lets you provide a forum for a discontent that everyone feels, but haven’t found a way to express yet” (Graeber 2013, 22).

Of course, the subtle transformation of a personal act of defiance into the consolidation of a counter-hegemonic project is never unidirectional; it is made of both radical pushes and conservative pulls back. In 1979 already, carnival historian Dubois (1979, 30) noted that “the shift from transgression to subversion only happens under particular circumstances, depending on specific events.” At the time of writing, there has not been any spectacular revolutionary explosion in Luanda and the tendency is rather to increase the repression of street politics and to gag parliamentary debates around contentious issues. In order to unfold the “particular circumstances”

under which the Vosi Yetu Project can be interpreted as a seed of subversion, I now turn to its curatorial intention, that is, to the discourses it developed to banalise the nexus between public arts and citizenship and disrupt the culture of fear.

### **The Vosi Yetu Project in Luanda: a carnivalesque “celebration of defiance”**

On Saturday, February 15, 2020, Vosi Yetu organised its first Bungula Street Session on the side of a major road in Luanda.<sup>8</sup> The event was filmed and posted on Facebook with the following caption: “Meaning ‘All of Us’ in Umbundu, Vosi Yetu is a project that pursues the objectives of integration, education, promotion and celebration of Human Rights through Arts.” The objective is to take culture out of its comfort zone (galleries, theatres, closed spaces) and bring it to those who have most difficulty to access it, with a focus on the promotion of fundamental rights.

Since then, Vosi Yetu has produced various videos to pitch itself, with a final 15-minute documentary released on YouTube in September 2022 where the curatorial intention is discussed by a panel of eight Angolan artists and curators (Sebastião 2022). This short documentary, entitled “A arte na educação para a cidadania e direitos humanos” [Arts in citizenship and human rights education] makes three important statements regarding the connection between artistic practice and citizenship in present-day Angola.

First of all, the artists interviewed evoke their struggle to access formal venues to showcase their talents. Public policies encouraging artistic education and promoting culture are weak and often biased towards a few established institutions. Besides a limited network of mega-cinemas programming international blockbusters and a few haphazardly maintained theatres from the colonial era, most cultural events take place in privately owned spaces where artists either have to pay to be featured or experience a soft power agenda when financially supported by international partners.<sup>9</sup>

With the Bungula Street Sessions, Vosi Yetu primarily sought to promote an alternative geography of artistic expression, a simple yet efficient manner to reach a wide public whilst challenging the subreptitious gatekeeping practices of official arts and culture representatives. Portfolio 1 portrays some of the key points of contention that the mere occupation of a public space in Luanda raises. The pictures were taken in the neighbourhoods of Cacuo and Bairro Operário, either by me or by my partners present that day.<sup>10</sup> The portfolio highlights the capacity of the Bungula Street Sessions to adapt to their surroundings, both physically and socially. They made use of a bus stop (Figures 2 and 3), a rudimentary canopy in front of a container-turned-bar (Figure 4) or even a simple wooden retailing stall (Figure 6). Socially, the audience varied in terms of gender and age in each session. The almost uniform crowd of young men present in Cacuo in November 2021 contrasted with the children that dominated earlier in October, whereas the audience was less numerous but more diverse in Bairro Operário in September 2021. This reflects the philosophy of the Vosi Yetu Project, which does not seek to present a pre-established show to a designated public but rather intends to reclaim the street as a public space, in the Habermasian definition of a space open to all so that it allows the formation of public opinions.

A note about the audiovisual materials presented in this article is necessary. The very nature of the Bungula Street Sessions prohibits the collection of formal consent from the participants. They are spontaneous performances. Asking people to consent to anything beyond that particular moment would be seriously detrimental to the existence of the situation itself. As a consequence, I have blurred most of the faces of people who could be recognised on my films and photographs, with the exception of the artists and activists who formally gave me their consent afterwards. I am divided about the result. On the one hand, blurring someone’s face seems to me less ethical than embracing their presence. On the other hand, navigating this conundrum triggered new conversations and helped me make this article more attuned to the vision of the Vosi Yetu Project.

