

# The Spirit of Saint-Louis

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The news from Saint-Louis was shit. Literally. The smell of it wafted into our taxi as we bumped over Faidherbe Bridge and onto roads as rough as a crocodile's back, the island-city's cobbled streets in the midst of a subterranean overhaul, torn apart and scattered, and reduced to sand and trickles of tainted water. The city, our driver explained, was repairing its sewer pipes. We arrived at night, my partner and I, to an abandoned city, and took the driver's word for it. The construction sites were still, the shadowy machinery like great beasts at rest, nestled into sandpits amidst nests of broken cobblework. Saint-Louis' streets are arrow-straight, and driving through this long, narrow island at the mouth of the River Senegal is akin to navigating the furrows of a keyboard. We reached our hotel, near the steel girder bridge to the long, sandy spit of Langue de Barbarie, in an obsolescent quiet. No music cut the air, only the warm lapping of the River Senegal licking at the edges of the island. That static calm was broken early, with the clash and grind of traffic as the morning round of taxis diverted around the destruction and trundled over the bridge.

As we walked through the city, the workmen were back at it, disturbing the peace with their picks and mattocks, swung to loosen the old rusted pipes. The same ingress of salty Atlantic waves that is undercutting the island and threatening Saint-Louis' inundation, eats away at the sewer pipes. In other words, this repair work was overdue. To state this is to state the obvious; maintenance is the great underpinning of all human civilization. Yet, on our first day, we met an Italian who had recently returned to Saint-Louis on a kind of reminiscence tour, having vacationed there years before. "What are they doing to my beautiful city?" he cried, after picking his way through the construction. "They are tearing it apart!"

It's a nostalgist's conceit—and what traveler does not live with one foot firmly planted in nostalgia?—to see change as damage. To a local, though, the road work was not changed but an upgrade. Once the pipes were laid, the cobblestones would be pounded back in, and soon the road would look as it did before, give or take a few polished pipe-ends jutting from the brickwork. It's not progress, but the bare minimum needed to keep an ancient city like Saint-Louis from sluffing into the sea. Nonetheless, from the Italian, as from other sentimental travelers, and countless guidebooks, there was no mention of that, or the crumbling 19th-century French colonial double-story villas. The idea seemed to be: the French built it well enough, so leave it alone. But their two-centuries-old lime mortar and horsehair walls, their courtyards, and shaded balconies, were all of it crumbling, like a dry cookie, with a touch.

It was for its architecture that Saint-Louis was given its UNESCO Heritage status in 2000, but that is a dubious distinction with little to its credit, a label that draws in visitors but not the funds to repair their heavy footfall.

It is inarguable that Saint-Louis offers a kind of reprieve. It is calm; it feels, despite its sizeable population, to be empty. Compared to the ragged, medieval bustle of Dakar, Saint-Louis carries itself with a Golden Age refinement. Saint-Louis is noticeably clean, its streets largely devoid of trash. What garbage makes it into curbside trash bins is collected by a roving truck, whose binmen shoo away the goats that gather to nibble at the sweetly rotting innards within the bins.

I took up a lone piece of paper I found crumpled in the bric-a-brac of a crumbling brick pile. The edges of the sheet were ripped as though it had been torn roughly, in rage, from its book. Under the title *Examen*, it read, in French:

*Senegal is one of the poorest countries in the world. But many drugs are consumed in Senegal. We resolutely withdraw from our commitment to make Senegal a country free from drugs and their harmful consequences. Therefore, after having explained two consequences of drug consumption, we will present Senegal's strategies for countering this scourge.*

*Drug abuse is a jacket in Senegal, especially by the unemployed. Le Blanc use drugs as stress relief, but not the Senegalese. This results in the loss of memory, finally you will be a murderer and the prison will be your room. Drug abuse is not perfect for your health. Your life changes direction and you become unemployed. You never stop using it.*

*To avoid this, the state has requested the police stop the growers, users, as well as the sellers in Senegal.*

For this small work, the student received half-marks. The original text, with its looping letters and large circles used to dot the 'i's suggest it was written by a girl.

