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On interference and hotspots.
Ethnographic explorations of rural-urban connectivity in and around Kinshasa's *phonie* cabins

In Kinshasa's *phonie* houses, radio communication with regions in the country is made possible. The article provides an ethnographic description of social life in and around these contemporary *phonie* houses. An analysis of the management of *phonie* conversations, which usually take place in the presence of the operator and customers, who themselves often participate actively in the radio conversations, provide a deeper insight into how urban residents literally live with the village. This leads to an exploration of different "agents of interference" in Kinshasa's social landscape. These are social roles that bridge between different worlds, but often embody risk and danger. As a result, the emphasis in the analysis is primarily on interference, a technical and social experience familiar to many, not only in Kinshasa, but everywhere where long-range connectivity is lived.

Key words: RD Congo; Kinshasa; techno-sociality; Kinshasa; rural-urban relations; interference

Over interferentie en hotspots.
Een etnografische verkenning van stads-dorp connectiviteit in en rond Kinshasa's radiophonie huizen.

In Kinshasa's fonie-huizen wordt radio-communicatie met regio's in het binnenland mogelijk gemaakt. Het artikel biedt een etnografische beschrijving van het sociale leven in en rond deze hedendaagse fonie-huizen en verschaft dieper inzicht in de wijze waarop stedelingen letterlijk "met het dorp" leven. De analyse is gericht op het beheer van de fonie-gesprekken, die meestal plaatsvinden in het bijzijn van de *opérateur* en andere klanten, die zelf heel vaak ook actief deelnemen aan de fonie gesprekken. Dit leidt tot een verkenning van verschillende "figuren van interferentie" in Kinshasa's sociale landschap. Dit zijn sociale rollen die de brug maken tussen verschillende werelden, maar vaak risico en gevaar belichamen. Hierdoor ligt de nadruk in de studie vooral op interferentie, een technische en sociale ervaring waarmee velen - niet alleen in Kinshasa, maar overal waar connectiviteit op lange afstanden wordt beleefd, vertrouwd zijn.

De l'interférence et des « hotspots ».
Une exploration de la connectivité urbaine-rurale autour des cabines radiophonique à Kinshasa

L'article offre une description ethnographique de la vie sociale dans et autour des maisons de radiophonie à Kinshasa. Une étude de la gestion des appels à travers la phonie, qui prennent généralement lieu en présence de l'opérateur et d'autres clients, qui souvent aussi participent activement aux conversations privées, nous informe sur la façon à laquelle les citadins littéralement vivent «avec le village ». Cela conduit à une exploration des différentes « figures d'interférence » dans le paysage social à Kinshasa. Il s'agit des rôles sociaux qui font le pont entre

des mondes différents, mais incarnent souvent le risque et le danger. L'analyse se concentre principalement sur l'interférence, c'est-à-dire l'expérience technique et sociale avec laquelle beaucoup, non seulement à Kinshasa mais partout où la connectivité de longue distance est vécue, sont familiers.

On interference and hotspots.
Ethnographic explorations of rural-urban connectivity in and around Kinshasa's *phonie* cabins

From a roof top, a city looks different than what people commonly experience. So does Kinshasa, capital city of DR Congo and home to approximately 10 million residents. Walking in Kinshasa's streets, looking for public transport, or on the way to a store, one's gaze tends to be fixed downward. On the sandy roads in Kinshasa's less elite areas, one tries to avoid potholes, water puddles, or electricity cables; in between, one looks up as one walks by, greeting neighbors and other acquaintances on the way. Rarely, however, is one's gaze directed upwards. And so only rarely does one notice the different types of antennas that make up Kinshasa's skyline. Yet, when standing on the rooftop or balcony of one of the newly erected *flat-hôtels*, one's attention is caught by a whirl of cables, pylons, and antennas. And, from above as well, peering over various compounds, dish antennas attached to the outsides of walls, either sitting on flat corrugated rooftops, or on new, shiny red-brick gable roofs, catch one's gaze. These satellite dishes not only showcase the popularity of satellite television in recent years, but they are also the material indexes of Kinois' electronic entanglements with other worlds, "elsewheres" (Lingala, *libanda*, literally "outside").

   Makeshift wire antennas also pop up, under which, on weekdays and Saturdays, between 8am and 4pm, one can observe a man (rarely a woman, see below)[i] sitting next to a high-frequency radio (*radiophonie; phonie*) with a notebook, on which he jots the names of customers and the amount of money they have sent or have come to collect. If he is alone, he might be whistling while changing from one radio wave to another. At other instances, this *opérateur*'s loud and deep voice will repeat "*allô allô – moto aza na onze mille? nani?*" ("Is there someone on 11.000 [Mhz]? Who?") Or, especially when it is not raining or when there is not too much wind, he might be surrounded by small groups of people while he contacts others in far-away places with whom a conversation has been scheduled.

    These different material infrastructures, i.e. satellite dishes versus the antennas for *phonie*, link Kinois (inhabitants of Kinshasa) with different distant others: *phonies* enable communication with Congolese elsewhere in the hinterland, while the satellite antennae have a more global reach. This article then is concerned with the sociality in and around the *phonie* cabins, which arrived in the DR Congo during the colonial era. The *phonie cabin* provides an example of electronically mediated long-distance communication that took place before the advent of cellular technology, and continues to be enacted parallel to and sometimes in combination with it.[ii] This article thus is about the technosociality emerging around residual media (Acland 2007), media that continue to be actively used despite understandings that it has been supplemented through a variety of other technologies. The reason that the *radiophonie* is still used in Kinshasa is that it remains one of the most important ways to connect significant others (mainly family members) in various urban and rural areas where cellular communication is nearly impossible.

Connectivity
Phonies can be considered among the city's heterotopias (Foucault 1967), eliciting the co-presence of village and city. I am in particular interested in the rural-urban connectivity, the social

quality of bridging and bonding that electric communication facilitates, established in these spaces. Currently, much of the research on communication in the Global South emphasizes the promises of mobile phone (Lingala, *tshombo*) communication and the internet in fostering democracy and reducing poverty. We should certainly be attentive to the ways in which people express and organize their lives in this era of electronic modernity, as electronic communication and information technologies make up a large part of the economy, politics, and the everyday of many around the world (see among others Latour 2005; Bessire and Fischer 2012). Analysis of contemporary sociality, not only in Kinshasa but anywhere long-distance connectivity is experienced, must acknowledge the role of technological devices in social life, as well as historical shifts in the imagination of connectivity along technological innovations.[iii] In their introduction to the edited volume on *The Social Life of Connectivity in Africa,* de Bruijn and Van Dijk (2012: 14) make a distinction between bridging and bonding, and claim that the "issue is whether the bridging that connections make possible leads to particular or new forms of bonding." This question resonates with Latour's musings (2005: 5) about connectors constituting the social fabric: " 'social' is not some glue that could fix everything including what the other glues cannot fix; it is what is glued together by many other types of connectors." Indeed, connectivity, or the possibility of being tied to social, spiritual, and other non-human others, depends on "connectors," human and non-human forms of bridging and bonding. A telephone, a bridge, or even skin and ears, allow contact or access.

Connectivity is differently *imagined* but also actively *managed* according to social and cultural regimes of speech and repertoires of authority, material infrastructures, and the social bonds between interlocutors. This management depends not only on technology but first and foremost on social actors, that is to say, human beings who link people through their speech, body, and power. For the anthropologist, one of the tasks in the study of techno-sociality is to look into the various social categories that "connect". I am indebted to the research by Clapperton Mavhunga (2014), a historian of technology cultures in sub-Saharan Africa, who identifies travel and movement as crucial modes of knowledge production, transfer, and acquisition. As Mavhunga reminds us, the "hunter" is one of many "people on the move" who tell us stories about technological and social innovation. Relevant for my analysis is that the hunter is one of many "connectors", bringing together people from the village with the world of animals, spirits, and exploiters (the colony, the postcolonial state, tourists). As will become clear in this article, the *phonie opérateur* is one type of connector in contemporary Kinshasa, and is closely connected to the hunter and its contemporary equivalent, the lorry driver. Therefore, in this article, much attention will be devoted to the various "agents of connectivity" who populate the Kinois imagination of sociality. In particular, my ethnographic material pushes me to relate the connecting work of the *phonie opérateur* with that of the *ndumba* (Lingala for young, sexually active girl), the *ndoki* (the witch/sorcerer) and the *poro* (the truck driver).

