Driving along one road of a city. Limiting the space of understanding, deepening the possibility of understanding. I chose my hometown, Maputo, capital of Mozambique. I chose 25 de Setembro and Marginal, the two avenues part of a road that runs northwards delineating Maputo’s bay, where its ever-changing urban planning manifests the social and economic decisions of the present government; where humans move in bounded yet seemingly free urban spaces, constructing difference and uniformity through conflictual and yet harmonious dynamics. I was to observe the beauty of the urban flow… in one long road. And you were to come with me.¹

¹ The following text is composed of three narratives: the voice of the ethnographer guiding the reader through a journey along this road, the voice of the ethnographer remembering and analysing what she saw during the journey, and extracts chosen by the ethnographer from a speech Mia Couto presented in 2005, entitled ‘The Seven Dirty Shoes’ (www.comunistas.info/mia.htm on the 2nd October 2006, translated by the ethnographer). I would like to thank Khalid Shamis for agreeing to take the photographs under my direction, as well Mia Couto for agreeing to have this text published.
Avenida
25 de Setembro

Drive towards the south end of 25 de Setembro, make a u-turn, stop the car, breathe in, prepare the camera, switch off the air-conditioning and open the window. The south end is characterised by an industrial area. Turn your eyes left to observe the small industrial buildings, manifesting strong plastic forms, dated from the 40s and 50s, such as the oil and beer factories; now turn them right and see the contrasting Railway-owned land, where old trains and maintenance tools are buried in high grass, followed by stone double-storey houses originally constructed for railway employees. Look left at the sports club Ferroviário, an old white and green building, surrounded by blossoming acacias.

Can a city be understood through one long road? Could I, through 25 de Setembro Avenue and its continuation, Marginal Avenue, deepen my understanding of Maputo? I got in the car with the intention of driving this road, northwards, noticing and observing its various and different rhythms, the interactions between individuals, the services offered, the networks established, the landscape, the infrastructures, the environment, the cultural practices. Yet, this was not a new site. I had been there before, but never had I driven the road slowly and methodically with a research intention in mind, which did change my observational projections, my analytical standpoint as well as the direction of the photography.

“We already know this speech. The war, colonialism, imperialism, apartheid, everything and everyone are to blame. Except ourselves. It is true that, to a certain extent, others are to blame for our suffering. However, part of the responsibility has always resided at home. We are being victims of a long process of avoiding responsibility. The act of avoiding responsibility is one of the most fundamental stigmas that burden us, Africans from north to south. Some say that this is a part of the inheritance from slavery, the time in which we did not own ourselves.”

The first traffic lights indicate the border between the industrial and the commercial areas, the latter having lively formal and informal trade. Cross Guerra Popular Avenue carefully, attempting not to crash, ignoring the red green and yellow lights which interchangeably, almost randomly, come and go. Look to your right and see the Central Market. Feel its age through the façade. Park the car. Be careful not to leave anything inside it. Put on the steering-wheel lock. Wrap your camera around your chest, lock the car, negotiate who will be looking after it, and cross the street walking towards the market.

A city is made of rhythms; flowing goods, people and services constantly moving and being moved in complex networks of exchange and power. The existence of these networks determines individuals’ lives, as much as they determine the existence of the networks. In a dialectical relationship of power, networks are born, developed and killed, in constant flows, or in other words, in rhythms. This life and death is also relational to the physical environment, which includes the built and natural environments.
The understanding of a city's rhythms and networks will, hopefully, allow me to take a glimpse at the complexity that permeates each urban space, made of superimposed economic, political, cultural and social layers, like the Central Market.

"The boss, many times distant and invisible, was responsible for our destiny. Or for the absence of a destiny. Today, not even symbolically, do we kill the old boss. One of the ways of calling the other, which emerged in the last 10 years, was the word ‘boss’. It was as though it never really died, as though it was looking for an historical opportunity to throw itself in our daily life. Can we blame someone for this reappearance? No. Nevertheless, we are creating a society, which produces inequalities and which reproduces power relationships that we believed to be buried."