### Portfolio 1



**Figure 1:** Bungula Street Session, Cacua, November 20, 2021. Photographer: Félix Cantares.

A large crowd gathered around the musicians. This picture was taken before the show started. The man in a blue hoodie in the middle is still organising the cables. I appear in the bottom left corner, holding a camera with a mounted microphone. To my right, in a light pink shirt, is rapper Ikonoklasta. This picture shows how quickly passers-by gathered to find out what was going on (see Figure 4 for contrast). Although young men made up most of the audience, a few women also stopped for short moments, including vendors carrying goods on their heads.



**Figure 2:** Bungula Street Session, Cacuaco, November 20, 2021. Photographer: Félix Cantares.

This picture, taken a few hours after Figure 1, locates the event in its urban surroundings. The concert took place in the shade of two bus shelters, next to a major road, which cannot be seen here. The blue pedestrian bridge and the yellow water tower in the background are important urban markers used to navigate this area, which is poorly mapped and of ill repute to those who do not live there.



**Figure 3:** Bungula Street Session, Cacaco, November 20, 2021. Photographer: Chloé Buire.

Same place as in Figures 1 and 2. Street life continued as the concert was going on. Vehicles navigated the road between the improvised stage and the nearby shops, as visible in Figure 1



**Figure 4:** Bungula Street Session, Bairro Operário, September 11, 2021. Photographer: Manetov.

General view of the concert given in Bairro Operário, a central neighbourhood known for being the birthplace of many freedom fighters in the 1950s to 1970s. This time, Faradai and his crew had negotiated with the owner of the red container to use the space in front of what is in fact a small bar. The white container on the left holds the sign of a Pentecostal church. On this day the crowd was much smaller, probably making my presence more visible than in Figure 1.



**Figure 5:** Bungula Street Session, Cacucaco, November 20, 2021. Detail of the electrical installation in Cacucaco. Photographer: Chloé Buire.

Every month, the Bungula Street Session was organised in a different neighbourhood. The exact spot was chosen so as to accommodate a public that could vary between a few dozens to about one hundred participants. The main difficulty was the access to electricity, essential for the musical instruments. On the day in Cacucaco, a cable was pulled from a nearby shop. The shopkeeper received a small sum in compensation. A few meters away, another shopkeeper was in a discussion with Ikonoklasta about the musicians' cars that were parked in front of his shop. The rapper laughed the complaint away with the argument that the road belongs to everyone, which is, in fact, the very essence of the Vosi Yetu Project. In our conversation afterwards, Faradai acknowledged that the only time they were stopped from performing was not because of police interference but because members of the local MPLA branch forbade anyone in the vicinity to provide them with electricity.



**Figure 6:** Bungula Street Session, Cacuaco, October 2, 2021. Photographer: Félix Cantares.

This picture (Figure 6) was also taken in Cacuaco but during a different session from that held under the bus shelters presented above. This time, the Vosi Yetu Project partnered with Projecto Agir, a local organisation focusing on popular education and political mobilisation outside political parties. Amongst its tools, Projecto Agir has developed an itinerant library. The participation of Projecto Agir could be one of the reasons why the audience on this day was made up mostly of children, many of the members of Projecto Agir being teachers in local schools.

Borrowing Henri Lefebvre’s vocabulary of differential space, Kinkaid (2020, 180) argues that “nonnormative practices and modes of embodiment” are fundamental to call into question “the normative meanings and practices of space”:

Crucially, in these jarring moments, the naturalized ideologies of space become apparent and are disrupted, making space for new modes of being in the world. Such moments of spatial disorientation and bodily alienation mark the everyday phenomenological experience of subjects marked by social difference. (Kinkaid 2020, 180)

I contend that the Bungula Street Sessions constitute “jarring moments” that acknowledge the everyday phenomenological experience of those who live at the margins of the state and that manage to transform their everyday into a new normal. They are not street protests, nor riots. They do not interrupt traffic (Figure 3) and are, in fact, often hardly readable for the outsider (Figure 4). Nevertheless, they make space for Kinkaid’s “new modes of being in the world,” naturalising odd behaviours such as playing live music, singing or reading books. The way they make use of the urban environment disorients usual spatial practices, although the depth of this disruption can only be measured by those who feel it in their bodies, as I develop in the last section of this article.

