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POLYPHONIC PAGES: BAKHTINIAN DIALOGISM AND GENRE THEORY IN ELOGHOSA OSUNDE'S *VAGABONDS!* AND 'PEMI AGUDA'S *GHOSTROOTS*

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Abstract

Eloghosa Osunde's *Vagabonds!* and 'Pemi Aguda's *Ghostroots* share a Lagos setting, a debut year close enough to invite comparison, and a formal restlessness that refuses to settle into one genre. Osunde's book moves between short story, testimony and myth under the guidance of a spirit narrator named Tatafo; Aguda's linked stories fold horror, family history and the ordinary business of a Lagos afternoon into a single register. This paper reads both works through Mikhail Bakhtin's account of the novel as a meeting place for competing voices, tracing heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, the chronotope and the carnivalesque across two chapters chosen for close study, Osunde's "Thomas" and Aguda's "Manifest" and "Birdwoman", alongside the paratextual material that frames *Vagabonds!*, its glossary of legal definitions and its address from the city itself. It argues that these formal choices are not decoration. They are how each writer stages an argument about who gets to speak in Lagos and on what terms, and how a genre theory attentive to hybrid, digitally adjacent forms of contemporary writing, from autotheory to the novel-in-stories, can describe what Bakhtin's terms alone leave under-specified. Findings show that the formal restlessness both writers report choosing is, on the evidence, inseparable from a question about who in Lagos is allowed to be many things at once.

Keywords*:* Mikhail Bakhtin, Dialogism, Heteroglossia, Polyphony, Carnivalesque

Introduction

Vagabonds! and *Ghostroots* arrived within two years of each other, in 2022 and 2024, from writers who share a city and, on the evidence of an interview and a blurb, a wariness of being filed under a single genre label (Osunde, qtd. in Tepper, par. 3; Talabi, par. 2). Osunde has said that she set out to write "a book of fiction where the individual stories were given momentum by a narrator's perspective, in a particular sequence, to create a specific rhythm", adding only that "beyond the above categories, this book is that" (qtd. in Tepper, par. 3). Aguda, for her part, has told an interviewer that she does not "care for pigeon-holing" and would rather let her stories "find its readers no matter what section it's shelved under" (qtd. in Talabi, par. 2). Both statements describe books that are hard to shelve because they were not built to be shelved, and both writers arrive at that difficulty from a career spent moving between form essay, column, short story, blog post, before the book-length work now in question.

This paper takes that difficulty as its subject rather than its obstacle. It argues that the formal instability of *Vagabonds!* and *Ghostroots*, their movement between voices, registers and genres, is best read through Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the novel as a "diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised" (Bakhtin, "Discourse" 262), and through a genre theory willing to treat hybridity as a norm of contemporary writing rather than a deviation from it. The analysis that follows works closely with two extended passages, Osunde's "Thomas" chapter and Aguda's "Manifest" and "Birdwoman", together with the paratextual material that opens *Vagabonds!*, its glossary of legal definitions of vagrancy and its address delivered by the city of Lagos itself. These sections are not chosen because they are representative of the whole of either book; a study confined to two chapters and three stories cannot make that claim. They are chosen because each rewards sustained attention to how Bakhtin's categories, heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, chronotope and carnival, operate at the level of the sentence, and because each stages, in miniature, the larger argument both books make about whose speech counts as reality in Lagos.

Theoretical Review

Bakhtin's account of the novel begins with a claim about language rather than about plot. In "Discourse in the Novel", he argues that no national language is a single, settled thing; it is stratified by profession, generation, region and ideology into what he calls heteroglossia, "the internal stratification present in every language at any given moment of its historical existence" which he treats as "the indispensable prerequisite for the novel as a genre" (Bakhtin, "Discourse", 263). Where poetry, on Bakhtin's account, tries to purify language of this stratification, the novel is the form that takes stratification as its material, organising "a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices" into a single artistic structure (262). Heteroglossia is therefore not simply a matter of a text containing several languages in the everyday sense, Yoruba besides English, Pidgin besides King James English, can include that. It is a matter of a text staging the social friction between ways of speaking that already exist outside it.