Observe the mobile vendors, selling samoosas and pies, perfumes and DVDs, dolls and oranges; observe people going in and out of their cars, scared of being robbed, the street children asking you to let them carry your shopping, the imported cars parked along the street. Go in. Feel the smell. Observe the colours. Touch the fruit. Touch the colours. Walk around, looking at the people, black vendors, black buyers, white vendors and buyers, Indians, mulattos, canecos, light blacks, dark whites, until there are no colours, but just vendors and buyers. Choose between grapes, peaches, raw honey, caged birds, pecan nuts, arts and crafts, oranges. Observe the sound and enjoy.

Going inside this market brings me a sense of nostalgia, like going inside an old favourite book which I often come back to reread, to rediscover. I visit the market every time I go to Maputo on holiday, where I buy bags for friends, cashew nuts for family members living overseas, tamarind for my curries, grapes for my fingers and mouth. Being there makes me think of a city inside a city. It almost feels self-sustained.

"The popular saying says, ‘the goat eats where it is tied’. We all know the sad use of this aphorism and how it justifies the action of people that take advantage of situations and of places. It is already sad that we equalise ourselves with a goat. But, it is also symptomatic that, in this convenient popular saying, we never identify ourselves with producing animals, such as the ant. Let’s imagine that the saying changes, becoming the following: ‘the goat produces where it is tight’. I can bet that if this were the case no one would want to be the goat.”

Leave the market through the main entrance, where you came in earlier. Check if your car is still there, but do not walk towards it. Cross the avenue to its opposite side. Walk through a small street, the Mesquita Street, perpendicular to 25 de Setembro opposite the market, which leads you to the central Mosque of Maputo. Observe the intricacy of the old façade of this mosque, with its arabesque forms and designs; then look behind you, observing the women begging in front of this monumental building. They are old or handicapped, or both or either and have baby children.
I am curious about mosques. I go in. It is a men-only mosque. I walk around appreciating its architecture, profoundly touched by the exclusion of women from this place of worship.

I imagine them at home on their prayer mats, forgetting how the hathaan sounds, away from the public life of Islam. Is this Islam? Or is this the Indian culture in Maputo? I exit the mosque and sit next to the other women, the ones that wait outside.

‘Everything you do now is for money,’ Gracinda tells me. ‘Look around you. Everyone is after money. This is just another way of getting there. This is my job.’ Gracinda is not Muslim, although her head is meticulously covered; on Sunday morning she works outside the church. They wait for men to come out from prayers, expecting them to show repentance/generosity in the form of money.

“We talk about soil erosion, deforestation, but the erosion of our cultures is way more worrying.”

Walk back to your car. Argue about who looked after it, get in, find some coins, pay the car guard, place your camera on your lap, unlock the steering-wheel lock, lock yourself inside the car, start the engine, watch out for cars, and carry on driving north.

Maputo’s urban planning dates to the end of the 19th century. It was designed on the basis of military notions and intentions. When observed from above one sees the roads’ linear forms, creating a mosaic of squares and rectangles, in an infinite number of 90° angles. The city design aimed at organising a future development, a future set of networks and rhythms according to the objectives of that period, when Lorenço Marques was the capital of Mozambique, one of Portugal’s overseas provinces.

“I am from a time in which what we were was measured according to what we did. Today what we are is measured according to the show we make of ourselves; by the way we place ourselves in the shop window. Many of the institutions that should produce ideas today are producing pieces of paper, filling in shelves with reports condemned to become a dead archive. Rather than finding solutions, problems are found. Instead of actions, new studies are suggested.”

I was born in Maputo. I wonder how Lorenço Marques was. The roads are the same, although the names have changed since independence. Now we live amongst the memory of all the African revolutionaries; my mother lives in Eduardo Mondlane, I took Julius Nyerere and Robert Mugabe on my way to high school, my best friend lives off Kenneth Kaunda and Mao Tse Tung is known to have the best tar in the city – no potholes, no relaying necessary. My grandmother still remembers the old names, the old clubs, the old people; she remembers independence with sour pain. My parents fought for independence. I try not to take it for granted. The ownership of an urban space is ever changing, and predicatively, so are the forms of ownership. While my grandparents and parents walked downtown, I was driven and now drive; while they shopped in the Central Market for most groceries, I go in there as a visitor, appreciating its Mozambiqueness.
You are in downtown Maputo, a baixa de Maputo. There are shops and services on both sides of the street; small shops, franchises, coffee shops, printing shops, there are many shops. There are Vodacom and Mcel shops on either side, competing for Mozambicans’ eyes and pockets.