This momentary disorientation leads to a second layer of intention in the overall endeavour of the Vosi Yetu Project. Besides the festive happening, the goal is to make the public more aware of its own power on its environment. The sessions often featured community activities overtly promoting literacy and critical thinking. In Cacuo in October 2021, for example, members of the Projecto Agir not only installed an ephemeral library (Figure 6) but also gave a short lecture to the children (see Supplementary Video S1). More subtly, and directed at a public of young adults, the Vosi Yetu Project also partnered with theatre companies. Supplementary Video S2 captures an extract of one of these theatrical interventions: the actress plays the role of a woman who has newly arrived in the capital and ingenuously points out the prejudices and nepotistic practices that bar young people from accessing formal jobs in Luanda.

Kinkaid places the call for a “critical phenomenology of social space” at the intersection of Lefebvre’s definition of social space, Merleau Ponty’s phenomenology of perception and the interest of scholars of queer and feminist geographies (such as Gayle Salamon, Kirsten Simonsen and Lisa Guenther) in the “forms of embodied difference [that] shape our engagements with the world and how intersubjective meanings crystallize around these” (Kinkaid 2020, 172). Of course, Vosi Yetu does not use this vocabulary. However, the artists interviewed in the documentary explicitly define their involvement in arts as a mode of being in the world that allows them to reclaim their place in a society that pushes them to the margin of dominant representations. As a visual artist and performer, Yola Balanga, for example, uses her body as a site of social disruption and of connection to society at large:

As I make arts, I find that it is more of a discovery and even a revelation of what we are as people, as beings, as individuals of a society. It’s an acceptance. I feel much freer doing arts than doing anything else. ...

What the artistic training brought me is the sense of feeling more intimacy with myself and with the collective; of adding to my person a broader idea of what I consider to be freedom. (Sebastião 2022, 2:10–2:28, 11:19–11:32)

In this perspective, the street performances curated by Vosi Yetu are not just a way to bypass the weaknesses of formal cultural venues. They include overtly political content and call the spectators to take position in their social environment. It is this capacity to transform the festive into defiance that makes them carnivalesque in inspiration. Their very name, the “Bungula Street Sessions,” recalls the importance of the carnival in Angolan popular culture.

“Bungula” is the name of a specific rhythm and dancing style. Popularised during the Luanda Carnival in the 1970s and 1980s, bungula is a dance associated with the enigmatic powers of traditional witchcraft.<sup>11</sup> Since then, Luandan slang transformed the Kimbundu word into a

Portuguese-like verb, “bungular,” that is synonymous with “shaking things up” or “creating confusion.” The name “Bungula Street Session” thus captures more than an innocuous intent of performing on the street or of bridging African values (reference to bungula) with global modernity (use of English). Instead, it is a promise of intentional disorder, one that any observer of the artistic scene in Luanda will easily catch. Disorder, as witty and playful as it may be, always contains the seed of discontent, even more so in a context where self-censorship is still strong, as Birmingham puts it in his history of the Luanda Carnival: “The Carnival and similar feast days always represented a flexible response to the traumas of change, a tight hold on the values of the past, and an ironic portrayal of how to exorcise contemporary devils” (Birmingham 1988, 93).

Just like the carnival observed by Birmingham in 1987, the Bungula Street Sessions are “a celebration of defiance” (Birmingham 1988, 102). Of course, the contemporary devils have changed. In the 2020s, Angola is not at war anymore and the personification of power held in the figure of the president of the Republic during the dos Santos era has given way to a much vaguer sense of diffused authority that is difficult to pinpoint and, thus, resist. But the voices that rose during the open-mike sessions I attended leave no doubt about the political load of what people had to say.

Supplementary Audio S1, recorded in Bairro Operário in September 2021, captures how an adult man (probably in his 40s or 50s) surprised the artists present that day by rapping fluidly on a beat improvised by Tubo de Ensaio. For the sake of the discussion, I shall call him “the man in red,” for he wore a red polo-shirt that day.<sup>12</sup>

On that day, the session was rather calm, with no more than two dozen people stopping by at any given time and an unusual underrepresentation of children compared to other sessions in Cacuaço, for example. But the way this man casually took the microphone to improvise was sufficient to prove that the message of freedom of expression had reached its target.

I live in this Bairro Operário and I have nothing to do.  
I'm here at home and I just got the fever from them, now they want to know about my life.  
I do very, very, very little but that's why my rap needs to bleed.  
Everyone needs to be conscious.