Polyphony names a related but distinct achievement, one Bakhtin develops at length in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. A polyphonic novel is one in which "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices", replaces the single governing perspective of a conventional narrator (Bakhtin, *Problems* 6). For Bakhtin, this is simply not a technique for representing many opinions; it is a refusal, on the author's part, to let any one voice, including the narrator's own, finalise what the others mean. The result, he writes, is "a plurality of consciousnesses, with equal rights and each with its own world", combined without being merged into a single account (6). Dialogism is the condition that follows from taking heteroglossia and polyphony seriously at the level of meaning itself. If every utterance is already a response to prior utterances and an anticipation of a reply, meaning is never made once by a single speaker; it is made between speakers, in a collision

and adjustment of positions that never fully resolves. This paper uses dialogism, in what follows, to name the moments in Osunde and Aguda's fiction where competing belief systems, Pentecostal Christianity and ancestral haunting, animist explanation and secular scepticism, argue with one another inside a single scene without a narrator stepping in to settle the argument.

Two further Bakhtinian terms structure the reading of the setting and event that follows. The chronotope, introduced in "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel", names "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" (Bakhtin, "Forms" 84). Bakhtin's own examples are historical, the road of the picaresque novel, the castle of the Gothic, but the concept travels well to a city like Lagos, where a market stall or a moonlit bedroom can carry the weight of a much older history inside a single present moment. The carnivalesque, developed most fully in *Rabelais and His World*, describes the temporary inversion of hierarchy that festival licences, a state Bakhtin calls "life drawn out of its usual rut", or "life turned inside out" (*Rabelais* 11). Carnival, on his account, is not simply disorder; it is disorder that briefly makes a different social arrangement imaginable before the ordinary hierarchy reasserts itself.

Bakhtin wrote about the novel as a form reaching back to Rabelais and Dostoevsky, and nothing in his work anticipates Lagos, Pidgin or a spirit narrator named Tatafo. Applying his terms to Osunde and Aguda therefore calls for a second body of theory, one concerned with genre as it operates now, across memoir, blog and fiction. John Frow's *Genre* argues against treating genre as a fixed taxonomy, describing it instead as a means through which texts organise, and are organised by, social knowledge. He develops this argument in the book's opening chapter (Frow 6-31) and returns it in the final chapter, where he examines blogs and social media as emergent genres of the digital era (134-67). Lauren Fournier's account of autotheory sharpens this point for texts that mix the personal and the theoretical, or, by extension, the personal, the fictional and the documentary. She defines autotheory as "the integration of the auto, or 'self,' with philosophy or theory, often in ways that are direct, performative, or self-aware", built from "the personal-theoretical, incidental, gut-centred nature of autotheoretical research" (Fournier 6, 5). Osunde and Aguda are not autotheorists in Fournier's sense; neither book argues with philosophy the way Maggie Nelson's does. But Fournier's insistence that hybrid form is not a failure to choose a genre, but rather a deliberate refusal of the separations genre categories impose, self from theory in her case, memoir from fiction from blog in Osunde's and Aguda's, describes exactly the kind of formal decision both writers report making. Osunde's own account of writing "beyond the above categories" (qtd. in Tepper, par. 3) and Aguda's refusal to "care for pigeon-holing" (qtd. in Talabi, par. 2) are not incidental remarks about marketing. On Frow and Fournier's account of genre, these are claims about how meaning should be allowed to move through a text without being confined

to fixed categories. It is this understanding of genre, as much as any individual Bakhtinian device, that the readings below seek to take seriously.

Textual Analysis

Polyphony and Heteroglossia in *Vagabonds!* and *Ghostroots*

Osunde's "Thomas" chapter demonstrates heteroglossia before a single character speaks. The chapter's epigraph, "Blessed are they that have not seen and yet have believed", is attributed in the text to John 20:29 (Osunde 15), and it is followed immediately by a very different register, an uncle's retelling of a football match against India that supposedly ended 99 goals to 1. The story is introduced as something "Nigerians know and pass on with the conviction reserved for Holy Communion bread" (15), a phrase that yokes sporting legend to scripture inside a single sentence and signals that the chapter will not keep its registers apart. Uncle Anjos, narrating the match to his nephew Thomas, reports that witnesses disagree about what actually happened on the pitch: "Some say it was a lion that came roaring into the air . . . some say it was a snake uncoiling itself from the dead leather; others say it was both interchangeably" (15). No account is granted priority. The ball's transformation is heteroglossic in Bakhtin's sense because it stages, inside the plot itself, the social fact that a national memory can be held by several incompatible stories at once, none of them corrected by the narrative.

