

**“La prise de la Bastille libérerait
des milliers de prisonniers de consommation”:
the “spirit of ‘68” in Gauz’s *Debout-payé***

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Introduction: the “afterlives” of May 1968 in contemporary French workplace fiction

For the French, the words “May ’68” evoke a time of tumult: for some, the phrase conjures barricades, occupied businesses and schools, strikes, and fraught negotiations between student-worker alliances and their government. For others, the images are hazier: wasn’t that when young people wore bell-bottoms and dropped out of school and work to live in ashrams and on goat farms? As Kristin Ross noted in her 2002 work *May ’68 and its Afterlives*, in France, “(much) narrative labor... has facilitated the active forgetting of the events” of May 1968, characterizing it as a lifestyle-oriented countercultural “rebellion” or a “failed revolt.” (Ross 3) Although Ross primarily discusses how “nouveaux philosophes,” television retrospectives, and memoirs have obscured May 1968’s radical movements, contemporary fiction also treats the disappearance of May ’68’s values and events from social memory. For instance, Michel Houellebecq casts “Generation ’68” as libertine individualists in his 1998 novel *Les Particules Élémentaires*, contrasting 1960s and 1970s discourses of liberation with the alienation and atomization of contemporary French society. More recently, Nathalie Kuperman’s *Nous étions des êtres vivants* illustrates the sense of distance from French radical history, including May ’68, felt by modern workers who remember past revolts even as they undergo layoffs and harassment. Since the rise of neoliberalism in France in the early 1990s, many contemporary novels of working life portray the frustrations of white-collar professionals facing speed-up, overwork, harassment, and lay-offs in changing corporate work environments.¹ On the other hand, Gauz’s 2014 novel *Debout-payé* is part of a small handful of contemporary fiction works that represent the working class, blue-collar professions, and the service sector.²

As French Studies scholars including Dominique Viart, John Marks, Jeremy Lane, Sylvie Servoise, Jean-Paul Engélibert, and Aurore Labadie, among others, have noted, contemporary French authors have produced a great deal of fiction on working life

since the 1970s.³ Much of this fiction takes a sociological approach to chronicling the sociopolitical consequences of neoliberal capitalism on work, and thus on workers and French society. Author Thierry Beinstingel suggests that this contemporary crop of French workplace literature reflects white-collar workers' newfound understanding of themselves as laborers after May 1968. During and after the events of May 1968, Marxist ideas such as Guy Debord's theory of the "proletarianization" of professional labor, which asserted that white-collar work was governed by the same production-oriented logic as factory labor, entered public discussion (Debord, *La société* 114). The Grenelle agreements of May 1968 laid the groundwork for a trade union for businesspeople; unionization and the newfound sense of belonging to the working class spurred white-collar workers' realization that they were being exploited and often mistreated. Beinstingel also argues that authors followed suit, some of them becoming "militant" and representing everyday working life's indignities in a critical light ("Langages et littératures"). However, despite the impact of May 1968 on work and its representation in fiction, I maintain that contemporary French workplace fiction that alludes to May 1968 takes a defeated tone, highlighting the discouragement that workers possessed of a "proletarian consciousness" feel as they observe their labor rights and security being eroded.

On the other hand, I maintain that certain works of contemporary literature, primarily novels, counter this "narrative erasure" by emphasizing the transformative legacy of May 1968 on subsequent generations in militant, and even hopeful narratives.⁴ For instance, Ivorian author, journalist, photographer, editor, and screenwriter Gauz's first novel *Debout-payé* (2014) traces the influence of radical 1960s and 1970s ideals on two generations of service sector workers from the Ivory Coast living in France from the mid-1970s onward.⁵ Like his protagonist Ossiri, Gauz (the pen name of Armand Patrick Gbaka-Brédé) holds radical bona fides as the child of leftist Ivorian parents (his father a communist, his mother a socialist); Gauz came from the Ivory Coast to France in order to study and work in the late 1990s and early 2000s. His singular personal history endows his work with a trenchant perspective on radical triumphs and disappointments in both countries' political histories, reflected in the alternating moments of humor and gravitas in his protagonist Ossiri's observations on the conditions of life for African immigrants in France. While authors such as Houellebecq and Kuperman narrate the "liquidation" of May 1968's ideological essence into vague symbols, *Debout-payé* rekindles the "spirit of '68" within the narrative by vividly evoking radical history, theory, and praxis.

In order to explore how Gauz's novel emphasizes contrasts between past revolutionary moments and postmodern, late-stage capitalist urbanism and culture in contemporary Paris, I examine the novel's use of and allusions to the discourses present in decolonial (and other) Marxist theory, highlighting the texts and historical mo(ve)ments that the novel references. I demonstrate through my reading that *Debout-payé* places primacy upon revitalizing the ludic, creative, spontaneous, and humorous

ethos of the emancipation movements of the 1960s and 1970s in our continued struggles for economic and social justice, insisting that new radical praxis for the 2010s and beyond needs a *souffle créatif* to be successful. Finally, I argue that by invoking colonial histories and decolonial theories within a narrative tracking the interactions of contemporary people brought together by labor and commerce, the novel calls attention to the destructive power of globalized neoliberal capitalism to shrink and recolonize our world.

Decolonizing countries and minds: African intellectuals and the political heritage of May 1968

In a narrative of the political engagement of radical Ivorian students in the 1960s and 1970s, Gauz's novel also examines how subsequent generations of French and Ivorian French engage with the legacy of 60s and 70s radical leftism, tracing the ripples made by these movements in two countries. In 1974, brilliant young Ivorian students André and Angela, as well as André's cousin Ferdinand, face expulsion under the xenophobic policies of newly-elected president Valéry Giscard d'Estaing.⁶ About 25 years later, André and Angela's son Ossiri goes to Paris, where he meets his friend Kassoum shortly before the events of September 11, 2001 shake the world and rekindle the intense xenophobia that forced their parents' generation out of France. One third-person, omniscient narrative tells the story of Ossiri's parents' generation, while another omniscient third-person narrative recounts Kassoum and Ossiri's perspectives on their work and private lives in cosmopolitan 21st-century Paris. Former high school teacher Ossiri keeps alert with his creative observations of the world, which are filtered through a postcolonial Marxist lens thanks to his mother Angela's lessons in radical history, political theory, and her everyday political praxis. As Ossiri explains, in this line of work, creativity is essential to one's job performance and mental well-being: "Pour ne pas tomber dans la facilité oisive ou ... dans le zèle imbécile et l'agressivité aigrie, il faut soit savoir se vider la tête de toute considération ... au-dessus de l'instinct ou du réflexe spinal, soit avoir une vie intérieure très intense" (Gauz 15). Consequently, Ossiri observes Paris and thinks deeply about its flaws, viewing it as a city in need of "liberation." He encourages his friend and roommate Kassoum, an "enfant du ghetto de Treichville" (in Abidjan), to connect with beauty, culture, and meaningful work in Paris despite their marginal status as *sans-papiers*.