What this anonymous rapper said is a direct confirmation of Kinkaid's critical phenomenology hypothesis. Through feeling the momentaneous celebration of freedom curated by Vosi Yetu's artists in his body (“*tou naquela febre que me deram*” [I got the fever]), he felt an urgency to engage in the event. To paraphrase Kinkaid, it is the collective embodied experience that “crystallized” the “intersubjective meaning” given to the concepts of “freedom of expression” (the prompt used by Ikonoklasta when he gave the microphone to the man) and “consciousness” (the word he himself used in his improvisation).

The third layer of Vosi Yetu's curatorial intention eventually sits in this lexicon of “freedom of expression,” “citizenship” and “human rights.” These concepts are politically charged. In Angola, they unmistakably convoke a rhetoric associated with the international community and, more precisely, that of the Open Society Foundation, which, indeed, provided the initial funds for the Vosi Yetu Project.<sup>13</sup> Cabuenha Janguinda, another interviewee in the documentary cited earlier, makes it clear: the vocabulary of human rights and citizenship is imported from “third parties.”

About the concept of citizenship and human rights ... well, the underlying problem is that, most of the time, people don't even know what citizenship really means. So that is directly related with the education issue: we are not taught about it, people end up doing it intuitively, or learning with third parties, which is also one of the possibilities. (Sebastião 2022, 7:07–7:25)

By using the rhetoric of international pro-democracy groups, Vosi Yetu deepens the strategy of intersubjective meanings. It wilfully wraps the political defiance of its initiative in a general language of democratic values. If the Angolan authorities do not hesitate to violently suppress street protests and depict social activists as warmongers, they cannot so easily criminalise artists promoting “citizenship and human rights.”

The political reach of the Vosi Yetu Project appears in various aspects. Its capacity to occupy the street in underequipped peripheries undoubtedly disrupts the conservative geography of arts and culture, whilst at the same time capitalising on the spatial practices of the disenfranchised to expand the possibilities of public space. As Portfolio 1 shows, being physically present raises both practical and political questions, confirming Kinkaid's hypothesis about the potential of embodied experiences to convey non-normative ideologies of social space.

The documentary film shot by the project provides further indication of the assumed intentionality of these disruptions. The artists who accept to be associated with the Vosi Yetu Project, either by performing during their sessions and/or by appearing in their documentary, all endorse a strong commitment to use the arts to raise the critical consciousness of their audiences, and their own, so as to "add to their own person," as Yola Balanga eloquently put it. However, it is the words of the man in red who improvised during the session in Bairro Operário in September 2021 that best encapsulates the capacity of the project to transform abstract concepts into prompts likely to mobilise anonymous city-dwellers. His intervention, he says, came from the chills he felt when listening to the rap of Ikonoklasta and Isis Hembe that day: "They gave me the fever." The last section of the article presents a sample of reflexive visual materials to densify this sensory experience and interrogate how carnivalesque moments might catalyse a more stable spectacle of political disruption.

### **Making sense, giving sense: the spectacularisation of political disruption**

Blanes (2021, 123) contends that the *revús*' "struggle towards a brighter collective future" is characterised by an "optimistic and somewhat Gandhian stance." Himself a close companion of the activists and at times co-author of their work (see, for example, Blanes and Samussuku 2022), Blanes associates activism with the capacity to engage "in self-sacrificial behaviour, exposing themselves to police brutality, imprisonment and social discrimination" (Blanes 2021, 123). Blanes's work is essential for it takes politics beyond the formal spaces of parliamentary debates and media attention. However, the self-sacrificial behaviours he identifies are only the tip of the iceberg. The improvised words of the man in red may have been fleeting and opportunistic rather than entrenched and programmatic, but they, nonetheless, explicitly breached what Blane (2021, 123) calls the "sense of fatalism." I have, so far, convoked various authors to help me describe these moments of "rupture in the given" (Isin), of "celebration of defiance" (Birmingham) or of "spatial disorientation" (Kinkaid), when "we have begun to rearrange the pieces" (Graeber). But what happens next? When the carnival ends, when Vosi Yetu beatmakers unplug the microphone and pack together their sound system? What happens if we focus not on the momentary noise but on the silence afterwards, not on the Gandhian figures of political sacrifice but on the invisible mass of the iceberg that remains below the surface? This last section reflects on various encounters that happened before, during or after the Bungula Street Sessions to map out their ambivalent potential of disruption.