Seven years ago there were no cell phones in Maputo. We used landlines. Now, I am told that an extraordinary, maybe unbelievable, proportion of the active population of this capital owns a cell phone. Cell phones have been proven, in various urban and rural studies, to facilitate situations of poverty, tightening the relationship between rural and urban family members, easing cash and information flows. With the rate of growth of this market, Vodacom, in 2004, attempted to break into it; until then it had been solely controlled by the Mozambican Mcel. The competition between these two companies is public. I should even say that it is intrusive. There are yellow (mcel) and blue (vodacom) adverts throughout the whole city, on posters, in the papers, on the radio and on TV. Maputo is their playground, the people of Maputo their object of desire. They represent the free market, the lack of protection for national companies. ‘It’s good, ‘cause it gives mcel a reason to be better’, my economist friends argue. I wonder where the money that Vodacom makes in Mozambique goes.

“I look at our urban society and ask myself: do we really want to be different? Because I see that, these rituals of passage reproduce themselves as a loyal photocopy of what I always knew in the colonial society. We are dancing the waltz, with long dresses, in a prom night that is a copy of those in my time. We are copying the graduation ceremonies from European models from medieval England.”

Now look slightly up, above the shops, observing the façades, a mixture of missing windows and lights, and newly renovated and well-kept buildings. The Bank of Mozambique is on your right, grand, modernist, evocative, with a long mural on its façade. Contemplate decisions being made, money being produced, documents being signed. Contemplate the changes that have been undergone inside this financial house in the last thirty years, from socialist to communist to capitalist modes of production and distribution, money flows changing, quantities of money increasing, the power of the state decreasing.

“The hurry to show that one is not poor is, in itself, the proof of poverty. Our poverty should not be hidden. Those who should be ashamed are not the poor but those who create poverty.”

This avenue is made up of historical layers, in which the inheritance of political and economic decisions is visible. It has been the stage of drastically different times. These historical layers make up the present – new networks determined by foreign policy and international trends. Mozambicans are also sure to inherit financial debt, and a country modified to correspond to the conditions imposed by the IMF and World Bank, in order to receive yet another loan, of which we, Mozambicans, know very little. We now have tarred roads and more health centres, and we have a huge rate of unemployment and corruption. I think of the ethics of the new government, and whether these are publicly discussed. If I was to read these ethics in this avenue, in two words I would say, capital-power! Do I loose hope? No. Maybe sometimes.
“I spoke of the burden we have to get rid of in order to dive fully into modernity. But modernity is not a door solely made by others. We are also carpenters of that construction and it only interests us going into a modernity of which we are also constructors.”

At the street junctions, there are vendors, selling phone credit, fruit in tchovaxitadumas, hangers, pieces of material, and there are professional beggars, handicapped individuals with assistants. There are also mobile services like nail polishing, and cell phone calls. Turn right, into Samora Machel Avenue, at the junction with Continental and Scala.

Continental and Scala are old coffee shops. They are remembered by my elders, my parents’ generation, my grandparents’ generation. My mother and father used to watch movies at the Scala movie theatre, since then closed and reopened; now showing action thrillers from the nineties, like Rambo. Like the movie theatre, the coffee shop Scala also closed and reopened a number of times, while Continental has been solid in its pastél de nata production.

Outside Continental, there are tables with tourists, middle class workers having they working shoes polished, families drinking cool drinks and eating cakes. While seated, one has the privilege of breathing the life of this wide avenue. Quietly, one can watch the frantic traffic, the car guards and washers fighting for vehicles and meticulously washing them in ten minutes, people passing, in all their colours, their smells, their sounds.

Stop the car soon after the turn, decide who will be guarding it and whether you want it washed. Grab a pastél de nata at Continental and walk right towards the Saturday crafts market.

