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ANTI-PARASITIC URBANISM IN FRANCOPHONE AFRICAN FICTION: SOW FALL AND BOUDJEDRA

Abstract

The protagonists of Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des bàttu* (1979) and Rachid Boudjedra's *L'escargot entêté* (1977) are public health officials leading 'campagnes d'assainissement' in Francophone African cities. They are charged with removing a supposed public health threat from urban space: beggars in the former text and rats in the latter. This article reads the novels alongside Michel Serres's *Le Parasite*. It argues that thinking about the sanitation campaigns as part of a more fundamental project to eliminate what the protagonists see as parasites from their cities makes sense of the intersections between hospitality, socio-politics, hygiene, and communication in both texts. Consistent with Serres's understanding of parasites as intrinsic to systems, the novels depict efforts to eliminate them as doomed to failure, and in the process call into question the violence visited upon those treated as the unwelcome guests of the city. This violence is shown to be linked to French colonialism in the Maghreb and West Africa. Noting the narrator of *L'escargot entêté*'s efforts to escape European epistemes in his theorization of the city, the article puts Serres in dialogue with theorists of subaltern urbanism.

Les protagonistes de *La Grève des bàttu* (1979) d'Aminata Sow Fall et de *L'escargot entêté* (1977) de Rachid Boudjedra sont des responsables de services municipaux de salubrité publique menant des 'campagnes d'assainissement' dans des villes francophones d'Afrique. Chacun veut exclure de l'espace urbain une prétendue menace pour la santé publique: les mendiants dans le premier texte et les rats dans le deuxième. Cet article lit ces romans sous

l'optique du *Parasite* de Michel Serres. Il affirme que nous devons considérer les campagnes d'assainissement comme faisant partie d'un projet plus vaste, dont le but est l'élimination de tout ce qui est perçu comme parasitaire par les protagonistes. En adoptant cette perspective, on éclaire les intersections entre l'hospitalité, la socio-politique, l'hygiène et la communication dans les deux textes. Conformément à l'idée serresienne que les parasites sont intrinsèques aux systèmes, ces romans représentent les tentatives pour les exclure comme vouées à l'échec. Ainsi remettent-ils en question les violences qui accompagnent ces efforts. L'article montre aussi les liens entre ces violences et le colonialisme français et, tenant compte du désir du narrateur de *L'escargot entêté* d'échapper aux épistémologies européennes, met Serres en dialogue avec des théoriciens de l'urbanisme subalterne.

'J'ai ma dignité: j'aime la propreté et le silence'.[1] This is how the narrator of Rachid Boudjedra's 1977 novel, *L'escargot entêté*, describes his ideal city. On the surface, his proclivities might seem benign. The World Health Organization considers sanitation 'crucial' to well-being,[2] and examples of quiet being used as a synonym for desirable can be found on any estate agent's website. Not everyone has access to clean and quiet neighbourhoods, but for Boudjedra's narrator, it would be undignified to want anything else. And yet, Macs Smith questions the desire for urban cleanliness and quiet.[3] He puts forward three principal arguments. Firstly, drawing on Michel Serres's *Le Parasite*, he argues that these desires are

[1] Rachid Boudjedra, *L'escargot entêté* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1977).

[2] World Health Organization, *Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH)* (2023) <https://www.who.int/health-topics/water-sanitation-and-hygiene-wash>.

[3] Macs Smith, *Paris and the Parasite: Noise, Health, and Politics in the Media City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2021).

expressions of a more fundamental aversion to 'parasites', which Serres defines as disruptive forces that traverse hospitality, socio-politics, biology, and communication.[4] Secondly, following Serres's assertion that 'déparasit[age]' is a strategy of centralized power,[5] Smith argues that French urbanism since the 19th century is 'anti-parasitic'. And finally, he affirms that the desire to rid cities of parasites is ethically problematic.[6] In this article, I propose to examine the place of the parasite in two fictional African cities: the North African capital depicted in *L'escargot entêté* and the Senegalese city in Aminata Sow Fall's *La Grève des bàttu ou Les Déchets humains* (1979). These two novels, published two years apart, have numerous similarities. Their protagonists are municipal sanitation officials overseeing *campagnes d'assainissement* in African cities. While the word 'parasite' does not appear in either text, both protagonists are fixated on figures Serres considers archetypal parasites (for Boudjedra the rat and for Sow Fall the beggar), and both texts offer examples of the parasite traversing hospitality, economics, biology, and communication. I will argue that these novels don't only make visible how the aversion to parasites shapes urban planning and politics, but point readers towards radically hospitable approaches to the city in which those on the margins are seen as equally deserving participants in the urban system.

This article is also an opportunity to address a potential blind spot in Smith's theorization of 'anti-parasitic urbanism.' Smith's book focuses on Paris, and he asks us to read it as 'a case study of one city whose arguments and observations concern architecture, urbanism, and urban politics more generally'.[7] The invitation to generalize from Paris is

[4] Michel Serres, *Le Parasite* (Paris: Éditions Grasset et Fasquelle, 1980).

[5] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 175.

[6] Smith, *Paris and the Parasite*, 4.

[7] Smith, *Paris and the Parasite*, 14.

problematic given the history of urban planning models and theory being exported from Western metropolises to the cities of the Global South. As Gautam Bhan writes, 'the urbanism of [southern] cities has been read, described and understood largely in terms of theory built elsewhere'.[8] Of course, for cities in French colonies, Paris — particularly Haussmannized Paris with its wide boulevards and straight lines — was a constant reference point, and it would be difficult to make sense of their urban planning in isolation from the metropole, but there is a risk of epistemic violence in simply applying a theory like anti-parasitic urbanism, articulated through a European capital, to cities in Algeria and Senegal. In this article, I will argue that anti-parasitic urbanism is a useful concept for the study of the cities depicted in these novels while remaining attentive to that risk. I will be guided by Jennifer Robinson's notion of a 'reformatted urban comparativism' in which 'concepts might finally be exploded to reveal new starting points inspired by the "difference" drawn off as the concept travels across diverse cases'.[9] This means allowing Boudjedra's and Sow Fall's novels to articulate new genealogies and horizons for the relationship between the city and its so-called parasites, and putting Smith's concept in dialogue with subaltern urbanism, a field broadly concerned with giving voice to cities, urban zones, and citizens on the outside of hegemonic urban theory. Subaltern urbanism responds to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's writings on the silences in the colonial historical archive, and a line in the seminal 'History' chapter of her *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* hints at what the parasite can bring to the

[8] Gautam Bhan, 'Notes on a Southern Urban Practice', *Environment and Urbanization* 31 (2019), 639-654 (p. 641).

