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Another Tale of Two Cities

Protesting Globalization in Odia Ofeimun's *London Letter and Other Poems*

Globalization is unequivocal about the centrality of the image of the cities to the accomplishment of its mission. Whether from London to New York, or from the Asian Tigers to Lagos and Johannesburg, the image of cities looms large in such a way that suggests how the conceptual agenda harks back to history, reminding us of the roles of various cities as veritable sites of operation for the previous Euro-American imperialist activities. However, the current postmodern agenda not only implicates the cities but also critically operates in such a manner which creates a split between them. This paper seeks to study *London Letter and Other Poems*, a poetry collection by Nigeria's Odia Ofeimun, as a direct response to the challenge of globalization. It seeks to explore how the work contextualizes the experience of Lagos migrants in a global city like London, and the challenge these Lagosians face in this place as against Lagos, their non-global city of nativity. Specifically, the paper examines the contradictions and odds against the operation of globalization besides the fact that it impoverishes some cities to enrich others in terms of financial and human resources.

Literature, the City, and Globalization

In the enigmatic evolution of the city in modern times, perhaps one of the major literary attempts to capture its attraction and wonder is to be found in the 19th-century *Mysteries of Paris* by Eugene Sue.¹ The success of this publication in 1845 was evident in the readership it enjoyed and how this resulted in the publication of other similar works on the city of Paris and other cities as centers of human gravity. However, this pioneer effort of Sue also inspired an alternative focus on the structure

1. See David Frisby, "The City Detected," in *Cityscapes of Modernity* (Cambridge & Malden: Polity Press & Blackwell, 2001), 52–99, p. 53.

and operation of the city in which it was not spared the focus on its shadows. It is this fact that gives credibility to the understanding that writing has always been concomitant with the evolution of cities.²

Certainly, one feature of the city at all times – whether the pre-industrial city, the earliest of which, according to Sjöberg, dates back to 3500BP in Mesopotamia,³ or the (post)modern city – is the defining trope of immense productivity in a way that contrasts with what goes on in the rural areas. But from the foregoing, another thing that is evident is the freedom to hold opinions on the constitution and operation of the city. It is this that in turn accounts, ironically, for both its admiration and denigration. Regarding the opinions held about the city, it is important to subscribe to the notion that “positioning” is crucial to whatever view anyone holds about the subject in focus; also related to this is the prospect of the impossibility of ruling out the application of reversal theory.⁴ Put differently, the foregoing position allows for a presentation of the city in terms of an object under perception, and to do this effectively, Vincent Hope in his essay, “The Perception of Space” (in *Spaces and Crossings*) explains that

to perceive an object properly is *to be able to be able* [sic] to control one’s position or posture by the spatial relation of the object to one’s body. To perceive the spatial relation between objects is to perceive where the objects individually are and to be able to be able to [sic] control one’s position simultaneously by the different positions of the objects.⁵

2. Illustrating the close relationship between the evolution of the city and writing, Richard Maxwell cites Levis-Strauss’ explication on this time-honoured joint evolution: “the only phenomenon with which writing has always been concomitant is the creation of cities and empires, that is, the integration of large members of individuals into political system, and their grading into castes or class” (Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, p. 53).

3. See David Thorns, “Industrial-Modern Cities,” in *The Transformation of Cities* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 13–40, p. 13.

4. In psychology, both positioning and reversal theories are reconciled by the fact that whatever stance is maintained at one point or the other about a subject becomes automatically specified for others who may subsequently go ahead to assimilate, resist or reinfect it in their own reactions to the same issue. This view holds much water for the various perceptions of the world cities by world writers as it does for the perceptions of globalization – see Margaret Wetherell, “Paranoia, Ambivalence, and Discursive Practices: Concepts of Position and Positioning in Psychoanalysis and Discursive Psychology,” Rom Harre and Fathali Moghaddam ed., *The Self and Others* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 2003), 99–120, p. 99.

5. Vincent Hope, “The Perception of Space,” in *Spaces and Crossings* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2001), 19–25, p. 24.

In the delineation of the city, therefore, the location of the perceiver himself is also crucial. Some colonial writings of various kinds, for instance, present European cities in forms that reflect the passionate nationalism of these writers. Taking Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* for illustration, one sees an evident celebration of London as geo-symbolically represented by River Thames in its ceaseless and glistening flow as against River Congo, whose navigatory treasures have been seriously depleted by the oil-sprained and almost stagnant condition. However, when one turns to Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure* as a textual reaction of the colonized, the depiction of Paris becomes that of an unfeeling city to which the colonized of the Third World move and end up being alienated and disillusioned to the extent of not attaining their desired goals. This view finds pertinence in the expatriatory circumstance of the central character, Samba Diallo.

