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Reframing Uncertainty in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

Du rire, du grotesque et de la capacité à faire semblant. Repenser l'incertitude à Goma, dans l'est de la République démocratique du Congo

Silke Oldenburg



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On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the Ability to Pretend

Reframing Uncertainty in Goma, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo¹

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Silke Oldenburg

On a lazy Saturday afternoon back in November 2008, two brothers, whom I will call Bahati² and Kazi, and I were having a drink in a local pub (Swahili: *nganda*) in Goma's southern neighbourhood of Keshero. Both in their early twenties at the time, Bahati and Kazi were well-known in the neighbourhood: Bahati worked intermittently as a moto taxi driver, while Kazi earned a living by trading second-hand clothes. The brothers were joking around as usual, when suddenly, loud gunshots caused a tense quietness throughout the bar. At first, the sounds reminded me of fireworks. Yet, after eleven months of fieldwork in Eastern DR Congo, and only two weeks after the siege and attempted takeover of the provincial capital of Goma by the rebel group CNDP,³ I had developed an ear for distinguishing different types of gunfire. Kazi is the first to react and sighs: "Mamma ye." His older brother Bahati interjects, quickly, but attentively, "Ni Kituku pale" (this is over there in Kituku). When I ask rhetorically for confirmation if these are gunshots (*masasi*), Kazi starts laughing and says "Nonon, si masasi ni mbwa!" (No, these are no gunshots, these are dogs). Bahati repeats his former statement "Ni Kituku pale", then he joins in the laughter and plays on words "Kituku parle", which in French means "Kituku talks".

Fieldnotes, November 2008; Kituku is a big market in the neighbourhood Keshero.

- 1 This kind of "talking" has long characterized everyday life in Goma and was also a notable feature when I began my long-term fieldwork in this war-torn city in Eastern DR Congo in 2008. Goma is a complex and inconsistent urban terrain, open to many different interpretations. This becomes most apparent in moments when fear and astonishment converge, as in the brothers' performative dialogue: the swift process of perceiving and identifying the gunfire, analysing the potential consequences, and then infusing the situation with an ironic twist. Oftentimes, people tried to reassure me and,

I believe, themselves, that everything was “normal” and under control, often through laughter. Therefore, I agree with Giselinde Kuipers’ observation⁴ that humour, while not always the central focus of research, subtly emerges “in the field” and comes to the fore: sarcastic laughter about governmental policies, a winning smile to trick somebody, shrill laughter to convert fear into farce, or cathartic and liberating laughter to reassure oneself were just some of the more noticeable forms of laughter (in contrast to more subtle, embodied ones) that I encountered while conducting research in Eastern DR Congo (hereafter: DRC). Soon, I realized that the interchangeability of fact and fiction, puns and parody, jokes and laughter had seeped so deeply into the social fabric that humour was more than a *conditio humana*; rather, it was a revelatory social practice, shaping urban knowledge by improvising and organizing (or complicating) a particularly complex urban context in Central Africa.⁵

- 2 For nearly three decades, the DRC has been engulfed in violence. The protracted armed conflict has claimed millions of lives and displaced around six million people due to civil wars, local disputes, and cross-border confrontations. The overall situation remains to this day highly volatile and pervasive. Bahati and Kazi, having grown up in Goma, have acquired skills and knowledge to identify conflict-related dynamics that help them navigate their environment. Their pun and the way they make the frightened anthropologist laugh reveal a method of coping with a crisis context that, following Henrik Vigh, can no longer be regarded *in* context but should be understood *as* context, the literal social field of “action and meaning”⁶. As war has become an endemic feature of the social fabric, crisis and uncertainty are now ubiquitous, taken-for-granted aspects of life, and have become “chronic”⁷. The paradox of chronic crisis, in contrast to a conception of crisis typically understood as a singular, episodic event, shapes how people perceive and experience their complex everyday environment. It is therefore not surprising that my interlocutors describe and analyse Goma using adjectives such as “grotesque”, “bizarre”, and “absurd” as reflective means to make sense of their context or pretend that gun shots are nothing more than barking dogs.
- 3 It is a truism that all laughter is intersubjective. It connects and distances people, creates social bonds and mocks authorities, plays down threats, or conceals embarrassment.⁸ While researching the experiences, imaginaries, and social practices of young people in war-torn Goma, I realized, as I reviewed recordings back at my desk in Germany, the variety and importance of laughter in this context of chronic crisis. Listening again to taped conversations where an interlocutor discusses traumatic experiences with a giggle, and being appalled at myself for joining in the giggle even more intensely, prompted me to reflect on the various roles that humour and laughter play in uncertain times, also challenging my positionality as researcher.
- 4 In what follows, I explore the nexus of various forms and expressions of laughter which intertwine the granular level of social interaction with the broader context of armed conflict. Drawing on extended fieldwork conducted in Eastern DRC since 2008, I examine how laughter works as a means of agency and a way to uphold dignity amid hardship, political instability, and suffering caused by rebel groups, an active volcano, and pandemics. Despite the chronic crisis in Eastern DRC, people strive to make sense of their circumstances and use practices of pretense and simulation, which enable them to laugh and make others laugh, as vital means for navigating this complex sociopolitical landscape. I therefore argue that laughter is a particular and agentic

form of expression through which war, insecurity and nervousness are being articulated.

- 5 Drawing on political anthropology, phenomenology, and humour studies, this article aims to: (a) reflect on the methodological challenges of capturing fleeting moments of laughter in academic writing; (b) situate urban Eastern DR Congo, specifically Goma, as a locally perceived grotesque context; and (c) highlight laughter as a vital mode of sense-making used by various actors within diverse humorous frames. Focusing on the nexus of grotesque laughter, pretense, and the uncanny, I explore how Goma's residents both shape and are shaped by chronic crisis, articulating experiences of war, insecurity, and tension through everyday practices in order to maintain continuity amidst hardship.
- 6 The article begins by discussing the importance and challenges of studying humour in protracted conflict zones, followed by an analysis of Goma's urban environment through Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque and Freud's notion of the uncanny. After a brief historical overview of humour theories related to crisis and uncertainty, I present ethnographic data illustrating how verbal and embodied laughter helps urbanites navigate daily precarity. Throughout, I highlight how laughter functions as a vital sense-making practice, illustrated by a range of ethnographic examples that reveal its social and emotional dimensions.