[9] Jennifer Robinson, 'Comparative Urbanism and Global Urban Studies: Theorising the Urban', *Global Urbanism: Knowledge, Power and the City*, ed. by Michele Lancione and Colin McFarlane (Milton: Routledge, 2021), 96-104 (p. 100).

study of the postcolonial cities under examination here. Spivak describes 'the retrieval of the history of the margin' as a rhetorical strategy that 'works at the silences between bits of language to see what will work as meaning, to ward off a silence filled with nothing but noise'.[10] The parasite similarly invites us to pay attention to the shifting margins and the interstices of communication. Thinking parasites and the subaltern alongside each other is an opportunity to give a different political inflection to the former and, for the latter, to put as much emphasis on noise as on silence.

What is anti-parasitic urbanism?

Before looking at the novels, what does the parasite mean in an urban context? *Le parasite* has four meanings in French. First is the etymological meaning of the unwelcome guest. In ancient Greece, the *parasitos* was a poor person allowed to eat with nobles in exchange for entertainment. The suspicion that such people weren't really paying their way gave rise to the meaning of the freeloader. Science borrowed the term to describe organisms that live off another's life force. And finally, it can mean noise. These four meanings point to four domains in which parasitism takes place: the hospitable, the socio-political, the biological, and the mediatic. Central to Serres's argument is the idea that the parasite traverses these domains. This explains our tendency to use language from one to make sense of breakdowns in another (an example is the computer virus, which borrows from biological parasitism to visualize a mediatic parasite). Whether we are talking about the home, society, the body, or communication, the parasite ensures that what we put into systems never equals what comes out.

[10] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 239.

By providing a framework for thinking about the home, society, the body, and communication alongside one another, the parasite enables connections between three areas of enquiry in urban studies: 1) hygiene's influence on urban planning; 2) what Henri Lefebvre called 'le droit à la ville';[11] and 3) media-theoretical approaches to the city. Regarding the latter, in 1961, Lewis Mumford argued that cities were information processing systems.[12] That line of thought has given rise to an informatic approach to urbanism embodied today by the Smart City model, in which cities are viewed as machines from which noise, glitches, and information loss must be eliminated.[13] The parasite helps us to see how informatic approaches to urban governance dovetail with the socio-economic homogenization of the city long criticized by Marxist urban theorists and hygienic projects to rid urban spaces of disease. Smith gives a range of examples of this in the Parisian context, including campaigns against noise that depict it as a public health threat; Haussmann's biopolitical rationalization of the street network; Le Corbusier's attempts to atomize society by turning the home into a noiseless machine; and Jacques Chirac's *discours d'Orléans* in which he described Black and Arab immigrants as economic freeloaders and noise producers.[14]

Smith argues against these attempts to rid the city of its supposed parasites through reference to Serres's claim that parasites are not exogenous disruptors that can be eliminated from a system, but instead intrinsic to systems. The parasite, Serres writes, 'est nécessaire à la

[11] Henri Lefebvre, *Le Droit à la ville* (Paris: Anthropos, 1968).

[12] Lewis Mumford, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects* (New York: Harcourt, 1961).

[13] For problems with Smart City urbanism, see Shannon Mattern, *A City Is Not a Computer: Other Urban Intelligences* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021).

[14] Smith, *Paris and the Parasite*, 1-3, 28-30, 34-45, 49-50.

relation, inéluctable par le renversement de la force qui tente de l'exclure'.[15] There are no channels without noise, and no cleansing ever completely expels parasites. Projects to eliminate parasites from the city are thus doomed to fail. Recognising that futility invites a questioning of the violence latent in such efforts.

However, while Serres does challenge the negative connotations born by the parasite, his work does not necessarily lend itself to a prescriptive urban politics. On the contrary, he has been criticized for being more interested in how systems work than in who holds power within them.[16] In *Le Parasite*, Serres associates *déparasitage* with centralized power, and at times seems to be advancing an anti-authoritarian politics: the text repeatedly evokes the image of the slave turning the tables on the master. Against a model in which the centre dominates, he argues that real power is found at the margins. And yet, his understanding of this dynamic is ambivalent, as evidenced by his reading of Boursault's fable of the city rat and country rat. The two rats are parasites of the man whose crumbs they feast on. But when the man hears them, he makes noise and scares them off. 'Le parasité parasite les parasites. Il était dans les premiers, il saute à la dernière place. Or celui qui se place dans le dos de tous gagne à ce jeu, comme à beaucoup de jeux'.[17] The parasite is a position one occupies rather than a stable identity, and those who have historically occupied the centre can take up that position as easily as the marginalized. The lion, IBM, and Zeus exemplify parasitism at different points in his argument.

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[15] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 145.

[16] Cf. Christopher Watkin, *Michel Serres: Figures of Thought* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 14.

[17] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 35.

This is why Smith ultimately turns to Derrida. Unlike Serres, Derrida, who discusses parasites in *Limited inc* and his seminars on hospitality, prioritizes the fact that in the etymological meaning, the parasite is marked out as being of a lower class. Whereas Serres sees the parasite as a role in a game that anyone can play, Derrida underscores the legal and discursive frameworks that result in some entities being classed as hosts and others as parasites. 'En principe, la différence [entre un hôte et un parasite] est stricte, mais il faut pour cela un droit'.[18] The power to make those laws matters. And while Serres is right to say that power lies at the margins, too, Derrida insists on the violence that many are subjected to by virtue of being marked out as unwelcome guests. Though he doesn't draw the comparison himself, in Derrida's account the parasite is akin to the *barbaros*, another noise-producing outsider who receives welcome or death at the discretion of the host. In concrete terms, it is true that in Boursault's fable the man and the rat parasite each other, but only one party is capable of stepping on the other. Saying that both are parasites at different moments does not negate the structural imbalances in power that characterize their experience of that identity. This observation enables Smith to move from Serres's political agnosticism to an understanding of anti-parasitic urbanism as an ideology that produces and reproduces certain groups as the pathologized others of the city, and to an *engagement* on their behalf.

