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ACCOMMODATING POVERTY IN AFRICA: THE OWNERSHIP OF PUBLIC SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY LAGOS AND CAPE TOWN

BIOGRAPHY

Professor Sandra Klopper is currently Dean of the Humanities Faculty at the University of Pretoria. She has written extensively on the traditionalist art of southern African communities; on African fashion, textiles and beadwork; on various aspects of South African youth culture and on the art of several contemporary South African artists.

→ **In contrast to** other African cities like Lagos and Johannesburg, Cape Town is an international tourist destination. As such, it is often characterised, both implicitly and explicitly, as the antithesis of these large urban conglomerates. But while there is general agreement that Cape Town is clean and comparatively safe, as I demonstrate in this essay, it has achieved this reputation by compromising the promise of greater tolerance following South Africa's first democratic election in 1994. Homeless people and economically disempowered youths have been particularly hard hit by the devastating consequence of this increasing tendency to marginalise and even deny the participation of diverse social groups in the construction of the city's public image.

In this essay, I rely on the work of Deutsche and others to explore the implications for concepts of citizenship of this on-going commitment to securing Cape Town's identity as a tourist destination. Based on the work of these scholars, I suggest that Cape Town differs markedly from cities elsewhere in Africa, including other South African cities like Johannesburg and Durban, where street life and the engagement of the poor in informal trading form an integral part of the cultural and social fabric. Even though these centres and megacities like Lagos face seemingly insurmountable problems, viewed from this perspective, they afford comparatively hospitable spaces for the majority of the people who live in them.

fig 1 Lagos Street
Photograph by Yeye Siju Osunyemi

Across the African continent, urban landscapes have changed beyond recognition since the mid-20th-century. Once dusty colonial outposts, many have become busy metropoles, their skylines dotted with high-rise buildings. Chief among these are Lagos and Cairo, both of which now have populations far exceeding ten million, thus qualifying as 'megacities' according to the definition of the United Nations Centre for Human Settlement. Partly because of rapid population growth, traffic gridlock, and inadequate service delivery, these and many other African cities not only struggle to accommodate the needs of local populations, but find it very difficult to attract foreign visitors. In a 2006 *New Yorker* article describing life in contemporary Lagos – currently the sixth largest city in the world – George Packer (2006:65) paints a picture of extreme squalor. Unimpressed by Stewart Brand's idea of squatter cities as vibrant, and Robert Neuwirth's characterisation of these urban conglomerates as places where solid communities are created without official approval from the state or the market,[1] he argues that: "In the dirty grey light of Lagos, Neuwirth's portrait of heroic builders of the cities of tomorrow seems a bit romantic, and Brand's vision of a global city of interconnected entrepreneurs seems perverse." Packer suggests, instead, that "The vibrancy of the squatters in Lagos is the furious activity of people who live in a globalized economy and have no safety net and virtually no hope of moving upward."

In a paper titled *Governance and urban development: Prerequisites to safeguard social cohesion*, presented by the Governor of Lagos at the Mayors' Forum on Governing Emerging MegaCities, held in Frankfurt/Main in December 2006, His Excellency, Asiwaju Bola Ahmed Tinubu (2006), effectively confirmed Packer's bleak image of contemporary Lagos, which also featured in a report released by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs in June 2008. This noted that "As the city population swells by up to eight percent every year, the slums and their associated problems are growing. The government estimates that Lagos will have expanded to 25 million residents by 2015." (IRIN 2008) In support of its concerns regarding the future challenges facing Lagos, the report quoted Francisco Bolaji Abosede, Lagos Commissioner for

fig 2 Victoria & Albert Waterfront, Cape Town Photograph by Can Bilsev

Town Planning and Urbanisation, who noted that "By 2015 Lagos will be the third largest city in the world but it has less infrastructure than any of the world's other largest cities."