From Ethnographic Encounters to Analytical Curiosity: How Laughter Became Central

- 7 This article draws on extensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted primarily in French and Swahili during my PhD research (2008–2013) in Goma, Eastern DRC, and sustained through recurrent periods of fieldwork until today. Working without a formal research assistant allowed me to build close relationships with a diverse group of interlocutors, including longtime friends like Bahati and Kazi, whose everyday humour and irony opened windows into lived experiences of chronic armed conflict.
- 8 My initial awareness of humour as a significant analytical category emerged somewhat unexpectedly. While reviewing interview recordings back in Germany, I was struck by the tension created when interlocutors recounted traumatic events punctuated by laughter, including my own occasional giggles. This awkwardness prompted critical reflection on the complex social functions of humour in a context marked by pervasive insecurity and chronic crisis.
- 9 To deepen my understanding of local humour and its cultural nuances, I regularly engaged in reflective discussions with a circle of local friends who helped interpret and contextualize meanings embedded in conversations. This collaborative interpretive process was indispensable for grasping the subtle ways humour operates within a sociopolitical environment shaped by war, displacement, and resilience. As Eva Van Roekel⁹ emphasizes, understanding humour requires immersion in the local social fabric, making ethnographic familiarity crucial to avoid misinterpretation.
- 10 Researching the role of laughter and humour in an urban setting influenced by long-term armed conflict, natural disasters, and epidemics might not initially seem like an obvious choice. However, examining humour and its various forms offers a compelling perspective on how people cope with violence.¹⁰ Humour, as a mode of social

communication, provides insights into how individuals navigate and interpret their experiences in such contexts, turning laughter into a valuable analytical tool. By taking laughter seriously, we can better understand how it helps modify social experiences of distress and offers a window into local power dynamics. Although laughter alone may not transform the overall situation of crisis, it reveals how individuals make sense of their circumstances and interpret their broader social environment. Thus, humour provides an epistemological approach to exploring deeper social, psychological, and cultural phenomena, particularly in unstable settings.¹¹

- 11 Laughter, as a form of social interaction, frequently emerges during fieldwork, often as a means of “breaking the ice” through humour or self-deprecation. Ethnographic accounts often highlight such instances,¹² where humour can initiate or halt social interactions, with varying outcomes. To fully appreciate the subtleties of humour, it is essential to have a deep understanding of local cultural and social contexts. As Eva Van Roekel¹³ notes, humour is intricately woven into these contexts, making it crucial for researchers to be well-acquainted with them to avoid misinterpretations.
- 12 One of the significant challenges in researching humour is transforming ephemeral moments of laughter into academic prose. The fleeting nature of nods, grins, ironic shrugs, and other embodied expressions goes beyond textual representation, making it difficult to systematically document and analyse these subtleties. This challenge partly explains why much humour research focuses on jokes, which are more readily accessible and easier to describe.
- 13 In selecting ethnographic material, I prioritized instances that, while varied in form and length, illuminate how humour functions as a strategy for making sense of uncertainty and precarity. To address the inherent difficulties of capturing embodied and transient expressions, I combined careful observation with reflective interpretation, situating these moments within established theoretical frameworks. This approach allows the analysis to move beyond isolated examples, revealing the deeper social dynamics at play in Goma’s urban environment.
- 14 In Goma, past war-related experiences shape an insecure present where crisis becomes a blend of the unfamiliar and familiar, the backdrop to everyone’s actions and imaginations. This interplay between the familiar and unfamiliar echoes Freud’s concept of the “uncanny”: the simultaneously frightening and pleasurable sensation of encountering something both strange and familiar.¹⁴ Although ongoing crises have become part of everyday life, they are not perceived as normatively positive.¹⁵ In this context, laughter illuminates the nuances of local subjectivities in social interactions, connecting everyday urban life with the broader backdrop of armed conflict and generalized crisis.
- 15 Studying urban contexts of armed conflict through laughter and humour deepens our understanding of how people perceive, communicate, and navigate life in a protracted warzone. While laughter takes many forms, scholars across disciplines largely agree that it often emerges from moments of disjunction. As Trnka notes, “whether the discordance is pleasurable or painful, laughter is a means of giving voice to a situation that strikes one as radically irregular”.¹⁶ In this light, urban uncertainties, such as political or social instability, not only challenge social norms but also create spaces where individuals negotiate a sense of continuity and familiarity in disrupted environments.

- 16 The ethnographic vignette presented earlier, where a convivial moment between local interlocutors and the researcher was interrupted by the realities of insecurity following a rebel group's attempted takeover of Goma, illustrates this dynamic. A seemingly casual exchange was suddenly reframed within the broader context of armed conflict. Here, reframing refers not to analytical frame theory but to a shift in social and affective register, reorienting meaning and mood in moments of disruption. Building on this understanding, the article argues that humour's core elements of estrangement and astonishment, as explained by incongruity theory (introduced later), emerge when the unexpected disrupts the familiar, eliciting laughter or providing reassurance and the release of tension.