In this article, in talking about the parasites of the city, I will thus not be talking about a predetermined and stable class that would include rats and beggars. I am interested in the discursive and legal frameworks that make it so some characters in these novels get to be the hosts of the city who label others as unwelcome guests, and how this process underpins the violent expulsion of the latter from the body politic. Likewise, in comparing the fates of rats

[18] Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle, *De l'hospitalité* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1997), 57.

and beggars in the two texts, I am not asserting an inherent affinity between the two groups. As I will discuss, comparisons between rats and marginalised people have historically served as a pretext for violence directed at both rats and people. By reading these novels alongside each other through the lens of anti-parasitic urbanism, my goal is to bring into relief some of the ideologies that underpin metaphorizations of people as rats or rats as racialized others, and to contest them. As Derrida writes, to be a parasite is not an objective fact. Parasites are 'called thus by the owner [of a home/body/place], jealously defending his own'[19]. Both of these novels show us the contingency and selfishness behind the processes that mark some out as the parasites of the city, and in so doing they problematize the very idea that some are welcome in the city and others are not.

La Grève des bàttu: Economic parasitism and the hospitable city

La Grève des bàttu follows Mour Ndiaye, 'le directeur du Service de la salubrité publique' (12) of a Senegalese city referred to as *la Ville*.[20] After the central government calls on municipalities to 'assainir les voies publiques' (12), Mour, who dreams of being vice president, tasks his office with permanently removing beggars from the streets. Doing so will make the city more attractive to Western tourists, boost the economy, and spare the bourgeoisie the awkwardness they feel encountering poverty: 'Ces mendiants, ils nous… enfin ils nous mènent la vie un peu dure, voyons' (12-13). The public health commission's

[19] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc*, trans. Samuel Weber (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 90.

[20] In this section, parenthetical citations refer to Aminata Sow Fall, *La Grève des bàttu ou les déchets humains* (Dakar: Nouvelles Éditions Africaines, 1979; repr. Paris: Groupe DDB, 2011).

draconian treatment of the beggars provokes the *grève*: the poor decamp to the periphery and cease to make themselves available for alms. This creates problems for the bourgeoisie, who cannot uphold *zakat*, the pillar of Islam that requires Muslims to donate to the needy, and who risk missing out on the good fortune promised to them by their *marabouts*. The novel climaxes with Mour begging the beggars to return so he can give his alms and not miss out on the government post he believed he'd earned by evicting them in the first place.

The government's approach is anti-parasitic in its conflation of mendicity and disease. Clearing beggars from the streets falls to the public health department and is referred to as a 'campagne d'assainissement' (93). The beggars are described as outsiders invading the city and a form of pollution that threatens public health: 'On ne peut tout de même pas les laisser nous envahir, menacer l'hygiène publique et l'économie nationale' (14). The beggars suffer from a variety of physical deformities, and their deviant bodies incarnate the infirmity with which they supposedly threaten the body politic. The ruling class's pathologization of poverty is epitomized by Mour's deputy, Kéba Dabo, who has a paranoid fear of beggars. Seeing poverty makes him nauseous (35), and he believes the poor 'empestent l'odeur de la Ville' (33). While the word 'parasite' isn't used, the portrayal of these people as economic freeloaders and disease vectors serves as a pretext for violence to be unleashed on them. The beggars are beaten, verbally abused, and driven to distant villages.

While Sow Fall's decision to refer to the setting as 'la Ville' sometimes makes the narrative feel like a fable, reference is made to Dakar. When the beggars leave the city centre, they set up camp in the 'nouveau quartier des Parcelles Assainies' (95). This neighbourhood on the periphery of Dakar was established in the early 1970's as part of a World Bank-funded initiative to create low-income housing outside the city centre. Sow Fall's choice of this neighbourhood for the site of the beggars' commune playfully highlights the inevitable failure of projects of *assainissement*, and it also anchors the novel's action in the real history

of Dakar, underscoring the fact that the anti-parasitic urbanism depicted in the novel is an extension of hygienic urban planning ideologies that have shaped the city since its founding.

Hygiene, urban planning, and control were intimately intertwined in the French colonial project, just as they were in the domestic context. Dakar became the poster child for the European portrayal of West Africa as the 'White Man's Grave'.[21] Yellow fever, malaria, and bubonic plague made French domination of West Africa difficult. Disease halted military campaigns and interrupted construction and trade. Controlling outbreaks thus became a priority for the colonial administration. Hygiene was also a tool for cultural oppression, establishing white European modes of life as the norm and pathologizing the indigenous, evidenced by the decades-long battle by French administrators to define the indigenous straw hut as insalubrious.[22]

Over time, hygiene became a pretext for racial segregation, as the African body came to be perceived as a pathogenic threat to white European health.[23] 'Beginning in 1900, French colonial administrators undertook a concerted effort to remove Africans from the economic center of power in eastern Dakar', justifying the forced migration as a prophylactic measure

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[21] Liora Bigon, 'A History of Urban Planning and Infectious Diseases: Colonial Senegal in the Early Twentieth Century', *Urban Studies Research* (2012), 1-12 (p. 3).

[22] Alain Sinou, *Comptoirs et villes coloniales du Sénégal* (Paris: Éditions Karthala et Orstom, 1993), 189.

[23] In the South African context, Maynard Swanson coined the term 'sanitation syndrome': 'equating black urban settlement, labour and living conditions with threats to public health and security'. Maynard Swanson, 'The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900-1909', *The Journal of African History* 18 (1977), 387-410.

against yellow fever.[24] The 1914 outbreak of bubonic plague intensified these efforts. The government imposed two *cordons sanitaires* to prevent the indigenous population from accessing the administrative centre,[25] and established a new *ville indigène* called Médina in reference to the North African casbahs that were its model. These segregationist policies, which went against the French Republic's official race-blindness, were justified on hygienic grounds. In 1919, the Governor General, Gabriel Angoulvant, so that no one would see 'une idée politique d'opposition de races' behind the creation of the Médina, sought to redefine 'ville européenne': 'Le nom 'ville européenne' doit s'entendre dans le sens de 'ville de gens qui acceptent l'assujettissement aux règlements sanitaires applicables aux Européens'. While the indigenous population would theoretically be welcome, he asserted that 'les règlements d'hygiène publique […] sont le plus généralement incompatibles avec les habitudes de vie des indigènes'.[26] European hygiene was thus functionally synonymous with whiteness.