Truths come hard to Senegal's youth. Outside a restaurant, I'm approached by a young man speaking English. The language isn't common on the island—in the local bookshop, *L'Agneau Carnivore*, I found only one book not in French—but the boy, Saliou, spoke it well. Language is an unrecognized aptitude found everywhere in Western Africa—bilingualism is taken as a given, but it is not uncommon to meet people who speak three, four, or five languages.

Like many Saint-Louis youths, Saliou was drawn early to music. The city is a junction of musical genres. Jazz from American soldiers posted in the city during World War II, blues blown in from Mali on the hot *harmattan* wind, and, more recently, rap and hip-hop being slung by homegrown internet sensations. But the classic reign supreme, with the yearly Jazz Festival held each spring. Saliou was hopeful to perform in it one day. All he needed was a guitar. "Mine was stolen," he said, hanging his

head. "By my friends."

"Some friends," I said.

"I have a djembe," he said, the traditional drum apparently a sour consolation. "I need some money to get an electric guitar." In this land of blues, the electric guitar reigns supreme (Saliou is a disciple of the American bluesman Gary Clark Jr.). Fifty thousand francs is what's needed to buy a decent model, twenty thousand of which he's saved. The only trouble is the lack of a local music store. Anyone wanting to buy an instrument has to go through a broker, who, for a fee, will bring from the mainland whatever was desired. Saliou was undeterred. "I'll get the money," he said. I waited for the other shoe to drop, for the hand to extend and the eyes to glisten, but that was my expectation, not his. He asked me for nothing, only that I come to his show that weekend.

It was wrong to assume, off the bat, that Saliou expected money, but beggary is a hard topic to clear from the mind when one is on the streets. Some dozen children—I came to recognize several of them—patter through the town to beg for money and food. Carting plastic margarine tubs or trepanned tomato cans, they hustle along the street, plying every passerby with the hollow clumping of the few coins in their tins.

They are *talibés*, children either taken or sent from their countryside homes to places like Saint-Louis, Dakar, and Theis, to live in a *daara*, a Quranic school, where they are ostensibly tutored in the ways of Islam by a holy teacher, a *marabout*. In something more akin to prostitution than education, the children are turned out on the daily, despatched to collect what they can from the streets and return it to the *daara*. Senegal's President, Macky Sall, has since 2016 promised to end child begging and "remove children from the streets," reiterating in 2019 his intention to "definitively resolve the problem of children in the street." Investigations by Human Rights Watch have found little evidence that any concrete action has been taken over Sall's rhetoric. In 2016, over 1,500 children, including around 1,000 *talibés*, were removed from the streets of Dakar in a government action referred to as *le retrait des enfants de la rue*. But the failure to investigate or arrest any of the marabouts responsible for forcing the children to beg, meant the return of some 1,000 *talibés* to those same teachers.

Someone seeking to help the *talibés* is the Saint-Louis-based mononymous artist Zeus. His idea is "to bring the *talibés* together, to introduce them to painting to make them forget the suffering they endure on a daily basis." We found him doing that in his open-air workshop, a hand-painted sign above the door reading *L'or Dure*, or Hard Gold, or ostensibly, "order", as Zeus has a predilection for triple entendres. While Zeus lounged on a low seat with a bottle of Gazelle beer, several young men squatted in dusky alcoves with pots of paint, scrawling on plastic menu holders discarded by hotels—thin bodies in black paint, dhow sails in orange, palm trees in green.

The walls of *L'or Dure* are covered with painted canvas, though canvas is not an all-pervading medium: some paintings are done on potato sacks or the lids of oil buckets. Others are framed within bicycle tires. Zeus's gawky, almost featureless, figures, with large feet and heads, and fingers like tuning pegs, inhabit a vibrant world of primary color. Their bodies, their skin are a mottle of yellows, blues, and reds. "The colors of life," Zeus said. "Art transcends the chaos of the world."