Laughter as intersubjective communication

- 17 Laughter is frequently associated with humour, yet it is essential to distinguish between the two. Psychological research underscores this distinction, analysing laughter and humour as separate phenomena. Laughter can arise in contexts devoid of humour, such as moments of social awkwardness, embarrassment, or nervousness, while humour does not always elicit laughter, especially when one is alone.¹⁷ While humour involves cognitive perception and the interpretation of what is amusing, incorporating various theoretical frameworks and forms of engagement, laughter represents a physical and emotional response.¹⁸ It functions not merely as an individual reaction but as an expressive mode of social interaction. Classic humour theory offers a substantial body of scholarship on the cultural manifestations of laughter and its role as a sociopolitical archive.¹⁹ Among the foundational approaches to humour, three major theoretical frameworks have significantly shaped academic discourse: Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory, and Relief Theory.²⁰ The study of humour has long been explored across disciplines, each contributing distinct perspectives. While classical philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle examined its metaphysical and ethical dimensions, anthropologists like Mary Douglas and Alfred Radcliffe-Brown have investigated its social functions and meanings.²¹
- 18 Superiority Theory, closely tied to social dynamics, is most notably articulated by Thomas Hobbes. It posits that laughter emerges from a sudden sense of superiority over others, positioning humour as a reflection of social hierarchies and relational structures. Though laughter is often perceived as an individual experience, its communicative and relational aspects are central to understanding how humour operates within social contexts.²² Relief Theory, rooted in psychoanalytic thought, is particularly associated with Sigmund Freud. In his seminal work *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud conceptualizes humour as a psychological mechanism for releasing internalized tension. He argues that jokes serve as a socially acceptable means of expressing repressed desires, often concerning sexuality and aggression; otherwise constrained by societal norms. From this perspective, humour functions as a means of negotiating and subverting social taboos, offering psychological and emotional catharsis.²³ Incongruity Theory, by contrast, shifts focus to cognitive and structural elements of humour. It suggests that humour arises from the recognition of incongruities, unexpected deviations from established patterns or expectations. This framework emphasizes the cognitive engagement with surprise and discrepancy rather than humour's interaction with power structures or psychological relief.²⁴

- 19 Taken together, these perspectives highlight the multifaceted nature of humour. It is not merely a source of entertainment but a sophisticated social instrument that both shapes and mirrors interpersonal interactions, power structures, and cultural logics.²⁵
- 20 Expanding on these classical theories, Kuipers²⁶ integrates phenomenological approaches that conceptualize humour as a “specific outlook” or a distinct “mode of perceiving and constructing the social world”. This perspective is in line with the broader sociological paradigm of the “social construction of reality”,²⁷ illuminating how humour and laughter render the complexities and absurdities of social existence intelligible.²⁸ By framing humour as an interpretive lens through which individuals and societies negotiate meaning, this approach underscores its capacity to reveal, critique, and play with the contingencies of social life.

Laughter in context: Goma as grotesque city?

The region of the Kivu is the heart of Africa. Our soil is fertile, and there are so many natural resources—but, how is it possible that we live in misery? This is just grotesque.

Female student, public university, September 5, 2009.

- 21 Located in Central Africa’s Great Lakes region, Eastern DR Congo is known for its fertile soil and abundant natural resources. Goma, the provincial capital and largest city of North Kivu, has a population of approximately 1.5 million and is undergoing rapid urbanisation. This growth is largely driven by the influx of internally displaced persons (IDPs) seeking refuge from ongoing conflict. However, the city faces significant challenges related to urban violence and insecurity, which are closely linked to broader political instability and the activities of armed groups in the surrounding rural areas.²⁹
- 22 Goma frequently makes headlines due to its complex and often dire situation. Since the early 1990s, the city has attracted global attention with the arrival of around one million Rwandans who settled in camps around Goma. This influx, coupled with a cholera epidemic, the successive “Congo Wars” (1996–1997, 1998–2003), the eruption of Nyiragongo volcano (2002, 2021), various rebellions that threatened or succeeded in taking over the city (e.g., CNDP in 2008, M23 in 2012 and 2025), and the deadly Ebola outbreak (2018–2019), underscores the city’s tumultuous history following the end of Mobutu’s 32-year dictatorship.
- 23 Without delving too deeply into the historical and complex dynamics of armed conflict for this article, it is evident that these events have significantly impacted the living conditions and social fabric of Goma’s residents. From being a site of a singular crisis event, Goma has evolved into a context of critical continuities.³⁰ Filip De Boeck has already noted a “crisis of meaningfulness” in the 1990s (when DRC was still known as Zaire), resulting in a world where fact and fiction are often interchangeable.³¹ This continuity reflects what Michael Taussig terms the “mimetic faculty”, the population’s need or capacity to “pretend that one lives fact not fiction” in a context shaped by crisis.³² This interplay of reality and pretense becomes crucial in understanding how Goma’s inhabitants navigate their complex and often surreal urban environment characterized by “social hyper-vigilance”³³ in order to “get on with living”.³⁴ In this sense, the grotesque, as Rémi Astruc argues, is not merely an aesthetic phenomenon

but an existential response to alterity and transformation, a way of grappling with unstable realities through humour, absurdity, and narrative play.³⁵

- 24 Urban residents of Goma experience the city as an ambiguous space; not only in the present but also over the *longue durée*. Once a small provincial town, Goma has been transformed into a major urban hub, its growth fueled by protracted armed conflict and successive waves of displacement. This trajectory has drawn together a wide range of actors: international NGOs, peacekeeping forces, armed groups, and internally displaced people, as well as others drawn by economic opportunities. As a result, Goma has become a complex melting pot of local identities, aspirations, and ambitions. It is both a vital border economy and a space shaped by humanitarian intervention, rapid construction, and latent tension. While some are drawn to its vibrancy and opportunities, others perceive it as alien and precarious compared to their rural origins.³⁶ This dual perception underscores Goma's "grotesque" character, where the dissonance between reality and imagination intensifies the search for order and meaning. It is precisely within this space of dissonance and unpredictability that humour, irony, and narrative play emerge as key strategies for navigating urban life. These responses do not simply reflect coping mechanisms but form part of a broader repertoire through which residents engage with the city's contradictions.

Making sense: the grotesque, the uncanny and urban dissonances

- 25 Uncertainty, closely tied to the unpredictability of the future, creates a productive context in Goma for exploring how individuals derive meaning in an environment often described as "grotesque" by its inhabitants.³⁷ This characterization reflects not just a sense of despair but also a deeper engagement with the complex realities of urban life.³⁸ The city's uncertainty manifests in various forms, from erratic political and economic conditions to sudden, inexplicable events that challenge conventional understanding. One example of how uncertainty can become an opportunity for meaning-making is the collapse of a "fake bank" in Goma in 2008, which caused many clients to lose their savings but initially triggered widespread laughter and disbelief. Sylvie, a 24-year-old university student, commented during an informal conversation: "You see, this means that Goma is an important city. Such things only happen on TV. We live like in the movies." Though she was not directly affected, her ironic remark illustrates how laughter helps reframe surreal urban experiences and cope with uncertainty (fieldnotes, September 2008). Carolyn Nordstrom's analysis of a warzone in Mozambique provides a framework for understanding this phenomenon. She suggests that such responses, including laughter and irony, can be seen as mechanisms for managing the grotesque dimensions of urban life, for "taming" uncertainty.³⁹ In a city where the absurd and the unexpected are constants, humour serves as a vital resource. It allows residents to frame their experiences, navigate the city's incongruities, and articulate the ambiguities and contradictions they encounter. By engaging with these moments of absurdity through humour, people not only address but also actively reinterpret the chaotic and unpredictable nature of their environment. Thus, laughter becomes more than a reaction; as a response to the complexities of urban existence it constitutes a meaningful social practice, helping individuals to maintain a sense of agency and coherence amidst the chaos. The notion of crisis generally presents a state