The application of positioning and reversal theories is instructive for the understanding of the postmodern cities as it is for the apprehension of globalization. The invention of globalization in the present fashion⁶ – which implies that we must take seriously the view that globalization is not a new phenomenon – is necessitated by the transmutation of the mode of production from being industrial-based to information-based. This said transmutation is mediated through the various media networks that have become crucial, if not inviolate in the bid to link peoples of different parts of the world at the same time. In technical terms, this present mode of production is often explained in terms of a transition from Fordism to flexible production in which case global markets are created and maintained through the operations of such organizations as World Trade Organisation (WTO), the World Bank, among others.⁷ It has further increased the ubiquity and preeminence of the Multi-National Companies (MNC) as they register and assert their presence across countries and especially in the cities. It is in the light of this that the increasing frequency and flexibility of border and border crossing can be understood. Explaining the development in relation to the cities and the states, Saskia Sassen in "The Impact of the New Technologies and Globalization on the Cities" (in *Race, Identity, and Citizenship*) writes:

6. In a carefully drawn tabulation, illustrates further the transformation of the modern age of Fordism in which world economy was "industrial-manufacturing-based" into a postmodern age defined essentially by a flexibility that turns world economy into an information-dependent one and further resulting in transnationality. See David Thorns, "Global Cities," in *The Transformation of Cities*, 68–95, p. 71.

7. See Ankie Hoogvelt, "Africa: Exclusion and the Containment of Anarchy," in *Globalisation and the Postcolonial World* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 162–181, p. 166.

In the past cities were centres for imperial administration and international trade. Today they are transnational spaces for business and finance where firms and governments from many different countries can transact with each other, increasingly bypassing the firms of the host country.⁸

The above appears to be a leveling of world cities. But in actuality, the operation of globalization has resulted in the dialectic categorization and polarization of world cities into global and non-global. Invariably, the capital and human pull to the cities in the present age can be regarded as one-sided – the one in which the Third World cities are discriminated against as non-global cities. Clarifying further this fact about the conceptual agenda, Sassen sees it as a contradictory space which is constantly defined by contestation and border crossings, a condition of which the city is emblematic.⁹ The implication of a situation like this is the construction of the credentials and prospects of globalization as a transmuted imperialist strategy of the First World and in which there is a productive dispersal of both labor and capital from the Third World cities for the enhancement of and advancement of the wealth and position of First World cities. The relationship of the two worlds, therefore, still remains that of the core-periphery interaction.¹⁰

With the establishment of this of relationship, the recourse to the cities occasions the inauguration of discourse and counter-discourse as expected within the understanding of postmodernism. Odi Ofeimun's *London Letter and other Poems*, therefore, fits into this category. In other words, the streaks of controversies and contradictions in which globalization is strewn confer on it the lot of a contested space. And as hinted earlier, in the layout of the city, there is always an abiding interest of literature, serving on the one hand, as intervention; and on the other, making a necessary intrusion upon the space of the city structure in which it is not impossible to see a textualized reflection of the link between two cities or more.¹¹ It is

8. Saskia Sassen, "The Impact of the New Technologies and Globalization on the Cities," in *Race, Identity, and Citizenship*, ed. Rodolfo Terres et al (Berlin: Blackwell, 2003), 355–372, p. 360.

9. Sassen, p. 362.

10. See Peter Dicken; *Global Shift: Reshaping the Global Economic Map in the 21st Century* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: SAGE, 2004), p. 9.

11. Citing Michael Butor, David Coughlan illustrates the function of literature in relation to the city in the essay, "The Space of the Novel": "the impression is different as the text becomes a link between two city spaces and the jolt is not as great;" [now quoting Butor], "In my own city . . . many other cities are present, by all kinds of mediation," see David Coughlan, "Situating Intertextuality: Networks, Borders and the Space of Literature," in Rita Wilson and Car-

not therefore out of textual character that this collection forges a link, of a critical kind, between the cities of Lagos and London.