Debout-payé contrasts a watershed moment in the lives of political radicals in France during the mid-1970s with the more cynical era of the first decade of the 2000's. In the narrative of Ossiri's parents André and Angela and their friend Ferdinand, who are working and studying in Paris and living at the MECI (Maison d'Étudiants de Côte d'Ivoire), the novel expounds upon how the immigrant experience in France changed in the years around and after May '68. In particular, the novel illustrates how in the mid-1970s, as an ideology of "France for the French" overtook French national politics and

shaped French identity at the end of the Trente Glorieuses, the radicalism of the late 1960s was suppressed and the movement of radical African students was quashed by xenophobic, racist policies. The novel portrays the MECI as a central locus of internationalist Marxist organizing and theory. Historian Françoise Blum notes that radical leftist activism in the MECI was a veridical part of French radical history from the 1950s onward. The Fédération des Étudiants d'Afrique Noire en France (FEANF), an *association* and de facto student union organized in 1951, held meetings at the MECI. Blum notes that the FEANF contributed much to the student organizing and consciousness-raising, as well as to the elaboration of new Marxist political theories and the incorporation of international Marxist theory within student organizing, that characterized French 1960s radicalism.

Outre son rôle d'ordre syndical, la FEANF a fonctionné dès ses origines comme un lieu d'élaboration d'une pensée théorique de libération de la tutelle coloniale, en lien avec d'autres pôles attractifs pour les étudiants, tels Présence africaine, qui publia notamment, un numéro conçu par la Fédération et intitulé 'Les Etudiants noirs parlent'... La FEANF fut tôt indépendantiste, rejetant les pourparlers engagés entre les parlementaires français et africains... (comme) des compromis ... l'indépendance serait révolutionnaire et unitaire, ou ne serait pas. En ce sens, la Fédération appela à voter non au referendum de 1958, qui instaurait une Communauté francoafricaine. Elle mérite sans doute... de figurer pour l'histoire au rang des mouvements de libération nationale. (Blum 265-266)

Debout-payé thus implies that radical sociologist Angela and her medical student partner André are involved in the organizational and theoretical activity of the FEANF.

However, André's cousin Ferdinand, who arrives in 1974, remains skeptical about the need for political action. Ferdinand "n'arrivait pas à voir 'La Crise' de ses propres yeux," due to the contrast between his hometown Abidjan's uneven urban development (and marked contrasts between wealthy neighborhoods and extreme impoverished areas) and the seemingly incessant expansion, visible "busyness," and flow of frivolous consumer goods he sees in Paris.⁷ Ferdinand tends to observe numerous African immigrants at work, which gives him a sense of hope about his own chances of enjoying some of this prosperity. "Les rues étaient toujours aussi... bien balayées par les frères maliens; les cousins arabes continuaient de... (faire) pousser les buildings à la vitesse des champignons les lendemains de pluie... les 'Félix Potin' et les Prisunic étaient toujours remplis d'autant de victuailles et objets plus ou moins inutiles..." (Gauz 64) However, his cousin André declares to Ferdinand that "la Crise a mis fin aux Trente Glorieuses, trente ans de bonheur et de plein-emploi," (Gauz 63) a "grand gâteau" (Gauz 71) that the French once shared with immigrants. Westerners responded to the oil crisis⁸ "en pensant à toutes leurs usines, leurs centrales thermiques, leur plastique, leurs

voitures... leurs habits, leurs perruques... leurs télévisions, etc., les Occidentaux, Américains en tête, ont pris peur” (Gauz 63). In this way, André convincingly links the economic crisis to the rise of the racist, xenophobic anti-immigration policies that put an end to the political progress of the late 1960s.

Ferdinand, who has taken André’s old job as a security guard at Les Grands Moulins de Paris, still wants to believe that he can integrate and enjoy this prosperity. At the mills, the factory workers, who consulted André for medical advice, call him “Doc” because they mistake him for André. Ferdinand bears this racism calmly: “Cela ne le dérangeait pas de ressembler à son brillant cousin... même s’il était conscient que c’était à cause d’un mélange de clichés racistes, de négligence, et de paresse intellectuelle” (Gauz 69). Ferdinand decides that his newfound economic security and social status matter more than fighting against injustice and discrimination: “Pour lui... le plus important était désormais l’habit de la responsabilité qu’il avait : les jolis souliers noirs, le bel uniforme bleu... Il se sentait important pour la première fois de sa vie” (Gauz 69). Ferdinand chooses not to protest as young people did only a few years before, but to adhere to an ethos that scholar E. Frances White dubbed “respectability politics” in her scholarship on Black American women and their struggles for liberation, which she argued were hampered by tendencies toward social conformity in Black communities. Instead of risking revolt, Ferdinand adopts the hegemonic values of white French society and tries to “fit in,” even wearing a literal uniform. He is frustrated by the frequent protests and meetings of the Communist Ivorian students in the MECI, where he also lives; as many French did during the cynical mid-1970s, Ferdinand scorns the holdover radicals as quarrelsome *râleurs*, mockingly referring to them as “réunionnais” for their endless ‘réunions’ (Gauz 51). Unaware of the fact that his fellow students are meeting to preserve their prospects for employment and visas, Ferdinand laughs to himself that at least the strident whistle blown to call meetings wakes him up in time for work (Gauz 52).