of flux that disrupts established norms and expectations. During such times, laughter can take on new dimensions. It becomes a way to navigate the uncertainty and upheaval characteristic of crisis situations. The ambiguity inherent in crises, where familiar frameworks are questioned, can make laughter a powerful tool for dealing with the disorientation and instability that arise. Laughter, in this sense, provides a momentary escape and a means to reframe chaotic experiences, in line with Mikhail Bakhtin's view of laughter as a liberating force within the carnivalesque.⁴⁰

- 26 Referring to the notion of the “grotesque” alludes conceptually to the important contributions of Mikhail Bakhtin whose ideas of the grotesque (the carnivalesque, bodily excess, and subversion of norms) suggest juxtapositions, contradictions and forms of hybridity which can be extended to urban contexts where diverse cultures, practices and ideas converge and clash. As Barnard notes, “grotesque laughter retains something of its ancient liberating power”⁴¹ in these settings, reflecting times of change and transitions such as the shift to democracy in South Africa. Bakhtin's concept of the grotesque, as outlined in his work on François Rabelais, is crucial for this discussion. Bakhtin describes the grotesque as involving extreme distortions and exaggerations that challenge conventional norms. In this context, laughter is not merely a reaction to humour but a response to the profound disruption of familiar categories. The grotesque's blend of the bizarre and the absurd often triggers laughter as a means of processing unsettling experiences, highlighting how laughter can serve as a form of emotional and physiological adjustment to ambiguity. It involves an element of shock or discomfort, challenging conventional boundaries and norms. The grotesque often provokes ambivalence by eliciting both fascination and repulsion. It can make us feel drawn to and yet uncomfortable with the strange or distorted elements it presents. Using the grotesque as a lens through which people attempt to make sense of their experiences allows for an exploration of how urban life, with its contradictions and excesses, is both disorienting and deeply revealing. The city's chaotic blend of modernity and decay, and the juxtaposition of vibrant economic activities with pervasive insecurity, contribute to its perception as a “grotesque city”, a place where the boundaries between the familiar and the unfamiliar blur. This perception is reflected in the way people use laughter to deal with the absurdity and incongruity that define their everyday lives.

The grotesque and the urban body

- 27 Laughter plays a crucial role in managing the grotesque, particularly in contexts characterized by absurdity and uncertainty. The grotesque is marked by extreme distortions and exaggerations, which can provoke laughter through their inherent absurdity and visceral impact.⁴² This laughter serves not only as a physiological response but also as a means to express and navigate complex emotional states, highlighting how individuals adapt to the ambiguities and dissonances of their urban environment.⁴³ In Goma, where unpredictability is a defining feature of daily life, a market vendor laughs as he realizes he has changed his merchandise so often that he sometimes forgets what he is currently selling. His laughter does not merely signal amusement; it helps him process the fluidity and uncertainty of his economic reality.
- 28 Laughter often emerges as a reaction to the “*uncanny*”, a concept Freud described as the unsettling experience where the familiar becomes strange and the strange becomes

familiar. For example, a group of young men burst into laughter when a wooden scooter (*tshukudu*) passed by carrying a makeshift hot tub. One exclaimed, “*Mais c’est bizarre !*” Their laughter, half surprise, half delight, reflected a shared understanding of Goma’s surreal urban life, where absurdity is commonplace but still disarming (fieldnotes, August 2020). This response enables people to reconcile the strangeness of their experiences with what they know, making laughter a vital tool for navigating and mitigating feelings of ambiguity and discomfort.

- 29 Laughter also interacts with the social practices embedded in mimetic routines. Rather than simply aiming for acceptance or normalcy, these routines help individuals render challenging circumstances more bearable by creating frameworks for creatively reinterpreting existing elements. This mimesis, as discussed by Taussig and others, involves generating new meanings and forms from the reinterpretation of familiar elements or the simulation of what is believed to be the good life.⁴⁴ A group of young men in Goma exemplifies this as they construct makeshift speakers from discarded plastic bottles, humorously calling them “*les Bose du quartier*”, a playful reference to the well-known high-quality Bose brand of loudspeakers. Their laughter underscores not just their ingenuity, but also the way humour serves as a coping mechanism, transforming economic scarcity into an opportunity for playful self-expression.
- 30 In politically charged environments like Goma, emotions such as fear, suspicion, and mistrust often surface through embodied and interactional routines, nervous laughter, sighs, or subtle gestures of alarm. For instance, during a sudden power outage in a crowded neighbourhood, a loud explosion temporarily silences a group before nervous laughter breaks out. “Ah, it’s just the transformer again”, someone chuckles, the laughter veiling a deeper unease. Such reactions are not merely expressive but serve to regulate affect and restore a sense of control, however fleeting. Moments like these underscore how laughter, even when detached from overt humour, becomes a shared way of managing collective stress and uncertainty in fragile urban environments.
- 31 These examples illustrate how laughter operates within the grotesque, the uncanny, and the mimetic to mediate urban experiences, allowing individuals to navigate uncertainty, negotiate their social realities, and reclaim agency within challenging environments.

Pretending as social practice

- 32 The practice of *faire semblant* (to pretend) is a significant tool for both self-assurance and social interaction in Goma. This concept is deeply embedded in the everyday life of the city, where pretense and simulation serve as vital strategies for navigating a complex sociopolitical landscape.⁴⁵ Common expressions like “Goma is a theatre” or “Goma is a cinema”, despite the absence of actual theaters or cinemas, vividly illustrate the city’s inhabitants’ skills at adopting different personas and managing their realities through performance. By pretending or simulating different states of being or feelings, residents are not only able to deal with their own situations but also influence how others perceive them.⁴⁶ This practice becomes a form of social choreography where individuals carefully stage their reactions and interactions to align them with various social expectations and personal goals.