In the taxonomic categorization of cities into global and non-global, the relationship between Lagos and London becomes that of contradistinction. This is so because the former, though one of the foremost in Africa, has come under the buffeting of the various strategies of exclusion to which non-global cities of the Third World have been subjected. Putting this succinctly, Hoogvelt says further:

The present transformation of the global economy reduces many parts of the Third World to a position of “structural irrelevance.” But this is not to say that in the period of transformation itself those parts of the Third World do not have a function: between 1982 and 1990, creditor nations received \$1345 billion in debt service, most of it coming from the heavily indebted nations of Africa. . . Structural irrelevance is the outcome of this process of accelerated pillage under debt-peonage.¹²

The issue of debt service to which Africa has been subjected in an unending way, has resulted in the pauperization of her cities, Lagos included. The enormity of this makes the fact of “structural irrelevance” a matter of double truth. For, not only is the non-global West African city irrelevant – except when serving as a receptacle for transferring capital to the core of global cities – in terms of its poor relation to the global city of London, it is also irrelevant in terms of the crumbling socio-political and infrastructural system that defines it. This situation goes further to illustrate the contradictory insincerity of globalization. It is even the more so when its invention in the present fashion as a conceptual agenda is vulnerable to the projection of the intention of the location biases of its western proponents. For, as Cacciari reminds us in *The Necessary Angel*, “Truth is the death of intention; any theory that wants to reduce truth to the ambit of international relation is destined to miss ‘the peculiar giving of itself of truth from which any kind of intention remains withdrawn.’ In reality, therefore, this conception betrays only an ignorance of the problem of representation.”¹³ The truth of globalization despite the enthusiasm of the “hyperglobalists” is, for that matter, fun-

lotta von Maltzan ed., *Cultural and Literary Criticism: Spaces and Crossings* (New York and Oxford: Peter Lang, 2001), 73–86, p. 55.

12. Hoogvelt, p. 162.

13. See Carlos Vidal “Globalization or Endless Fragmentation? Through the Shadow of Contradictions,” in *Over Here: International Perspectives on Art and Culture*, ed. Gerald Mosquera and Jean Fisher (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 2004), 26–46 p. 39.

damentally flawed as it is hardly divorced from the imperialist intentions of the West which aspire to the attainment of “the end of geography.” The agenda is normally propagated in a manner that attempts to neutralize the sovereignty of the nation-states, especially of the Third World. It thus looks forward to an anticipated result in which the major sources of the First World capitals’ wealth – that is, the Third World, which have continually been consigned to poverty in the capitalist scheme of things – will further be undermined. The concealment of truth, which is also tantamount to the divorce from truth in relation to the representation of globalization, justifies the assertion that globalization is capable of breeding contradictions to the extent of engendering anarchy. The preparation for this anarchy is evident in the increasing “maximization of national capabilities.” Otherwise, as Gilpin warns, globalization is historically predicated on the ideological prejudices of dominant states, the practice of which is unsympathetic to narratives of the already dispossessed or the potentially dispossessed.¹⁴ The powers of its callous contradictions are projected in the readiness of the disposed to seek further dispossession in the migration to the capital centers in the First World.

At Home in Lagos

Ofeimun’s engagement of this socio-political and economic crisis is, therefore, what one encounters first in this collection, yet not without some sense of hope and nationalism as the segment, “My City by the Lagoon” opens. In “Lagoon,” he writes:

I let the lagoon speak for my memory
though offended by water hyacinth
waste and night soil. . .
I still let the lagoon reclaim
the seduction of a land moving
with the desire of a sailing ship
pursuing a known star.¹⁵

Like most coastal cities and settlements, the place of the maritime phenomenon of the lagoon in the history of Lagos cannot be over-emphasized. For the lagoon has always been there from time immemorial. It was indeed a witness to the pre-history

14. See McGrew “A Global Society?” in *Modernity and its Futures*, ed. Stuart Hall et al (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 61–80, p. 84.

15. All parenthesised references are to Odua Ofeimun’s *London Letter and Other Poems* (Lagos: Hornbill of Arts, 2000), p. 3.

of Lagos and when this island was founded in the pre-colonial time by the Yoruba bounded by the Egun of Badagry to the south, the lagoon must have played an active role as a collaborator and facilitator of movement, migration and settlement. In the various political and succession crises between the ruling families of Akitoye and Kosoko, and the intrigues of installation, dethronement, exile, reinstatement and war, there was no way the lagoon could have been excluded. As the British colonial government cashed in on the situation of succession crises to colonize Lagos in 1961¹⁶ after the abolition of Slave Trade – which was, to say the least, an abolition of convenience – the lagoon played roles that were beyond the navigatory. So, by arousing the lagoon’s sense of history which straddles both the pre-colonial and the colonial on the one hand, and on the other, the independence and post-independence, there is an acknowledgment of the visceral link between the fate of the city and the lagoon.¹⁷ In its unrivalled position as a witness to history, it then becomes clear why at the close of the 20th century, when western imperialist strategies had taken their toll on the city both physically and otherwise, the agelessness of the lagoon as a natural phenomenon to which the fate of the city is tied, becomes a compelling choice of weaving yet another narrative around the city. It explains why the lagoon occupies the place of a privileged and sustained motif throughout the collection. This choice of the lagoon as a veritable custodian of Lagos memory, and by implication that of the entire nation is further justified in the position of Richard Terdiman on the perception of memory in his book *Present Past: Modernity and the Crisis of Memory*:

But “memory” is so omnipresent, so fundamental to our ability to conceive the world that it might seem impossible to analyze it at all. Memory stabi-

16. As from the 1830s, Lagos was caught in the web of succession crisis which came to a head during the tussle between Akitoye and Kosoko. It was characterized by a scenario of alternation between enthronement and dethronement as well as reinstatement. By 1851, however, the British had succeeded through their military might in reinstating Akitoye who, unlike his nephew Kosoko, agreed to sign a treaty putting an end to slave trade. But beyond this apparently humanitarian intervention of the British was the undercurrent of imperialism as a decade after, specifically in August 1861, “under the guns of H.M.S. *Prometheus* anchored in the lagoon, Oba Dosumu agreed to cede his kingdom to the British.” This would mark the beginning of the rapid and systematic colonization of the rest of the southern and northern parts of the Niger – see Robert Smith, *Kingdoms of the Yoruba* (London: Methuen, 1969), pp. 170–172.

17. For, Lagos being the first part of Nigeria to be colonized by the British naturally became the colonial capital of Nigeria and for many years after independence until the early 1990s when the seat of central power was moved to Abuja.

lizes subjects and constitutes the present. It is the name we give to the faculty that sustains continuity in collective and individual experience. Our evidence for it may not be as direct as Freud's evidence for the unconscious, but it is an essential postulate in our attempt to explain how the world remains minimally coherent, how existence doesn't simply fly apart. Memory functions in every act of perception, in every act of intellection, in every act of language. So even framing the question one might ask about memory is difficult. For in framing these questions, we might as well attempt to see vision.¹⁸

So, it is for this omnipresent nature of the lagoon that the poet-persona declares, "I let the lagoon speak for my memory." Despite the natural interference of "water hyacinth" which constitutes a challenge to navigation, besides the human pollution of "night soil," and which is also an obvious social criticism of the neglect of the amenities for good sewage system by the government and other private sectors and individuals concerned, in turning to the lagoon, the possibility of "vision" becomes evident. This is so as the movement of the lagoon is akin to the aspiration of the "city by the lagoon" itself, whose ambition is demonstrated in "pursuing a known star." The pursuit no doubt is the strong will exhibited by a non-global city to attain productive relevance and compete favorably with any other city that has become a known star – whether London or New York or Tokyo.

In an extension of the aspiration of the city, despite the daunting challenges, it remains undaunted. Rather, for it, the present becomes an interface between history and the future:

The lagoon speaks
like a foetus remembering the future.
listening from the depths of formlessness song
for the Words that break
against the voyages of discovery
in the discovery of voyages.¹⁹

Here is a postcolonial attempt to relive the process of colonization and the tension that was bred and contained between the British or the entire western exploration of the city and the natives who naturally stood to resist, no matter how feebly, and their posterity charged with the responsibility of contesting such narratives of discovery.

18. Richard Terdiman, *Present Past: Modernity and the Crisis of Memory* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 8.

19. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 3.

The picture painted of Lagos in this segment is understandably panoramic. Understandably panoramic because memory, what Terdiman will further call the “present past” is an agglomeration of various previous experiences woven into the fabric of the present. This explains why in “Demolition Day” Maroko comes to the picture.²⁰ In the demolition of this slum, thousands of people in the category of “the wretched of the earth” were rendered homeless just by one act of military decree. The foregoing attests to the position of Jean Franco in his essay, “Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third-World Intelligentsia” (in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*) that the language of domination and dispossession has often been “semanticized” along sexual lines by constructing power in masculinity.²¹ It then begins to add up why the image of suffering is often cast in the feminine mode. So, a woman becomes the symbol of the Maroko demolition victimhood without any prospect of resettlement or compensation:

Face to face with the demolition squad,
she wept, a wet rag trembling
against the drone of bulldozers. . .

She knelt, dry leaf against iron hoofs
among the forgotten of Lagos,
the homeless of Maroko, wishing
the Lord would nod at her withered hands
stretched pleadingly towards the law-mighty
epaulettes glinting with a merry stamp
towards her vale of sad wire.

20. A little well over a decade ago, a military dictatorship ordered the demolition of a popular slum on the far side of Victoria Island. The manner of the sudden dispossession was so grim and lacking in human face that in the words of Ofeimun himself in a recent review, “it was promptly memorialized across Nigerian literature” – from Soyinka to J. P. Clark-Bekederemo, to Ogaga Ifowodo to Maik Nwosu. In fact, these works, including Ofeimun’s contribution on the demolition in this collection, he suggests rather appropriately, can as well be regarded as *Maroko corpus* today, and find parallel in such literary response as Jorge Amado’s to the insatiate slum clearance of his country, or South African writing’s memorial on the demolition of District Six during apartheid. See Ofeimun “Daring Visions: *Invisible Chapters* by Maik Nwosu,” in *English in Africa* 32, 1 (May 2005) 135–41, p. 137.