Despite official alarm in the face of the future, Packer's *New Yorker* article elicited a host of critical, if sometimes quite ambivalent, responses from Nigerians living abroad. Referring to the article, Chicago-based artist, Dayo Olopade (2007), acknowledged that each time he visited Lagos, he realised anew that

> **... this metropolis cannot be cradled in the palm. Every day 21 people in Africa's most populous nation decide to move there. And thus the boiling, mapless sprawl of Lagos is not easily mastered, by foot or any other conveyance. Sheets of dust rise during winter ... loosed by crowds gorging the city streets and centers. Traffic is a textbook nightmare.**

But Olopade also challenged Packer's characterisation of the city as a burning inferno:

> **... in Lagos, the world feels farthest from its fiery end. People live, people work, people walk. And in fact, determining the texture and quality of such urban spaces beyond material underdevelopment also relies upon viewing the city as a locus of shared memory, commemoration, mutual experience and interaction – a living organism.**

Contrasting Packer's views with those presented in Dutch architect, Rem Koolhaas's *Lagos: How it works* (2007), Olopade noted that

> **... Where Packer sees despair, [Koolhaas] sees a fertile corpus of streets and peoples, and perhaps, even, the future of civilization ... Almost everyone in Lagos is undernourished in some critical way – but alongside the ever-expanding slums and high-rises of today's Lagos, there is something tremendous at work. I can feel it in my feet.**

While the Nairaland Online Forum elicited similarly complex responses in a series of comments posted between 8:37pm on 23rd May 2007 and 2:31pm the following day, many of the Nigerians who participated in this discussion

were equally offended by Packer's article. "No," wrote Dis Guy, "this western media are trying to rubbish us, don't mind them they see nothing good in Lagos ... there are flower in the middle of the road Shythole!!" Other respondents, like Spoilt, asked: "Did he lie?" before proceeding to claim that "Lagos is rotten ...we definitely don't have maintenance culture." Later on in this heated exchange between patriotic defenders of the city and Nigerians who reluctantly endorsed Packer's apocalyptic vision of Lagos, Spoilt interjected again, claiming that Packer

> **can't be blamed. Each time I return to Naija to visit, I am alarmed at how the whole place has decayed. Its so bad. there's filth in the middle of the streets, the air is thick and polluted. its really bad! We are just so used to living in that squalor. I don't blame a visitor for actually writing about it. Lagos is one of our major cities and visitors are always shocked when they touch down. Its a mess.**

Towards the end of this lengthy interaction, Vikiviko joined the debate, first asserting: "Agreed. Lagos is dirty", then claiming that it is also

> **one of the most peaceful cities to live. Ask Foreigners who live in Lagos how they thrive in abundance. Nigerians face hell in the streets of major European countries, they face discriminatory and racist abuses. Not in Lagos. Whatever you say of Lagos, you cannot take away its shine. It is still the most secure place to live.**

In the concluding comments to his *New Yorker* article, Packer (2006:75) emphatically disputes positive perceptions like these, which have been widely disseminated by megacity researchers like Koolhaas. Quoting from Koolhaas's essay, 'Fragments of a lecture on Lagos', he notes that when this Dutch researcher's team first visited the city, they were too intimidated to leave their car. The group ended up renting the Nigerian president's helicopter to get a more reassuring view of the city. From this perspective, Koolhaas (cited in 2006:75) felt that "What seemed, on ground level, an accumulation of dysfunctional movements, seemed from above an impressive performance ...".

Distancing himself from this optimistic take on the chaos of Lagos, Packer (2006:75) quotes Folarin Gbadebo-Smith who points out that:

> **Lagosians sometimes talk about [their status as a megacity] as a trophy. As far as I'm concerned, its an impending disaster. We have a massive growth in population with a stagnant or shrinking economy. Picture this city ten, twenty years from now. This is not the urban poor, this is the urban *destitute*. We're sitting on a powder keg here.**

Whether theoretically grounded or popular, arguments for or against characterising Lagos, on one hand, as a burning inferno – literally but also metaphorically – and on the other, as a fertile, creative space, focus on the expectations of Lagosians, rather than outside visitors. In this respect, Lagos is the ultimate African antithesis of Cape Town, with a greater urban population of less than four million. Hemmed in by the mountains and the sea, its capacity to expand chaotically is severely limited. Thus, despite the fact that it has witnessed an unusually high pattern of growth since the late 1980s, this has never been near the annual six percent growth of cities like Lagos. Most importantly, though, Cape Town is the only city in sub-Saharan Africa that has become a major international tourist destination.