- 33 The notion of “Goma as a theatre” underscores the performative nature of everyday life in this city. The metaphor reflects how the residents of Goma use theatricality and role-playing to navigate their environment. This performative approach allows them to adapt flexibly to shifting circumstances, presenting themselves in ways that may either mask their true feelings or align with desired social roles. Emically, this is often expressed as *faire semblant*. A young entrepreneur, for example, switches effortlessly between identities, presenting himself as a successful businessman to potential investors while adopting a more humble persona when negotiating local prices. This strategic adaptability highlights how individuals in Goma constantly modulate their self-presentation based on context.
- 34 Although performative self-presentation is a widespread phenomenon, the way it is articulated in Goma through expressions like “*faire semblant*” illustrates how deeply embedded it is in the social fabric, shaped by the region’s political and economic realities. The specific conditions of Goma, including political instability, economic precarity, and the presence of numerous international actors, create a unique environment where pretense becomes not just a strategy but a necessity for survival and social mobility. While similar forms of adaptability exist elsewhere, Goma’s social, political, and economic landscape amplifies and refines these performative strategies in distinct ways.
- 35 This practice of *faire semblant* is not merely about personal reassurance but also serves as a strategic tool in social and political interactions. For example, in a context marked by scarcity and political repression, *faire semblant* allows individuals to maintain a semblance of normalcy and control. When faced with political oppression or humanitarian crises, pretending to accept or align oneself with the prevailing discourses can be a means of securing one’s survival or gaining access to resources. A market vendor, for instance, might loudly praise government policies when speaking in public, despite privately criticizing them, as a way to avoid suspicion from authorities. Similarly, a family hosting a foreign NGO representative may perform gratitude and enthusiasm for development projects while privately doubting their effectiveness. Such performative strategies illustrate how individuals in Goma navigate power dynamics and resource distribution through carefully staged interactions. This notion of *faire semblant* resonates deeply with embodied expressions of laughter, which similarly function as deliberate social performances.

Embodied laughter

- 36 A vivid example of this embodied laughter occurred during a conversation with motorcycle driver Prince when he brought me home and I invited him to have *ndazi* (local doughnut). In the middle of our discussion, a sudden and intense thunderclap shook the air and caused Prince to instinctively crouch down, a reaction rooted in both the shock of the sound and his background as a demobilized “child soldier”. However, almost immediately, he burst into high-pitched laughter, as if to dispel the tension, and continued our conversation as if nothing had happened. This moment illustrates how laughter can serve as a mechanism to mask uncomfortable emotions. Prince’s laughter was not merely a spontaneous response to the thunder but a deliberate act to conceal his momentary vulnerability and regain control over the social interaction. His laughter, or “*faire semblant*”, likely occurred because I, as an observer, remained

unfazed by the thunder and the underlying tension of his past experiences. The contrast between his reaction and my own nonchalance highlights how laughter can function as a social tool to manage and negotiate one's emotional state in the presence of others. In these moments, laughter functions as a multifaceted social tool. It can act as a facade, hiding deeper feelings of fear or anxiety, and providing a brief escape from Prince's discomfort while also showing that my own upbringing explains my different behavior.

- 37 Embodied experiences of laughter reveal its role as both a cognitive, interactional and physical phenomenon, deeply intertwined with emotional and physical states, particularly in conflict zones.⁴⁷ Humour and laughter are not merely mental processes but are lived, felt, and expressed through the body, reflecting and influencing how individuals experience and navigate their surroundings. This embodied dimension of laughter becomes especially poignant in urban environments marked by the grotesque and uncanny, where bodily performances and behaviours interact dynamically with the urban landscape.⁴⁸ In her exploration of how individuals contend with abject poverty, violence, and marginalization, Nancy Scheper-Hughes focuses on the embodiment of crisis. She examines how social crises manifest themselves in bodily states and perceived pathologies, offering a profound critique of conventional notions like post-traumatic stress disorder.⁴⁹ Scheper-Hughes argues that such concepts often obscure the depth of human suffering and the alternative modes of resilience that people employ. Her work on a Brazilian favela highlights how the physical body becomes a site where the abstract experiences of crisis and trauma are enacted and expressed.⁵⁰
- 38 Also in Goma, residents engage with their uncertain context by employing laughter and euphemism to interpret and downplay threats, striving to maintain a sense of normalcy amidst ongoing upheaval. In this context, laughter addresses the unpredictability of life, offering moments of relief, bonding, and assertion of agency in a world where conventional responses to crises are often inadequate.⁵¹

“*Twende mu palais*”: humour and irony as means of estrangement

- 39 “*Twende mu palais*” (Let’s go to the palace) was a phrase I frequently heard from young people in Mugunga, one of Goma’s largest IDP camps, particularly in 2008. When inviting me into modest, often dilapidated huts, they would say it with a smile, referring to their home as a *palais*. The phrase, a hybrid of Swahili (*twende* = let’s go) and French (*palais* = palace), performs a subtle irony to highlight the gap between aspiration and reality. The act of calling a shack a palace was not simply self-mockery. It also served as a moment of social alignment or gentle resistance, especially when addressed to me, the outsider. It acknowledged, playfully but pointedly, the contrast between aspiration and circumstance. At the same time, it was also used among peers, reinforcing a shared awareness of absurdity without losing humour.
- 40 This playful renaming exemplifies how humour and irony can act as tools of estrangement, drawing on Bertolt Brecht’s concept of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation or estrangement effect), which challenges taken-for-granted realities. As Fredric Jameson notes,⁵² this effect disrupts habitual perceptions by making the familiar appear strange. More than simple irony, it prompts both speakers and listeners to confront the

stark contrast between their living conditions and the idea of a “palace”, fostering critical awareness of their sociopolitical reality. Thus, the estrangement effect functions not just as a rhetorical device but as a means of reinterpreting and resisting the structures that shape displacement and inequality.