Many of his characters play instruments, most carry some kind of message. Beside a painting of a yellow-faced flautist is written a poem:

Femme nue, femme noire  
Vêtue de ta couleur qui est vie, de ta forme qui est beauté  
J'ai grandi à ton ombre; la douceur de tes mains bandait mes yeux

Et voilà qu'au cœur de l'Été et de Midi,  
Je te découvre, Terre promise, du haut d'un haut col calciné  
Et ta beauté me foudroie en plein cœur, comme l'éclair d'un aigle

The poem is the first stanza of *Femme Noire*, by Léopold Sédar Senghor, Senegal's first president. The shadows of the third line ("I grew up in your shadow; the softness of your hands blindfolded my eyes.") are strictly rhetorical. In the sultry midday heat, there is not a shadow in the city.

There is simplicity in Zeus' work, but chaos too. In one, a blood red boat tips on a rolling sea, spilling its load of so many black dots into the water. The name of the vessel, written on the hull, is "Clan Destin Barça Barsak." Again, the word carries multiple meanings: "Clan Destin" is clandestine, but also the Clan of Destiny, the destined group. Its destination: Barcelona (Barça) or death (Barsak, a Wolof word).

We crossed west from the island of Saint-Louis onto the Langue de Barbarie peninsula, where some of these boats strike out for the Canary Islands. The Canaries have become the destination of choice for migrants with Europe as the end destination in mind. The Mediterranean, the largest mass grave of Africans in the world, is a passé route, too heavily guarded, too heavy trodden. In 2019 some 2,500 migrants arrived in the Canaries by boat, in 2020, the number was over 20,000. Though it entails less overland travel through the dangers of Mali and Libya, it isn't without its risks. The UN estimates that a quarter of boats leaving the Senegalese coast don't reach their destination. Over 600 people have drowned making the journey in the past year alone. In October 2020, a boat that left from Mbour, a town south of Saint-Louis, caught fire mid-journey, killing 140 of its 200 passengers. The days of national mourning called for by Sall after each nautical disaster is of little comfort to anyone; the rice brought by his representatives was merely an insult.

The sea is as much a part of those boats' departure as it is their demise. Pollution, neo-colonialism, and rising sea levels have reduced the fishing industry, once the cornerstone of both the Senegalese economy and diet, to a crapshoot. Villages south of Saint-Louis have already been abandoned due to encroaching water. Fishing stocks have decreased, owing to Asian fleets scouring Senegalese waters of everything that swims. Local fishermen, working from their handmade pirogues cast are forced to cast finer and finer nets, hauling in even the smallest fish to complement their catch.

I cannot tell whether Langue de Barbarie feels decades behind or decades ahead of Saint-Louis. Neither is good, its rubbishy disorder an omen of hard times ahead. Between the large pirogues, the sand is all but obscured with garbage, a flotsam of every describable waste known to man. From out the boats come basket after basket of silverfish. The sky above churns with opportunist birds: western-reef heron, great white egret, white-breasted cormorant, and Caspian terns gliding down and picking at the flesh of discarded fish frames.

Over the fracas, a taxi driver hails us with "Ho spazio!", his perfect Italian catching our ears. We ride with him southward along the peninsula, to the beach where dilapidated tourist resorts are threatened with an Atlantic eating its way through the sand of Hydrobase beach. The driver had lived in Italy for decades, long enough to attain citizenship, though he was back in Saint-Louis for good, to look after his ailing mother. He thought the improvements to the city were good and necessary, something that "would heal the town."

Heal may be a strong word; breathe might be better. Viewed from the peninsula, Saint-Louis sits like a pebble in the throat of the River Senegal. The city is a contention of history, historically immobile, yet set adrift from its time when it was the final waypoint on the France-to-Argentina airmail run. Certainly, it's difficult to imagine Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, the most famous airman to fly that

route, glided down into the city of today his gypsy moth to jot down notes about wind, sand, and stars. But rejuvenation is an inevitable part of improvement; its embrace will mean the essence of this city, and will carry forth the spirit of Saint-Louis.

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