These examples show how central hygienics was to French governance of Dakar. Indeed, even interventions like the construction of the main roads were 'regularly classified in the official documentary records less as "urban planning" than as "*assainissement*"'.[27] The idea of urban planning as a mode of *assainissement* continued beyond Senegalese independence, as evidenced by the naming of Parcelles Assainies, with the target of the

[24] David Nelson, 'Defining the Urban: The Construction of French-Dominated Colonial Dakar, 1857-1940', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 33 (2007), 225-255 (p. 231).

[25] Bigon, 'A History of Urban Planning', 7-8.

[26] Archives Nationales du Sénégal, Letter from the Governor General, 15 February 1919, 3G2/160 piece 7, quoted in Sinou, *Comptoirs et villes coloniales*, 284.

[27] Bigon, 'A History of Urban Planning', 7.

hygienic ideologies shifting from the black population to the poor. In a 1960 speech shortly after independence, Prime Minister Mamadou Dia mingled hygiene and socio-economics in a speech calling on the country to pursue 'l'hygiène, la propreté, la correction, la politesse, l'investissement-travail, la réhabilitation du travail manuel qui permet de lutter contre le sous-emploi, *de réduire les parasitismes sociaux* (familial, de caste) et d'augmenter la capacité d'épargne'.[28] In the 1970's, this anti-parasitic rhetoric evolved into an official pathologization of poverty, as politicians began to speak of those on the margins of society as 'déchets' or 'encombrements humains' (which Sow Fall picks up in her subtitle: *Les Déchets humains*), and devised hygienic policies to cleanse the city of them.[29] Poverty was portrayed as a form of waste or congestion that needed to be cleared from the body politic.

These examples show that the drive to eliminate supposed disease agents has overlapped with social, political, and racial exclusion throughout Dakar's history. Sow Fall's novel represents and fundamentally undermines this anti-parasitic ideology. Throughout the book, characters challenge the ethics of Mour Ndiaye and Kéba Dabo's efforts to rid the city of parasites and question whether such a goal could ever be realized. During a meeting with the heads of the new 'brigades d'intervention', Kéba tells the men that only immaculate cleanliness will do. 'Circulez sans arrêt à travers la Ville, jusqu'à ce qu'elle soit parfaitement nettoyée' (32). The employees push back, arguing that the problem is intractable. When Kéba tells them they can banish the beggars to villages with no transport links, an employee responds, 'ils reviendront toujours!' (32). Following the meeting, Kéba's secretary joins in,

[28] Quoted in Ousseynou Faye and Ibrahima Thioub, 'Les marginaux et l'État à Dakar', *Le Mouvement Social* 204 (2003), 93-108 (p. 99). My emphasis.

[29] René Collignon, 'La lutte des pouvoirs publics contre les "encombrements humains" à Dakar', *Canadian Journal of African Studies* 18 (1984), 573-582 (p. 573).

telling him, 'tu perds ton temps avec les mendiants. Ils sont là depuis nos arrière-arrière-grands-parents. Tu les as trouvés au monde, tu les y laisseras. Tu ne peux rien contre eux' (34). She portrays the poor not as an exogenous menace destabilising a previously ordered system, but as having been there since the beginning. This is consistent with Serres's thinking. Discussing a hypothetical architect who meticulously tries to keep rats out of his home, he writes: '[les rats] sont, comme on dit, toujours déjà là. Ils sont du bâtiment'.[30]

The novel doesn't simply show that anti-parasitic urbanism is doomed to failure; it has it accomplish the opposite of its intended goals. Rather than cementing the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, consolidating power in the centre, and pre-empting disorder and disease, anti-parasitic urbanism brings about an inversion of the power relationship between centre and periphery and a destabilization of the formal economy whose integrity begging threatened. In Sow Fall's Dakar, the bourgeoisie give money to the poor for *zakat*, the Islamic obligation to give alms. Nguirane Sarr, a blind man who becomes one of the leaders of the beggars, realizes his receiving of alms is a kind of labour, which he can withhold (47). When the poor join him by decamping to Parcelles Assainies, they turn the city upside-down. From then on, the bourgeois commute in their thousands from the centre to the periphery to offer sacrifices. Begging goes from a dispersed, informal practice to a localized, formalized one, with a bus station rebaptized 'l'arrêt des mendiants' (95) and a building for processing donations. The bourgeois lament that the beggars now set the terms for the urban economy (96). The ordinary movement of resources from the periphery to the centre is inverted. Whereas early in the novel, the beggars are described as invading the city, at the end it is the 'confrérie' of beggars which is 'envahie' by almsgivers (154). This shift is consistent with

[30] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 32-33.

Serres's notion that the parasite (whose prefix *para* means adjacent to) derives power from occupying the margins, not the centre.

The novel's parody of almsgiving mocks Dakar's bourgeoisie and those marabouts who operate less as religious leaders than as *consigliere* to the wealthy. It also makes an implicit argument against the notion that access to the urban community is paid for. Mour justifies his anti-parasitic policies on the grounds that the right to the city needs to be earned through work in the formal economy: 'c'est pour qu'ils travaillent qu'on les chasse des rues de la Ville' (40). I quoted Derrida above as saying that entities are called parasites by an owner 'jealously defending his own'[31]. Smith uses this passage in *Limited inc* to argue that identifying parasites is a way for hosts to assert ownership of property.[32] Mour is just such a putative host here, enshrining his own right to the city by asserting the beggars to be parasitic freeloaders. As a representative of the government, he is trying to establish the kind of 'droit' that Derrida says is necessary to distinguish between host and parasite.[33] But the beggars contest his argument. 'Ils se sont toujours considérés comme des citoyens à part entière. Pour eux,' Sow Fall writes, 'le contrat qui lie chaque individu à la société se résume en ceci: donner et recevoir' (44-45). They reject Mour's efforts to mark them as outsiders, and against his transactional community, they argue for the city to be governed by an economy of the gift. Their idea that access to society should be something that is not bought but freely given and received recalls Derrida's assertion that an economics that made space for parasitism

[31] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, 90.