While the political *Zeitgeist* right before the election suggests that “les étrangers étaient devenus trop nombreux en France... ils arrachaient désormais leur travail aux vrais Français,” Ferdinand remains indifferent (Gauz 71). However, when Valéry Giscard d’Estaing becomes president and appoints Michel Poniatowski Minister of the Interior, the MECI radicals meet to discuss Poniatowski’s plans to expel foreigners rather than hurrying to renew their visas. Ferdinand scorns their protests, and instead applies for his *carte de séjour* based on André and Angela’s advice. While the MECI radicals miss their opportunity and become *sans-papiers*, Ferdinand starts his own security company and brings his fiancée to France. *Debout-payé* illustrates the delicate position of immigrants aware of their economic precariousness, clarifying why they may complain privately about racism rather than jeopardizing their jobs and social status with political protest. At the same time, the novel suggests that lingering too long on theorizing problems before acting is dangerous, illuminating the importance of organized action in creating political change.

However, unlike André's cousin Ferdinand, André's partner Angela represents a decidedly radical model of negotiating a postcolonial African-French identity. Angela's story is told within the third-person narration that recounts her son Ossiri's life in Paris about 25 years after her return home. Ossiri's memories of Angela overtake him one day when, bored at work, he contemplates an image of African femininity on a Western Union advertisement posted in his workplace.

'Envoyez de l'argent au pays.' La femme s'était nouée sur la tête un morceau de pagne. Sa camisole aux motifs vifs et multicolores était coupée dans le même tissu que sa coiffe. Un wax hollandais... La pièce de tissu vaut au moins le salaire mensuel d'un petit fonctionnaire de Ouagadougou... La femme était figée dans un large sourire que surmontaient des pommettes bien rondellettes... la femme respirait l'embonpoint et le bonheur... (Gauz 107-109)

However, he is reminded of Angela not because she resembles the woman in the ad, but because she contrasts with the stereotype on the poster. Angela, who adopted jeans and Western-style dress after her time in France, nevertheless espoused a radical decolonial African consciousness in her daily life; her before-bed stories for her children were often history lessons, including a demystification of the *pagne*. Angela links American cotton production by enslaved Africans back to European imperialism in Africa, noting that Europe maintained colonial power not only through slavery, but also by creating new markets to monopolize. When cheap cotton flooded Europe and could no longer be profitably sold there, "ils eurent une brillante idée : l'Afrique ... un grand réservoir de consommateurs... Ils déversèrent des kilomètres... de pagnes sur toutes nos côtes... Les Africains se mirent à couvrir leurs beaux corps avec ces étoffes... L'achèvement ridiculement coloré du cycle infernal de l'humiliation des nègres commencée depuis l'esclavage" (Gauz 113-115). Angela's discourse explains to Ossiri, and to the reader, that politically conscious postcolonial Africans see the *pagne* not as a sentimental emblem of Africanité, but as a symbol of ongoing colonial presence in Africa.

By teaching her children to associate contemporary Ivorian culture with French colonialism, and thus with capitalism, Angela embodies the revolutionary postcolonial imperative of radically rethinking *africanité*. Ossiri remembers his childhood in Abidjan as the beginning of his relationship with French culture and his consideration of how Frenchness informed his Ivorian identity. As theorist Homi Bhabha suggested, although previous postcolonial theorists such as Edward Said argued that "colonial power and discourse is possessed entirely by the coloniser," the colonial subject faced with a "repertoire of conflictual positions" of identity may find it easier to identify with and mimic the cultural norms of their colonizers (Bhabha 200). Angela has taught her son to surmount this sense of divided identity by reclaiming precolonial African heritage and rejecting the hegemony of the "Françafricain" economic and political system embraced by Ivorian political leader President Félix-Hophouët-Boigny in the nominally

decolonized Ivory Coast. (Gauz does not mention *la Françafrique* by name, but he alludes to it by discussing historical crises related to Houphouët-Boigny's leadership, as well as France's ongoing economic, cultural, and political influence in the Ivory Coast.⁹) Angela's praxis emphasizes that resistance and revolt come in many forms and sizes. She gives her children Bété names rather than French names like their classmates. In her home, she forbids bread, dairy products, Nesquik, la Vache qui rit, and other French consumer products that *la Françafrique* makes widely available. Instead, her family eats "igname, manioc, 'riz couché', banane, sous toutes les formes... elle déployait un trésor d'imagination pour qu'ils n'enviassent pas leurs camarades de classe nourris à la tartine de beurre Président..." (Gauz 117). Ossiri remembers Angela's explanation that "on ne peut pas être indépendants quand même ce qu'on mange vient de ceux qui nous aliènent" (Gauz 117). Even daily meals in Angela's house function as an ideological and material protest against Françafrique.

Just as May '68 involved "Maoist experiments of going to the people... (of) intellectuals who took up jobs on the assembly line in factories" (Ross 99) and "complex meetings between workers and intellectuals... or of historians and farmers" (Ross 130), Angela "refus(e) le très lucratif poste de maître-assistant que le ministère d'éducation lui proposa à l'Université d'Abidjan" (Gauz 116). Much to her family's chagrin, "elle avait décidé de rester la modeste institutrice qu'elle était avant de partir en France continuer des études que l'Université nationale ne pouvait lui dispenser" (Gauz 116). Since her working life is part of her lived praxis, Angela refuses to commit "le suicide des classes... (une théorie) inventé(e)... par un certain Amilcar Cabral, une espèce de Che Guevara à mélanine" (Gauz 116). Cabral proposed such sacrifices, alongside historical studies and radical pedagogy, in an address delivered to the first Tricontinental Conference of the Peoples of Asia, Africa and Latin America held in Havana in January, 1966: "On the political level our own reality... can only be transformed by detailed knowledge of it, by our own efforts, by our own sacrifices..." Cabral warned that an anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist ideology is the only way to hold back "imperialism... (which is) capital in action" and will repeat itself in the form of neocolonialism as long as capitalism continues. To achieve national liberation, Cabral suggested that radicals become teachers and teach history and political theory to children in public schools.¹⁰ Angela follows Cabral's suggestions for strengthening her country's underclass with decolonializing knowledge. Although her family mocks "Amil-caca-bral" and Angela's decision not to take a more prestigious job, Angela's choice to remain in a profession that demands less of her time also permits her to give her children a Marxist political education.