Central in the analysis will be the notion of "interference", which brings together the technological and the social. "Interference" here primarily refers to the incongruity of *radiophonie* communication with electricity, that major infrastructure that symbolically differentiates between "the urban" and "the rural". The *allô allô* operates better when there is no electricity at all. Rain or too much wind also render *phonie* conversations difficult. In quite literal fashion, noise (*makelele*), provoked through the interference of waves, disturbs the conversation. Recently, "noise" and distortion have gained interest of philosophers (Serres 1981) and social scientists (Ginsburg et al. 2002; Larkin 2008) because of the metonymic and metaphorical meanings the degrading and degraded material infrastructure embodies. For Serres (1982: 14) "The town makes noise, but the noise makes the town", suggesting that social systems depend heavily on interruptions and disruptions. Risk, chance, anxiety and disorder consolidate social systems, Serres holds. In similar fashion, Larkin (2008) argues, that "a particular sensorial experience of media marked by poor transmission, interference, and noise" (2008: 218) takes on a "far greater material and political presence" (2008: 219) than scholars tend to acknowledge. Blurred images and distorted sounds constitute a "semiotics of distortion" (2008: 239) that signals a technological

marginalization intimately tied to uneven access to economic and political worlds. In the *phonie cabine,* the jarringly harsh sounds pouring out of *phonie* microphones which often only a very well-trained ear can sift out so as to hear the words expressed by the distant interlocutors, are like shadows on TV screens, hot temperature in cinema halls, dropouts on private video images. Ginsburg et al. (2002: 19) identify these features as part of a "semiotics of interference", i.e. the process of meaningful communication "whereby the physical qualities of media create noise that threatens to overwhelm the message itself".[iv] I agree with Ginsburg et al. that we should not ignore the noise but rather try to understand how unwanted, undesired and/or interfering sounds, images, and people contribute to the experience of electronic modernity.

Building further on these insights about materiality and representation, and delving into the socio-technical realm, I propose that the study of "interference" also speaks to social life as such. After all, interference, or the undesired involvement of others in one's life, is a social activity. Meddling into others' affairs, intruding into their private space, etc. are examples of interference as a social practice. Focusing on "interference" draws our attention to the undesired effects of social connectivity, i.e. of one's accessibility or availability to engage with others. I ask: What are the social and technical layers of "interference" in Kinshasa's *phonie* cabins? How is it managed (if at all)? What can we learn from it about urban sociality and life in an interconnected world? And finally, more abstractly, what does an analytical focus on "interference" inform us about the dialogue of electronically mediated connectivity with other forms of social connectedness, co-habitation and co-existence? The relevance of the ethnographic material speaks to larger issues of Kinois social universe, i.e. beyond the *phonie* cabin, and bears also relevance for reflections on sociality in general. In particular, it is hoped that the following ethnography inspires a reconsideration of social personhood as it is experienced, imagined and managed in an increasingly interconnected world (Strathern 1992; Strathern1995; Myhre 2013; Vokes 2013; Rodima-Taylor 2013).

The article also develops a heuristic argument regarding the study of life in electronic modernity. Further developing the analysis of "media chronotopes" (Vokes and Pype 2016), i.e. a study of the interactions between temporalities and the experience of place as these are mediated by electronic media, I identify the *phonie cabine* as a "hotspot," a space of excess of meaning, affect, and flows. The "hotspot," as a particular form of media chronotope, provides an excellent entry into the ethnography of electronic modernity. After all, information and communication technologies are both material and immaterial, embodied and disembodied, physical and virtual, and these infrastructures assemble words, people, their individual and shared histories, expectations and imagined futures. Hotspots – such as bars, markets, public phone booths, but also bodies, are spaces of congregation and flow; they are by definition spaces of connection and disconnection. It is to these dynamics of creating, sustaining, and managing relations to others via speech and technology, and their embodied and (im)material interactions with various forms of place-making, that we need to be attentive in order to understand how electronic modernity and social selves are entangled.

In the first part of this article, I describe the infrastructure of the *phonie cabins* themselves, and then move on to an exploration of the *phonie* as a hotspot. Attention to the geography of the *phonie cabine* in Kinshasa will show how the urban and the rural are "literally" (via speech and words) and materially linked to one another. This will be followed by an exploration of the social work that takes place in and around the *phonie* cabin. Here, I describe actual conversations in the *cabine*, and look at the people who man the *phonies* (both the operators and their customers). In the fourth part, I explore how the *opérateur* as a connector resembles other figures in Kinshasa with similar roles, and what this resemblance illuminates about the *phonie cabins* and the predicaments of urban life in DR Congo. Finally, I combine the various analytical threads to further develop the notion of the "hotspot." The material is based on participant observation in and around *phonie* cabins in Kinshasa, interviews with *opérateurs*, *radiophonie* owners and customers. While I carried out focused research on *allô allô* houses in January 2015, July-September 2015, and April 2017, I also draw on data collected during other research visits to

Kinshasa since 2003 (in total 43 months). For privacy reasons, all names in this article are fictionalized.

Phonie infrastructures

The following transcription of the beginning of a *phonie* conversation in Pakadjuma, Kinshasa, 7 August 2015 provides an intimate view in the ways in which an *allô allô* conversation can be set up:

[Bip phonie]… [bip phonie] *[sound of the phonie – one literally hears someone switching the radio waves]*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: mama zela nanu *Maman, wait*
[puis bip phonie] , *[sound of the phonie]*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: allo… o wema… *allô … oo Wema [secteur Wema, territoire Boende, Tshuapa Province]*
Opérateur in Wema: ok moto ya … azala wana ebongo ba solola na ye, *allô you, friend of … he is here … they are talking with him*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: moto ya nani? *Friend of whom?*
Opérateur in Wema: moto ya vilaire azala wana… *Vilaire's friend*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: nalobi boye… *listen to what I'm saying*
Opérateur in Wema : loba *talk*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: moto ya Fidèle azala? *Is Fidèle's friend around?*
Opérateur in Wema: Ok. *ok*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: Wema… *Wema*
Opérateur in Wema : a l'acoute… *listening*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: okimaka frequence boye ndenge nini? *How did you move up to that other radio wave?*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: Zwa boye...epayi na ngai bebe, bebe bokonge (avec une voix derriere celle de l'operateur qui semble affirmer le nom Mwasi ya djo papa) okomi ok? *Do this … Bebe is with me, Bebe Bokongo [a female voice in the background, in the cabin in Kinshasa, confirms that she knows Bebe – she says "it is Djo's wife"] – Did you arrive here?*
Opérateur in Wema: bokenge ok? *Bokenge, ok?*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: Bokonge bokonge mwasi ya papa. *Bokonge Bokonge. The man's wife.*
Opérateur in Wema: abengi nani? *Who did she call?*
Opérateur in Kinshasa; abengi mama ariete benanga epa ba djo papa Ok?... *She called maman Ariete Benanga for Djo, ok papa?*
[bruits phonie inaudible…] *[unintelligible noise]*
Opérateur in Kinshasa: mwasi ya djo papa ok? Mwasi ya djo papa ozolanda? puis bruits… Abengi mama ariete benanga ok?... bruits la reception se deteriore… aza na ekole mama na ye ozolanda? bruits… olandi? *Djo's wife? Papa, oke? Djo's wife, papa, are you following [this conversation]? She called maman ariete Benanga, ok? … [noise gets worse] … his wife is in school. Do you hear me? [Noise] …*

Communication along the *phonie*, fondly called *allô allô*, differs from the more recent mobile phone conversations because of its possibility of "conversational polyphony" (Bessire 2012: 197), its orientation towards *mboka* (the village), its association with "old-fashioned communication", and the shabbiness of the *phonie cabines*. All of these features co-create *allô allô* sociability and *phonie* talk.

Phonie opérateurs spend hours in a cabin connecting with colleagues in the Congolese hinterland over dual-way radio systems. All *opérateurs* (who sometimes are biologically quite young) I met have a strong voice, as technical interference makes the transmission fragile. The *allô allô* operator speaks with a voice like thunder. His voice needs to be severe, and needs to persevere, due to the frequent noise – from the radio interference, but also from the wider urban environment. This also leads to a lot of repetition in the *opérateur's* language. As the *cabine* is

very often not sheltered but mostly a modest structure comprised of a wooden table and a bench, passers-by, cars, and sounds of other conversations render the work of an *opérateur* very difficult at times.

The transmitter and antennas required for a *phonie* installation to function, are usually purchased by a big man, an entrepreneur who owns trucks that travel between the capital city and particular villages far away from Kinshasa. Along the route, *radiophonie* systems have been set up to enable communication between the truck drivers and their patrons or colleagues. Hospitals, mission stations, army bases, and sites of logging companies or plantations are other spaces that tend to operate *phonies*. In certain instances, some communities eventually buy the *phonie* (sometimes paying with bushmeat) once it is no longer needed by the original owner. As part of their political campaigns, deputies also donate *phonie* installations to communities from which they hope to get votes and support. NGOs often get the request to bring a *phonie* to areas where they operate.[v]

Even when mainly intended for business communication, such as in cases when *phonies* are attached to truck drivers, *sociétés* (companies), or NGOs, Kinshasa's *phonie* houses seem to be quite open and fairly accessible spaces for communication as individuals who are external to the companies are also allowed to use the *radiophonie* for personal conversations. Though, they are often asked to pay a small fee (ranging between 2000FC and 6000FC),[vi] which can be waived if one knows how to mobilize joking relationships or play with other forms of intimacy in a space where rural sociality infuses social interactions. This openness to others is often seen as a community service and people in the villages are very grateful for the access. The *phonie* technology thus brings together the worlds of missionaries, traders,[vii] and the family.