- 41 By reimagining a humble shelter as a palace, the residents of Mugunga use laughter to create a sense of distance from their everyday experiences, revealing the absurdities of their reality through a lens of exaggerated contrast.⁵³ Pretending to live in a palace instead of a small hut within an IDP camp transforms an ordinary situation into a form of sociopolitical commentary by exploring alternative ways of interpreting their experiences. Here, humour and irony are not merely entertaining; they are essential for navigating the complexities of life within an IDP camp, an attitude which allows them to maintain or assert their sense of dignity but also to create “an analytical distance from which a ‘rational’ rather than a purely emotional response can develop”.⁵⁴ The social interaction conveyed through “*twende mu palais*” exemplifies how laughter not only playfully depicts a social reality but also functions as a mediator between the IDP and the researcher, capturing “the challenges and experiences of the profound changes that characterize modernity”.⁵⁵

RDCédé or République démoniaque du Congo

- 42 Expressions like “RDCédé”, a pun on the official acronym RDC (République démocratique du Congo) and *décédé* (deceased), or “République démoniaque du Congo” circulate widely across informal conversations, social media comments, and heated taxi-moto debates in Goma and beyond. These expressions encapsulate a critical, ironic gaze on the Congolese state. They are not official slogans, but punchlines that signal affective and diagnostic judgments. By referring to death or demonic possession, they stage the DRC as expired or haunted, grotesque metaphors that reflect the surreal and often disturbing contradictions of political life.⁵⁶
- 43 These examples of wordplay serve as satirical *détournements*: they re-label the state in spectral or grotesque terms and thereby unmask what many perceive as the falseness of the official democratic narrative.⁵⁷ “RDCédé” implies that the Republic is no longer functioning; “République démoniaque” suggests its possession by malevolent forces. In both cases, humour acts as a form of *dénonciation du faux-semblant*, pointing to the chasm between the state’s self-presentation and its actual workings. As Susanna Trnka notes, political humour has an ambivalent character as it is not only a critique, but also a coping strategy, a way to navigate the contradictions of social life without frontal confrontation.⁵⁸
- 44 In Goma, laughter and irony play a crucial role in making the unintelligible aspects of urban life legible. Through jokes and exaggerations, residents transform the seemingly incomprehensible into descriptive frames that are, if not coherent, then at least shareable. This process of estrangement allows for reflection: as Taussig argues, such acts make “the normal in the abnormal visible”.⁵⁹ In this way, humour is not escapism but a technology of sense-making. As Victoria Bernal⁶⁰ and Abderrahmane Moussaoui⁶¹ have shown, irony in African urban contexts is often a subtle form of critique, one that thrives in conditions of uncertainty and opacity.

- 45 During fieldwork, I often encountered such expressions among younger interlocutors. In one instance, a group of university students reacted to a news story about stolen exam fees with sardonic laughter: “*Voilà la RDcédé.*” The moment captured not joy, but recognition. Humour here became a shared diagnostic tool. Such expressions also proliferate in digital settings, especially in Facebook comment sections, where people mock corrupt politicians or infrastructural absurdities using these same refrains. The comments are sharp, witty, and saturated with local knowledge. Far from being frivolous, they express layered political consciousness and affective saturation.
- 46 These ironic reversals resonate with other emic framings of Goma as a surreal or performative space. Interlocutors would frequently describe their experience with phrases like “*C’est de la comédie, ça*” (that’s a comedy) or “*Tuko ndani mu film*” (we are inside a film). These metaphors cast everyday life as a kind of spectacle that is chaotic, unpredictable, and tinged with farce. Such renderings are in line with the broader grammar of *faire semblant* I trace throughout this text. Here, pretending or staging is not about illusion; it is about crafting a provisional coherence in the absence of structural stability.
- 47 This imaginative capacity, to reframe one’s condition through irony, to render the grotesque as laughable, serves both as a shield and as a mode of critique. These practices can be understood as crucial narrative strategies for living amid fragmentation and uncertainty.⁶² In this sense, “RDcédé” is not just a joke. It is a political act; playful, yes, but deeply reflective. It enables urban dwellers to hold the absurdity of their political condition at a distance, while also voicing their discontent.

Between grotesque and “bad taste”

- 48 In every society, there are specific groups or subjects around which humour often revolves, and during fieldwork, jokes about “the pygmies”⁶³ were notably prevalent.⁶⁴ As joking is always about “particular people, places and events”,⁶⁵ in a context fraught with ethnic tensions and conflict, laughter about “the other” is particularly grotesque. One example I want to provide is about the local group of Twa that is emically often referred to as “*des pygmées*” (the pygmies) in Goma. The humour directed at them often emerged within the context of emergency aid and developmental efforts, reflecting both the absurdities and the underlying tensions of such initiatives.

For instance, a popular joke among locals went as follows: A development agency arrives in a “pygmy” village with the intention of improving their sanitation system. They construct several pit latrines near the woods. Once the work is completed, the pygmies approach the site, only to be horrified, and they flee in panic. The punchline, delivered with barely restrained laughter by my friend, a waiter, was: “It’s because the pygmies mistook the size of the toilet holes for mass graves.”

- 49 This example vividly illustrates what Donna Goldstein characterizes in a Brazilian favela as “bad taste” humour, a form of humour that, while crude, provides deep insights into the role of laughter amidst crisis and social dysfunction.⁶⁶ Such jokes encapsulate multiple layers of meaning: they play on the perceived primitiveness of the pygmies, critique the ineffectiveness of development projects, and intertwine with the haunting legacy of past atrocities, reflected in the metaphor of mass graves. The humour here not only exposes the absurdities of the situation but also serves as a way

of dealing with the persistent trauma and sociopolitical failings but also has an element of “ironic truth telling”⁶⁷ alluding to the many development projects that miss their objectives.

