Perspectives Shaping Westerners Understanding of Urban African Futures

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Often, Western students and scholars are intrigued by cultures that differ from their own, resulting in individuals turning to literature to discover narratives about foreign landscapes, such as Africa. Learning about African history better equips an individual to understand the present-day social and political dynamics in African terrains, which in turn allows them to formulate holistic conceptions about African futures. However, when Western learners turn to literature to apprehend portrayals of African culture, they often discover sources that were either written or influenced by colonial ideologies. The colonial lens portrays African countries as sites of disparity, which needed Western powers to create a modern and less

“barbaric” society. However, as history has shown, European colonizers used this ideology to justify acquiring African land for their capitalistic benefit. African terrains offered rich natural resources and cheap labor, which bolstered the European economy and made these nations’ power more expensive. Despite Europeans’ claims of helping the African people, they refrained from providing any new aid or infrastructure. Rather, they continued to minimize African culture by perpetuating discourse about the “uncivilized” nature they encountered.

Consequently, this conception of Africa became normative in published Western texts, which were the primary sources of literature Europeans and Americans had access to. Unfortunately, false narratives of Africa did not dissipate with time. Modern writers often use this stereotypical narrative to “other” Africa as a weak terrain experiencing irreversible poverty and danger. Due to this prevailing notion, Western learners must be prepared to identify literature that is muddled by a colonial lens. Western learners must locate literature sharing the nuanced histories and experiences of Africans before, during, and after colonialism to gain a more accurate understanding of urban Africa and its future.

Garth Myers is one scholar who elaborates on the flaws of colonial literary tones and

perspectives permeating into modern literature. In his article, *African Cities Alternative Visions of Urban Theory,* he opens by explaining that "Most urban social studies are still built in theories utilizing US and European cities to stand as the universal modes, or measuring cities in non-Western settings by the models and metrics of the West... African cities are still typically studied through the lens of development, or in a manner that remains stuck[1]." Myers tactically juxtaposes a Western lens with an African lens to highlight the disconnect between the two perspectives' understanding of what constitutes urban Africa. Furthermore, by coupling inaccurate stigmas about African landscapes with close-minded, rigid Western criteria for what is deemed an urban city, one discredits what Africans consider urbanity and can produce a bias within an individual about the degree of modernization that African cities exhibit.

Myers shares the example of Mike Davis' book, *Planet of Slums*, which details the experiences of women giving birth in the "third world hell" of Ajegunle – a "slum" in Lagos, Nigeria. Davis' book centers on the idea that the majority of those living in African cities are doomed to permanent states of "pollution, excrement, and decay." Myers contends that Davis dramatized the state of African cities and used minimal accurate or substantial evidence to back his claims regarding the prevalence of and

conditions in African "slums" and provides his audience with a vision of Africa as underdeveloped, malnourished, and unsanitary. Although some African terrains experience these unfortunate circumstances, deceiving the audience into believing that the majority of African cities function in this state is an injustice to those who call these cities home. Thus, it is crucial for individuals to recognize the bias that authors like Davis hold and to separate elements of truth from fabrications and exaggerations about modern African cities.

Another example of an author using a Dickensian tone to describe the "slums" of Lagos is George Packer. In his article *Decoding the Chaos of Lagos*, he describes the shortcomings of Lagosian "slums," which he contends inevitably lead its residents to a state of cyclical misery[2]. Packer begins by describing the terrain as a "floating slum" in the midst of water as "black and vicious as an oil slick" that has "wood houses perched on stilts" with "rust-colored iron roofs.[3]" Packer's use of vivid imagery portrays the landscape as barely livable and on the brink of collapse. Although there are indisputably parts of Lagos that suffer from poor living conditions, generalizing the entirety of Lagosian 'slums' as undesirable is an unproductive way to imagine their futures and minimizes the resident's opportunities and ambitions.

As the article continues, Packers provides first-hand accounts from individuals sharing their experiences living and working in the “slums.” However, none of the accounts he includes vary in the trajectory of the individual. Rather, he only shared stories of those whose struggles hindered them from attaining economic success. One example includes the story of Safrat Yinusa who, “left behind her husband and two children and found work in one of Lagos’s huge markets… In two months, she had saved less than four dollars. Considering that the price of rice in Lagos is thirty-three cents per pound, it is hard to understand how people like Yinusa stay alive.[4]” Packer insinuates that living in Lagos poses a doomed future due to the minimal economic and occupation opportunities and that if one were to move to Lagos one would inevitably experience a similar fate.