The two-way radio systems enable conversations between Kinois and others in places as distant as Wema, 1,000km from Kinshasa as the crow flies, but only reachable after days of travelling over roads and rivers. Yet, this is a communication technology in decline, as it suffers from competition with cellular companies, which now nearly cover the entire national territory. Indeed, just as in many other countries, mobile phone technology in DR Congo is taking off at great speed. International enterprises team up with local governments to set up cellular communication infrastructure. In the last decade, with the expansion of the mobile telephony sector, *allô allô* communication has become increasingly less popular, yet a few *phonie* cabins persist. In particular, *phonie* agencies that converted into money transfer agencies have been able to remain in service; while, somehow surprisingly, several new *phonie* houses have been installed as well.

The technicality of the *radiophonie* infrastructure only allows sounds to travel as far as 2.500km thus seriously limiting the distance that can be bridged, compared to, for instance, mobile telephony with fixed lines or mobile devices and the internet. Through its technical affordances,[viii] the *phonie* thus becomes a device that primarily relays with the hinterland. Contemporary *allô allô* communication in Kinshasa is mainly oriented to the poorest regions in the country: areas in Mai-Ndombe, Kwango, Kwilu, Equatorial Provinca, Tshopo, South-Ubangi, Mongala, Low-Uele, and Kasai.[ix]

<<examples of circuits>> (see also the maps)
"T20" : Kinshasa (4) - Kasongo-Lunda – Feshi – Popokabaka – Panzi – Kingwangala – Tembo – Pelende – Kitangu – Kangula – Kakabantu (KWANGU Province)
LONGOMBA Phonie - Kinshasa (Pakadjuma – "Longomba III") – Lodja – Elongo – Ilembwa – Wema – Bolenda – Nkembe – Bofale – Bofania (TSHUAPA and TSHOPO Provinces)

Because of its history and limited reach, *phonie* technology is considered "not urban" and maybe even belonging to another time. As nowadays, DR Congo is *almost* entirely covered by mobile phone operators such as Vodacom, Orange, Airtel, Africell and the like, the few areas without cellular coverage occupy marginal economic, political, social and cultural positions in the Congolese imaginary. Kinshasa's inhabitants speak of these sites as "enclaved spaces" (*des enclaves*),[x] foregrounding the disconnect between these spaces and the city. Especially when

debating the social role of newer installed two-way radio systems, the *opérateur* and *phonie* owners regard their work as to "*désenclaver*" (open up) these areas. Such language has profound social meanings as, first, it suggests that these spaces are not participating in electronic modernity. Second, it also has ramifications for the imagination of the "nation". The qualifier "enclaved", when referring to exclusion of cellular communication infrastructure, sheds particular light on the discourse of telephony companies whose advertisements evoke national unity and imagine the nation as a speech community brought together via mobile phones and cellular communication. Marketing slogans such as "Vodacom: from Boma to Goma" (translated by KP), or "Welcome: wherever you are going, you will be covered by Vodacom RDC" (translated by KP) literally exclude these "enclaved" regions from the nation.

   Phonie infrastructures are also significant for local and national politics as politicians often use the phonies either as gifts or as communication channel for their propaganda. Tellingly, the Congolese State is knowledgeable about the political bonding capacities of the *phonies*, and has restricted the operating hours of *phonie* houses (from 8am until 4pm). *Phonie* activities are submitted to strict state control and surveillance (bureaucracy, registration, payments of taxes, fines, equipment confiscation, and so forth), and the network is often cut or interfered by the State, who puts music on the waves during moments of political unrest, or when they suspect that the *phonie* is used to plot against the government. Via these practices, the State acknowledges the political powers of *phonie* infrastructures. Here, the fabric of national society as ruled by the state must be contained and at times even cut.[xi]

   Creative ways are found to reconnect the enclaved areas with the "mobile phone nation". In certain *allô allô* conversations, the mobile phone and the *phonie* are combined: someone from a remote village contacts the *opérateur*, asks him to dial a mobile phone number; and puts the mobile phone on the microphone of the *phonie*. This practice, called *faire la liaison* (literally "to make the connection"), speeds up the conversation as it overrules the trip a messenger needs to undertake to deposit a call notification (*avis d'appel*). By "making the connection", an instant conversation can occur. This practice is significant as it materially performs the association between two different symbolic realms: the village, where old-fashioned communication technologies such as the *radiophonie* are used, versus the city where high-tech communication devices like the mobile phone dominate. The assemblage of the *phonie* microphone-cum-mobile phone literally indexes the congruence and juxtaposition of different technological orders in establishing a dialogue between the city and the village.

   Interpreted on a more symbolic level, the *liaison* made with people in "enclaved" areas helps us to rethink the city's borders and provides a new approach to the rural-urban connection. While most scholars do not impose strict boundaries between "the rural" and "the urban," nevertheless, strict attention is usually paid to either one or the other.

   As one of the various spaces where bonds with other spaces are amplified, the *phonie cabine* is closely connected to *nzando* (the market), another hub where the village comes into the city.[xii] The intimacy between the *phonie* and *nzando* is strong: *phonie* cabins are usually situated on the margins of the market, very often in a corner of a compound abutting the market. This association between commerce, market, and communication is not incidental: it is here that truck drivers unload their wares, take some rest and attempt to communicate with their patrons, colleagues, or suppliers. In most compounds where a *phonie* is installed, a great deal of movement also happens around buses that transport passengers to and from the hinterland.[xiii] Both the *phonie* and *nzando* are intimately connected to goods, people and information coming in from the villages.

   Unsurprisingly, movement is key to both *radiophonies* and *nzando*. Some of the *phonie* interlocutors are on the move themselves, like the truck driver who arrives in Kinshasa five days later than expected and urgently needs to inform his patron about the loss of two goats and the flat tire; or the man who has come to Kinshasa from Bokungu (Tshuapa Province) to sell fish, but sees his stay endlessly prolonged because of lack of funds to take the boat back, and desperately wants to know how the illness of his daughter is evolving. Other *allô allô* customers have set up home in Kinshasa, like the two elderly sisters who need to send money - 40.000FC (approx. 35USD) - to

distant relatives for the funeral of one of their classificatory uncles; or the young woman whose father had returned to Oshwe (Mai-Ndombe Province) and was called to the *phonie* to listen to his opinion about her marriage. All she could say was *"nazolanda"* (I am following [what you're saying]). This linkage between mobility and communication is not unique to the *allô allô* assemblages. Taxi drivers were often the first to introduce SIM cards and cellular telephony (Vokes 2016; Bochow 2012: 137 endnote 7).

Redirecting our gaze to the urban scale, we notice that the city's spaces of electronic connectivity are differently positioned within urban territory. Cybercafés, as centers of extraversion and transnational cosmopolitanism, began in city centers and then also gradually appeared in the city's peripheries, where the poorer municipalities are situated. Kinshasa's center (*ville*) especially, which includes the municipality of Gombe and other more elite areas of the city, is the center of gravity for digital communication; while *phonie* houses gravitate towards the outskirts of Kinshasa, and the city's markets. Significantly, the communication is also oriented to different "elsewheres:" in cybercafés, communication is strongly oriented to other urban centers in the DRC and the diaspora, while the *phonie* communicates with villages and settlements. We thus understand how technologically mediated connectivity has different geographical directions. Speech communities emerging from electronic technologies are embedded in different discursive geographies, which speak to different worlds of belonging.

Connecting with *mboka*

A private *allô allô* conversation in Kinshasa is very often initiated by someone in *mboka*, the village. At that point, speaker A visits the *opérateur* in his village, asks him (or her, though *opérateurs* tend to be men, see below) to contact an *opérateur* in Kinshasa, informs him that he would like to have a conversation with speaker B and decides on a time for the conversation to take place (usually the morning after, e.g. at 10am). In pre-mobile phone times, a messenger (*messager,* usually a child, often a teenager) would announce orally that someone was expected to meet at the *phonie* the following day. Sometimes, a small note was delivered to the house. Now, it also occurs that the village *opérateur* communicates a mobile phone number on which the addressee in Kinshasa can be reached. These are the various material and immaterial forms of "call notifications". Significantly, while the caller is usually identified by name, the reason for the conversation is not communicated in these announcements.

In its material (and even immaterial) form, an *avis d'appel* is a "text" (Barber 2007: Kindle 2%). For Barber, a "text" is a "hot spot of language" because it is tied to emotions (excitement, admiration, desire), and is fundamentally relational: seeking attention; it potentially possesses a time-dimension as well (memory mainstay).

During the 1990s, as popular memory about the *phonies* goes, Kinois were glad to receive an *avis d'appel*, as it mostly came from people working in Angola, where many Congolese had travelled to, attracted by the boom in diamond mining (De Boeck 1998; Bumba 2016). Then, often an *avis d'appel* suggested that money was about to be sent to Kinshasa, thus generating anticipation and excitement. Nowadays, however, with the diamond boom in Angola in serious decline, the *avis d'appel* is met with much frustration and disquiet, having also become an experience of pressure and compulsion. When receiving an *avis d'appel,* one expects that money will be asked for, or that bad news (illness, death, accidents, problems with cattle or crops, etc.) will be communicated.[xiv]

For the distant observer, *allô allô* conversations might seem rather banal, and not unlike any other long-distance conversation one can overhear in a public phone booth or in public transport. Yet, socially significant speech is going on in the cabin. This deep speech, very often in the various registers of language of the area with which the *phonie* communicates, offers us a deeper understanding of society and individual experiences, as it can evidence, establish, or secure (or not, in case of conflict) relatedness between interlocutors sitting in Kinshasa and those far away. This deep speech can be embedded in ritual activity, healing practices, politics (as in quarrels, claim-making, or accusations), or in the search for individual and collective economic futures.