Cape Town's ability to maintain its status as a preferred destination for foreign visitors can be ascribed, most obviously, to its scenic beauty and surrounding attractions, including the Cape winelands. However, its reputation as a comparatively safe tourist destination also plays a major role in its popularity. The value of this reputation to the economy of the Western Cape, and South Africa generally, is indisputable. But the social cost of maintaining this reputation is seldom if ever acknowledged, largely because already marginalised communities, notably homeless people, have been targeted so ruthlessly in Cape Town's effort to build its image as an attractive tourist destination, that these communities have become all but invisible in the city's primary tourist areas, such as the City Bowl area and the Waterfront. In the lead-up to the 2010 Soccer World Cup, Cape Town has also been unusually successful in curtailing the 'antisocial' activities of graffiti artists.

Cape Town's success in displacing these communities and their activities has been achieved in large part through concerted legal campaigns that date back to 2002, when efforts were first made to step up prosecution of graffiti artists who failed to secure the City Council's permission to paint even large, publicly-acclaimed murals drawing attention to a greater need for racial harmony and other pressing social issues. Even at that time, a Council spokesperson claimed that this was done in the conviction that there is a direct relationship between the production of 'hiphop' spray-can murals and the proliferation of tagging – the spray-can signatures 'hiphop' graffiti activists began scribbling on sites throughout the city in the early 1990s. Building on these efforts, city councillor, Jean-Pierre Smith announced in October 2007 that a new set of by-laws would regulate spray-paint sales, lead to the confiscation of artists' properties, and initiate a