The crafts market takes place every Saturday. Due to the reconstruction of the square where it used to take place, since last year, it has moved three times. With it move artists and sellers, finding new corners and sidewalks to lay out their art. Tourists like this market; there is a sense of ‘authenticity’, of ‘localness’. They can talk to artists whose art they might buy. If the artist is not present, they negotiate with the uncle, or nephew or brother, or son. There are only a few women selling in this market; as with street vendors, this business is very male in Mozambique. Most great artists of this country are male, like Chichorro, Naguib and Malangatana, painters, and Chissano, the late sculptor. Reinata, from Nampula province, an illiterate woman, is one of the few strong female presences in this male-dominated scene. Is Maputo a patriarchal society? Do I contribute to or do I challenge this conservative rhythm?

You are in the middle of a street, in downtown Maputo; you are in the crafts market. National and international art and crafts converge in this space, unclearly exposing commercial and kinship networks, at various scales. Look at the carved wooden windows – from the Congo, the colourful wooden sculptures representing historical events of Mozambique, like the floods or the court case of Carlos Cardoso, the batiks hanging in lines between trees, gently waving to the rhythm of the wind; look at the tourists, engaging with the artists and sellers, negotiating, smiling in excitement, frustrated at the insistence, decisive about buying or not buying; notice the life, and how by just being there you are part of it – a potential buyer.
Most Saturdays that I am in Maputo, I visit this market. My house in Johannesburg is where I collect the bits I am able to buy there. I like coming back from a trip to Maputo and finding a place in my house for the new pieces I have brought; it is like making my own Mozambique inside my house, outside my country, as a migrant. Sculptures and other pieces go through so much transformation, from raw material to the end result, worked with creativity, manifesting a view, a way of understanding and expressing emotions and ideas. The artist finishes them; they are passed from hand to hand, and like this avenue, they acquire new meanings over time, in constant reconstructions and redefinitions, according to who owns them and what purpose they serve.

Back in your car, place your goodies in the boot, pay the car guard, start the car, u-turn and turn right back into 25 de Setembro. Drive past the small shops; on your left observe the old colonial Post Office, on your right Emose’s headquarters – a Mozambican insurance company – followed by Hotel Tivoli, recently renovated in purple tones. As the following traffic lights approach, look up on your left side – look higher up. 33. The 33-storey building, the highest in southern Africa.

I remember the first time I went to 33 – trinta e três, as it is. My school friend lived on the 27th floor in the left block. There are three blocks – left, centre and right. At the time the lift in her building was not working, so we had to use the one in the right block to the 33rd floor, walk up the stairs to the top of the building and from there walk across to the left block. Once we got there I was paralysed, not by fear, but by amazement, by curiosity and acknowledgement of my size. The view from the top. God’s eye. Subsequently I often wondered if the government of Mozambique all lived on the 16th or 17th floor, disengaged from the reality below, way too high to understand the micro-dynamics, but not high enough to see the whole picture, to have a comprehensive view and knowledge of the macro-networks of this city. And then, if I thought about the whole country, I often got confused, upset. I returned to the top floor a few more times. The view from the top lost its wonder, I sought to be on the ground listening to conversations, looking at faces, diving into the urban fabric, not looking at it.

“More than a generation technically able, we need a generation able to question the technique. A youth able to rethink the country and the world. More than people ready to give answers, we need the ability to pose questions. Mozambique does not only need to walk. It needs to discover its own path in a foggy journey and a pathless world. Other people’s compass does not fit; others’ maps do not help. We need to invent our own north and south. We are interested in a past that is not burdened with misgivings; we are interested in a future that does not come already drawn like a financial sheet.”

Carry on driving. On your right there is the theatre Avenida, followed by the popular fair, opposite Macau restaurant. Notice the new traffic light, where road constructions are taking place. Take care not to bump into one of the workers. When the light turns green, drive through the sports park on your right, where a movie is being shot, and on your left, the new hotel VIP, Mcel headquarters, two petrol stations next to each other, office buildings, a Standard Bank branch, Chicken on the Run, Steers, KFC, a local coffee shop, a Vodacom shop. Look right to FACIM, the host of an annual national fair of commerce and services. Look left to observe the colours and forms of the post-modern building of Televisão de Moçambique. At the Robert
Mugabe rotunda, carry on driving straight between two giant advertising posters for Vodacom, where you read ‘1 imagem vale mais que 1000 palavras’, 1 image is worth more then 1000 words. You have exited 25 de Setembro Avenue.