To a large extent, *phonie* talk is situated within vertical hierarchies, depending on social relative positions, such as gender, generation, and professional relationships. This verticality orients the ideal distribution of listening and speaking. Unsurprisingly then, people in the *cabin* muse on others' style of communicating, and they deliberate on the appropriate words and grammar to use when preparing an *allô allô* conversation. This draws our attention to the weight of correct speech and the cabin as a space where "good" or "bad" speech can be performed.

Words are significant connectors; they are both embedded in existing entanglements and also able to open up or close relatedness (Yankah 1995; Peek and Yankah 2004). Studies on gossip (Gluckmann 1963, Besnier 2009) and phatic communication (Malinowski 1946[1923], Elaychar 2010) point at the ways in which circulation of banal talk or small talk bind people. Language choice as well as linguistic registers tie conversation partners to different realms of their lifeworlds, mediating belonging and membership in these different worlds. To that extent, the usage of ethnic languages in the *cabine* is performative, as it immediately opens up an affective realm of attachment, but also indicates and confirms boundaries (between those who do and those who do not understand it). Language, as an important marker of belonging, either blocks or allows participation in the group.

Beyond the evident dialogic nature of speech that ties two interlocutors for the moment of the interaction, different types of speech serve as relays, connecting the *phonie* customer with *mboka* but also with the immediate urban world. In certain instances ritual language is used (when praying for others, and giving blessings); at other moments, authoritative talk takes place (when instructing, for instance, or giving remarks, comments or advice), at still other moments banter and small talk dominate. While all these forms of speech (re-)connect the conversation partners in a symbolic unity, more disruptive forms of speech are also exchanged over the long-distance radio. When complaints are made, suffering is expressed, or when interlocutors quarrel, then the social outcomes of *allô allô* talk become risky. Such forms of speech can jeopardize bonds between two interlocutors. One particular type of "speech," "bad words" (*maloba mabe),* is considered dangerous as "bad words" threaten the fabric of social life. *Maloba mabe* refers to speech that does not respect established boundaries of appropriate linguistic behavior.

In the cabin – or on managing interference

Before moving on to the analysis of *phonie* sociality and making further statements about managing interference, I give a short description of an *allô allô* conversation I observed in Pakadjuma, an informal neighbourhood in Limete (between Ndolo and Kingabwa, on the railroad). The conversation is between Marie, 23 years old – living and working in Pakadjuma, and her sister, living in Bofania (a locality in the south of Kisangani, Tshopo Province). For over ten minutes already, and through a difficult line, Marie has been communicating angrily. During the *allô allô* conversation, Marie has learned that her mother and her sibling, both living near Bofania, are ill. They are asking her to send money so they can pay for needed medications. Throughout the conversation, Marie tries to communicate that she does not have any money, and that they (in the village) must sell the clothes she had left behind. The conversation takes place in Lomongo,[xv] spoken by the Mongo ethnic group,[xvi] and mastered by most people present inside the *phonie* cabin. As the conversation unfolds, we learn that Marie clearly disagrees with the upcoming marriage of one of her nieces who had recently become a widow. This exchange is obviously one in a line of various intermittently ongoing conversations taking the form of gossip, rumors, and hearsay by relatives and friends from the village, or through others in Pakadjuma who might communicate with their own contacts. Marie's tone becomes aggressive, and from time to time, the operator deliberately blocks the communication by putting his hand on the microphone when she is shouting; he then tells her off, and takes over the conversation. In this way, he protects Marie from consequences of her *maloba mabe*. At this point, Marie engages in a fierce discussion with the *opérateur* and others hanging out in the cabin. Not only does she shout in a determined manner, but she also gesticulates heavily. Especially her arm movement is dramatic. Moving her right arm quickly upwards, then down again, and then upwards again, all the while

keeping her wallet in her hand, which is going up and down as well, Marie is bodily expressing the inner turmoil the *allô allô* conversation is provoking in her.

After another ten minutes of troubled communication, Marie, visibly upset, leaves the cabin. People around shout at her saying she should not be responding in such a way (*boye te*, "not like that") to her relatives. To our surprise, Marie re-appears half an hour later. Showing us some money (Congolese francs), she announces that she is transfer this money to her relatives. When the communication is established with her sibling again, the operator offers to speak on her behalf, which she refuses. We overhear Marie telling her sibling that she is sending 19.000FC (then about 22USD). Marie informs her sister that she had to borrow this money. This is a clever way of showing how their dependency on her has resulted, for her, in a new kind of dependency on an unnamed other. She knows that in Bofania, people worry about such dependencies, but this is actually what she is trying to achieve. Marie is clearly still angry with her relatives and gives them two conditions: she does not want her niece to marry again; and, she repeats the instruction that she does not want them to use her clothes, but that instead they should sell them in order to find extra cash. While, obviously, it will be quite difficult for Marie to check whether these conditions are actually followed, they sound like a threat. Others in the *cabine* disapprove of her language (and do not stop telling her), though they understand her too. As other *phonie* customers explained to me, life in Kinshasa is hard, particularly for someone living in Pakadjuma. In addition, she is a young woman in her early twenties, living on her own. Marie's relatives probably think that she is having a wonderful time in the great city. On one hand, Marie wants to perpetuate this image because she does not want to return to her village, but on the other hand, it leads to a great deal of pressure for her. So, Marie did, in fact, return half an hour later. There was no other option if she was to remain a proper daughter and sibling. The hailing from the village had been successful.

There are two features of *phonie* sociality that this case study brings out. First, this ethnographic description defines the *phonie* as an infrastructure of support: attention and money transfer are the results of expressions of illness and distress. Through the two-way radio, care can be practiced (very much like mobile phone interactions between kin in the diaspora and their elderly people in Kinshasa, where attention is given and money is sent, see Pype 2017a). Second, and crucial to my analysis, this example allows us to see how the *phonie* is a space shot through by a variety of commitments, in particular to distant relatives, colleagues, and to people in the compound. The *opérateur*, his customers, and observers are drawn into reasoned engagements with each other and their distant conversation partners. They each navigate ethically complex terrains because at stake is the fulfillment of commitments to intimate others.

The interference of the *opérateur,* in putting his hand on the microphone or offering to literally take over Marie's role of interlocutor in the long-distance conversation, is a constant occurrence in the *phonie cabine*. The practices of voicing conditions, commenting on and even correcting speech, or speaking on behalf of others are negotiations aimed at respecting social hierarchies. Thus, in early April 2017, Kims, a teenager who had arrived in Kinshasa four days earlier with three baskets of fish, did not seem able to convince his father, back in Paris (a fishing village in Equatorial Province), that he had not yet been able to sell his aunt's and his father's baskets. As all of us hanging out at the *phonie* cabin overheard, Kims had arrived rather late in Kinshasa on Saturday, and indeed, on Sunday there was no market. On Monday, protest actions against the president's elections delay (*ville morte*) had blocked Kims from selling, just like Tuesday morning's ongoing rain, from 5am until 2pm, had made it impossible to sell any fish. Kims' far away father naturally thought these were mere excuses and did not believe his son. He repeated time and again that the third basket – Kims' – should only be sold when his father's and aunt's had been sold. When, before Kims' departure from Paris, father and son had agreed to speak over the *phonie* on Wednesday morning, they had anticipated that Kims would have had some success in selling the fish. Yet, the father did not trust his son, who nonetheless complied with the rules of respect, and let his father do all the talking. During the *allô allô* conversation, Kims did not get angry, did not raise his voice, nor did he insist on the hindrances that he had met. After twenty

minutes of inconclusive conversation, the *phonie* manager, who like five customers and myself had been following the dialogue, took over the microphone, introduced himself as a medical doctor and owner of the *phonie* and confirmed that political instability and rain had prevented any commercial activity. Even the *phonie* itself had been closed on Mondays and Tuesdays, he added. The *phonie* owner thus spoke on behalf of his customer, and helped to smooth out the village's expectations of the city. There was in fact, at that very moment, no money to be sent to Paris; and the son did not appear an irresponsible person, so the doctor continued. The doctor was performing a social script that tried to reinstall trust and social harmony. He mediated between Kims and Kims' father, a man the doctor did not know at all.