The chapter's prose moves just as restlessly between idioms. Anjos narrates in the exclamatory, colloquial voice of oral storytelling, "That day? Ha! The whole of Nigeria went haywire!" (15), before an unnamed collective voice takes over to explain the crowd's anger: "it's just that India used juju to confuse our players. They would never have won if they didn't use juju" (16). The same page reports that the match's combatants, after fighting each other to exhaustion, "hugged and shook hands" and asked "So what was that your name again?" (16). Three registers, oral legend, nationalist rationalisation and comic afterword, sit beside one another without a narrator adjudicating between them, which is close to what Bakhtin means by a text organising "a diversity of social speech types . . . and a diversity of individual voices" rather than resolving them into one ("Discourse" 262).

Ghostroots stages a comparable polyphony at the level of individual scenes rather than communal legend. "Manifest" is narrated in the second person throughout, a choice that already unsettles who is speaking to whom, before folding in the voices of the narrator's mother and father around the dinner table. When the mother first mistakes her daughter for the long-dead grandmother Agnes, the daughter's reply, "Hmmn?' you ask. 'Who's that?", meets only her mother's silence and retreat (Aguda 7). The father supplies a different register again, matter-of-fact and slightly irritated, explaining that "Agnes is your mother's mother" while eating dinner in front of a news report on the South Sudan civil war (7). Three ways of knowing the same fact, the daughter's ignorance, the mother's dread and the father's offhand history lesson, occupy the same short scene without merging.

"Birdwoman" widens this polyphony to a crowd. In Agege Market, onlookers comment on the unmarried, unsmiling Felicity in Nigerian Pidgin, "If man for dey, shebi im go dey smile?" (Aguda 111), a line the narration glosses only by showing Felicity's indifference to it, not by correcting or endorsing the sentiment. Later, as the street magician Ayao begins his act, another voice in the crowd remarks, "Him say e be magician o. E go soon show us" (112), and when Ayao calls for a volunteer, a third voice heckles, "For what o?" (113). None of these voices belong to a named character; they exist only as the market's collective commentary, and Aguda lets that commentary carry as much narrative weight as anything Felicity herself says or thinks.

Dialogism and Ideological Conflict

Heteroglossia describes coexistence; dialogism, in the stricter Bakhtinian sense, describes the argument that coexistence produces. In "Thomas", that argument is explicitly generational. Anjos is remembered by his family as a boy who "studied old stories from before the country earned its name, from way before the land was taken" (Osunde 16), while his contemporaries, weary of "enough bloodshed, enough loss", wanted only "to be young in peace" (17). Their verdict on him is blunt: "Anjos, they decided, was the delusional one" (17). Osunde does not adjudicate this dispute. The narration records both the family's fear that digging up the past will "trouble the ground" (17) and Thomas's own delight in Anjos's stories, a delight the text describes as feeling "both the danger and the promise of the world in full" (17). That single phrase holds two incompatible evaluations of the same inherited knowledge together without resolving which is correct, which is close to what Bakhtin means when he describes Dostoevsky's characters as retaining "equal rights" within a single event rather than being sorted by the author into right and wrong (*Problems* 6).

The chapter's central legend performs the same refusal at a national scale. When Nigeria loses 99 to 1, the crowd's insistence that "India used juju to confuse our players" (Osunde 16) is not corrected by a rival, rational account; instead, the narrative simply offers the alternative, "That an entire country had a choreographed hallucination? A nationwide delusion?" (16), before closing the question with a single word, "Exactly" (16). The dialogic move here is that both explanations, occult sabotage and collective self-deception, are left standing, each as implausible as the other. The text's refusal to favour either explanation is itself the argument: national memory, in Osunde's telling, survives on precisely this kind of unresolved contest.