[32] Smith, *Paris and the Parasite*, 192.

[33] Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *De l'hospitalité*, 57.

would call into question the very nature of 'the "own," "ownership," "property"'.[34] By asserting urban space as something to be shared, the beggars assert it to be no one's property.

A similar argument against Mour's transactional understanding of his relationship to the other comes from the novel's female characters. When Mour's wife Lolli accuses him of betraying her by taking a second wife (who works in tourism, linking her to European capital), he responds, 'quel est le contrat qui me lie et qui m'empêche de prendre une seconde épouse si je le désire?'. She responds, contesting the transactional terms in which he understands their marriage, 'le contrat de l'honnêteté, de la reconnaissance' (61). Her contract is no contract at all: Lolli understands marriage as an absolute openness to the other rather than a legal agreement. Almost all of the novel's women are openly critical of the government's actions, and the fact that the beggars' strike is led by a woman, Salla Niang, suggests there is an intersectional dimension to the novel's critique of anti-parasitic urbanism. The implication that Mour's management of his home life (*oikos*) is linked to his management of the urban economy (*oikonomia*) represents another connection between the hospitable avatar of parasitism and the socio-political one. It also recalls Spivak's statement that if 'the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow'.[35] By placing Salla Niang at the head of the strike, Sow Fall moves a doubly marginalised figure into a position of power.

However, while Salla Niang's rise fits with a reading of the novel as promoting solidarity of the oppressed against a patriarchal, capitalist, developmentalist hegemony, Lolli's marriage problematizes that straightforward political message. The voices of tradition that defend the beggars' right to the city expect Lolli to accept Mour's second wife. The

[34] Derrida, *Limited inc*, 76.

[35] Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 274.

counterargument comes from her daughter Raabi, a law student. While Senegalese women had greater access to higher education post-independence, and while the university has shaped Raabi's anti-imperialist politics (66), the novel portrays her as representative of a new, cosmopolitan elite. Her argument against polygamy — that it belongs in the past (60) — echoes her father's argument against begging (39) and has developmentalist undertones. Lolli and Raabi embody Spivak's assertion that 'the "third-world woman" [is] caught between tradition and modernization, culturalism and development'.[36] That Raabi appeals to progress while the beggars appeal to tradition reveals a fault line in the prospective alliance between bourgeois women and the poor, and it muddies the novel's message regarding Westernization and modernization in a way that is never completely resolved. I will return to this in the conclusion.

These discontinuities notwithstanding, both the beggars and the women of the city are firmly opposed to a contractual understanding of communal bonds. They harken back to a time when, as Nguirane Sarr puts it, 'la mendicité […] n'était pas considérée comme un fléau' (109). Begging was not perceived as a plague to be cured, because the legal framework that, according to Derrida, is a precondition for any distinction between the welcome guest and the trespassing parasite did not exist. Mour's failure to radically question that framework is ultimately the cause of his humiliation. The one moment in which he feels that 'le mur qui se dressait entre lui et les mendiants' (159) comes down is watching beggars scrap over money he has thrown into the air. He never understands his relationship with them in terms that aren't transactional and he continues to see them as people who need to 'retrouver leur qualité de citoyens à part entière' (160) rather than having the same fundamental right to the city that he has. The beggars ultimately refuse his alms because he only offers to help them

[36] Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 304.

become welcome guests in the city, instead of challenging the very distinction between guest and parasite that justified their violent expulsion from the city in the first place.

L'escargot entêté: Biological parasitism and the informatic city

While *La Grève des bàttu* satirizes the treatment of the poor as parasites, Rachid Boudjedra's *L'escargot entêté* focuses on the pathologization of a non-human organism. Its narrator is a municipal public health official in a North African capital which has launched a 'campagne de propreté' (129).[37] His task is to exterminate the city's five million rats, which he perceives as a dire threat to 'les conditions d'hygiène de [s]es concitoyens' (44). The narrator claims with a mix of fascination and horror that Alberta, Canada, is the only place in the world inhabited by humans that is rat-free (64). The rat is a quintessential parasite for Serres. In Boudjedra's novel, biological warfare against this animal becomes a war for the economy, for a kind of *Lebensraum* for humankind (echoes of Third Reich rhetoric can be heard in his belief that 'l'espace vital des hommes se rétrécit' [19]), and for the very ontological boundaries of the human.

As Peter Soppelsa explains, the global 'war on rats', one theatre of which is depicted in this novel, has historically been intimately linked with French imperialism. In 1894, the third bubonic plague spread from Hong Kong. Plague reached France's north African ports in 1907. Alexandre Yersin's identification of the plague bacterium and the discovery that fleas carried by rats were the primary transmission vector led to a global campaign against rats. 'Because the plague emergency collided with the "new imperialism" around 1900, managing

[37] In this section, parenthetical citations refer to Boudjedra, *L'escargot entêté*.

the mobility of rats, fleas, and plague became integral to maintaining overseas empires'.[38] France opened Pasteur Institutes in Tunis, Algiers, Tangiers, and Casablanca, as well as 'rat labs' across the Maghreb.[39]

Rats became a mirror of French attitudes towards human others. They were identified as an inferior 'race' and compared to the Germans on the other side of the World Wars. Experts played up the fact that the plague-carrying brown rat was an 'invasive species from Asia' that had pushed out Europe's native rats, giving 'chauvinistic and ethnocentric' overtones to the extermination campaign. The elision of rats and non-white people was not merely rhetorical: North African cities became test sites for poisons deployed with little regard for colonized subjects. Tests in Algiers, Oran, and Constantine resulted in fumes rising into homes. Comparison of human ethnic minorities to rats was used as a justification for genocide against those people. 'Brown rats', Soppelsa writes, 'were symbolically caught in a common French colonial tangle of dehumanization and exoticism with medicalization and hygienism'.[40]

This history supports Serres's claim that hospitable and biological discourses of parasitism converge through the rat. In *L'escargot entêté*, the narrator's aversion to rats is closely tied to a distaste for human others. While he is generally pleased that his work will help his fellow citizens, '[il] revendique [s]a solitude' (21). He associates people with dirt and requires visitors to his home to clean their shoes before crossing the threshold, although no one visits. All guests are unwelcome. Speaking to the socio-political dimension of parasitism,

[38] Peter Soppelsa, 'Losing France's Imperial War on Rats', *Journal of the Western Society for French History* 47 (2021), 67-87 (p. 68).