While Gauz's narrative represents how radical leftist activism during the '60s in France was influenced by African students like Angela, *Debout-payé* also suggests that radical movements in France may have permitted these students to access theory that they couldn't find in their own home countries. Although one might imagine the travel of cultural and intellectual capital emanating from the metropolis out to the colonies, Kristin

Ross points out in *May '68 and its Afterlives* that “one of the great gauchiste particularities of the time (was that) theory itself was not being generated from Europe but from the Third World” (*May '68* 80). The preeminent press for third-world anticolonial (and Marxist) theory in Europe was Éditions Maspero in Paris, which was the first publishing house to publish Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* with its preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, as well as the first French-language editions of works by Moroccan anticolonialist communist revolutionary Ben Barka, by Che Guevara, and by Amílcar Cabral. By globalizing the circulation of political theory, the French leftist movements of the 1960s linked struggles for decolonization to French student and worker struggles, bringing theoretical innovation from the “Third World” to France and to anyone who came to live there.

Ossiri warmly remembers his mother’s lessons during a cold day of work in Paris: “Ossiri se souvenait aussi des gestes, lentes et assurés... de cette flamme qui embrasait ses yeux... Et cela le réchauffait” (Gauz 119). His mother’s love and unconquerable radical spirit allow Ossiri to face the mental desert of his job guarding the now-abandoned Grands Moulins de Paris, the same mills where André and Ferdinand once faced racial discrimination as security guards. By evoking the cold, abandoned mills in Ossiri’s narrative, the novel emphasizes that Ossiri has no better career opportunities 25 years later in the neoliberal timeline. The mills are as bereft of activity as contemporary France is of radical idealism and meaningful work for immigrants.

Beauty in the street: dérives and détournements in postmodern Paris

The novel also narrates Ossiri’s friendship with his friend Kassoum, whom Ossiri helps to emancipate from the capitalist-imperialist mentality that oppresses him. Kassoum, like the other residents of the MECL, doesn’t circulate within the city. The Méciens are only sporadically employed, and thus fall into the lassitude of people who have nowhere in particular to be all day. “Comme dans tous les ghettos du monde, les Méciens bougeaient peu... incapables d’une simple balade à l’air libre sur le pont de leur galère. Aucun mur, aucun geôlier ne les retenait... Mais chez la plupart des humains, le ghetto, riche ou pauvre, rétrécit l’horizon, il fabrique des barreaux dans la tête” (Gauz 187-188). Kassoum is shaken from his own sense of immobility by observing Ossiri’s mysterious comings and goings; by shadowing Ossiri’s urban explorations, Kassoum discovers experiences and places that he never imagined he could access without money, where French culture is free for the taking and Ivorian and African culture flourish within Paris. Eventually, Ossiri realizes that Kassoum is following him and invites him along.

Just as 20th-century Marxists theorized that carving out new routes within the commodified, monetized spaces of cities would allow individuals to reclaim space and assert their right to exist freely, these adventures offer the two young men a new sense of liberty. For instance, Ossiri and Kassoum’s explorations defy the capitalist logic of Paris’s

urbanist reorganization after Haussmannization. In his work on the psychology of urban space, the *Arcades Project* (written in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s) Walter Benjamin famously called Haussmannization the “manifest expression” of the “phantasmagoria of civilization” within capitalism. The city is reshaped to celebrate “the pomp and splendor... of commodity-producing society,” to encourage flânerie and push the poor to the social and spatial margins of the city (Benjamin 235). Resisting the paths of Haussmanization amounts to an act of psychic defiance. During in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, in a similar spirit of urban radicalism, the Situationists pursued a large project of theorizing forms of resistance to capitalism through space and movement in urban areas, through what they named psychogeography and the *dérive* (drift). According to Situationist Guy Debord, psychogeography was the “étude des lois exactes et des effets précis du milieu géographique, consciemment aménagé ou non, agissant directement sur le comportement affectif des individus” (Debord, *Oeuvres* 38). *Debout-payé* also explores the idea that economic ideology constrains movement, showing how Kassoum becomes conscious of the lassitude and immobility that he and the other disenfranchised *sans-papiers* stuck in the insalubrious MECI building feel, which Kassoum also felt in muddy, rubble-filled Treichville. As he breaks this sense of unfreedom by “drifting” without spending a centime in the commodified urban space of Paris, Kassoum creates his own psychogeographic study and attains a sense of existential freedom. Kassoum thus realized that although he is a marginalized *sans-papiers* of color, he has the right to exist wherever and however he wishes to.¹¹

In this sense, Ossiri and Kassoum’s exploration of Paris fits well within Debord’s definition of the *dérive*, which emphasizes that walking through the city is not merely useful for amusement, for novel sights, or as the prelude to consumerism and leisure. Urban exploration can be “indissolublement liée à la reconnaissance d’effets de nature psychogéographique et à l’affirmation ludique-constructive ce qui l’oppose en tous points aux notions classiques de voyage et de promenade” (Debord, *Oeuvres* 65). While conventional notions of traveling, which emphasize tourism, “discovery” and “spending money” and usually don’t include the travel of immigrants, Kassoum begins to understand after four weeks of following Ossiri that they are not merely unwelcome *sans-papiers*, but playful travelers, explorers, and thus subjects and citizens of the world. “Il comprit... qu’il était dans une autre culture, un autre monde, avec ses beautés et ses laideurs... comme partout ailleurs... Ossiri lui révéla combien il était *riche* du simple fait d’avoir voyagé” (Gauz 189, my italics). The novel deftly contrasts two notions of richness, refuting the consumerist clichés of travel and urban leisure attached to economic privilege. Travel is more than lavish spending during vacations and touristic outings in the city; it is also the valuable gathering of new experiences and the sense of liberty that we feel when we move freely. Gauz’s narrative details the “treasures” that are free for Kassoum and Ossiri to enjoy in Paris, in an enumeration that makes their reclaiming of space in the commodified city visible and substantive:

“des secteurs gratuits du musée du Louvre ; une exposition photo dans une drôle de maison... une promenade au cimetière du Père-Lachaise... plusieurs petits concerts gratuits dans des bars de Belleville... un pèlerinage dans une médiathèque où il y avait plus de disques de musique africaine que dans tout Abidjan... une boîte de nuit à Bastille où tous les videurs étaient... d'Adobo (à Abidjan) ; et même une pièce de théâtre (à) Ménilmontant.” (Gauz 188-189)

Ossiri and Kassoum's ludic peregrinations thus defy the capitalist logic of urbanism, the deep grooves made by centuries of consumerist flânerie, and xenophobic notions of France as a homogeneous country with no place for Africans and their cultural contributions.