Ghostroots locates the same structure inside a family rather than a nation. "Manifest" builds towards a direct question the daughter puts to her mother, "Mummy, do I look like your mum? Do you look like her?' (Aguda 8), a question the mother answers only by fleeing to lock herself in the bathroom (8). The daughter's next question, put to her father the following morning, was, "But what's wrong with her?" (8), receiving a rationalising answer, "Her mother died around your age . . . maybe the resemblance has

heightened?" (8), that explains nothing about why a resemblance should provoke terror rather than grief. The Pentecostal mother's silence and the secular father's shrug represent two incompatible ways of managing an inherited history, and Aguda, like Osunde, declines to let either position win.

"Birdwoman" makes this ideological standoff explicit rather than implied. Ayao, mid-performance, asks Felicity directly, "Do you believe?" (Aguda 113), and her answer is a single unequivocal word, "No" (113), repeated when he asks again (114). Felicity's scepticism does not stop Ayao's chant, "Àṣẹ òrìsà l'ẽnu mi!" (114), nor does it prevent her transformation into a bird moments later. Aguda stages belief and disbelief as two positions that coexist inside the same body at the same instant, since it is Felicity's unbelieving self that flies, a more literal rendering of Bakhtinian dialogism than most novels attempt, with doubt and enchantment sharing a single sentence rather than a single argument.

Chronotope: Lagos and History

Bakhtin's chronotope offers a way to describe how these arguments are anchored in particular places without becoming abstract. In "Thomas", the football legend collapses ninety minutes of play into what the narration calls a story that "happens to you once and then lives with you forever" (Osunde 15), a phrase that measures the match not in clock time but in the far longer time of national memory. The domestic scene that follows performs a smaller version of the same collapse. Every evening, the text reports, Anjos "told him tales by moonlight", stories that reach back to a period "before the country earned its name, from way before the land was taken" (16), so that an ordinary bedroom becomes, for the length of a story, contiguous with the colonial and precolonial past. Bakhtin's definition, "the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature" ("Forms" 84), describes precisely this fusion, a single room in which historical time is made available to the present through the act of telling.

Ghostroots achieves a comparable fusion through a domestic failure rather than a story. In "Manifest", a power cut forces the family to sit "in relative darkness", lit only by a candle mounted in an empty Milo tin (Aguda 7-8), and it is in this dimmed, ordinary space that the mother first calls her daughter by the dead grandmother's name, "Agnes, is that you?" (8). The candlelight is not incidental scene-setting; it is the chronotope that lets an unacknowledged family history surface inside a contemporary Lagos dining room, the same collapse of past into present that Osunde achieves through storytelling, achieved here through a blackout instead.

"Birdwoman" stretches the chronotope in a different direction, vertically rather than backwards in time. Once Felicity begins to fly above Agege Market, the narration reports that she "can now see a pattern to the rowdy market streets, and Felicity thinks how tiny the world must look to God" (Aguda 114). She also feels "relieved of a lifelong burden of being" (114). Altitude functions here the way Anjos's

moonlit stories function in *Vagabonds!*, as a temporary suspension of ordinary time and hierarchy that only this chronotope makes available, before gravity, in the form of a glass building, returns her to earth and to the crowd that will stone her (115-16). In both books, an ordinary Lagos setting - a bedroom, a dining table, a market - turns out to hold far more history and possibility than its size suggests, close to what Bakhtin means by a chronotope carrying generic significance for the kind of story a place allows to be told.

Carnivalesque Inversion

The carnivalesque in "Thomas" follows directly from national defeat rather than festival. celebration After Nigeria's loss, Osunde writes, "People had so much anger in them that they poured into the streets and started to fight each other", strangers "lunging at each other, trying to draw blood", yet the passage insists that "none of it was done with malice" (15-16). The fighting includes "women on the sidelines picking fights with each other, children following suit" (16), a detail that extends the inversion of normal restraint across age and gender rather than confining it to men. The episode ends, as Bakhtin's account of carnival predicts it should, with reconciliation rather than lasting harm, strangers who "fought to exhaustion, then hugged and shook hands before heading off together" (16). Bakhtin describes carnival as "life drawn out of its usual rut", or, more starkly, "life turned inside out" (*Rabelais* 11), and Osunde's street brawl matches that description closely, a temporary and total suspension of civic order that resolves back into community rather than into lasting division.