“Slowly it becomes clear, that more technical individuals do not solve, on their own, the misery of own nation. If a country does not have strategies turned into production of profound solutions, then all that investment will not produce the difference. If the capacities of a nation are turned towards the quick enrichment of a small elite than having more technical individuals is very irrelevant.”

I went to school in FACIM. The Portuguese School of Maputo rented the space, given that the fair only occurs for one week a year. The fair consists of different buildings that belong to different companies. In my 10th grade I had classes in the Nescafe building. I was in FACIM from 1991 to 1999. I saw the forest opposite this, on the left side of the avenue, being cut down, for the sake of new office buildings, petrol stations, hotels… we used to run there during our sports class. I wonder about the policy on urban green belts in Maputo. I wonder about when, how and by whom, hydrological assessments are done. It is either a case of lack of environmental/urban planning policy, or a lack of implementation due to weak technical support or to massive corruption. Who decides about where to construct in this city?
RHYTHMS OF A ROAD, VOICES OF AN ETHNOGRAPHER

Vanessa Ulia Dantas e Sá

Discover Maputo’s bay where individuals fish peacefully, where the avenue’s lamp posts carry Vocadom and Western Union’s publicity. You are between the bay and the hill; drive slowly, following the gentle curves. Notice the breeze. After the petrol station on your right, stop the car at the fenced Clube Naval, where members enjoy the swimming pool, tennis and squash clubs. You have to pay to get in, or be a member. Ask to go in just to watch for one minute. Observe the boats coming in and out of the docks, people coming in and out with beautiful towels, bags and outfits, in big 4×4s; walk to the pool area noticing the middle-aged women in bikinis chatting away their Saturday morning and afternoon, the couples kissing underwater, young and old men fishing, people waiting or eating meals at the restaurant alongside. Drink from this contentment.

“We are living on a theatre stage: a vehicle is no longer a functional object. It is a passport to a status of importance, a source of vanity. The car become a reason for idolatry, something like a sanctuary, a truly promotional obsession.”

Class division. One avenue, another rhythm. Money decides whether you can gain access to Clube Naval, whether you can swim and tan, and do other things leisure-related. I ‘grew up’ in Naval – doing the leisure things with my parents, their friends and my friends. I still enjoy going there, sitting with my mother’s friends, having intellectual talks, analysing Maputo’s litter management system, the quality of tanning lotions, and deconstructing the latest literary products on the market. As I arrived after driving the whole street, I noticed it being fenced, othered from the rest of the avenue, excluding those who cannot gain access. It is a middle class club, for those who do not own pools and yet can choose the swimming pool over the polluted beach.

“It is urgent that our schools highlight humility and simplicity as positive values. Arrogance and exhibitionism are not, as it is pretended, emanations of the African culture in power. They are emanations of those who mistake the package for the content.”

Back in your car, carry on driving north. On your right, the bay seems to enlarge, while on your left houses seem to almost fall on your car. New houses, some of which are under construction, other inhabited and others paused, with unfinished structures and cement walls. Contemplate. The following buildings on your right house the shop and workshop of the handicapped association. They work in leather. Stop and visit them. They are open 365 days a year. Back on the road, observe more new houses on your left, on the hills that support Maputo’s higher neighbourhoods. When the two lanes converge, you have the Holiday Inn on your right followed by a precinct of shops and restaurants, all surrounded by art and craft vendors.

After this busy stretch you enter a new section of the avenue; you are at the beach. You can see people playing volleyball, others walking, marriage ceremonies taking place in the water, chocolates being bought and sold, coconuts being opened and drunk, tchovachitadumas being pushed, small fishing boats arriving and leaving, windsurfers dancing with the wind. After
a while you see Clube Marítimo, opposite a petrol station. Turn off on the next road to your left; park immediately afterwards. It is important that you decide who is guarding your vehicle, and that you memorise his face. Leave the car empty and locked. Hold your camera tight, and make your way to the fish market of Maputo.