These "invisible others", the people at the other end located in the village *phonie*, exert considerable power within the relationship because they can end the conversation at any time. Just as Kims was constantly polite towards his father, let him repeat his instructions endless times, so I would often see women and junior people especially just shutting up, and perhaps only saying "*nazolanda*" ("I am following"). This phrase not only depicts discursively a position of dependence but it is acoustically a form of submission to the distant interlocutor. The absence of speech and the passive discursive performance of submission literally situate the city-dweller in a subordinate position to *mboka.* Yet, when *interference* happens, this can, and at certain times needs to be, managed. The *phonie* house then becomes a space of intensive social negotiation. While living in Kinshasa, Marie must unavoidably work with the fact that her life is entangled with that of others. She was nevertheless able to set her conditions, and thus could reposition herself within the hailed subjectivity. Marie was bringing her economic power into the conversation in order to weigh in on lives in the village and on her relationships with her kin. Kims was obviously not in a position to negotiate with his father. Here, another man, because of his seniority, profession, and economic position within the *cabin*, could intervene on Kims' behalf.

This management of interference, in particular when responding to claims made by others upon oneself and to obligations and responsibilities towards people far away, needs to be situated against the fraught distribution of selves, whether open, hidden, or closed; and of actions, thoughts, and plans that run through Kinois sociality. "*Kipe ya yo*" is the catch phrase for a form of sociality that undergirds the interactions of Kinois residents with their relatives, their co-residents in the compound, their sexual partners, their guardians, their bosses, etc. It captures Kinois' desires to be autonomous and "free". Literally, "*kipe ya yo*" is slang derived from the French-Lingala: "*s'occuper de*" (to be concerned with") and the Lingala "*ya yo*" (yourself). One reads it as slogans on taxi buses, one hears it in the music world (see the song by JB Mpiana),[xvii] and one says it or hears it during quarrels. "*Kipe ya yo*" is an imperative, a grammatical form that is both social and anti-social: it is addressed to an (urban) other but does not leave space for response.

The *kipe ya yo* sociality speaks to the hardships of urban life and the knowledge that money or opportunities have most often not been acquired in morally "right" ways, or that others will expect or demand "their fair share". By avoiding answering on questions (by saying "*kipe ya yo*"), certain truths do not need to be aired. In similar fashion, one often hears the saying that "not every truth should be told".[xviii] This culture of taboo and censorship is embedded in a sociality of dissimulation and avoidance of confrontation (see Archambault 2017), and responds to a strongly felt experience of having to struggle to have a private life. As De Boeck and Plissart (2004: 53) write: "In Kinshasa, the private life of the individual and the moralities generated by the collective gaze are constantly living in a sometimes uneasy, often contradictory cohabitation." *Kipe ya yo* sociality then designs social interaction between (classificatory) parents and their offspring, within romantic couples, and in the compound. Hardly any questions are ever asked; people observe others in order to obtain answers to their questions and suspicions; they look carefully at other people's clothes, facial expressions, forms of interactions; they overhear conversations without commenting, and listen closely to others' words. When new tenants arrive in a compound, one will be very attentive during the first months to see who they are, what their habits are, what

they eat, etc. A mother will not ask her adult son where he has spent his afternoons or where he has bought/received new clothes. And a wife will not ask any questions if her husband arrives home on a Sunday morning at 6am, nor is she allowed to look in his mobile phone. This *maîtrise de soi* (self-discipline) literally puts boundaries between the self and (intimate) others. In *kipe ya yo* sociality, everybody, from the teenage girl to the elderly grandmother, is allowed to manage her own networks, opportunities, incomes and expenses. *Kipe ya yo* thus speaks to the difficult balance between leading a private life, avoiding the interference by others, the dominance of gossip in the city, and the need to acquire a certain amount of freedom. This draws our attention to the sociality of opacity (Hultin 2013), i.e. the possibility of ambiguity, vagueness, indeterminacy, and remoteness. While Hultin understands "opacity as a way of cutting relations," Myhre (2013: 4) on the other hand underlines the productive work of opacity as "neither a hindrance for relations nor a provision that people establish in order to create relations. It is a condition and premise for a relation, as it defines what may count as information and hence what amounts to a relation through its sharing or non-sharing." *Kipe ya yo* sociality then is an attempt to free oneself from the controlling, moralizing, and even opportunistic gaze of others, i.e. relatives, (classificatory) parents, and intimate or not so intimate others. As an expression of the desire for more autonomy, or for having greater agency as an individual, *kipe ya yo* thus refers to the fact that personhood is intrinsically relational; that Kinois are constantly bound up with others.[xix] The *kipe ya yo* shout literally puts boundaries regarding the exchange of information thus blocking any possibilities of claim-making and moralizing corrections.

The *phonie* house is a space of public speech where the boundaries between public and private are blurred. It is exactly here that the experience of interference become highly dramatized, though it cannot be avoided. One needs to answer a call from the village. Not showing up to an *avis d'appel* is not an option, as many of my interlocutors stressed.

The *opérateur* as a connector

The *opérateur* seems to know perfectly the balance between speaking and listening. As described in the previous section, the *opérateur* will take over the microphone at certain instances; others can also interrupt the conversation – literally asserting "*boye te*", "not like that." This management of *phonie* speech has a deep meaning which relates to the socio-spiritual powers of public speech described in ethnographies of rural life in DR Congo. As Devisch (1993: 144) wrote for Yaka society (ethnic group whose territory is in Kongo and Kwango provinces),

"[a]ssertive speech ([kiKongo,] *ngaandzi*) and authoritative knowledge of the traditions ([kiKongo,] *bumbaku*) display force and vivify the listener and life-world. They are the privilege of the patriarch, family head, ritual specialist, and respected elders. This speech enacts and imposes distinction, that is, the normative and hierarchical order."

Furthermore, public discourse "aims at renewing the fundamental interwovenness or vital solidarity between group and lifeworld." (Devisch 1993: 143) This solidarity draws on the conscious participation of subjects of an ethnic group in the life force, a material-mystical power that draws on ancestral rituals, and that is transmitted via bodily substances and speech. This life force links members into one community and defines one's material and spiritual health. Drawing on these reflections on the performativity of public speech in the Yaka community, we can understand the socio-spiritual operations of words, which can produce but also jeopardize sociality. It is thus that the *phonie* becomes a crucial space for the future of the ethnic group and its members. Furthermore, these insights push us to consider the *opérateur*'s crucial role in the community. He is nothing less than a guardian of speech, and occupies a senior position vis-à-vis his customers, especially vis-à-vis juniors and women. As enablers of long-distance communication to the *mboka*, the *opérateur* is important in the maintenance or consolidation of social order, as well as the quality of the lines running between city and village. Thus *allô allô* technology acquires a generative force: in the cabin, through the appropriate use of language,

ethnic society can be generated. Here, it is important to dwell further on the responsibility that the *opérateur* embodies: he is not only a mediator (Latour 2005) in the sense that he transforms, translates, distorts, and/or modifies the meaning of the elements being carried – as described in the section above. Rather, the *phonie opérateur* is also a "connector" – a role we should not gloss over too lightly. In a Latourian reading of key figures in social networks (Latour 2005: 221), "connectors" "make possible the transportation of agencies over great distance." The *opérateur* is first and foremost the enabler of the transmission of the flow of life. Apart from words, affect and life-flow are transferred along the radio waves.[xx] We can argue that the *phonie opérateur* protects the fragility of the life flow, which, due to the distance, becomes even more delicate. Given that visual markers such as bodily posture, facial expression, dress code, and gestures are not easily communicable along the *phonie* lines, and that language transports not only messages but mystical life forces as well, a *phonie* conversation is risky for the future of the group, when the life flow depends entirely on the acoustic.[xxi] It is therefore not all that surprising that there should be a great deal of meta-talk about *allô allô* conversations in the cabins. These observations about the role of speech in the social reproduction of the lineage cast another light on the fear and pressure experienced in and around the *phonie cabin*, and also explain why the *opérateur* (and the *phonie* owner and the messenger) feel responsible to intervene when a conversation threatens to go wrong. Strikingly, this sense of responsibility is shared by *allô allô* customers, who likewise feel entitled to comment, advise, and correct speech style, word choice, tonality, and interactivity.

The role of the *opérateur* as the guardian of the social fabric is reflected in two statements I heard during fieldwork. One interlocutor claimed that the *opérateur* is like a *nganga*, a spiritual healer. Like many Kinois, Jeremy, a 40-something working towards a doctoral dissertation at UNIKIN and born and raised in Gungu (Kwilu Province), did not just provide general commentary on the constrained relationships between people living in the city and those living in the village, but he also shared a story of personal hardship for his own story of "making it in the city" and negotiating responsibilities. He told me that generations of intellectuals in Kinshasa – since the 1990s – had the *phonie* to thank for their position in society. "Where was I going to find money to pay school fees? Like many of my fellow students, we would go to the *phonie* and urge relatives to send us money." There was no possibility of being refused money. The only answers would be that life was hard, and that perhaps they needed to wait. "But in the end, money would come." Jeremy argued that the personal and professional success of a generation of intellectuals depended on *mboka* for money, but actually owed it to the *opérateur*. Jeremy's account shows both a confrontation with the limits of living in the city and the infrastructures of claim-making. Just like a *nganga*, the *opérateur* knows what is going on in people's lifeworlds, is an important smoother of relationships, and enables the flow of life flow/money between *mboka* and Kinshasa.