21. Jean Franco, “Beyond Ethnocentrism: Gender, Power, and the Third-World Intelligentsia,” in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg ed., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 503–515, p. 503.

She wept, a wet rag trembling against
gruff indifference and glee-toothed power –
the snarl of antlers and implacable mortars
rolling the earth over her Carthage
over her world of cardboard and decayed zinc
over wishes, tired bones, her Maroko
escaping from the throes of History.²²

One thing to which one is uncomfortably held spell-bound in the above is the extremism of domination and dispossession. The victim, having been stripped of all access to good living, has suffered a callous diminution which is interpreted in her reduction to “a wet rag trembling” or “a dry leaf.” It will be no exaggeration, therefore, to see her as representing the living dead which the establishment has made of these people, the sealing of which is their final expulsion from their ‘world of cardboard and decayed zinc.’ But the sadism and impunity of the government of the day are brought to the fore in the abhorrently gleeful acts of the demolition as exemplified by the uniformed agents whose agenda of human and environmental vandalism raises a very serious existentialist question in the sense that even “the Lord” could not grant her wish to avert the demolition.

By the time “Self-Portrait of a Lagosian” is brought to focus, Maroko, having been replaced by “flashy skyscrapers,” becomes for the victim of the demolition a tantalizing scene with its expected elusiveness:

You, you traveled to your old Maroko of the mind
before the Slum Clearance Act overcame the seething swamps
with futurist architecture; you met the friend
that you have always been to yourself who wore his knowledge
of your rise and fall with the finality of a fatwa.²³

The victim, having been thus eternally denied his old Maroko, is now haplessly left with a self-consolatory pastime of engagement in an autistic travel during which some surrealistic satisfaction is attained by having “a feast.”

There is no doubt that this is a testimony against the totalitarian tyranny of military regimes in Nigeria. The promulgation of their various decrees and proscription of all forms of civil and rightful organizations and movements justifiably critical of their aberration were some of the most trying moments of the country’s travail. It

22. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 6.

23. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 7.

was an era which spanned more than half of the nation's independence history until 1999. This class of the military, defined essentially by an abiding pathology for political opportunism and adventurism, in its successive interruption of civil regimes, acted true to type when viewed against Leo Tolstoy's observation on its vulnerability:

Military service always corrupts a man, placing him in conditions of complete idleness, that is, absence of all intelligent and useful work, and liberating him from the common obligations of humanity, for which it substitutes conventional considerations like the honour of the regiment, the uniform and the flag, and, on the one hand, investing him with unlimited power over men, and on the other, demanding slavish subjection to superior officers.²⁴

But in all this, part of the Third World discontent against globalization is evident in the fact that the destructive authoritarianism of most of these regimes were known in some cases to have been openly sponsored by western nations.²⁵

In "Eko – my city by the lagoon," one encounters a more comprehensive panoramic version of the features of the city of Lagos. And to achieve this successfully, there is again a gendering of the city; after all, whether in matters of honor or dishonor, women stand to represent the collectivity of a nation,²⁶ and in this case, one may add the collectivity of the city. The features in themselves reveal a continual implosive contestation between binarisms such as poverty and wealth, hunger and satisfaction, with a tilting imbalance of the overwhelming treacherous impact of the unfavorable. The situation may not be surprising as globalization in the reality of its operation sanctions exclusionary and inclusionary strategies which, according to David Held in his essay, "Globalization, Stratification and Inequality" (in *Global Covenant*), "makes the gulf between the empowered and the disempowered harder to bridge."²⁷ And for cities that are not favored in this polarization, there can only be a readiness to be content with the socio-economic and cultural manipulations of "the empowered" other.

So cast in the mould of a woman, "my city by the lagoon" begins:

24. Cited in Udenta Udenta, "Art and Ideology in the Period of Re-colonization: The Revolutionary Aesthetic Imperative," in *Art, Ideology and Social Commitment in African Poetry* (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1996), 91–122 p. 101.

25. See Hoogvelt, p. 172.

26. See Nira Yuval-Davis, "Ethnicity, Gender Relations and Multiculturalism," in Rodolfo Terres et al. ed., *Race, Identity, and Citizenship* (Berlin: Blackwell, 2003) 112–125, p. 114.

27. David Held, "Globalization, Stratification and Inequality," in *Global Covenant* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004), 34–54, p. 45.