- 50 Donna Goldstein suggests that the “bad taste” of such humour reflects a broader existential response to a world where traditional mechanisms for addressing grievances have failed. In this context, humour becomes a means of engaging with the harsh realities of life, offering a way to confront and articulate deep-seated frustrations in the absence of more constructive outlets.⁶⁸ The shared experience of suffering and absurdity among those who find this humour funny indicates a collective understanding of the unspeakable and a way to discuss it openly.
- 51 The pervasive nature of black humour in Goma extends into various aspects of daily life. For example, during a particularly lackluster football match at Goma’s stadium, a spectator suddenly shouted, “But today, today they are playing as if they just found their way out of the mass graves!” (Fieldnote, August 29, 2009). While I was initially taken aback by the starkness of the comparison, the surrounding crowd erupted in laughter. The use of mass graves as a motif in these jokes reflects a nuanced interplay between fact and fiction, drawing from a shared cultural understanding of past horrors. This reaction highlights how such laughter functions not only as a form of relief but also as a means of bonding among those who share a common, often grim, knowledge and experience.⁶⁹ “Bad taste” humour in Goma reveals a profound connection between humour and societal coping mechanisms. It illustrates how dark humour can function as a form of resistance, enabling individuals to discuss and deal with taboo subjects and painful truths within a shared cultural context. However, as Goldstein and Schepers-Hughes both describe the Brazilian context, variations of black humour are not exclusively forms of resistance but forms “where existence itself is made possible”.⁷⁰

Conclusion: Agentive Laughter

- 52 Returning to the opening vignette, where two brothers rhetorically transformed gunshots into barking, this study concludes that although Goma’s population may feel powerless to influence their country’s broader political and economic trajectory, laughter remains a potent act of agency. It enables individuals to reshape their experience of everyday life and assert control over meaning-making amid persistent uncertainty. In a context where “chronic crisis”⁷¹ has become the “new normal”, this practice transcends mere coping, becoming a socially embedded practice that sustains both critique and resilience.
- 53 Understanding laughter in conflict-affected settings requires attention not only to its humorous content but also to its situational, affective, and interactional dimensions. An ethnographic lens reveals when and how laughter arises, its social and emotional functions, and how it manages tension, sometimes manifesting itself as nervous or polite laughter, or even silence when humour falls flat. These nuances illustrate laughter’s role as both commentary and relational practice in negotiating fear, discomfort, and instability.
- 54 The performative nature of everyday life in Goma, and the widespread practice of “*faire semblant*” (pretending), form a sociocultural archive that simultaneously entertains and critiques. By describing their urban reality as “comedy” or “film”, inhabitants

transform hardship into a mode of social commentary that makes the absurdities of existence bearable and intelligible. This resonates with Berger's⁷² insight that humour holds epistemic potential: it not only alleviates suffering but reshapes how people perceive and engage with their social world. Through laughter, individuals actively engage with uncertainty, subverting its grip rather than merely enduring it.

- 55 While the future remains unpredictable and plans are often made day-to-day, the ability to articulate experience, whether by pretending to “live like in the movies” or redefining a makeshift shelter as a palace, extends beyond humour. These embodied and performative acts assert dignity, modernity, and agency in the face of uncertainty, enacted through gestures, speech, and social interaction. Capturing such ephemeral expressions in academic prose remains a challenge, as much of their meaning depends on timing, tone, and context, elements that resist simple description.
- 56 As an intersubjective act,⁷³ laughter does not always create solidarity,⁷⁴ but it offers a framework for making sense of precarious realities. This interplay of humour and pretense does not deny suffering but reconfigures it, allowing individuals to reclaim control over their lived experience. In this sense, agentive laughter is not merely reactive. It is a generative force, enabling people to endure, interpret, and act upon the world around them.

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NOTES

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2. All research participants' names have been changed. Their anonymity has been protected through the use of pseudonyms and by altering identifying details where necessary.
3. While this vignette describes the tense situation in 2008 when the rebel group CNDP (National Congress for the Defence of the People) was on the brink of taking over Goma, it is important to acknowledge that in January 2025, the rebel group M23 (March 23 Movement) successfully seized control of the city, marking a significant and violent shift in the region's ongoing armed conflict.
4. KUIPERS, 2016, p. 15.
5. OLDENBURG & MWEMEZI, 2024.
6. VIGH, 2008, p. 8, italicized in the original.
7. *Ibid.*
8. BAYART, MBEMBE & TOULABOR, 1991; GAY PARA, 1986; SCOTT, 1985.
9. VAN ROEKEL, 2016.
10. VAN ROEKEL, 2013; 2016.
11. KUIPERS, 2008.
12. BESNIER, 2016, p. 79.
13. VAN ROEKEL, 2016.
14. FREUD, 2003 [1919]; TRNKA, 2011, p. 331.
15. VIGH, 2008, p. 10–11.

16. TRNKA, 2011, p. 338.
17. RUCH, 2008, p. 22; KUIPERS, 2008, p. 389.
18. NWANKWO, 2024.
19. MORREALL, 1983; BESNIER, 2016; KUIPERS, 2016.
20. KUIPERS, 2008; MORREALL, 1983; RASKIN, 1999.
21. DOUGLAS, 1975.
22. KUIPERS, 2008, p. 376; MORREALL, 1983, p. 243.
23. KUIPERS, 2008, p. 367; MORREALL, 1983, p. 246.
24. MORREALL, 1983, p. 244; NWANKWO, 2024; PLANT, 2009; TRNKA, 2011, p. 338.
25. BERNAL, 2013; GIAMARIO, 2016, p. 210.
26. KUIPERS, 2008.
27. BERGER & LUCKMANN, 1980 [1966].
28. KUIPERS, 2008, p. 380; PLANT, 2009, p. 124.
29. OLDENBURG, 2018; OLDENBURG & KAMBALE, 2023.
30. VIGH, 2008.
31. DE BOECK, 1996, p. 92.
32. TAUSSIG, 1993, p. xv.
33. VIGH, 2008.
34. TAUSSIG, 1993, p. xv.
35. ASTRUC, 2010; OBADARE, 2016.
36. OLDENBURG, 2016.
37. The notion of the “grotesque” was frequently expressed using the French term *grotesque*, also by Swahili speakers, often within French-Swahili code-switching contexts.
38. HÄNSCH *et al.*, 2017, p. 4.
39. NORDSTROM, 1997, p. 156.
40. BAKTHIN, 1984.
41. BARNARD, 2004, p. 297.
42. SCHEVILL, 1977.
43. KRAMER, 2012.
44. TAUSSIG, 1993; DE BOECK, 1996.
45. JACKSON, 2010, p. 51.
46. OLDENBURG, 2020.
47. STODULKA *et al.*, 2018, p. 525.
48. BEEMAN, 1999.
49. SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2008, p. 37.
50. SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2008.
51. OLDENBURG, 2010.
52. JAMESON, 1998.