[39] Soppelsa, 'Losing France's Imperial War on Rats', 73.

[40] Soppelsa, 'Losing France's Imperial War on Rats', 70-73.

the narrator repeatedly invokes the image of the rat as an invasive species tied to colonialism, but instead of the rat being an invader from Asia, it becomes an ally of European colonizers. 'Ce sont les Européens qui l'ont amené avec eux', (36) he says, adding that if there are no rats in Alberta, it's because the indigenous population has kept the colonizer's pests at bay. Exemplifying the slippage between the biological and social parasite, the narrator's plan to chemically castrate rats elides into eugenic fantasies directed at humanity. He believes rat poison should be used on criminals (32), supports a two-child limit (44), and has sworn himself to celibacy. The women in his neighbourhood '[l]'accusent de vouloir éliminer l'espèce humaine' (15). His sanitation campaign is targeted at society as much as at rats, and at its most extreme reveals a desire to eliminate all encounters with otherness, even at the expense of the human race.[41]

L'escargot entêté's narrator is not only anti-parasitic in the hospitable and biological senses; he also exemplifies the mediatic dimension of the term. He abhors noise, which he associates with communal life. His private residence is characterized by 'la béatitude du silence' (46), whereas the noise of his neighbourhood makes him put cotton wool in his ears (43). His desire for the city to be noise-free extends to the sense of information loss and inefficiency. The novel opens with him complaining that he has arrived at the office late because the chatty bus driver has gummed up the urban machine. Every day he times his commute with 'un chronomètre de haute précision' (10). He laments that the city doesn't

[41] In his theorization of 'immunity', Roberto Esposito argues that the genocidal project of the Nazis — as well as the 'auto-genocidal fury' at the end of the Second World War — is the telos of a modern desire to safeguard the self from communal contagion. Roberto Esposito, *Terms of the Political: Community, Immunity, Biopolitics*, trans. Rhiannon Noel Welch (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 79-87.

work like clockwork, and blames this for the supposed public health crisis: 'Si tout le monde était aussi strict [en termes de ponctualité] que moi, la ville ne serait pas dans cet état de saleté' (10).

The narrator's distaste for urban noise dovetails with an obsession with clear communication. The novel's style becomes a proxy war in his quest for urban order. Much of the novel is dedicated to his concern that his reports aren't sufficiently legible. He imposes an austere style on himself characterized by short declarative sentences. Reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's Molloy, who circulates 'sucking stones' through the pockets of his coat,[42] Boudjedra's narrator slips his numbered notes into protective plastic sleeves and stores each one in one of his twenty pockets (122). When he comes out with the phrase, 'La chair des mots est pulpeuse', he catches himself: 'Très lyrique. À raturer' (84). 'Raturer', with 'rat' leading the way, is the word he always uses. Poetic ambiguity is another rat to watch out for.

The parasite makes sense of the overlap between the narrator's quest to exterminate the rats supposedly eating away at the city's physical and economic health, and of his aversion to noise, inefficiency, and ambiguity in both the city and his writing. It suggests that these are not separate obsessions, but inextricable components of an ideology whose goal is not really to rid the city of rodents, but of parasites. The narrator tells us that he has walled off his desk from his co-workers with two dictionaries: 'L'un de zoologie. L'autre de vocabulaire' (54). The systematic organization of the living world and of communication are the two pillars of his ideal space.

Of course, for Serres, 'si la santé se définit par le silence, la santé n'existe pas.'[43] Boudjedra's narrator, despite his devotion to the cause, grasps that his task is Sisyphean, and

[42] Samuel Beckett, *Molloy* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1951; repr. 1982), 97-101.

[43] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 145.

gradually reveals a remarkably ambivalent attitude towards rats. He considers it a given that his project will fail. Echoing Serres ('La bataille contre les rats est perdue, il n'y a pas de maison, de bateau, de palais, qui n'en ait son lot ou son pourcentage.'[44]), he asserts that rats and humans are co-extensive: 'Là où l'homme s'établit, il y a des rats' (35-36). Indeed, life without rats would be unliveable for him (62). He would like to write 'un livre sur les bienfaits du rat' (47) to make people rethink the desire to exterminate them. He suspects the book would open 'une brèche dans la zoologie classique' (49), breaking through the ordered structures represented by the dictionaries that symbolically wall him off from his community. Hinting at the stakes of a *remise en question* of anti-parasitic urbanism, he claims that a book defending rats would be so revolutionary that the state would surely silence him (98).

The narrator's hypothetical book would challenge the rat's association with mediatic parasites as well as its status as a biological one. The first case study he imagines including is the legend that in ancient Greece, the disappearance of rats from a city was a warning for earthquakes. 'Dès qu'il disparaissait d'une ville, ses habitants en déménageaient promptement. […] Un rat est un sismographe!' (47). The rat is not a parasitic noise-maker in the urban media system here, but a medium that makes other noises intelligible. In the process, it saves lives rather than threatening them. He also references the 1870-1871 Siege of Paris, during which rats switched from a parasite reducing the food supply to a food source themselves, helping to stave off starvation (48). 'Lors des famines, l'abondance des rats est vitale' (21). In both mediatic and public health terms, the parasitism of rats is reconsidered.

The narrator's re-evaluation of the rat manifests in his writing, too. Just as the real rats prove impossible to eliminate from the city, removing ambiguity from his notes proves self-defeating. 'Je rature beaucoup sur mes petits bouts de papier au point qu'ils deviennent

[44] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 32.

illisibles' (22). Too much erasure makes him unintelligible. Every 'rature' smuggles the letters r-a-t into his narrative. Eventually, even physical rats manage to infiltrate his note-taking system: when a co-worker leaves a dead rat on a secretary's desk as a prank, the narrator slips it into a plastic sleeve and tucks it into one of the pockets he uses to organize his notes. His thoughts become rat-like, and he begins to believe the 'bruit' (71) circulated about him, that there is a rat in his brain. At the novel's climax, he turns his back on the directness of prose and decides not to erase an especially lyrical passage. 'Je voudrais', he explains, 'pour une fois, être vrai' (141).