Apart from the realms of healing and well-being, there is also a clear association with the world of the army. One *opérateur* referred to the role of the *opérateur* in the military, and claimed that a military *opérateur* immediately obtains the position of lieutenant (very high rank in the military grading system), which evidences his pivotal role.

Taking these two analogous roles into our analysis, it becomes clear that the *opérateur* occupies a complex role in *phonie* sociality: he is not only an enabler of communication, rather, the references to the world of healing and of violence speak to practices of protection, power and authority. Apart from a mediator, he is a "connector", who sets forth affective, material, economic and spiritual exchanges between *mboka* and the city.

Agents of interference

The *opérateur* is only one of many connectors populating the Congolese social universe. As my analysis of *allô allô* sociability is mainly focused on interference, I will now situate the *opérateur* among other "agents of interference" in Kinshasa. Indeed, while *allô allô* conversations in Kinshasa are oriented towards *mboka*, and thus primarily inform us about translocal subjectivities, the *phonie* also speaks in surprising ways to and about Kinois sociality. In particular, the *opérateur* as an interfering connector resembles and is closely tied to the *ndumba* (young,

sexually active girl), the *ndoki* (the witch/sorcerer), and the *poro* (the truck driver). An exploration of this resemblance and proximity illuminates not only the hidden dynamics of rural-urban connectivity but also the predicaments of urban life. All four characters literally bring different worlds together, connect individuals, goods, ideas, and affect, but do this by interfering, intruding, and installing risk and danger. In line with Serres' thinking regarding noise and the constitution of social systems (1982), we could argue that Kinshasa's social life depends to a great extent on the "noise" produced by and around the *ndoki,* the *ndumba*, *the* poro, and the *opérateur.*

The following exploration is more abstract than the previous part of this article, as it relies on semantic associations, metaphors and analogy. First of all, metaphoric language about *allô allô* operations draws us into the world of urban sexuality and pushes us to consider the *ndumba* (ranging from "free girl," to "girl who is sexually active," to "prostitute", Pype 2012: 259) as a significant urban connector. The main radio wave over which *phonie opérateurs* converse with one another, is called *le boulevard* (in French). A *boulevard* is not a sandy road that structures mobility in or between villages; rather the notion of the *boulevard* opens up an imaginative realm of movement in urban spaces as it refers to the wide lanes used by motorized vehicles. As a particular subtype of the road (*nzela*), the *boulevard* evokes the Kinois imagination of the street as a space of chance encounters with urban others. As a space of possibility, the street is nonetheless perceived in ambiguous ways. Moralizing language will use the term *balabala*. This synonym with derogatory connotations references a sandy, unpaved, road in Kinshasa, and thus not only suggests lower economic status for those who use the *balabala*, but the word also carries moralizing connotations about cheapness and risk attached to "easily consumable" goods. *Mwasi ya balabala,* "a girl from the street", for example, references a girl met "randomly" (in public transport; in one of the city's bars and nightclubs, etc.). *Biloko ya balabala,* "things from the street", which one can buy from ambulant vendors, are often considered dangerous, because their origins or networks are unknown. And, even though snacks sold on the pavements might end an ardent hunger, most Kinois are nevertheless aware of the risk on typhoid (*maladie des mains sales*, literally "illness due to unclean hands"). All these suspicions toward the social and sanitary risks of people and commodities one encounters or finds in the city's various *nzela* are urban manifestations of "the forest" (*zamba*), a space-time configuration in Congolese ethnography representing everything outside of the social. This is a moral imagination where *zamba* – the space of the undomesticated, "nature" – and *mboka* - the space of the social, "culture" – are each other's opposites (Bekaert 2000; Devisch 1993; De Boeck 2004). In this imagination of the *zamba* versus *mboka*, the city – with its various spaces of interaction with social others, occupies an ambiguous position. The city in itself is a large forest (De Boeck and Plissart 2004), while the domestic space of the compound (*lopango*) in which family units and bachelors reside, constitutes a safer space protecting against potential dangers that urban others (like the *ndumba*) might embody.

For the *opérateur*, the frequency-as-*boulevard* represents a space of potential commercial benefit, where words can translate into opportunity, very much like flattery and flirting, two other forms of social communication that aim at transforming words into opportunity. So, when a *phonie* operator is without a customer, he will first tune the installation to "the main boulevard", i.e. the familiar frequency of the *phonie* circuit in which this particular radio is embedded. Here, the *opérateur* usually engages in some banter with other operators, or exchanges gossip and other small talk. After that, the *opérateur* will be looking for conversation partners while whistling and changing the radio waves. This search is called *kosala kindumba,* literally "enacting prostitution." The idiom, often used to talk about commerce, where flattery and even lies are used to convince customers, orients us towards the domain of urban sexuality.

Once a customer has arrived (e.g. when a scheduled appointment is taking place; or an improvised conversation is about to happen), then the *opérateur* will look for another radio wave in order to allow a more private conversation. This move from the *boulevard* to a smaller, and thus more intimate, frequency is called *kokota na chambre*, literally "to enter into the room."[xxii] Also here, *chambre* is used in French, and it speaks to the urban geography of intimacy. The

chambre, as a space separated by walls and a door or curtain, designates a space of private encounters, usually sexual intimacy. In common parlance, *chambre* denotes either the bedroom, a separate space in a house, or a room in a *hôtel*, a venue where unmarried couples or illicit lovers withdraw for sexual encounters.

The translation of *ndumba* is not straightforward. In its literal sense, this kiKongo word denotes a virgin, a young girl without sexual experience. However, as Gondola (1997) indicates, in Léopoldville (as Kinshasa was called during colonial times), *ndumba* suggested a "free woman", i.e. an autonomous woman without a male guardian (father or husband). Nowadays, the meaning of *ndumba* has taken on a connotation of immorality: for most Kinois, *ndumba* refers to either a prostitute or a girl who exchanges her sexuality for commodities. *Chic-choque-chèque* is shorthand for informal polyandry, which suggests that women entertain multiple lovers who each provide different services (*chic*: buying nice clothes; *choque*: having sex; *chèque*: providing money for school fees, daily life, etc.) (Pype 2012: 273). *Kindumba* then suggests the act of exchanging one's sexual intimacy for money, goods, or other benefits, and occurs outside of the realm of matrimony.[xxiii] Relevant for our discussion is that the *ndumba* herself is an agent of interference (unwanted involvement) as an outsider, yet is also an intruder in the husband-wife unit. When exchanging her body for money or commodities with married men, the *ndumba* connects. She establishes a linkage between her lovers; between herself, her lovers and their wives; and between all these individuals and their own former, present, and future sexual partners. Thus an invisible, yet intricate and very intimate network of bodies, bank notes, and words, thrives around flirtation, seduction, and sexuality.

The imagination of the *ndumba* as a primordial connector in the city is tied to the imagination of the city as populated with affinal and cognate kin. Linguistic material confirms this image of the city inhabited by (fictive) kin: people in Kinshasa address unfamiliar others as "*maman*", "*papa*", "*yaya*" (elder sibling), or "*mbuta*" (kiKongo for "elder", "genitor", Devisch 1993: 147). When elderly people address an unknown younger person when calling someone's attention, asking for road directions, or requesting other help, they will open the conversation by saying "*mwana*" (child), *"fiston"* (son) or another affective appellation that suggests intimacy. Social interaction in the city is framed along the kinship logic, thus immediately inserting urban others in a fictive kinship relationship with the speaker.

Significantly, in Kinois parlance, one sexual encounter establishes two individuals in a long-lasting (although sometimes latent) "husband-wife" (*mobali-mwasi*) relationship. The idea of "ex-partners" does not exist since these intimate relationships can be dormant for a long while and can be re-awakened at any time. This means that the prostitute and the polyandrous girl is the *mwasi* (wife) of many men. These women have many husbands, who all have their own cognates and affines, thus turning the city into a space populated with the *ndumba*'s affines. The idea of the *ndumba* as a fictive agnate and thus as a dangerous, intrusive other is also tied to longstanding approaches of agnatic relatives as sources of conflict and intrusion. Devisch (1993: 147) writes about healing cults among the baYaka: "Intrusive afflictions are usually transmitted through agnatic bonds."

Bringing the analysis back to *phonie* sociality, there are striking similarities between the *avis d'appel* and the *ndumba*. Both point to unwanted connectivity, though they have discrete spatial orientations and operate on different scales. The *avis d'appel* is situated within translocal connectivities and is directed toward enclaves, while the *ndumba* is an urban connector. The center of gravity of *ndumba* connectivity[xxiv] here is the city, although when she or her (former) husbands or travel, these networks extend spatially. Both the *avis d'appel* and the *ndumba* speak to the circulation of money: the *avis d'appel* (usually it is the person in Kinshasa who also pays for the call, because it is assumed that people in the village do not have money) must be paid for, and also often includes money transfer operations. The prototypical intention of the *ndumba* is obtaining money. If money is absent, then a disruption of the exchange or connection literally occurs. If a man has been too violent or is known not to pay, a *ndumba* will be reluctant to open her body.