Ghostroots locates its carnivalesque inversion inside the more contained space of a market performance. Ayao's card tricks draw a crowd that "yelp in delight" (Aguda 113), and Felicity's decision to step forward as his volunteer already inverts an expectation the text has built, that a woman alone in public, mocked for being unmarried, would stay back rather than draw further attention to herself. Her transformation into a bird is the story's most complete inversion, since it briefly grants her the kind of freedom the market's gossips assumed only a husband could provide. But Aguda's carnival, unlike Osunde's, does not resolve into reconciliation. When Felicity falls back to earth, the crowd that had cheered Ayao's tricks turns on her, "calling her witch in their various languages" (115), and stones her. Bakhtin's account of carnival allows for exactly this reversal; a suspension of hierarchy is always temporary, and the return of ordinary order can be as violent as the inversion was liberating. Felicity's own verdict on the episode, delivered mid-assault, "She is in pain now, but she flew! She flew!" (116) holds both halves of that carnival logic together, punishment and triumph, in a single line the narrative refuses to resolve into only one.

Genre Hybridity: Paratext, Statute and the Supernatural

Where the preceding sections track Bakhtinian devices inside individual scenes, *Vagabonds!* stages its argument about genre before the first story even begins. The book opens with a mock dictionary entry,

"1. Vagabond (n) . . . A person who wanders from place to place without a home", glossed by the narrator as meaning, "in other words, an outsider, an unbelonger, many" (Osunde 8). The entry then shifts genre entirely, from lexicography to statute, quoting language drawn from Nigerian criminal law in several northern states that defines as a vagabond "any male person who dresses or is attired in the fashion of a woman in a public place or who practices sodomy as a means of livelihood or as a profession" (8-9). A companion entry for "Gross Indecency" quotes further legal language penalising "exposure of nakedness in public . . . capable of corrupting public morals" (9). By interleaving dictionary, statute and editorial commentary, "hunted . . . wanted . . . kept secret . . . invisible, hypervisible, threat, trouble" (9), Osunde does at the level of the book's front matter exactly what Frow describes genre as doing more broadly, organising social knowledge rather than merely labelling a fixed form (Frow 6-31). The fiction that follows cannot be read apart from the law the paratext has just quoted verbatim, since the book has already established that the categories "vagabond" and "criminal" are, for some of its characters, the same legal fact.

The "Welcome Note from the City" that follows extends this generic instability into voice. Èkó, the personified city, addresses the reader directly in a register that mixes Pidgin, incantation and direct address: "There is an eye following you, and you know. Everywhere you go, e dey look you" (Osunde 11), and the "Tatafo (Genesis)" section that opens the first story proper borrows the cadence of scripture, "So, in the beginning, there was Èkó . . . 'Let there be lives!' Èkó said, and immediately, there were lives" (13). None of this material would sit inside a conventional realist chapter; it belongs to lexicography, statute, sermon and creation myth in turn, and Osunde's own account of the book as something written "beyond the above categories" of novel and story collection (qtd. in Tepper, par. 3) describes this paratext as accurately as it describes the chapters that follow it.

Aguda's genre hybridity works less through borrowed document forms and more through the treatment of the supernatural as simple narrative fact rather than metaphor. When Felicity sprouts feathers mid-transformation, the prose does not signal a shift into figurative language; it reports, in the same declarative register used for the market scene around it, that "she is high above the ground, looking down . . . riding on waves of air" (Aguda 115). The same matter-of-factness governs "Manifest", where a resemblance between granddaughter and grandmother is treated with the same narrative weight as a power cut or a missed phone call. This is closer to what Aguda has called her own resistance to "pigeon-holing" than to conventional magical realism, since she has said in an interview that she would rather let a story "find its readers no matter what section it's shelved under" than commit in advance to horror, literary fiction or folklore (qtd. in Talabi, par. 2). The collection's final story, "Masquerade Season" (175), names in its title the one Yoruba festival tradition that makes carnival, in Bakhtin's specific sense

of masked, licensed inversion, an explicit subject rather than only an implicit structure, though a full reading of that story falls outside the scope of the present study.

