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THE GLOBAL POLITICAL ECONOMY OF GREEN FINANCE AND SOCIO-ECOLOGICAL TRANSFORMATION

Special Issue Guest Editors:
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Jess Auerbach: From Water to Wine: Becoming Middle Class in Angola. Toronto, Buffalo, London: University of Toronto Press 2020, 256 Pages, 18 Euros.

Academic writing can be as delightful as wine around a campfire alongside a sincere, open-minded friend and her travel stories. This is one of the main take-aways from reading *From Water to Wine*, Jess Auerbach's highly self-reflexive ode to the Angolan middle class, centring on the coastal city of Lobito. Structured around the five senses and illustrative of Pierre Bourdieu's theories of capital and social distinction, the book posits that, at least in times of economic boom, more Angolans are taking on the mannerisms and reaching the accumulation levels of the transnational bourgeoisie. The basic tenets of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' are gradually being met and progressing into a *glocalised* pursuit of the Honda Civic, the iPhone, sushi, and imported perfumes to match every occasion. Auerbach generally sees that as a good thing – one that "is working" (p. 5). Despite experiences with violence and trauma (pp. 169-173),

she reflects fondly on her times as a participant observer working as a music teacher in Angola and hanging out with Angolans studying and working in Brazil, with which the West African country shares a colonial past and official language: Portuguese.

A self-described "almost-digital native" (p. 151) writing her didactic book with younger "digital natives" in mind (p. 163), Auerbach uses comics, her own poignant poetry, screenshots, traditional recipes, and references to Angolan popular culture to captivate them. An eclectic researcher, she also makes sure to refer to plenty of literature on various subjects that could entice students and researchers into further reading around the book's main topics and beyond. (Hopefully, they will want to visit Lobito, too.) The anthropologist does not claim to present a complete picture of the Angolan middle class, of its prejudices and codes of behaviour, and acknowledges that the narrative is based upon her own subjective experience. She enters some new territory by drawing readers' attention to senses other than sight and invites others to add to the threads she has begun to pull.

Moreover, she reveals early on that a major goal of her book is to help dispel mediated stereotypes surrounding Africans, by deliberately using a “cheerful” approach in showcasing ways in which they “are doing just fine” (p. 11): namely the Angolan Scouts, disposable income, gastronomy, and higher education and career endeavours.

Along the way, Auerbach reflects on her own positionality, encapsulated by the image of her as a White South African woman riding a motorbike in Angolan streets while wearing an “astronaut helmet” and speaking, “with a Brazilian accent,” a Portuguese that is still a work in progress (pp. 13, 36). Besides the author’s transparency with readers, her care for her subjects shines through, as she lets their quotes largely speak for themselves and protects their identities from possible repercussions in their authoritarian, volatile, oil-rich *República*. She shows optimism (vaguely expressed) for Angola’s democratic future and refrains from judgement when a government official describes censorship as “a necessary step in the ‘maturation’ process of a very young nation” (p. 133). But by leaving it up

to readers to extract from between the lines or from her choice of interview quotes many of the unsavoury aspects of a system she defines as *capitalismo selvagem* (p. 19), Auerbach misses the chance to hammer home the deeper meaning of ordinary Angolans’ gaining access to luxuries the established transnational bourgeoisie takes for granted.

Among such luxuries is the ability to invest considerable time and money into boosting one’s cultural capital, which more Angolans are apparently crossing the Atlantic to do in Brazil (where Auerbach went to learn Portuguese). Black Angolans’ arrival and status in Brazil had been quite different during “the Age of Empire,” when they were trafficked there as slaves, but Angolans’ origin and skin colour are likely still very much a factor in their level of social mobility in the South American country. Perhaps again in the name of caution, perhaps not to veer too far from her focus on Angola, Auerbach oversimplifies historic and cultural links between Angola and Brazil. She opts for subtlety rather than openly discussing differences between, how Black Angolans, Afro-Brazil-

ians and those considered White, are treated in Brazil, or the two countries' similar but distinct journeys with the intertwined scourges of racism, inequality and exploitation (pp. 9-10, 40-41).

The main strength in *From Water to Wine* lies in Auerbach's brilliantly articulate and accessible writing style, amid her keen powers of observation, her compassion and curiosity. It is probably appealing enough to make even readers who may have heard only the "ugly" news about Angola want to open their hearts, sharpen their senses, and go experience the country. There is no telling the greatness she can reach as a scholar when she decides to dig deeper and commit to clearer, more specific thesis statements, even when insisting on academic unorthodoxy.

ANA BEATRIZ RIBEIRO