“Reality is that there is only one way to value ourselves: through work, through the product that we able to make. It is important that we know how to accept this condition without complexes or shame: we are poor. Or, we have been made poor by history. But we are also part of that history, we were also made poor by ourselves. The reasons for our current and future failures also live inside ourselves.”

Here you have many choices. You can buy your fish or seafood and have it cooked in one of the restaurants at the back of the market, you can buy them and cook them at home, not buy and just watch, or go straight to a restaurant and have their own fish or seafood cooked. If you choose to buy fish bring your own scale or use the government scale on the right inside; negotiate the price until it has dropped by 50%. If you choose to stay and eat here, walk through the market until you see all the restaurants and find one you like the looks of. Sit down and get ready to wait for at least one-and-a-half hours. Listen to the competing loud sounds of prices being negotiated and of the sound system in your restaurant; observe the colours. The whole market is in constant movement.

The fish arrives in the early afternoon. Women and men buy directly from the fishermen, who had gone to the sea very early in the morning, before sunrise. The fish and seafood are brought to the market, organised in perfect rows and piles. You can buy prawns, live crabs, crayfish, calamari, and all different kinds of fish like pescada, carapau, vermelhão, garopa, serra and espada. The market remains open until around 9 pm, at which time the vendors start packing away their goods. The restaurants remain open until the late hours of the evening. The vendors are back with the same fish and seafood early in the morning, at around 7 am. At around 3 pm new fresh goods arrive.

On your way out, find the kid who guarded your car. The car guarding service is more expensive here, so be prepared to pay more. Go back to the avenue, turn left and carry on driving north. As you drive further you come across a residential neighbourhood, Bairro do Triunfo, with big houses and sand roads, opposite the beach. After a while, you can see Game on your left, while on your right there are people walking to and from the beach. The traffic thickens, drivers slow down. Observe kids and adults resting on the beach, some playing soccer.
Pay attention to maize growing on your left; think of urban agriculture. The following stretch of the road has small rustic bars, opposite vendors selling furniture, clothes and other Mozambican things. Drive through, carefully observing the uprooted trees on the right, the sand flowing from the beach towards the left edge of the road, opposite the big houses, in permanent and degrading erosion.

During the summer, individuals visit the beach. There are takeaway trailers, chickens being barbecued, there are hundreds of cars driving towards Costa do Sol. It’s summertime, the schools are on holiday and the beach becomes full. At low tide, it becomes even more populated. Individuals from the low and middle classes walk on the sand watching for broken bottles and old cans; others fearlessly dive into the ocean’s populated waters. The summer brings life to this avenue; from September to March, each Saturday and Sunday feels like a New Year’s Eve. The seasonality of Maputo.

The road ends at Costa do Sol, a restaurant located in a colonial building, owned by Greeks. It’s normally full. It faces the beach, and the island, where once a prison functioned, during the colonial period. Stop your car, choose whether you want to walk on the beach, buy a drink from one of the street vendors or have a coffee at Costa do Sol.

The tourists drive along the avenue northwards to Costa do Sol and its famous seafood, where seated in this immensely colonial building while waiting for prawns and grilled fish they can observe ‘the others’, the population that seasonally floods the beaches of Maputo. But are ‘the others’ also tourists in their own city? What does this journey through the city and to the city, in taxis, buses and uncles’ cars represent for them? What does the beach of Maputo represent in the imagination of those who frequent it?

“But the strength to overcome this historical condition also resides inside ourselves. We will know, as we have known, how to achieve certainties that we are producers of our destiny. We will have more and more pride in being who we are: Mozambican constructors of a time and of a place where we are born every day. That’s why it is worth it to accept taking not only the seven dirty shoes, but all the shoes that delay our collective march. Because the truth is one: it is more worth walking barefoot than falling with other people’s shoes.”

Once you are back in your car, u-turn and travel southwards, I can assure you you will find infinite new details, and infinite urban beauty.

After driving this long road I am content to stop and look at the sunset from inside the car. I feel I know Maputo better and I think of what my understanding of this city would be if I travelled each road of this capital incessantly, looking for its rhythms and networks. The journey gave depth to a lifelong conversation with this, my city.