53. DRIESSEN, 2016, p. 142–143.
54. BERNAL, 2013, p. 307.
55. RATOUIS & BAUMEISTER, 2011, p. 10.
56. OLDENBURG & MWEMEZI, 2024.
57. DE BOECK, 2012.
58. TRNKA, 2011, p. 339.
59. TAUSSIG, 1992, p. 18.
60. BERNAL, 2013.
61. MOUSSAOUI, 2013.
62. NORDSTROM, 1997, OLDENBURG, 2010.
63. Although “pygmies” is a derogatory term and loaded with colonial and pejorative connotations, it is widely used in Eastern DRC. I use it here solely in the context of the joke.
64. This was particularly the case during my research stays in 2008 and 2009. I cannot confirm whether this pattern persisted in later periods. Due to the sensitive and potentially offensive nature of ethnic humour, I approach this topic with caution, acknowledging the complexity and power dynamics involved.
65. BESNIER, 2016, p. 83.
66. GOLDSTEIN, 2003; see also MARTIN-GRANEL, 1991.
67. TRNKA, 2011, p. 338.
68. GOLDSTEIN, 2003, p. 271.
69. VAN ROEKEL, 2016.
70. SCHEPER-HUGHES, 2008, p. 49; GOLDSTEIN, 2013.
71. VIGH, 2008, p. 11.
72. BERGER, 1997.
73. KUIPERS, 2011, p. 365.
74. VAN ROEKEL, 2016, p. 69.
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ABSTRACTS

This article explores the complex role of laughter, the grotesque, and the practice of pretense in everyday life in Goma, a city in the war-affected Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Drawing on long-term ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Goma since 2008, the study examines how residents navigate chronic uncertainty, ongoing violence, and social precarity through humour and performative acts. In a context marked by protracted armed conflict, where crisis has become a chronic, everyday condition, laughter emerges not simply as a spontaneous emotional reaction but as a deliberate social practice and form of agency. Through a combination of verbal humour, embodied laughter, and playful “faire semblant” (pretending), inhabitants reframe their

precarious realities, sustain dignity, and create spaces for social critique and resilience. Here, *reframing* is not used in the sense of cognitive or discursive frame analysis, but rather to describe how humour and laughter enable people to shift the affective and moral register of experience in everyday life. Drawing on political anthropology, phenomenology, and humour studies, the article situates Goma as a grotesque urban environment where fact and fiction, fear and irony, are constantly intertwined. Ethnographic examples reveal how laughter functions as a vital mode of sense-making, enabling people to navigate tension, insecurity, and trauma. The performative dimension of laughter and pretense allows residents to assert control over meaning and social relations despite the overwhelming uncertainty of their environment. While this study raises the challenge of capturing such fleeting, context-dependent expressions in academic writing, it ultimately shows that laughter in Goma is an agentive, relational practice that sustains social bonds, critiques power, and transforms suffering into a shared, bearable experience.

Cet article explore le rôle complexe du rire, du grotesque et de la pratique du faire semblant dans la vie quotidienne à Goma, une ville de l'est de la République démocratique du Congo marquée par les effets durables de la guerre. S'appuyant sur un travail de terrain ethnographique de longue durée mené à Goma depuis 2008, l'étude examine comment les habitants composent avec l'incertitude chronique, la violence persistante et la précarité sociale à travers l'humour et des actes performatifs. Dans un contexte de conflit armé prolongé – où la crise s'est transformée en condition quotidienne – le rire ne se présente pas uniquement comme une réaction émotionnelle spontanée, mais comme une pratique sociale délibérée et une forme d'*agency*. Par le biais de jeux de mots, de rires incarnés et de formes de faire semblant, les habitants reconfigurent leurs réalités précaires, maintiennent leur dignité et créent des espaces de critique sociale et de résilience. Ici, la notion de « reconfiguration » n'est pas employée au sens cognitif ou discursif de l'analyse des cadres (frame analysis), mais pour décrire la manière dont l'humour et l'ironie permettent de déplacer les registres affectifs et moraux de l'expérience quotidienne. À l'intersection de l'anthropologie politique, de la phénoménologie et des études sur l'humour, l'article propose de lire Goma comme un espace urbain grotesque, où le réel et la fiction, la peur et l'ironie s'enchevêtrent constamment. Des scènes ethnographiques illustrent comment le rire opère comme un mode de production de sens, permettant de traverser l'insécurité et les tensions. Sa dimension performative permet aux habitants de (re)prendre prise sur le monde social, malgré l'incertitude écrasante de leur environnement. En soulevant les limites de la restitution académique face à ces expressions fugaces et situées, l'article montre en fin de compte que le rire à Goma constitue une pratique relationnelle et agentive, qui soutient les liens sociaux, critique le pouvoir, et transforme la souffrance en une expérience collective partageable.

INDEX

Keywords: Laughter, humour, pretense, uncertainty, grotesque, uncanny, Goma, DR Congo, agency

Mots-clés: Rire, humour, faire semblant, incertitude, grotesque, inquiétant, Goma, République démocratique du Congo, agentivité

AUTHOR

SILKE OLDENBURG

Silke Oldenburg is an anthropologist with over 20 years of experience exploring the intersections of politics, urban dynamics, and environmental challenges in Eastern

DR Congo and Colombia. Her work focuses on diverse dimensions of urban life in the Global South, addressing displacement, political violence, infrastructures, care, and humour. Through long-term ethnographic research, writing, and teaching, she engages with questions of youth, uncertainty, and social resilience in contexts of chronic urban crisis.

Silke Oldenburg est anthropologue avec plus de 20 ans d'expérience dans l'étude des intersections entre politique, dynamiques urbaines et enjeux environnementaux dans l'est de la République démocratique du Congo et en Colombie. Ses recherches portent sur les multiples dimensions de la vie urbaine dans le Sud global, en abordant des thèmes tels que le déplacement, la violence politique, les infrastructures, le *care* et l'humour. À travers une ethnographie au long cours, elle explore les questions de jeunesse, d'incertitude et de résilience sociale dans des contextes de crise urbaine chronique.