A woman to love whose beauty hides
in tantrums and shredded decorum;
she breaks the combs that hold her braids
from bursting into a scream for help
she curses the lagoon and the wayward sea
and the glinting hour of shopping First Ladies
who tighten her lockjaw of traffic
with outriders streaming from hell.²⁸

Such overbearing flamboyance of the “First Lady,” representative of the ruling class, contrasts sharply with “malarious mangroves” that are also abode to some other categories of the city denizens. Subsequently, there is the reference to the “commerce of pain” and the “zinc shack kingdoms in joyless dancing / angling for living room in the hugging spaces / under hooves of marching skyscrapers.” This obvious instance of the gentrification of the city of Lagos accentuates the veracity of such assertion as the unprecedented social inequality and exclusion experienced in the last decades of the 20th century being a result of global changes to cities.²⁹

It is therefore no surprise when in the last stanza of the poem the effects of the negative aspects of the city are compared with the act of “drowning.” But hard as the city fights against this drowning by striving heroically with an unmistakable patriotic nationalism “to outshine the moon,” “and cure polluted lagoons,” her denizens seem to be incurably caught in a fever of disillusionment which finds collusion in the delirious yarn of the borders “for exiles.” The reason for this is perhaps best explained in the words of Dilys Hill (in *Citizens and Urban Policy*):

The effects of global economic restructuring are evident in changes to labour markets. . . . The changes have affected employment, migration, household formation and housing. The results have a polarization both within cities and between cities.³⁰

Besides, it needs to be clarified that the above is just an aspect of the consuming mementoes of the questionable concentration of the world’s wealth in the hands of a few nations, leaving the majority of the rest of Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe and Latin

28. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 9.

29. See David Thorns, “Urban Social Inequality and Social Exclusion,” in *The Transformation of the Cities*, 149–177, p. 175.

30. *Citizens and Cities: Urban Policy in the 1990s* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 246.

America to wallow in abject poverty.³¹ The situation creates at the same time a post-modern simulacrum which necessitates the valorization of the *surfaces* of the cities of these few nations, hiding as it were, their *depths* which are nothing but the wealth of the poor nations. Needless to say, such shift of attention from the depths to the surfaces thus explains significantly why the changes that have affected employment and migration are along one way traffic which forces citizens of the Third World into moving helplessly towards the First World nations. They do this in search of the wealth of their own nations from which they have been, ironically, alienated. Worse still, there is usually no guarantee for any better living for such immigrants because of the attendant oppositions to the nature of their spatial dispersal, the result of which is usually the devaluation of their status. This often contrasts sharply with the enhancement and preservation of privileges that define the status of citizens of the First World nations when they engage in such migration to the South, a dispersal experience which, in any case, they rarely have.

Dispersed to London

Naturally, it is this inequality “between cities” that lures citizens of non-global cities to the global cities, just as from “my city by the lagoon” the collection transits segmentally to “London Letter.” It must be admitted that here is a textualization of migration from Lagos to London where globalization in its western bias seems to have created a utopia of London with a pull of attraction for the citizens of the city of Lagos. Again, this textual transitional route from Lagos to London cannot be wholly surprising given the special historical link of colonialism between the two cities. London – having served as the colonial mother-city and capital to Lagos from the second half of the 19th century up to the second half of the 20th century – emerges in the consciousness of Lagos as a collaborator and hostess, of a kind, in the period of hardship.³² So, exiles, armed with this kind of false impression, naturally commence a march to London. Yet, it was during this colonial period, it can be argued, that the foundation of the dichotomy between the two cities was laid. One was the colonizer, while the other was the colonized. For the British myth of modernizing and civilizing the colonies of Africa – which was akin

31. Hetata cited in Julian Murphet “Postmodernism and Space,” in Steven Connor ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 116–135, p. 128.

32. Throughout the era of British colonization of Nigeria, Lagos citizens were privileged to carry special British passports with benefits that other citizens of the colony did not enjoy.

to that of the French vulgate and political prophylactics, and other forms of colonization – the undercurrent of gaining economic advantage over the colonies was underscored by the systematic depredation of the colonies' wealth and resources. Needless to say, it was in a bid to ensure an advancement of the precursory imperialist stage of slavery. Nevertheless, the postcolonial Lagos, because of the apparently unique link with London, may be content with the illusion of finding reception from the latter. It is an assumption that has its antecedent in the spirit that moved West Indians of British colonization to London in the 1950s, the frustrating impact of which is best illustrated in Samuel Selvon's *Lonely Londoners*. The reality of antagonism then, as of now, remains alarmingly constant, undermining and exploding at the same time the invention and proposition of globalization that otherwise appears to confer world citizenship on every willing individual that is prepared to subscribe to migrancy.