The two friends also assist others' *détournement* of commodified space within their work as security guards at the now-shuttered Grands Moulins de Paris. The narrative voice describes Ossiri's work in this “ruine magnifique,” where he enjoys making rounds and experiencing a “sensation de vertige quand il levait les yeux en certains endroits où montait un enchevêtrement de poutres de béton et de grands tubes métalliques” (Gauz 119). In addition to contemplating the beauty of a facility built for consumerist productivity that is now dormant, Ossiri also enjoys visiting a wall that he dubs the “galerie d'art” during his rounds. There, he meets graffiti artists, who “s'en allaient gentiment quand ils se faisaient prendre. Mais Ossiri leur expliquait qu'ils pouvaient revenir parachever leurs œuvres le soir, à la fin de son service ; il savait que Kassoum, son remplacement de nuit, ne faisait jamais les rondes” (Gauz 122). Since Ossiri alerts the street artists to a suitable time to return, and since Kassoum doesn't deter them, the two friends allow the street artists to create “de véritables fresques” (Gauz 122). Echoing the imperatives of Situationists' famous slogan from May '68, “la beauté est dans la rue,” Ossiri encourages graffiti as a creative means of producing “beauty in the street(s),” bringing playfulness and creativity to the post-industrial squalor of the city.

In addition to *Debout-payé's* two third-person generational sagas, the novel interweaves another text, fragmentary in nature, which catalogues Ossiri's alternately poignant, trenchant, and humorous reflections on human interaction within the urban spaces of late capitalism. Ossiri spends day-long shifts first within a Camaïeu near République, then a few months later moves to a Sephora on the Champs-Élysées. Ossiri's observations address topics ranging from the smells of bodies and their functions within the *parfumerie* and wondering whether one would direct the sexless, genderless angel at the Place de la Bastille to Camaïeu or Célio. However, as I will demonstrate, the one overarching theme that unites Ossiri's reflections is that of human nature – psychology, acculturation, movements, social relationships, and use of time – struggling to adapt to the commodified time and space of globalized capitalism.

As Ossiri circulates from home to work, then back, through the 11th arrondissement of Paris, he moves from the area near Place de la République to the

Goncourt metro station, proceeding from one form of global, cosmopolitan neighborhood to another. He begins in an urban marketplace full of immigrants and goods from the developing world: “Un bar tenu par un Kabyle, le magasin de vêtements d’un Chinois...le taxiphone d’un Tamoul... boucherie algérienne... un restaurant turc... boutique des Balkans... l’épicerie africaine du Coréen... cabinet médical juif... Descendre la rue du Faubourg-du-Temple ressemble à une promenade sur une tour de Babel” (Gauz 15-16). Yet, as he draws closer to the Goncourt metro station, he arrives in a space of assimilated cosmopolitanism, of Western European luxury goods and banks; the area is “plus français, plus occidentalement homogène, plus ‘normal’ ... bars à bobos, Caisse d’Épargne, boulangerie à l’ancienne, Le Crédit Lyonnais, pizzeria italienne, Le Crédit Agricole, revendeur Apple, librairie-papeterie, BNP Paribas...” (Gauz 16-17). This space also comprises institutions whose names and structures memorialize France’s history: “lycée à nom et prénom de défunt, deux écoles primaires avec liste d’enfants déportés pendant la guerre...” (Gauz 17). Ossiri marks his passage from a heterogeneous, non-corporate space of the cosmopolitan city to one whose homogeneity reifies an image of Frenchness through Western corporate brands, goods, and tastes, and references to France’s past. This is more than a movement through space; Ossiri’s daily commute “ressemble à un voyage dans le temps” (Gauz 17), passing from République’s worn façades and multicultural streets of independent commerce to the shiny surfaces of multinational business and finance near Goncourt – arguably, he travels from modernity into postmodernity. *Debout-payé* shows Ossiri as a bicultural, critical traveler who takes pleasure in comparing the opposing faces of contemporary cosmopolitan Paris and occupying space and social roles in both.

I argue that through these juxtapositions of modern urbanism with postmodern urbanism and of working-class cosmopolitanism with neoliberal globalization, *Debout-payé* offers a critical illustration on how the abandonment of radical ideals has made way for capitalism to reorganize the world, from the international circulation of goods to the circulation of people in urban space. As Fredric Jameson’s theories of postmodernism explain, this reorganization of the world is not merely aesthetic or pragmatic, but ideological. All modes of existence, from art to public space, display and glorify not the human subject, but commodities and their workings, in a dazzling, inviting display. Jameson suggests that this disappearance of the centered subject – “the end of the autonomous bourgeois monad or ego or individual” – has made way for new non-representational modes of showing and seeing (Jameson 15), such as literary pastiche and the immersive “total flow” of quick cuts in film and television. Dazzled by these fast-moving, disjointed narratives and disoriented by urban re/organization through architecture and city planning, we find our vision of the world, as well as of moving and existing within its spaces, completely transformed. We become captivated by the “extraordinary surfaces of the photorealist cityscape... urban squalor can be a delight to the eyes when expressed in commodification... an unparalleled quantum leap in the

alienation of daily life in the city can now be experienced in the form of a strange new hallucinatory exhilaration” (Jameson 23). At numerous moments in the narrative, *Debout-payé* similarly apposes the slick, postmodern city with its older vestiges, alienation with consumer ecstasy, and living bodies with cool, slick screens, while nevertheless accounting for the inevitable assertion of human social and physical needs in the commodified spaces of the city.