Thus, Packer's understanding of Lagos is through a Western eye. His article parallels other authors who use colonial perspectives to determine what qualifies as a city. Packer creates stark distinctions between a Western city and an African city, making it clear that the “slums” of Lagos fail to meet his criteria and are thus considered an ‘inferior’ cityscape. However, affluent Lagosian neighborhoods like the Ekoatlantic – a new coastal region of Lagos that boasts of economic development, residential buildings, and cutting-edge technology –that mirror Western aesthetics gain Packer’s

approval.[5] Therefore, if one were to read his article with no supplement sources or prior knowledge of Lagos, one could believe that the city lacked a culture beyond a collective sense of melancholia. Additionally, one likely could not recognize colonialism's contribution to the creation of inadequate aid for African “slums,” and how it shaped the construction of communities like the Ekoatlantic to become the new idealistic vision for Africa. Thus, only reading texts from one-sided Western perspectives, does not lend itself to gathering a well-rounded understanding of the people and culture of African cities. One must extract historical and non-colonial texts to understand what shapes the present dynamics articulated in modern texts.

When unraveling the origins of African cities before Europeans stepped foot on its soil, it is important to recognize misconceptions about Africa’s failure to “produce any significant cities south of the Sahara before the arrival of Europeans.”[6] Often, these terrains are described as mere settlements that relied on Europeans' arrival to catalyze efficiency and order. However, books like *Modern Architecture in Africa*, highlight the development of various African cities and distinguish “a city from a ‘settlement’ in terms of size, density, durability, and heterogeneity.”[7] Historians have proven that numerous pre-colonial cities, such as Carthage, Alexandria, Leptis Magna, Volubilis, Ile Ife,

Benin, Kumbi, etc., exemplified these qualifications. African cities were inherently heterogeneous due to their widespread locations and the varying ethnicities of their inhabitants. These cities shared attributes such as “high levels of self-sufficiency in food production,” successful “industries such as textiles, carpentry, and metal work,” “market and royal palaces forming a city center,” and “the relationships and responsibilities of the city’s population were organized according to hierarchical relationships."[8] Hence, these cultures developed their own economies and infrastructure to support a growing and modernizing population, much like modern-day cities. To reduce pre-colonial Africa to a site of underdevelopment and informality is ignorant. Reading sources describing the origins of these cities humanizes the identity of Africans and allows them to regain agency over their futures, which is often minimized when defining modern cities as “slums,” which serve as hubs of tragedy.

Once a reader gains perspective on the origins of African cities, one can continue one’s inquiry towards the effects of colonialism on present-day Africa. As previously elaborated upon, authors have extensively written about African “slums,” but fail to address what caused these terrains to endure varying modes of distress. Jenifer Hart tackles this task in her article *Colonial Governance, Modernization, and the*

Process of Informalisation, which centers on the concept of how newly created government structures in African cities "supported expatriate visions of economic, social, and spatial order."[9] Therefore, Western readers must acknowledge the inextricable connection between colonialism and modern Africa. Hart highlights that despite Accra's physical independence from Britain, its ruling elite remains dependent on the classist structure implemented by the British.

Consequently, the African "slum" became the antithesis of the African elite, who strove to maintain their newly acquired post-independence power. This unfortunate division manifested in numerous African countries where "stereotypes of urban poverty shift blame for structural inequalities on the most vulnerable local communities."[10] Examples of this can be seen throughout African history, such as South Africa's apartheid regime and numerous other African governments intentionally creating "slums" to separate the impoverished from the wealthy. When African governments utilize tactics employed by former British leaders, the "slums" are continuously marginalized into positions that make it difficult for them to assimilate into newly developing cityscapes. As a result, a layer of African identity and culture is overlooked when creating modern, technologically advanced cities. An example of this can be seen in the Eko Atlantic,

where the cost of residence exceeds what an individual living in the “slums” could afford. The economic growth inherent to the Ekoatlantic is immensely promising for the select few who fit the mold of the Western aesthetic and have been fortunate enough to find work or residence in this new cityscape. Thus, this begs the question of if the future of African cities is moving in an African or Western direction.

Undoubtedly, defining what is an African city is a nuanced and complex question that would take decades of intensive contemplation and research to attempt to answer. However, since Africa is the most rapidly growing terrain in our world, it is a topic that will dominate Western discourse in years to come. Thus, when Westerner learners work to understand why and how Africa is changing, one must remember that each source they study may be a one-sided story. For instance, Packer contends that “slums” are the bane of Lagosian society, which insinuates that it’s neighboring built environment, the Ekoatlantic, is the most promising concept for Africa. However, as previously explained, this Western perspective neglects how these built environments are often not created to serve as a space to preserve African culture and identities. Rather, the aim appears to promote economic growth and Lagos's global reputation. Unfortunately, this goal does not consider the needs of those living in “slums” that cannot reap the benefits these spaces offer. Therefore, it is

important to seek resources that privilege the multi-faceted past and present of Africa, which can aid one in feeling the authenticity and vibrancy of African culture. This becomes abundantly useful when a Western attempts to discern if Africa's future is working to aid the entirety of its population or if it is functioning to mirror the success and aesthetics of Western cities.