It will suffice at this juncture to take a look at "London Letter I," a poem divided into seven parts:

Na London we dey. Pooling vast memories
across the Atlantic, we witness
the red bus careering towards Marble Arch
so free from the swarm and crush of Lagos
the sweet journey turned to a fiasco
fiercer than the wars of democracy

we dey for London, spoiling our best wishes
in strands of rueful remembrance – *the god*
of bolekajas packing bins upon human cattle
to redress crowded busstops;
ah! we pitch for undergrounds haunted to delirium
by highlife numbers only a Lagosian can hear
in the snakes and ladders of the mind
Seducing Big Ben to dance "*na so so enjoyment.*"³³

In the pidgin, "*Na London we dey,*" or "*we dey for London*" (We are in London, or we have arrived in London), we encounter a conscious announcement of the movement of the sight of battle of the cities from Lagos to London. However, for all the excitement which stems from the arrival, the memory of Lagos remains inalienable from the migrant minds. They may have found "Marble Arch / so free from the swarm and crush of Lagos," but the success of this finding is seriously inverted and

33. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 14.

shadowed by the fact that they are now confronted with a counter-reality which makes the thought of Lagos a “rueful remembrance.”

In the second part of this eponymous poem, the critical and discerning perception of the persona shatters the myth of utopia constructed around London; for just as there can be found “in my city by the lagoon / generations under bridges and rampant flyovers / there are also in Thatcher’s ‘clockwork orange’ natives as hopeless as truth at Hyde Park.” This goes without saying that the continual refrain of “*na so so enjoyment*” (it is so much of enjoyment) is, at its best, sarcastic. There is an extension of the commentary on the decadence of the city of London in the third part of the poem. In a way, this exposes the insincerity of the hyper-reality which the media, as an integral part of the project of globalization, create about the cities of the First World. They consciously in their movies shield the vulnerabilities of such cities to make effective their magnetic pull from the Third World. But having arrived in London, it becomes clear to these migrant characters that London is also of “filth, sick city falling / artlessly begging my city by the lagoon.” Also owing to the overarching nuances of capitalism, the dignity of labour may have been seriously compromised as the developments in Peckham and Brixton are not different from those in Mushin and Aguda of “shuffering and shmiling” fame.³⁴

By the time we are in “London Letter IV,” the argument of the invention of globalization no longer holds water. Memory again becomes compelling as the migrants review the oil boom wealth of their nation and cannot make out why the “surplus value / of hope” has become “raised to the brim of vomitorium.”³⁵

34. This parodied allusion calls to mind the Nigerian legend of Afro Beat Music, Late Fela-Anikulapo-Kuti, who in one of his tracks, “Shuffering and Shmiling” analyzed the collective psyche of the Nigerian suffering masses as the one that lacks the gravitas to confront and dethrone the oppressive hegemony of the ruling class, preferring to adopt a quietism through which their suffering contrasts curiously with their smiles. He elaborated on this view further in one of his interviews granted in the late 80s entitled “Animal Can’t Dash Me Human Rights” – See Jack Mapanje ed., *Gathering Seaweed: African Prison Writing* (Heinemann, 2002), 313–316, p 315.

35. It will be recalled that the first time Nigeria was wheedled into obtaining a World Bank loan in the 1970s, she actually had no cause for it because of the buoyancy of the economy mainly attributable to crude oil boom. Yet, the West succeeded with the rationale that it was necessary for Nigeria to obtain the loan as she was, technically speaking, “under borrowed.” This would subsequently result in the inclusion of the country in the long list of World Bank and IMF debtors of the 70s and 80s. Needless to say, the travail of debt servicing coupled with the compulsion of paying back has since paralyzed the economies of most of these Third World Nations while the facilitators of such loans of the Western nations have continued to

The question of race, identity and nativity in the First World has been found to constantly undermine any form of global knowledge of welfarism. It explains why the migrants in the end find themselves again on the rueful path “against [the] loony chatters ringing: *‘Nigger go home / there is no black in the Union Jack.’*” It is significant to note that this part of the poem is not only quoted, but also italicized to illustrate the double emphasis on the question of racial prejudice within the western psyche and as an albatross to the achievement of common human progress on a global scale. This was true of history in the middle ages as it was on the threshold of the 20th century, and may remain an issue in the 21st century so long as the precisions of science can be enlisted in a service of compromise to indulge the sentiment of white racism. Howard Winant in the contribution, “Difference and Inequality: Postmodern Racial Politics in the United States” (in *Racism, the City and the State*) is unambiguous about this when he puts in perspective what can be termed the unfortunate historiography and dynamic of race:

We may be more afflicted with anxiety and uncertainty over race than we are over any other social or political issue. Time and time again, what has been defined as ‘the race problem’ has generated ferocious antagonism: between slaves and masters, between natives and settlers, between new immigrants and established residents, and between workers divided by wage discrimination. Time and time again, this problem has been declared resolved, or perhaps supplanted by other supposedly more fundamental conflicts, only to blaze up anew.³⁶

The implicit ordering of the difference in terms of race overwhelms every other consideration of globalization and consolidates the myth of the racial *other*. This ordering of difference, as Foucault reminds us, permeates every form of knowledge and explains why the presence of black immigrants is often considered suspect, to the extent of exclusionary extremities. And with this kind of knowledge, it is not surprising that the present form of imperialism which makes people willingly leave the city of Lagos for London sucks in the African content without leaving anything behind. So, in V and VI, the western capitalist basis on which the structures of global-

make extremely profiteering gains – See Peter Abrahams, “In the Jaws of Debt,” in *The Black Experience in the 20th Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 296–307, p. 299.

36. Howard Winant, “Difference and Inequality: Postmodern Racial Politics in the United States,” in Malcolm Cross and Michael Keith ed., *Racism, the City and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 108–127, p. 108.

ization rest is exposed as the migrants, despite their repetition of “*so so enjoyment, / pay as we pee or peel.*” The consumerist bias of globalization underscores this fact. Further, there is a revelation that in this “tale of two cities,” there is a rhythm between the levels of decadence that pervades infrastructural systems in London and Lagos. Yet, these black immigrants must be subjected to the most basal and degrading of undertakings to earn a living in London:

in this city of many navels and absent centres
see my countrymen sing *owambe*³⁷ to the garbage can
knowing that the pound yields no stink at dusk
after the sweat of day returns to Thames.³⁸

The issue of gentrification highlighted earlier comes up here again as in London there are found “prostrate denizens, lying low” and consigned to knowing “London from the heap-bottom of highlilife.” All this goes to show why the seventh and last part of the segment rivets on the double tragedy of these migrants from Lagos. Their movement from their homeland was occasioned by a sense of alienation engendered by the folly and decadence of governance and infrastructural system that fails to deliver on comfort; coupled with this was the need to be reconciled with the native wealth already swept to the city of London. However, they have ended up in London where the aggregation of all this, in addition to unfavorable temperate weather as well as the racial question mediated through capitalist operations, has left them more confused and traumatically alienated, having no place they can actually call theirs:

Like them who sang “Lagos, na so so enjoyment,”
we dey for London like we no dey at all’
dreading the winter like the old woman in nights
without firewood to hold harmattans at bay
we dey for London like we no dey at all
chewing cud in the birth of freedom as tragedy
a used up hope mocking the human condition
on both sides of the Atlantic: Na so so enjoyment.³⁹

37. *Owambe* refers to the musical pop brand played and enjoyed mostly among the Yoruba-speaking people of Nigeria, South-West.

38. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 19.

39. Ofeimun, *London Letter*, p. 20.

The repetition of “*we dey for London like we no dey at all*” (we are in London as though we were not at all) explodes with a tone of finality the rarefied proposition of globalization. It is, after all, in the context of this work, a “mocking of the human condition,” in which the migrant citizens of the Third World have been most hit.

Conclusion

It invariably implies that to the Third World cities, globalization remains a space of contestation; for even where there is a convergence between Lagos and London, it is only to the extent of decadent similarity. Otherwise, the postmodern simulacrum has only led to a double devaluation of the condition of these citizens of Lagos across spaces, making them, ultimately, victims of an advanced imperial strategy. Therefore, rather than forging a collaborative and dialogic alliance of cities for the purpose of mutual progress, Lagos and London in this case have laid out as two cities in conflictual contestation emanating from the potency of the North-South binarism. And with the tableau of Lagos’ travails of resource dispersal as against the manner of London’s resource pull, globalization, assessed against this backdrop, emerges, even at its best, as a concept that is as suspect as it is contradictory. Therefore, as the formulae of the new economic cartography emerge in their discounting of the primacy of distinct and individual geographies for the purpose of executing a project of planetization, there seems to be little hope for the Third World cities. For in the envisaged consolidation of the New World Order, one sees from a more sober and reflective angle, like Richard Helgerson, not only the “the folly of [such] maps and modernity,”⁴⁰ but also, one dare add, the folly of the present construction of geography and the tyranny of the management of its postmodern space.

40. See “The Folly of Maps and Modernity,” in Andrew Gordon and Bernhard Klein ed., *Literature, Mapping and the Politics of Space in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 241–262, p. 241.