Leaving the spectacle: reclaiming space for play, intimacy, and other rebellions within work and consumerism

We can examine the tension created by this apposition when Ossiri, who remains keen-eyed to keep alert during his security work, observes and details the “delight” and occasional arousal of shoppers engaged in consumer activity in an alienated city. As kitschy dance music plays in Camaïeu, “une vieille dame... bouge doucement ses hanches, dodeline de la tête tout en fouillant dans les robes à -70%... Telle une bite au milieu de ses gonades, le signe %... se balance au-dessus des têtes de ces femmes excitées par les soldes” (Gauz 45-46). Women of different nationalities and languages cry out with joy to see a beloved Sephora parfumerie in the middle of the urban labyrinth of Paris: “les gens s’écri(ent) à haute voix comme s’ils venaient de voir une vieille connaissance dans les bras de laquelle ils allaient se jeter: ‘Sephoraaaaa !’, version française. ‘Oh my god ! Sephooooora !’, version anglaise” (Gauz 80). Shoppers unwittingly repeat banal comments uttered by thousands of other consumers (“trop mignon ce p’tit haut” (Gauz 30) at Camaïeu, “ça sent trop bon !” (Gauz 79) at Sephora. Ossiri also describes the onerous employee obligation of dancing in front of the Champs-Élysées Sephora: “Cinq ou six fois par jour, les vendeurs et les vendeuses forment une haie à l’entrée. La musique est alors mise au volume maximal et tout le monde danse en battant des mains plus ou moins en rythme” (Gauz 100). Despite the unskilled, unrhythmic dancing, “(c)’est une des grandes attractions de l’avenue. Il y a systématiquement un attroupement devant le magasin... Chacun sort son appareil photo ou son téléphone... Le ‘spectacle,’ ils le regardent par écrans interposés” (Gauz 100). By placing “spectacle” between quotation marks, Gauz’s novel slyly references Guy Debord’s term for the experience of being affectively and psychologically ensnared within the rhythm and space of consumption (*La société*).

Nevertheless, Ossiri’s observations also make clear that the gleaming surfaces of a city engineered for consumption are not the only evidence of globalized capitalism’s power to reorganize human interaction or our use of space and time. Geographer and anthropologist David Harvey theorizes that capitalist globalization has created what he calls “time-space compression,” or the acceleration of economic activities as a force that speeds the movement of goods and people. People and commodities move from space to space, city to city, and nation to nation, keeping pace with the production, circulation,

and exchange of capital (Harvey). Ossiri observes customers in Camaïeu who have not yet become ensnared within the “spectacle,” who don’t find the merchandise “trop mignon” at all; after traveling through capitalist time-space with little time to adjust, people new to France find the country’s values, represented through its commodities, bizarre and even foolish. Two Ivorian nannies comment to each other over a pile of “pre-distressed” jeans at Camaïeu: “Moi, je n’achète pas les jeans *wóró-wóró* qui vont se gâter vite là! ‘Tu as raison, ma sœur. Qu’est-ce que ça veut dire de faire des trous dans les jeans avant même qu’on les achète ?” (Gauz 33). Employing the epithet *wóró-wóró* (after the poorly maintained, unreliable public taxis in Abidjan), the women demonstrate a distaste for the disposable commodities of the West that has not yet been acculturated out of them.

Yet many other global citizens who roam the same commodified spaces as these women have developed a taste for the commodified images of French luxury, style, and savoir-faire that the luxury goods at Sephora reify. As Ossiri notes, many shoppers come directly from Dubai, “ville-centre commercial,” to the Champs-Élysées, “rue-centre commercial,” for their experience of Paris and French culture: “Le pétrole fait voyager loin, mais rétrécit l’horizon” (Gauz 86). The affluent voyagers of the Arab world mingle with the young people of North African heritage – the so-called “Arabes” of the Parisian banlieues – in the shops, performing what French eyes see as different types of “*arabité*” through the restricting medium of consumer tastes and fashion. Ossiri observes that from the *Beur* youth of the banlieues to Saudi Arabian emirs and princesses, “Sephorabia” “est très fréquenté par des Arabes de tous horizons... le voile se porte dans tous les styles” as a fashionable accessory in different lengths, degrees of coverage, materials, and motifs (Gauz 82). He adds that hammams were the original Sephoras, “les premiers centres de soins et de beauté... mascara, khôl, henné, huile d’argan, graphite, rouge à lèvres... l’art du maquillage... trouve ses racines dans la culture arabe” (Gauz 84). Through this reflection that Arabs come to the West to follow the beauty culture that the West has appropriated and commodified, Ossiri theorizes a type of globalization-rooted attraction that Sephora exercises on Middle Easterners and Beurs alike. Consumerism also breaks down national divisions, even when the only divisions remaining are between brand preferences. Ossiri notes that Dior *J’adore* perfume “exerce une attraction systématique et très puissante sur les femmes arabes, chinoises et européennes de l’Est” (Gauz 99); we may notice, of course, that these are women of different “Eastern” cultures whose shared understanding of the Occidental world is mediated through advertising images of consumer luxury.

Yet Ossiri senses more radical possibilities for intercultural exchange, suggested by memories of France’s past of radical internationalism and revolts, quietly simmering beneath the surface of the shopping districts of the city. Ossiri studies the sales techniques of the clerks at Sephora, who are paid on commission, and admires the ingenuity of the man he has nicknamed “Le Crieur.” “Le Crieur”’s strategy is to declaim the slogans of May-June 1968 before intoning a meaningless, rhythmic scansion that