The narrator doesn't directly apply this epistemological transformation to the city. In the book's final pages, he returns to decrying the city's 'viscosités, ses immondices, et ses goulots d'étranglement' (146). And yet, just as his crossed-out lyrical outbursts leave traces, his crisis of confidence in his anti-parasitic project leaves behind an implicit critique of order and clarity in the urban context. Throughout the novel, the narrator identifies rats and the eponymous garden snail, another ostensible pest that destabilizes his way of looking at the world, with labyrinths. He spends hours watching the former solve mazes (24) and the latter's spiral shell offers a troubling challenge to his doctrine of straight lines. Every time he questions his aversion to these organisms, he is implicitly questioning his aversion to twists and turns in the urban landscape. Raji Vallury writes, 'La calligraphie ondulante des rats, leur manière de baliser et maîtriser une topographie labyrinthique démontre leur capacité de rendre plus fluides l'espace et le temps, de convertir les lignes droites en arabesques et vice-versa'.[45] While the narrator himself doesn't make the connection, his references to arabesque

[45] Raji Vallury, 'Poétiques et politiques de l'allégorie dans "L'escargot entêté" de Rachid Boudjedra', *Dalhousie French Studies* 105 (2015), 41-46 (p. 44). Réda Bensmaïa makes a similar argument in Deleuzian terms: 'the narrator thought that only the straight line was the

(emphasis on the 'Arab') labyrinths evoke the conventional descriptions of the North African casbah,[46] just as his stated preference for straight lines evokes the Haussmannian rationalism and orthogonal grids of French colonial urbanism. By enticing the narrator towards the labyrinth, the rat and snail thus challenge his alignment with a European urbanism that seeks to rationalize and control space, and beckon him towards the confusingly organic forms of the subaltern city. The narrator's growing fascination with curves coincides with an erosion of his desire for punctuality and efficiency, and, Vallury argues, a blurring of the boundary between order and disorder.[47]

Over time, the narrator loses faith in his dream of a rat-free, noise-free city, and he undergoes what Réda Bensmaïa describes as a Deleuzian becoming-animal that breaks down the boundaries structuring his world: 'Everything in his head becomes confused, everything in his body becomes muddled, and he finds himself gradually caught up in a metabolic metamorphosis which erases all human "borders"'.[48] Order and disorder, human and non-

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right choice, but he discovers affinities with the Rhizomatic trajectory of the rat'. Réda Bensmaïa, 'Becoming-animal, Becoming-political in Rachid Boudjedra's *L'Escargot Entêté*', *Postcolonial Literatures and Deleuze*, ed. Lorna Burns and Birgit M. Kaiser (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 165-180 (p. 175). Madonna Kalousian likewise sees the labyrinth as the novel's utopian horizon, a form that encourages a rethinking of the anthropocentrism of the city. Madonna Kalousian, 'Between Invertible and Invertebrate Histories', *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 41 (2021), 110-139.

[46] Seth Graebner, 'The Bird's Eye View: Looking at the City in Paris and Algiers', *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 36 (2008), 221-239 (p. 231).

[47] Vallury, 'Poétiques et politiques', 43.

[48] Bensmaïa, 'Becoming-animal, Becoming-political', 171.

human, self and other merge into ambiguous hybrids. This provokes a transformation in his understanding of his ethical relationship with what he once perceived as parasites. While the novel ends with the snail and its bewitching spiral shell crushed beneath the narrator's shoe, his declaration that he will '[se] constituer prisonnier' (149) signals the breakdown of his rigid anti-parasitism. As Hédi Bouraoui puts it, 'en se constituant prisonnier, le dératiseur se considère comme nuisible';[49] he admits that he is himself noisome, more disease than cure. He confers a kind of personhood on the snail: if he should go to jail for killing a garden pest, then the superiority of humans over other life forms — more fundamentally, the host's prerogative to inflict violence on the parasite — has been radically questioned.

Conclusion: Subalternity and parasitism

This article has drawn out some of the ways in which anti-parasitic urbanism in these texts is tied to the legacies of French colonialism. In *La Grève des bàttu*, the sanitation campaign is carried out to appeal to 'toubabs', white tourists. Even Mour Ndiaye sees it as a continuation of French imperialism: 'avant, ils venaient pour nous piller; maintenant, ils viennent se reposer chez nous'.[50] The narrator of *L'escargot entêté* self-identifies as 'un homme du tiers monde', anchoring his relationship to hygiene in a certain geopolitical context.[51] While attacks on beggars and rats are all too familiar to residents of Western metropolises, both novels underscore the specificity of the postcolonial city. They suggest that in the African cities they depict, the desire to eradicate parasites, which Serres associates

[49] Hédi Bouraoui, 'Rachid Boudjedra – *L'escargot entêté*: névrose individuelle ou fable politique?', *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la Méditerranée* 26 (1978), 161-169 (p. 169).

[50] Sow Fall, *La Grève de bàttu*, 39.

[51] Boudjedra, *L'escargot entêté*, 109.

with Cartesian rationalism, the Enlightenment, and modernity, is also bound up with Western imperialism (much like Cartesian rationalism, the Enlightenment, and modernity, as many have argued). These texts thus offer a corrective to Serres's reading of the parasite, which for all its discussion of authority and modernity doesn't engage with racism or colonization.