The *ndumba* and the *opérateur* (as the embodiment of the *avis d'appel*) have much in common with that other major interloper in the Africanist library, the *ndoki* (witch/sorcerer). All three agents of interference work along hidden, invisible lines. Just like *kindoki* (witchcraft/sorcery), sexuality, trade, and electronic communication ties people in invisible, albeit intricate ways and establish relations that may be unwanted at times, potentially leading to social distrust and upheaval. While the *ndoki* is mainly a nocturnal figure, the *ndumba* works not only at night but also hides her notebook of former and current sexual partners from others. The *opérateur* is constrained by the Congolese government to operate during day time (see below). Yet, all three figures rely on secrecy and opacity: they know how to be discrete and, if necessary, and will use coded language.

There are additional ways in which the *opérateur* relates to the *ndoki*. As mentioned earlier, *allô allô* technology works best when there is no electricity, leading compound residents to look suspiciously at an *opérateur* who is joyful in the event of a power cut. Whereas electricity is an important provider of the experience of urbanity and modernity (see Pype 2011: 628), residents in compounds where *phonies* are installed, suspect the *opérateur* of sometimes deliberately cutting the power. I heard people calling the *opérateur ndoki* (sorcerer) because of this fraught relationship to electricity. Also, it is no coincidence that "antennas" are used in the language of *kindoki* (Pype 2017b) to explain how a *ndoki* gets his/her knowledge about families, which aids *bandoki* (plural) in conquering the souls of the city dwellers.

Finally, a fourth agent of interference appears in *phonie* ethnography: *poro* (truck driver). *Baporo* (plural) – envisaged as the primary users of *phonie*– literally bring the *mboka* and the *zamba* into the city. As such the *poro* is symbolically close to the figure of the hunter (*mobomi nyama,* "he who kills animals"), who travels to a distant place to find his game. Yet, the hunter is not an agent of interference but a morally positive figure, because he speaks to diurnal society, brings game and meat back, thus feeding the village (Devisch 1993: 89). *Baporo*, however, are often absent for several days and nights, venture into various "elsewheres," transgress physical borders, and, like *ndumba,* are perceived as dangerous connectors. Very often, one hears warnings about truck drivers travelling to areas such as Tshikapa abound, and the various risks they embody due to sexual activity along the route. This often leads to problems with the husbands or relatives of the sexual partner's the *poro* liaise with. Although generally expressed jokingly, these cautions provide reminders about boundaries and the dangers of relations with "elsewheres," especially with life-flows from distant worlds. In these kinds of popular taboos, the truck driver thus meets the dangerous connectivity of the *ndumba*, yet both relate to different kinds forests: the *ndumba* operates in the city-as-forest; while the *poro* travels through the villages-as-forests. Their association to mobility, and especially to the risky interference of the outer worlds of *zamba*, renders the connectivity they embody hazardous and turns it into undesired connectivity, a form of interference or intrusion.

Urban hotspots for rural-urban connectivity

In this final part of my exploration of *allô allô* sociality, I want to weave the ethnographic observations into an analysis of the *phonie* cabin as a hotspot. As mentioned, the reason that the two-way radio infrastructure remains in use is that it is still one of the most important ways to connect significant others (mainly family members) in rural areas. For many in Kinshasa, *mboka* is an abstract, almost mythical space, inhabited by far away, and often unknown relatives who have power. Yet, there is an experience of the constant possibility of intrusion of the village space into the city.

Analytical attention to the *phonie* cabin as a social space allows me to fine-tune my argument on method. A "hotspot" – like the *phonie cabine*, but also the market, or the phone booth, or even the bedroom where girls are texting and commenting on digital images (Gilbert 2016) – is a space filled with social activity, excess of meaning, and movement of affect and commodities. The English Oxford *living* dictionaries (2017) list four different meanings for "hotspot," which derive from climatological, geological, geographical, and technical semantic fields. In its most literal

sense, a "hotspot" is "a small area or region with a relatively hot temperature in comparison to its surroundings." Yet, metaphorical usage of the geological meaning ("an area of volcanic activity") allows for "a place of significant activity or danger;" thirdly, a hotspot is "a popular place of entertainment;" and finally, in a more technical sense, a hotspot means "an area on a computer screen that can be clicked to activate a function" but can also be "a public place with an available wireless signal for Internet access."

Lingala and kiKongo idioms about "heat" (*moto*) and "cold" (*malili*) allow us to enrich the meanings of "hotspot" from an emic perspective. In the Congolese ethnography, "heat" and "cold" appear as two orienting symbolical idioms that speak to the well-being of the individual and the larger group. "Heat" and "cold" are at once productive, but on the other hand also dangerous. There is an interesting paradox in this paradigm: usually "heat" is an unsettling and disturbing quality; whereas coolness and cold (*malili*) are perceived as positive qualities denoting calmness, peace, balance and health. Management of social and individual health means knowing how to balance *moto* and *malili* (Devisch 1993, Bekaert 2000, for Tanzania Stroeken 2010). These are powerful symbols that signal socially productive or destructive actors, activities, and events.

Not entirely surprisingly then, the idiom of "heat" versus "cold" is also inserted in the "city versus village" imagination: cities are said to be hot due to their rhythms, difficulties, complexities, and simultaneity of flows of people, goods, and information within them (Stroeken 2010). The *cabin* is one of these "hot" spaces in the city, where people need to weigh and balance their words carefully in order to manage the temperature of the connections.

Four main themes appeared in the analysis that define the *phonie* as a hotspot: the *phonie* cabin emerged (a) as connecting different space-time configurations; (b) as a space of excess of emotions and claim making; (c) as a space of linguistic hybridity and cacophony; and, finally (d) as intimately tied to other hotspots in the city. All four themes also steer our attention to the experience of interference and the performance of interlopers.

First, hotspots combine spaces and times. Just like any hub, the *cabine* also depends on the desire and/or necessity to be connected to this "elsewhere." These elsewheres are sometimes associated with "other times," as the imagination of the "enclaved" *mboka* suggests. Related to these different chronotopes are different moralities. As a particular type of "lived space" (Lefebvre 1991) that allows for long-distance communication, the "hotspot" associates Kinshasa with rural "elsewheres", especially *mboka,* and the road (*nzela*). In the Kinois moral imagination, *nzela*, as a space between villages, or within the city is undomesticated space. The *nzela* is the prototypical space of the *ndumba* and the *poro.* The *phonie* house then becomes a space where these two connectors are symbolically domesticated. Yet, the *phonie* house is also a dangerous space because, here, the faraway relations established through the long-distance communication, are at peril.

Second, in and around the *phonie* world, *mboka* references a space where claims are made to consanguine kin residing in Kinshasa; whereas the city, as illustrated in the network of the *ndumba*, appears as a space where (fictive) affinal kin make claims. These different orientations of claim-making lead the analysis to variegated forms of interference that can best be explored by comparing the connecting work in/of the *phonie* cabin versus other vernacular "connectors". As I showed, in particular, four connectors populate *phonie* sociality: the *ndumba*, the *ndoki,* the *poro* and the *opérateur*. They all point to the risks of connectivity, and sometimes bring along "uninvited" forms of interference. These agents of interference associate individuals; awareness of and moralizing reflections on these connectors' social work remind people that they are not autonomous. Rather, these connectors firmly put people back in other people's networks – despite the urge to "*kipe ya yo*" – mind your own business.

Third, the *phonie cabin* is a space of linguistic hybridity as one hears kiKinois and ethnic languages interspersed with the international radiotelephony spelling alphabet and non-verbal communication such as whistling. *Phonie* talk is extremely diverse and can create linkages with other worlds and other people depending also on language, dialects, registers, and tonalities.

There is often translation going on, while boundaries of linguistic decency are constantly re-valued.[xxv]

Fourth, the *phonie cabin* is intimately tied to other hotspots in the city, in particular the body of the *ndumba* and the *nzando* (the market). Especially the *ndumba* embodies overflow as she is not only literally the glue between men and women in the city, but she also establishes hyper-connectivity. Affect, money, and health all combine in her body. She is too hot, too connected, and associates on too many levels. This is also why moralizing agents such as pastors, fundamental Christians, and doctors warn against the *blackberry girls*, these young girls use the smartphone in order to extend their networks, thus becoming yet more significant connectors (Pype 2016b).

The *allô allô* infrastructure also relates to the market. Beyond the sheer fact that Kinshasa's *phonie* cabins are often situated at the periphery of the city's markets, *phonies* and *banzando* (plural of *nzando*) share many other features of hotspots: they are both spaces of movement, activity, affect, and sound, as well as cacophonies of sounds and languages. The *phonie* house is itself also a market space: words are being sold.[xxvi] On the *nzando*, language is supposed to seduce, turning words into value and money exchange (very much like the *ndumba's* operations). As a space of barter, quarrels, deceit, manipulation, and other forms of negotiations, *nzando* is a space where the rules of decency are less enforced. Kabamba and Ntumba (1999) interpret local markets situated between cities and villages in the Kananga region as *des haut lieux* ("deep spaces"): they consider the market – which only occurs every fortnight (in contrast to the daily market in the city) - as a crossroads or center, where "human beings and all kinds of energies cross paths" (1999: 96, translated by the author). They continue: "the market needs to be sacralized in order to avoid it becoming a space where malicious people complete their murderous transactions, and so that those who frequent it can be protected from nuisances." (Ibid.) The reference to nuisance is telling here, as it suggests the possibility of negative, asocial interaction at the crossroads. Markets emerge here as spaces favoring interference.