purportedly describes the perfume he is selling but is in fact the same description for every perfume; only the radical slogan changes each time. Ossiri is amused that the salesclerk moves through his repertoire of radical positions without being noticed: “Il est interdit d’interdire... Narcisco Rodriguez...” “Sous les pavés, la plage... Bleu de Chanel...” When Ossiri confronts him, asking him if anyone has commented on the use of the slogans of France’s last moment of mass revolt, the clerk laughs and explains: “Bien sûr que non. Les gens ne comprennent rien et ne veulent rien comprendre. Ils veulent juste acheter” (Gauz 159-161). In a move that would have made Situationists like Guy Debord, who advocated for the end of representation in art as a radical tactic, recoil with distaste upon seeing their methods and slogans appropriated so cynically, the salesperson declares that customers only like “la musique des mots.” As the clerk dismisses the need for representational description of the products – an attitude about language and description that may also remind us of Fredric Jameson’s theories of postmodernist “non-representational” poetics and aesthetics, which we discussed a few pages ago – he adds that he especially enjoys the sound of one contextually meaningless word in his canned description. “C’est pourquoi je suis très fier du ‘benjoin...’ ça sonne bien ça, non ?” (Gauz 161) Ossiri hears the Crieur begin anew the following week with “Soyons réalistes, demandons l’impossible.” Thus, Ossiri allows himself to remember May ’68’s rhetoric of revolt and imagine the impossible for a brief, playful moment: the “Crieur,” he thinks, would never declaim “pendons la charogne stalinienne” for Dior, or “L’art est mort, ne consommons pas son cadavre,” for Yves Saint Laurent, or for Kenzo, “La barricade ferme la rue mais ouvre la voie” (Gauz 161). Although the incongruous (mis)use of May ’68’s discourse in the Crieur’s slogans is jarring, its presence does open another *voie* for Ossiri: the pathway to remembering France’s past of revolts and revolutions, and to imagining the “impossible possibilities” that this entails.

In fact, dreaming the “impossible dream” of new revolts helps Ossiri observe how human social and bodily needs reassert themselves in commodified space. In addition to observing the women who use Ivorian slang to denounce the illogic of consumerism, Ossiri watches other people. He sees a couple kissing greedily in Camaïeu as the canned in-store music blares a song called “Love Is Wicked.” In Sephora, a very tall, pale white man with a huge bleached blond Mohawk is holding the hand of a very pregnant, very petite black woman; despite the altitude separating them, they speak to each other so quietly that that Ossiri wonders how they can hear each other, marveling at how they reclaim intimacy in consumer space. In Sephora, an Arab woman, unveiled, belches loudly, then calls out “Allhamdulillah” when she realizes that Ossiri has noticed her, following the custom of thanking God if one is fortunate enough to belch after a good meal. Another woman, who wears a full burqa, puts tester makeup under her veil, holding it out like a tent as she applies it and checks her image in a hand mirror, then puts the testers back. A girl in a motorized wheelchair and her sister move through Camaïeu, excitedly choosing clothes together; the able-bodied girl helps her sister, placing

garments for them to try on upon the back bar of the wheelchair. A Saudi princess has her guards ask Ossiri if he has any relatives in her country, because he resembles a friend whom she hasn't seen in many years. Even people who are working break out of their roles to enjoy moments of shared humanity. Camaïeu clerks dance to the canned music and laugh together, and the security guards at Sephora communicate over their walkie-talkies using a private code based on the slang of several different Francophone African countries. Ossiri gives Carambars® to his coworkers, writing the dehumanizing trademark symbol even as he describes his friendly gesture and notes that skinny employees get two candy bars. Wherever he goes, Ossiri observes the human desire for social connections reclaiming commodified space.

His influence on Kassoum remains even after Ossiri mysteriously vanishes one day, possibly having been deported. Two days before his disappearance, he makes Kassoum promise to stop doing “debout-payés” as soon as he has his *carte de séjour*, reminding him that he had seen him happiest working with the gardeners. Now that Kassoum has rights of residency, he can find a fulfilling profession and create more “beauty in the streets” through his work. One day, in the pocket of his jacket, Kassoum finds a note written in Ossiri's handwriting: “Laisse le travail des vautours aux vautours” (Gauz 204). This ending of the book is symmetrical to the novel's beginning; at the start of *Debout-Payé*, Ossiri had to discourage Kassoum from head-butting a young, blacked-out drunk Frenchwoman who has attached herself to the two men in the wee hours of the morning, narrowly missing their shoes as she vomits. Exhorting Kassoum to care for the incapacitated woman rather than to respond in frustration, Ossiri told his friend not to live as a “vautour” (Gauz 22). At the end of the novel, Kassoum has found a career, and is the husband of the young woman whom he helped find a safe place in his apartment when she was sick and vulnerable; soon, she will bear their child. Finally, Kassoum has the luxury of no longer eating the “charogne capitaliste” in his working life (or in his personal life, for that matter).

Conclusion: extraordinary possibilities for revolt in everyday life

I would like to conclude by calling attention more explicitly to *Debout-payés* use of the minutiae of everyday life in its evocation of political resistance and the consequences of imperialism in both its colonial and cultural-capitalist forms. In sociologist Henri Lefebvre's Marxist theories of everyday life, which were quite popular with the radical students and workers responsible for the actions of May 1968, Lefebvre insisted in that everyday life is the site not only of banal and repeated acts such as work and chores, but of extraordinary events including birth, death, religious ceremonies, artistic creation, and political activity, including revolts. Likewise, Gauz's work emphasizes the possibilities for rebellion, beauty, and freedom immanent to daily routines of work, leisure, love, friendship, family life, and urban circulation. *Debout-payé* accomplishes a radical critical

task by heightening the contradictions between the coldness and cynicism of the contemporary postmodern world and the still-existing possibilities for human warmth, laughter, spontaneity, and playfulness. In doing so, it shows the appeal and necessity of making space for these sentiments and social behaviors, which form the cornerstone of both small, personal revolts and large-scale ones – the novel makes this apparent by placing these details alongside references to radical political theory and activist movements. In some cases, these efforts that the novel catalogs are large and concerted (such as the MECI students’ meetings and theoretical activities and Angela’s elaborate lived decolonial Marxist praxis as a teacher and parent). However, in other cases, they are small and individual (as with Ossiri’s observations and analyses keeping his mind active at his dull jobs at the abandoned mill and the retail shops, or with the shoppers and workers seeking joy and human connections in environments designed for consumerism and alienated labor). In this way, *Debout-payé* illustrates not only how systemic oppression exerts an influence on daily life, but how we may live our lives in a way that affords us freedom of movement as well as mental and affective liberation, the latter being key precursors to organizing political change. (After all, consciousness-raising sessions accompanied many of the political movements of liberation in the 1960s and 1970s, such as the feminist movement and the gay rights movements; similarly, “rap groups” and “rap sessions” were part of the black liberation/black power movements).¹²