The novels also highlight the problem of epistemic violence and the challenge of articulating an alternative to anti-parasitic urbanism that doesn't itself rely on Western frames of reference. As discussed above, while much of Sow Fall's novel critiques modernization, she has Raabi insist that it will help Senegalese women. Boudjedra's narrator calls himself out for relying on European Antiquity to make sense of his city. 'Je suis arabe et je le reste', he says, reminding himself to look to 'les présages arabes' instead of Greek myths for guidance. He tries, with limited success, to decouple his war on rats from Western metaphysics, and in the process from French imperialism. It is a losing battle: a few lines later, he cites as his *livres de chevet* 'le *Traité des Animaux* d'Ibn Bahr et l'*Histoire Générale des labyrinthes* de Silas Haslam'.[52] The former author was a 9th-century Arab pioneer of naturalism, fitting with the narrator's goal of grounding his ideas in non-Western thought. Silas Haslam, however, is a fictional English author cited in Jorge Luis Borges's 'Tlön, Uqbar, Orbius Tertius,' one of the stories collected in *The Garden of Forking Paths*. In trying to break free from what he calls the Daedalian labyrinths in his mind, which continually lead him back to Antiquity, Boudjedra's narrator ends up in a bibliographic maze (whose forking paths might be populated by garden snails) that leads to Borges: a writer from the Global South, but one with close ties to Europe and whose cosmopolitan opposition to literary nationalism is at odds with the narrator's efforts to establish an essentially Arab approach to

[52] Boudjedra, *L'escargot entêté*, 80.

urban hygiene. While both Boudjedra and Sow Fall call for hospitable alternatives to the violence they depict, they struggle to articulate a strategy that escapes Western epistemes.

This problem is familiar to theorists of subaltern urbanism. For Ananya Roy, a key question is how to talk about cities on the margins without essentializing certain topoi and forms. She uses the example of the slum, which has become a synecdoche for the megacities of the Global South. Against a dominant urban theory that sees these spaces as markers of halted urban development, subaltern urbanism 'seeks to resurrect the subaltern space of the slum as that of a vibrant and entrepreneurial urbanism' and in the process 'confer recognition on spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the archives and annals of urban theory'.[53] *La Grève des bàttu* does precisely this with its sympathetic depiction of entrepreneurial agency in a space Mour sees as a 'bidon[ville]'.[54] But Roy notes how easily that defence of the slum can elide with neoliberal discourses of the slum as 'a world of dead capital waiting to be turned liquid'[55] — one could read the beggars' claim to 'exerc[er] un métier comme tout un autre' as expressing a willingness to be recuperated by capitalism.[56] This is a reason to be wary of equating the slum or places like it with subalternity in a stable way. Invoking Spivak's understanding of subalternity as 'a position without identity',[57] Roy instead puts forward terms like periphery, informality, zone

[53] Ananya Roy, 'Slumdog Cities: Rethinking Subaltern Urbanism', *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 35 (2011), 223-238 (pp. 224-226).

[54] Sow Fall, *La Grève des bàttu*, 140.

[55] Roy, 'Slumdog Cities', 229.

[56] Sow Fall, *La Grève des bàttu*, 44.

[57] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Scattered speculations on the subaltern and the popular', *Postcolonial Studies* 8 (2005), 475-486 (p. 476).

of exception, and grey space, not as innate characteristics of the marginalized experience of the city, but as vanishing points that destabilize binaries and orient us towards 'the inevitable heterogeneity of Southern urbanism'.[58]

Roy's search for new terms and vanishing points goes hand-in-hand with the idea that, first and foremost, subaltern urbanism entails the interrogation of dominant epistemologies. This returns us to the question of whether anti-parasitic urbanism is an appropriate frame through which to analyse Southern cities like those depicted in these novels. The parasite, with its Greek etymology and — even accounting for Derrida's Algerian perspective — its baggage of French thought, is, like the labyrinth, one of those metaphors Boudjedra's narrator probably wishes he could do without. Serres himself acknowledges that the term poses a translation problem outside of the French context.[59]

Nevertheless, I see three reasons why the parasite and anti-parasitic urbanism can be useful for thinking Southern urbanism. Firstly, as this article has demonstrated, it helps articulate links between hospitality, socio-politics, biopower, and communication in French colonial urbanism, and how these linkages have continued to shape cities post-independence. The cities depicted in these novels developed in dialogue with Paris, and both novels portray the desire to eradicate parasites from the city as one of the legacies of colonial urbanism. I have argued that both texts seek alternatives to that ideology, which they associate with subaltern spaces like the beggars' commune or labyrinthine casbah. While anti-parasitism might not describe those alternatives, in these novels it describes the hegemonic urbanism within which subaltern challenges attempt to arise. Thinking about anti-parasitic urbanism in the (post-)colonial context also has the potential to enrich our understanding of how the

[58] Roy, 'Slumdog Cities', 231.

[59] Serres, *Le Parasite*, 25.

ideology shaped Paris, since colonial cities served as laboratories for urban planning approaches that were then transferred to the capital[60] (the war on rats, for example, spread from North Africa to Paris during the First World War[61]).

Secondly, the parasite, like the subaltern as Spivak defines it, is not a stable identity. It encourages us to think about power relationally and in flux. As the emblem of that which disrupts an ordered system, it pushes us away from epistemological clarity and towards the marginal, the muddled, and the ephemeral. Serres's invitation to engage with noise — something unintelligible but nonetheless present — offers another way to think about the silences that Spivak says mark the position of the subaltern in the archive.

The last reason is that the parasite challenges how we think about legibility in the urban context. There is a persistent commonplace in developmentalist writing about African cities that these spaces are disordered as a symptom of planning failures and that, through interventions like the smart city, surveillance, and rationalization of space, they need to be made legible — to their residents, but also to the state and global capital. In Boudjedra's text, that imperative to make the city legible is juxtaposed with a destabilizing lyricism. This lyricism concerns both how the city is described and its form. For the narrator, changing his ethical relationship to parasites entails an embrace of the literary, and vice versa. For Derrida as well, the parasite is connected to literarity. His longest engagement with the term comes in *Limited inc*, a text criticizing speech act theorists for bracketing off the 'parasitic' speech of literature and fiction from their theory of language. In *L'escargot entêté*, rats and snails tempt the narrator away from orderly urbanism and towards a city less legible than lyrical. In a

[60] Gwendolyn Wright, *The Politics of Design in French Colonial Urbanism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 3.

[61] Soppelsa, 'Losing France's Imperial War on Rats', 75.

similar way, the parasite encourages us to take seriously literary interventions in urban theory, like these two novels, that do not give us clarity, but instead intertwine the heterogeneity of the city with the ambiguity of language.