As discussed already, the very essence of the Bungula Street Sessions consists in a double invitation made both to local artists to perform for free on the street and to local residents to take part in the performances. But "taking part" is not as straightforward as it may seem. In terms of practical access, Bungula Street Sessions are indeed open to everyone. There is no cost of entry, no physical barrier, no security officer regulating the space. However, the few examples presented until now highlight the multidimensional capital that it actually takes, first, to dare to stop and, second, to take part actively as the kind of engaged public the Vosi Yetu Project seeks to involve.

In terms of gender, the balance is clearly tilted towards an over-representation of men. This gendering of public space is described in all the classic literature about gender in the urban space and about the division between public and private space (Rose 1993; Bondi 1998; Collignon and Staszak 2004). However, it would be erroneous to conclude that the Bungula Street Sessions are strictly gendered and that women would automatically feel estranged. Video 2 brings an important

element to this discussion: the Bungula Street Sessions actively promote the representation of women amongst the artists they invite. During the inaugural session in February 2020, women were also the most engaged participants from the public (Central Angola 7311 2020, 2:50–3:06). They particularly responded to a performance by capoeira artist Cabuenha, where he mixes his martial moves with dance and addresses the public through poetry and songs inspired by traditional tales he collected from his grandmother. Speaking in Kimbundu and inviting the public to clap and dance along, the performer developed an aesthetic closer to a family ceremony than a hip-hop show. In this instance, the performance required cultural capital that is familiar to women who are important guardians of the tradition in matrilinear societies such as that of the Mbundu ethnic group (Dias 1986). This example is an important reminder that the ability of a cultural event to mobilise the public only happens “under the proper historical and social circumstances” (Averill 1994, 244). This particular performance by Cabuenha in February 2020 indeed connected with the women present that day and opened a space for them to physically engage with the performance, clapping, dancing and forgetting the usual discretion expected from women on the street (see Figure 7).

As a woman, I also experienced the gendered nature of the Bungula Street Sessions in my body, but I believe my gender only played a secondary role in my socialisation there. Attending the Bungula Street Sessions was just one of multiple ways in which I interacted with the artists. Not only did long-lasting friendships make me familiar with the broader project, but my formal involvement in fieldwork about activism in Luanda gave me the “proper” context to engage in spirit and physically. Video S3 captures the physical proximity and the sensorial intensity of the session in Cacuo in November 2021. I remember holding the camera very close to my body and using the widest angle so as to record without having to stand back. Looking back at the images is somehow disturbing: the young man who took the microphone seems unaware of my presence, or at least skilfully avoids the gaze of the camera. A few members of the public, in contrast, look straight into the camera. All of this happens in such tight proximity that it is impossible to blur their faces without ruining the whole footage. It is an exemplary situation that shows the ethical conundrum of audiovisual research. In order to protect the identity of those who participated in this political event, I have to renounce the ethnographic value of my footage. The kaleidoscope effect I applied in Video 3 makes this contradiction manifest: can I salvage the multisensory evocative power of audiovisual material without betraying my ethical commitment?

Writing about the experience of riots in France, Romain Huët describes the particular sentiment that bursts out [*jaillir*] when rioters move together during a heated protest as “the sentiment of a temporary symbiosis with the other affected bodies,” which holds on to a “non-discursive” “desire to produce a spectacle” (Huët 2019, 62, 78). Of course a street concert is not a riot, although one could argue that claiming the street in Luanda requires a higher degree of defiance than protesting against the government in France. And of course, holding a camera during a concert cannot be compared with the experience of a rioter running from (or after) a police officer, as described by Huët. But when I was filming the Bungula Street Sessions, I contributed to a collective “desire to produce a spectacle,” what I call the “spectacularisation” of the event. Many participants, indeed, recorded the event.