Despite his mother Angela’s convictions that revolution was possible and even imminent – an idea that seemed reasonable only a few years after the global events of the summer of 1968 – Ossiri does not expect a revolution to happen right away. However, his connection with radical history provides Ossiri with opportunities for creativity, a more meaningful existence, and identification with a type of Frenchness that resists commodification – that of its revolutionary past. In addition to teaching this resistant mentality to his friend Kassoum, Ossiri uses these ideals and memories to keep his own hopes alive. In this way, he is even able to imagine what a new revolt would look like: “Si elle se répétait aujourd’hui, la prise de la Bastille libérerait des milliers de prisonniers de la consommation” (Gauz 40). While the novel does not tell the story of a revolt – it neither narrates the events of May-June 1968 nor imagines and narrates a new revolt in the 21st century – it does narrate how both the playful and serious ideals of May ’68 re-emerge when we least expect them, gaining new vibrancy and context in a world that desperately needs some form of liberation. *Debout-payé* reminds us that there is remarkable potential for changing the world if we decide to stop being “vultures” and turn our attention to pursuing meaningful work and building social connections – thus planting the seeds for political movements – even in the most unlikely spaces of the postmodern city.

Notes

¹ See also: *Je vais mieux* (Foenkinos), *La tête de l'emploi* (Foenkinos), *Mortel management* (Oyarbide), *Marge brute* (Quintreau)

² See also: *Ils désertent* (Beinstingel), *Retour aux mots sauvages* (Beinstingel), *Parle-moi du sous-sol* (Coquet), *Brûlons tous ces punks pour l'amour des elfes* (Campredon), *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* (Nini), *Daewoo* (Bon).

³ For insightful scholarly discussion of contemporary French workplace literature, see “« Ressources inhumaines »: Le nouvel esprit du travail dans quatre romans français contemporains (François Bon, François Emmanuel, Aurélie Filipetti, Lydie Salvayre)” (Engélibert). See also: *Le roman d'entreprise au tournant du XXI^e siècle* (Labadie), “‘Come you spirits unsex me!’ Representations of the Female Executive in Recent French Film and Fiction.” (Lane), *Écritures du travail, écritures politiques?* (Servoise), “Écrire le travail : vers une sociologisation du roman contemporain” (Viart)

⁴ The children of “Génération ’68,” as well as some who lived through it, examine the legacy of the far-left radicalism of the 60s and 1970s in France for lessons, warnings, hope, and inspiration in several recent novels and literary essays. See: *Après le silence* (Castino), *La ville orange* (Motsch), *Le Jour où mon père s'est tu* (Linhart), *Ah ! ça ira...* (Lachaud)

⁵ Gauz's second novel *Camarade Papa* provides more detail about France's imperialist conquest of the Ivory Coast during the colonial era and France's continuing political and economic domination of the Ivory Coast after independence, again using the perspective of a child of two Ivorian socialists to pointedly critique the two countries' histories of oppression.

⁶ Giscard d'Estaing's slogan “Il faut une France forte” was accompanied by a term of deregulation, scaling back of labor rights, and anti-immigration policies, to the point that Lionel Stoléru, Giscard d'Estaing's secretary to the minister of labor and participation, declared in 1980 that “il n'est plus question d'accueillir un seul étranger en France.” In 1974, Giscard d'Estaing's government suspended the right of immigrants to have their families join them in France – unless the immigrants came from the European Community. See: “Les années Giscard d'Estaing” (Bouchet)

⁷ Ethnographic studies of life in Abidjan from the era, such as *Moi, un noir* by Jean Rouch, portray the uneven urbanism in Abidjan, which, like Paris in the 1960s and 1970s, saw more construction and growth in quarters where wealthy people already lived, worked, and circulated, whereas its poor neighborhoods and ghettos either were untouched or were more depressing prefabricated public housing.

⁸ The “choc pétrolier” in 1974 occurred after the Yom Kippur War brought contentious relations between the West and the Middle East to a head. The countries of OPEC raised the price of a barrel of oil from \$4.31 to \$10.11 in one day, on January 1st, 1974. Oil prices increased 10 times over from

1970 to 1979, in part because of the end of the Bretton Woods agreement, which ended restrictions putting a fixed price on gold and severed the final link between the American dollar and the gold standard. The end of Bretton Woods precipitated the devaluation of the US dollar, which gave rise to inflation and stagflation throughout the 1970s. For more information, see: “Black Gold: the end of Bretton Woods and the Oil-Price shocks of the 1970s” (Hammes and Wills)

⁹ “Françafrique,” a term first used approvingly by Hophouët-Boigny, refers to France’s continued economic and political control in former colonies in Africa. For more on the history of Françafrique, see: *La Françafrique: Le plus long scandale de la République* (Verschave)

¹⁰ Cabral, Amílcar. “The Weapon of Theory.” *Return to the Source: Selected Speeches of Amílcar Cabral*. Monthly Review Press, 1976. As the book is out of print and difficult to find, I referred to the transcript of the speech on Marxists.org, which has no pagination, for my citations. <https://www.marxists.org/subject/africa/cabral/1966/weapon-theory.htm>. Accessed 10 March 2017.

¹¹ Debord, too, pursued an existential project through psychogeography; as McKenzie Wark notes, Debord’s idea of “Situations” was influenced by Sartre’s “writing during wartime... (his) example of a situation is telling: ‘Remove the prohibition to circulate in the street after curfew, and what meaning can there be for me to have the freedom ... to take a walk at night?’... The street Sartre wants to walk is the subject of his freedom... (But) what meaning can there be in the freedom to walk ... through Paris ... (with the curfew) of the occupation lifted?... The derive appears almost as if it is a direct answer ... The derive is the experimental mapping of a situation, the trace of the possibilities of realizing a desire.”

¹² For further information on consciousness-raising and “rap” sessions in 1960s liberation movements, see: *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (Joseph), “The women’s liberation movement, activism and therapy at the grassroots, 1968–1985” (Crook)

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