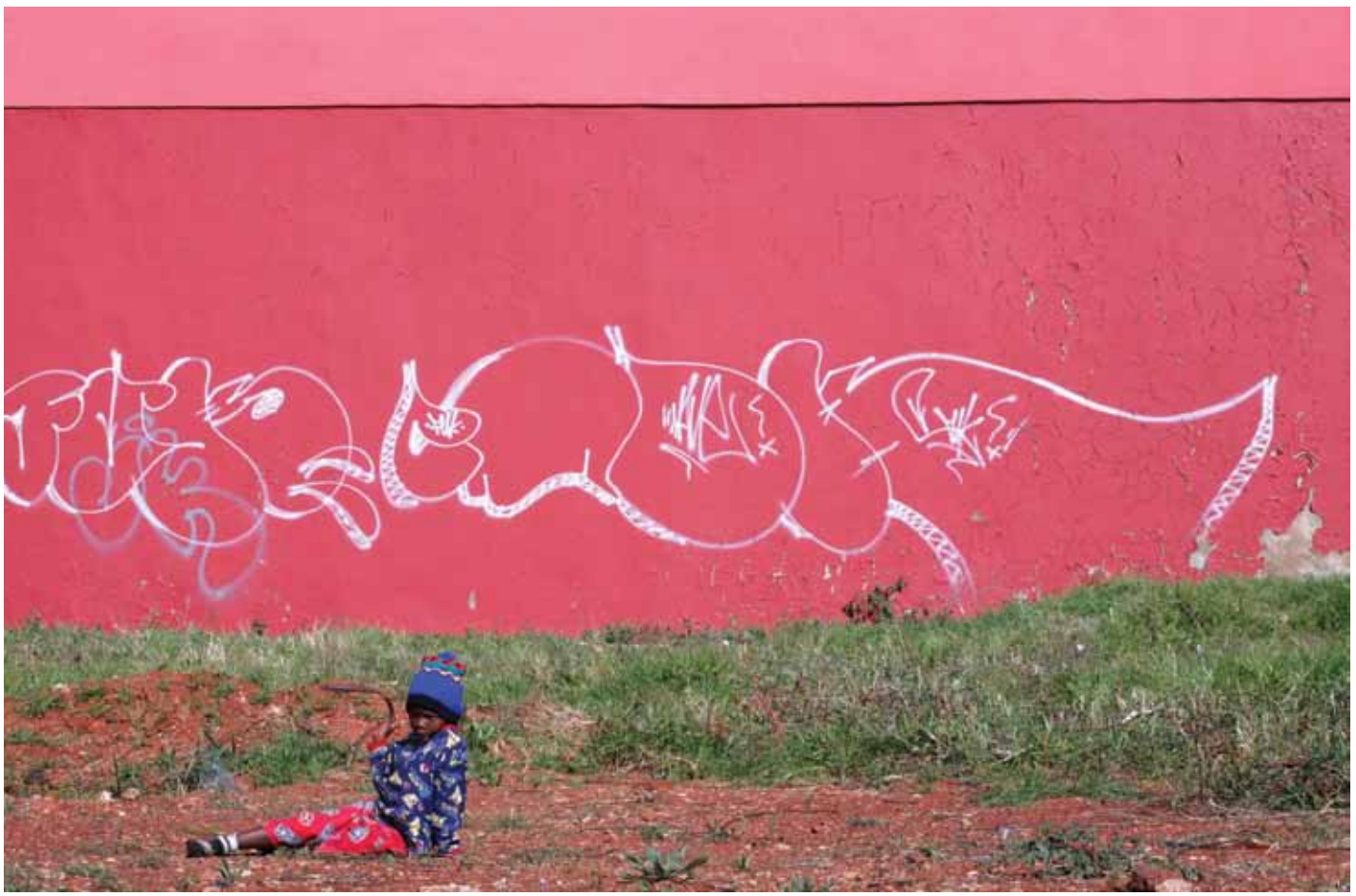

fig 3 Graffiti wall in Fietas, Johannesburg Photograph by Clive Hassall

24-hour graffiti hot-line for citizens to report unlawful paintings. (Millner 2007) Caillie Millner notes that, at the time, the city's executive councillor for safety and health, Ian Neilson, insisted that "We simply want to regulate them, the way you would regulate putting up a billboard."

The preamble to Cape Town's draft by-law on graffiti, published in August 2008, leaves no doubt that the City Council's concern to promote tourism played a primary role in its decision to regulate the activities of spray-can artists: "Graffiti can be environmentally offensive and constitute a public nuisance which, if not removed, spreads, with other properties becoming the targets of graffiti and entire neighbourhoods being affected, making the city a less desirable place to visit and in which to live and work." Elsewhere in the draft by-law, the need to protect Cape Town as a tourist venue is voiced even more explicitly: "Graffiti causes damage to Cape Town's image as a city known worldwide for its beauty." Declaring the existence of graffiti anywhere in the city a public nuisance, the proposed by-law goes so far as to place the onus on property owners for the removal of unauthorised spray-can tags and murals. Under a section titled 'Duty of the property owner', the by-law thus asserts the right of the City to "serve a notice on the owner of that property, to remove such graffiti by a date specified in the notice ...".

While it is fairly easy to convince ratepayers, seeking to protect the value of their properties, that graffiti artists are vandals, the devastating impact on the lives of other marginalised communities of Cape Town's interest in promoting the growth of its tourist industry raises far more serious questions regarding people's constitutional rights. The City Council's attacks on homeless people, in particular, have become increasingly brutal in recently years, culminating in the publication in 2006 of another by-law relating to streets, public places, and the prevention of nuisances. Although Cape Town's City Council has claimed that this by-law is one of the most progressive pieces of local government legislation in South Africa, providing "compassionate support for people living on the street" (Media Release 30 May

2007), the Freedom of Expression Institute accused the city of using the by-law to criminalise poverty and dehumanise the poor. Among other things, the by-law prohibits people from erecting any form of shelter, or sleeping or camping overnight, or bathing or washing in public. Writing in *Pambazuka News*, a weekly forum for social justice in Africa, Bronwyn Dyke (2007) noted that Cape Town's 'nuisance' by-law not only added to the vulnerability of the homeless by displacing them to outlying locations around the city, where they have no support mechanisms, but ultimately prevents the poor and unemployed from making a living.

These attempts to exclude the poor from the city date back to 2000 after a decision to shut down two recycling depots in the City Bowl area. When the closure of the Roeland Street recycle depot, Paper King, was first mooted early in 2000, the owner of a building next to this depot maintained that it was "in the wrong place", citing the fact that Roeland Street is "part of a tourist route and the collectors sort the scrap in front of the tourist buses". (Hood 2000a) Other landowners in the area also complained, claiming that "drug dealers and criminals hung around waiting for the street people to be paid". (Hood 1999) The fact that "millions of rands had been invested in nearby properties, including the Roeland Street Square retail and office building opposite the scrapyard", was given as a key justification for the subsequent closure of Northern Waste in nearby Canterbury Street, which had been operating in the City Bowl since 1966. (Hood 2000b) Described as "unsightly and untidy", it was said at the time that "potential developers, tourists and the general public" felt that the Canterbury depot area was 'unsafe'.