The spectacle here does not refer to the show performed by the artists in front of their public but more fundamentally to the intersubjective experience of making noise and being heard, of being on the street and of being seen doing so. Portfolio 2 captures the multidimensional mirroring effects of the cameras during the Cacuo Session in November 2021. The artists were fully aware of the presence of the cameras and were willing to play with them (Figure 8). They also filmed the scene themselves (Figure 9). The members of the public who seized the microphone to showcase their own songs or slams were no different. They played with the public and called the attention of the cameras (Figure 10). In Averill’s (1994, 244) words, the performance — regardless of its content — became a “public discourse” by the fact that the crowd was able to “display to itself and to the authorities its own power and revolutionary potential” (Figure 11). The show becomes

a spectacle and reveals its carnivalesque potential when all those taking part in it eventually claim the moment as their own and attempt to capture that glimpse of “popular power” that is a mark of carnivals (Averill 1994, 244).



**Figure 7:** Performance by Cabuenha, February 2020, Sequele. Photographer: Sacerdote aka Dizkuduru.

**Portfolio 2**

The mirroring effect of cameras: how to harness the symbiotic energy of the spectacle? Cacucaco, November 20, 2021.



**Figure 8:** Isis Hembe slams for videographer Félix Cantares's camera, Cacucaco, November 20, 2021. Screenshot. Videographer: Félix Cantares.



**Figure 9:** Ikonoklasta films the crowd, Cacucaco, November 20, 2021. Screenshot. Videographer: Félix Cantares.



**Figure 11:** Cacuaco, November 20, 2021. The whole experience would be incomplete if participants did not come home with selfies to prove they were there. On this picture, from left to right: Félix, filmmaker and research partner; Lima, member of the public who sang; Isis Hembe, guest artist. Photographer: Chloé Buire.



**Figure 10:** Cacuaco, November 20, 2021. Rapper M'bonzo Lima, who was a member of the public that day, takes the microphone and harangues the crowd to chant with him: "Todo ódio é pouco." On his suggestion, I share the full audio of his song (see Supplementary Audio S2). Screenshot. Videographer: Chloé Buire.

Just as the man in red a few weeks earlier in Bairro Operário felt urged to improvise a rap, the recording here also shows how “the fever” can affect a collective. Without pretending that I am able to analytically freeze the sparks that ignited the fire in one case or the other, I believe that visual materials are key to convey the kind of energy that Graeber (2013) calls “contaminationism,” from which democracy emerges. Focusing on what people *feel* rather than on what they *express* directly echoes what Arnaud observes about parades in the French Caribbean: “The drums, the songs, the costumes, and the intensity of the music can trigger a vindicative feeling *that the context fires up*” (Arnaud 2022, 78, emphasis added).

As such, the political reach of the Vosi Yetu Project is similar to a chemical mix that only precipitates when in contact with external components: the physical co-presence of a particular group of people at a given time, the narrative effort of a collective to build upon the individual concerns of artists, the cultural subtext convoked by the words and sounds of a performer.

### **Concluding thoughts on the place of academic writing in opening public space**

I opened this article with the provocative chorus launched by one of the participants in a Bungula Street Session. If we were to analyse those words under the cold light of national or international legislation such as the United Nations Resolution on Civil and Political Rights of 1966, those words would certainly qualify as inciting hatred, thus making them irreconcilable with an agenda of defending freedom of expression. However, as I have shown in this article, the political potential of an act of public speaking cannot be limited to its lexical content. The Bungula Street Sessions by the Vosi Yetu Project offer rich materials to explore the sensory elements that contribute to transform an artistic performance into a moment of political precipitation.

When I started thinking about this article, I imagined sharing videos of the most intense moments I experienced during those sessions. I eventually judged that it could potentially harm the protagonists to share their images here. I thus resort to screenshots, audio files, selective blurring, post-production effects and my own reflexive writing to transmit the kind and levels of energy that made me feel “something is happening.” Multimedia writing emphasises the ethical conundrum of visual ethnography. The questions of what can be said and heard, of what can be seen and felt are relevant not only to critically explore the limits of public space in Angola but also to question the form and reach of academic writing more broadly.

I am aware that the demonstration might remain somehow elusive, but I contend that it is precisely this indeterminacy that constitutes the core contribution of this article to a broader reflection on the emergence of the political in the cracks of authoritarianism. Fear dissipates, optimism bursts out, but the revolution is nevertheless more a fleeting hope than a tangible outcome.

By shedding light on the kinesthetic apprenticeship necessary to be present in those fragile spaces of disruption, I wilfully trouble the distinction between academic and political work and hope to replace the body, as a physical presence and as a sensory device, at the heart of reflexive ethnographies.