Dialogic Reflections on Identity, History and Morality

Together, these devices, heteroglossia, dialogism, chronotope, carnival and a paratext that borrows the authority of law and scripture, converge on a single claim both books make about identity. In "Manifest", the granddaughter's question to her mother, "Do I look like your mum?" (Aguda 8), is never answered inside the story; what the narrative offers instead is the fact that "Nigerian parents", especially "Pentecostal Christians", tell their children "nothing" about the relatives who "moved from somewhere to Lagos, left behind religions and curses and distant cousins and grimy pasts" (7). Identity, in this account, is not a fact the family can state; it is a silence the daughter inherits along with a face. "Thomas" poses the opposite problem, not too little inherited history but too much, held by a family that cannot agree whether remembering the precolonial past is wisdom or madness. Thomas's own resolution is neither to accept nor to reject his uncle's stories but to keep them, filling notebooks, as Anjos once did, with "true and frightening realities" (Osunde 17) whose truth value the text never confirms.

Gender sharpens this argument specifically in "Birdwoman." The market's dismissal of Felicity, "if man for dey, shebi im go dey smile" (Aguda 111), and its later violence against her once she returns to earth "naked" and bleeding (116) frame her flight as a transgression the crowd will not forgive, regardless of whether it was granted by magic or willed by Felicity herself. The moral verdict Bakhtin's carnival theory anticipates - that inversion licenses only a temporary escape before ordinary hierarchy reasserts itself with interest - is here specifically gendered. A woman's freedom is punished more severely than the street violence from which Osunde's football crowd walks away unharmed. Read beside one another, "Thomas" and "Birdwoman" suggest that Bakhtinian dialogism does not distribute risk equally among the voices it lets speak; some characters can hold contradictory truths and survive the contradiction, while others, in this instance a woman without money, husband or family, pay for the same contradiction with her body.

Conclusion

The readings above show Bakhtin's categories doing real interpretive work in two Nigerian texts written more than eighty years after Bakhtin's own essays on the novel, which is itself worth pausing on. Heteroglossia, polyphony, dialogism, chronotope and carnival were built from Rabelais, Dostoevsky and the European picaresque, yet they describe with some precision what happens when Uncle Anjos's football legend refuses to settle on one explanation, or when Felicity's flight suspends and then reinstates the market's judgement of her. That fit should not be taken for granted; it suggests less that Bakhtin's terms are universal than that the formal problem he was diagnosing, how a text can hold

competing social languages without a narrator flattening them into one, recurs wherever a writer is working against an official version of events, colonial historiography in Osunde's case, and Pentecostal silence about ancestry in Aguda's.

But the fit is not complete, and the incompleteness matters more than the analysis above has room to argue. Bakhtin's carnival theory, built on medieval and early modern European festivals, offers no account of why Felicity's transgression is punished by stoning while the football crowd's mutual violence resolves into handshakes on the very same page, the same type of event, a communal suspension of order, producing opposite outcomes in the two books. That asymmetry is gendered, and it is not something dialogism, polyphony or the chronotope, as Bakhtin defines them, were built to explain; it requires attention to who, specifically, a given society permits to hold contradictory truths without paying for the contradiction. Osunde's own paratext, the statute defining "vagabond" as anyone who "practices sodomy" or dresses against their assigned gender in public (8-9), supplies exactly this attention, naming the legal mechanism by which Nigerian law decides in advance whose hybridity will be tolerated and whose will be criminalised. A theoretical review built only from Bakhtin, in other words, risks treating "Vagabond (n)" as one more heteroglossic fragment among many, when Osunde has placed it on page eight precisely so that it cannot be read that way. Genre theory's recent turn towards hybridity, Frow's dynamic model, Fournier's autotheory, help here because they treat the mixing of forms as a claim with consequences rather than only a style, but even that literature was not built with Nigeria's vagrancy laws in mind. The two-book, few-chapter scope of this study cannot settle how far that consequence extends across Osunde and Aguda's fuller collections, let alone across the post-digital African writing their reception has begun to describe; it can only show that the formal restlessness both writers report choosing is, on the evidence of "Thomas", "Manifest" and "Birdwoman", inseparable from a question about who in Lagos is allowed to be many things at once and who is not.

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