By way of conclusion: qualifying connectivity

At the beginning of this article, I asked what "interference" looks like in Kinshasa's *phonie* cabins and if, and how it is managed. Situated at the crossroads of state interest, commercial intentions, and kinship obligations, *allô allô* conversations are entangled in various socio-political connectivities that pull the city and *mboka* (the village) together. The thick description of *allô allô* sociality has shown that the *phonie* infrastructure renders the *mboka* very much present in the experiences of those living in the city: sounds come in, claims are made, and goods from *mboka* are being sold in and around the *phonie*. As the search for the opening up of an *allô allô* conversation with Wema (see above) suggests, these urban-rural entanglements have their own rhythms and affectivities, and require patience, perseverance, and social skill.

This ethnographic study then is an initial attempt towards a qualitative study of the various forms of techno-sociality. When examining the role of the *opérateur*, I have made a distinction between his mediating and connecting performances. The connectivity enabled by the *opérateur* relates to deep entanglements with and through material, linguistic, and spiritual exchange. I also looked at other "agents of connectivity" that appeared in the imagination of *phonie* sociality, and observed a similar configuration of connecting operationality with the *ndumba*, the *ndoki* and the *poro*.

My analysis has concentrated on "interference", as one example of the various affective planes of connectivity. In contrast to Bessire's (2012) study of two-way radio communication among Ayoreo people living on both sides of the Bolivia-Paraguay border where, mainly sympathy was expressed over the two-way radio, my analysis of *phonie* encounters in Kinshasa describes the *phonie* as a space of strained connectivity, qualified by frustration, pressure and anger. It is important to acknowledge that interference is only one of the various affects that (can) accompany long-distance connectivity; we can expect various other affects, managed by other agents of connectivity to emerge in ethnographic research according to novel assemblages of

time-space-technology. In addition, as mentioned at the onset of the article, *phonie* houses were spaces of joy, celebration and prosperity in the 1990s. We learn from this that the way in which connectivity is experienced, is not determined by the technology.

As we cannot assume universal experiences of living and managing social life in electronic modernity, we need thick descriptions of people and social interaction in other places, other times and using other communication technologies. In particular, we should pay attention to the various "agents of connectivity", the layerdness of the established connections, the activities in the hotspots, and the affective dimensions of these spaces and relations. Such an analytic program is required in order to gain deeper insight in the thickening of sociality, affect and technology that make up our times.

Acknowledgements

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[i] Men are the owners of the *allô allô* infrastructures, and govern the equipment and the conversations.

[ii] Barker (2008) offers a fascinating ethnography of a parallel communication infrastructure in Indonesia, the Interkom. As an analog, voice-to-voice infrastructure connecting "tiny street side food stalls, ramshackle city homes, rooms in migrant workers' rooming houses, farms among rice paddies, and the odd middle class home" (2008: 129) within a particularly demarcated territory, the Indonesian intercom community seemed to be mostly thriving on informal, phatic conversations, with "a focus more on form rather than the content of communication" (2008: 131).

[iii] De Lame (2012) offers an incisive insight into the historicity of connectivity in Rwanda, from precolonial to contemporary times.

[iv] From a different angle, though in a fascinating study of Congolese comic strips and representations of Belgian and Congolese characters, Hunt (2002) takes on the notion of interruption as parody (irony and parody in Congolese comic strips) as something productive, as a mode of "speaking against" cultural domination. This kind of interference can have a social cost as illustrated in the fact that most disruptive comic strips were stopped being printed. Censorship is a strong reaction towards interference.

[v] Personal email communication, Lys Alcayna-Stevens, July 9 2017; Skype communication with Scott Ross, July 26 2017, speaking about their research in Tshuapa and Tshopo Provinces and Haut-Uele Province respectively.

[vi] In April 2017, receiving a call notification ("avis d'appel") cost 2,000FC (then approximately 1,5$); having a *phonie* conversation cost 3,000FC (approximately 2$); for a liaison conversation (*phonie* and mobile phone), one pays 2,000FC.

[vii] However, according to one *opérateur*, Greek traders brought the *phonie* to Congo.

[viii] As Gershon (2017: 18) informs us: "The concept of affordances was initially introduced by the psychologist James Gibson to refer to what an object or part of an environment provides an animal relative to the animal and commensurate with its body (Gibson 1979: 150). (…) Ian Hutchby (…) altered Gibson's original definition of affordances to make it applicable to communicative technologies by deeming affordances as 'the possibilities for action that it [the artifact] offers' (Hutchby 2001: 447)."

[ix] These are almost exclusively the former Bandundu and Equateur provinces (except for Kasai).

[x] People in these areas also sometimes refer to themselves as being "enclaved" (Alcayna-Stevens, personal email-communication July 9 2017).

[xi] Similar practices of limiting or blocking mobile phone connectivity also regularly occur, especially at moments of political unrest (Pype 2016a).

[xii] As hardly any vegetables or meat and fish for commercial consumption are produced *in* Kinshasa, Kinois depend on food produced *na mboka*, in the villages.

[xiii] However, not all relationships of dependency between city and village can be traced back to filial affinity. Rather, economic transactions outside of the village-city family also govern connectivity.

[xiv] The pressure generated by the *avis d'appel* is paralleled by the emotions that many Congolese in the diasporas experience when they wake up with (missed) phone calls from home. The "early morning phone call" (see also Lindley 2010), which sometimes literally wakes one up, often brings bad news or else requests for financial and/or material support. Nowadays, most of the money sent through *phonie* cabins circulates from the capital city to other regions within the country. With an increased transnational diaspora, and the presence of international money sending agencies, the circuits of claim-making and remittances have been repositioned.

Transnational migration, the decline of the diamond trade in DR Congo and northern Angola, and new ICT infrastructures all combine to bring about a redrawing of the circulation of money, speech and affect.

[xv] Although linguistic historians are unsure whether there is such a language as LoMongo (because of the assumed fictive nature of the ethnic group of the "baMongo", see footnote XI), in Kinshasa "LoMongo" has come to reference any dialect spoken in the region of the Mongo-cluster.

[xvi] The "baMongo" reference a group of various ethnic groups such as the Nkundo, Bolya, Ekonda, Kusu, Boyela, Sengele etc. who all trace their origins to one and the same ancestor. Within the Congolese library, it is argued that the "Mongo" ethnic group is a colonial invention, which came about through the research by Belgian missionaries, who clustered ethnic groups whose dialects are closely related, and thus constructed dictionaries of a non-existing language.

[xvii] See a CD issued by the Kinois rumba singer JB Mpiana (2007) entitled "*kipe ya yo. vis ta vie. Quel est ton problème?*", literally: "be concerned with your own issues; lead your own life; what is your problem?"

[xviii] "*Chaque vérité n'est pas bonne à dire*". Among French-Malagasy couples (Cole 2014) the same proverb is used to indicate the boundary mechanism between information communication among the couples.

[xix] Discursive performances of cutting off are confession tales, where ties with sinful others are broken, and sometimes with one's past, sinful self. During these confessional tales, Christian personhood emerges, as it is recomposed through the narrative act of confessing and converting (Pype 2011). Boundaries are thus defined, redrawn. In the confessional tales, the boundaries are defined by the distinction between a "Christian" and "non-Christian morality".

[xx] Bessire's ethnography of dual radio communication among the Ayoreo in Bolivia and Paraguay (Bessire 2012: 204) also points to the transmission of immaterial forces, the *ayipie* through electronic radio.

[xxi] At certain instances, this might be beneficial insofar as pointing the finger, a gesture readily interpreted as insulting, is often used when speaking through the *phonie* microphone. As such gestures cannot be virtually transposed to *mboka*, the *allô allô* interlocutor is protected against the potential destructive outcomes of anti-social and non-respectful non-verbal communication.

[xxii] Here, we encounter an example of "scaling sociality". Miller et al. (2016: 3-8) point at the affordances of different platforms of social media to scale between the private and the public. The move from a main *boulevard* to a *chambre*, for which the radio wave is only determined a few moments before the private conversation, is one way of scaling sociality while using a "traditional" media form.

[xxiii] De Boeck (1999) describes (informal) marriage (*libala ya cariere*) in the mining towns around the Congolese-Angolan border as a strategy for women to earn some money. Usually these "marriages" only last for the duration of their presence in the mining town.

[xxiv] I explore *ndumba* connectivity further in a paper on urban sexuality and social media (Pype, 2017c).

[xxv] This thus turns the *phonie* into an excellent location for the ethnographer to learn the difference between "good" and "bad words".

[xxvi] Interestingly, Devisch (1993: 138) identified a geographical organization of appropriate language versus language that is more sloppy, and sometimes even disrespectful: "rules of decency governing interaction, speech, and dress are less strictly enforced on the periphery of the village or at nightfall as well as among agemates of the same gender when meeting outside the compounds during the day."