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### **Notes**

1. In Luanda, 80 per cent of the urban fabric developed without formal urban planning (Plano Luanda 2015).
2. I here thank one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing the work of Graeber (2011) who, through both his anthropological questioning and his personal engagement in anarchist circles in the United States of

America, powerfully debunked the idea of revolution as a linear process starting with “victorious battles in the streets,” followed by “the spontaneous outpouring of popular festivity” and “the creation of new democratic institutions” and, ultimately, leading to “reinvention of life itself.” Instead, Graeber’s work digs into the fine grain of mobilisation to inspect how, despite a general admission of the failure of what might have looked like revolutionary momentums in the early 2010s, “we have begun to rearrange the pieces” (Graeber 2011, 6).

3. In 2021, President Lourenço acknowledged for the first time the brutal executions of hundreds of MPLA supporters that followed the attempted coup led by Nito Alves on May 27, 1977. Until this date, the internal purge, soberly known as “o 27 de Maio” [the 27th of May], was taboo in Angola. Specialists associate this date with the “hiatus” that marked the beginning of the era of fear towards the MPLA (Moorman 2008; Pawson 2014).
4. All translations from Portuguese and French are by the author.
5. Faradai’s work can be found at <https://linktr.ee/Faradai>. Tubo de Ensaio received a grant from the Culture of Resistance Foundation in 2022 (Cultures of Resistance Films n.d.).
6. Already in the 2017 general elections and even more markedly in the 2022 general elections, Luanda was where the MPLA registered its biggest electoral losses. Whilst the national results in 2022 gave 51 per cent to the MPLA (against 61 per cent in 2017), the party scored less than 34 per cent in the province of Luanda. In Cacuaco, one of Luanda’s most populous municipalities (and where most young people portrayed in this article lived), the main opposition party announced that it won 75 per cent of the votes, leaving only 21 per cent to the MPLA.
7. Branch and Mampilly (2015, 213) make an important contribution when they invite us to consider current popular protests across Africa as the expression of vivid political societies for whom “the creation of alternatives to formal state arrangements” has become their “very condition for survival.” It is an essential reminder here to inscribe the street action of the Vosi Yetu Project in a broader context of popular protests.
8. On the use of the term “carnavalesque” in the subheading, see Birmingham (1988, 102): “Carnival is a celebration. Politicians would like it to be a celebration of their strength and success. It is not. ... It is a celebration of defiance before the uncomprehending bourgeoisie in a city of bursting class conflict. But above all it is a celebration of historical tenacity and endurance in which five centuries of fishermen have absorbed and tamed peoples, cultures, religions, rituals from all over the world and made them a part of their very own distinctive Luanda carnival.”
9. See Polo Monzo (2020) for a reflection on the role of Portuguese, Brazilian and French cooperation for arts and culture in Luanda.
10. The Vosi Yetu Project was one of five case studies in a broader research project that was built in partnership with various collectives around the city. As such, Félix Cantares, who appears here as one of the photographers, is himself part of an activist organisation. He participated in my research as a co-filmmaker for the collaborative documentary film entitled “Histórias de Kakwaku” (see Buire 2022b, forthcoming). The other photographer, Manetov, is the founder of a street photography collective and is a friend of mine.
11. For a review of the social significance of various dances at the carnival during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Marzano (2016). For a broader overview of the evolution of the Luanda Carnival in the political history of Angola since the seventeenth century, see Birmingham (1988). Both references are representative of a more mainstream reading of the Luanda Carnival.
12. An important methodological and ethical note is needed here. Audio 1 comes from a video I recorded on my phone whilst attending the event with my husband and daughters. On that particular day, I was only identified as a researcher to the lead singer who has known me and my work for a decade and with whom I had earlier discussed my intention to record the Bungula Street Sessions. As such, I did not obtain the informed consent of “the man in red” to show the video of his performance in an academic paper. However, the public nature of the event complicates the matter. The man in red wilfully took the microphone that day and was aware he was being recorded (not only by me on my phone but by at least three other persons present that day, including a highly visible video-camera fixed on a tripod in front of the stage). Because the present article precisely questions the frontiers of the public and the very act of breaching the rules of silence, I contend that the voice of the man in red deserves to be heard.
13. Personal communication with one of the organisers, April 2021.

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