Not surprisingly, the 'strollers' – homeless people engaged in recycling waste for a living – have a very different perception of the roles they play in Cape Town's social and cultural life. As one of them put it: "We clean the city. We reduce the work of the Council. We clean the streets."[2] Others point out that there is a widespread but false assumption: firstly, that all those involved in recycling waste materials are homeless, and secondly, that all homeless people suffer from one or other form of substance abuse. The owner of Citi Scrap, a small recycling business that has escaped closure, presumably because it is not located in an area of the City Bowl that attracts tourists, is equally cynical about the treatment of the homeless. While he acknowledged that many 'strollers' are alcohol-dependent, he questioned the fact that they are constantly harassed by the police, and arrested if they are caught drinking during the breaks they take from the hard physical labour of hauling scrap to the depot. In his view, there is no real difference between the leisure activities of these 'strollers' and the fact that it has become increasingly common, with the growth of Cape Town's tourist industry, for restaurants to spill over onto the city's pavements, where they serve not only food, but also alcohol.

Most governments are reluctant to admit that tourism actively disadvantages certain sectors of the population. They do so in part by denying the fact that a decision to commit resources to tourism is what Colin Hall (1994:171) calls "a value choice" that "upholds the ideology of development",[3] thereby favouring the urban re-imaging strategies devised by economically powerful groups to attract capital for the benefit of a comparatively small minority. This tendency to naturalise the interests of economic elites in different ways has led some political theorists to advocate a form of democracy inspired by the notion of rights, such as the right to housing and the right to freedom of movement for the homeless (Deutsche 1998:272). Unlike initiatives that seek to co-opt marginalised groups or, alternatively, to render them invisible, those who advocate this form of democracy "propagate demands for new rights based on differentiated and contingent needs" that are often in conflict with the needs of economic elites and the increasingly globalised tourist industry. According to Lefort, who first formulated this notion of a 'radical' democracy, there is a fundamental contradiction in previous conceptions of democracy, because, although power stems from the people, in reality it belongs to nobody (Deutsche 1998:273). As Deutsche (1998:273-4) points out, for this reason democracy cannot appeal for its authority to a meaning immanent in the social. Instead, the democratic invention invents something else: the public space" where

> **the meaning and unity of the social is negotiated – at once constituted and put at risk. What is recognised in public space is the legitimacy of debate about what is legitimate and what is illegitimate … The essence of democratic rights is to be declared, not simply possessed.**

Ultimately, therefore, marginalised groups must empower themselves by questioning the controls exercised by economic elites through a declaration of rights, like the right to freedom of movement by homeless people living and working in the City Bowl area.

Unfortunately, however, there is often a significant gap between theory and action. In part because the policing of homeless people has become increasingly effective in recent years, it is unlikely that the erosion

of the rights of Cape Town's marginalised communities could easily be arrested. In this, as in almost every other respect, Cape Town differs markedly from cities elsewhere in Africa, including large urban conglomerates in South Africa, like Johannesburg and Durban, where street life and the engagement of people in informal trading – and other commercial activities associated with poverty – form an integral part of the cultural and social fabric. In contrast to the productive chaos that shapes the identities of these cities, Cape Town has virtually erased all evidence of difference and resistance. Even though megacities like Lagos face seemingly insurmountable problems, viewed from this perspective they afford comparatively hospitable spaces for the majority of the people who live in them. In these cities, people have rights to freedom of movement and commerce that are denied to those trying to eke out a living in Cape Town, where it has become an offence not only to erect temporary shelters, but also to beg, dance or sing or play a musical instrument in public, wash, clean or dry any object in public, and reside in a vehicle for longer than 24 hours.

Endnotes

1. Although Packer seldom cites his sources, Brand has written several papers praising the megacity phenomenon, while Robert Neuwirth is probably best known for *Shadow Cities. A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World*. 2005. New York: Routledge.
2. These comments were documented by Ariel Cohen during the course of 2002, when he was working on an exhibition titled *Push*. For this exhibition, Cohen recorded the sounds of 'strollers' pushing their shopping trolleys, which he used as a soundtrack to accompany his photographs of these trolleys loaded high with recycle materials. For further information on this exhibition see Klopper 2003.
3. See also M Roche 1992. Mega-events and micro-modernization: On the sociology of the new urban tourism. *British Journal of Sociology* 43(3): 63-600.

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