Douala/Johannesburg/New York: Cityscapes Imagined

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The capability to imagine . . . worlds is now itself a globalized phenomenon.
(Appadurai 1999: 8)

Thinking Cities: First Words

Consider an image, a panel, painted in acrylic on wood, on the side of a barber’s stand. Such stands are a mainstay of cities in West and Central Africa. Here, a man can get his hair cut and shaped. Here too, people gather, discuss current events, politics, sports, the shape and state of the city. On structures of this kind, painted images of people and places are common: celebrities from the president to Osama bin Laden and Mickey Mouse and sites the owner has inhabited, visited, or dreams of knowing. This particular stand shows a city skyline, pictured at dusk, flat against a reddening sky, a sun setting in the distance; several buildings loom, their facades in shadow. The structure with this image is in Douala. It is located in a neighborhood called Nylon, so named for its propensity to flood (water pools there, as it does when spilled on synthetic fabric). Nylon is a neighborhood typical of Douala in many respects: grossly underserved in terms of formal infrastructure, formal housing, formal job markets; the majority of inhabitants are in flux, in transit from or to another place, inside or outside Cameroon, in voyages real and imagined.

I propose to use the image on this barber stand to think, broadly, about definitions of the term “city.” My focus is African cities. One caveat, however: I am far from convinced that it is possible—or even reasonable—to speak of African cities as constituting a category on their own. It would be significantly more productive to discuss cities more generally, with given African cities as starting points, prototypes for an emerging, global form of urbanity. (What “global” might be taken to mean in this context, I return to by and by.) The types of urban centers scholars have tended to think of as normative—so-called First World, Euro-American cities—I contend, are in fact nothing of the kind. Far more normative, or in any event more useful as points of reference, if only

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because they are infinitely more numerous, are cities outside the industrialized “North.”

If we can agree that cities in Southeast Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, or the Indian Ocean offer as valid a set of spaces from which to initiate a discussion of the urban condition today as do those of Western Europe and North America, it seems fair to argue that a reconceptualization of the city is in order. Douala, after all, though it undoubtedly shares certain features with London, is very different from its sister on the Thames; the two are far less alike than are London and Paris, or Barcelona and New York. What, then, do we mean—what precisely are we referencing, when we use the term “city”? An initial set of answers might involve a rethinking of notions of place and boundary.

Douala, I propose—like Lagos or Kinshasa—as an urban center is significantly less invested in ideas of locality than cities such as London or Paris. This is not to say that “placeness,” that is, conceptions of the city as an entity bounded in space, is absent here. Like most cities, Douala is a locus of histories, pasts, and, for some of its inhabitants at least, rootedness; children are born there, loved ones are buried in its cemeteries, life stories unfold on its streets. At the same time, however, it is a site of infinite porosity. The appearance and demographic makeup of its neighborhoods is constantly shifting. Only its colonial core-cum-formal business district, Bonanjo, seems, at first glance, relatively untouched by such shifts, by a propensity for change so common in other districts that it is best described as a daily occurrence. Every day, boundaries—physical, social, interpersonal—are dismantled and reconstituted, rethought and constructed anew (or not), often, as AbdouMaliq Simone has shown (2002a), in accordance with rules, or for reasons, that defy ready classification. Radical alterations, microscopic to the eye perhaps, but socially, politically, economically fundamental, are par for the course, in ways arguably less common in urban centers such as London and New York. The city’s edges are in constant flux as well, expanding and, on occasion, shrinking virtually overnight. So too is—and to this I shall return shortly, for it is my principal concern here—the city’s identity as a node, a place one chooses to be “in.” Douala, I propose in these pages, is a city defined above all by mobility. Passage—in, through, beyond—in active refusal of closure, of boundedness, is one of its primary characteristics.

Recent studies of globalization have begun to challenge notions of place and boundedness, notably in relation to the idea of the nation-state and its borders (Appadurai 1996, 1999; Mbembe 1999; Pieterse 2004; Roitman 2004; Sassen 1999; inter alia). In discussions of cities too the relevance of these notions has been queried (see, notably, Sassen 2001). In the latter context, however, the focus has tended to be on what Saskia Sassen terms “global cities”: urban centers typified by strong concentrations of capital and infrastructure—sophisticated financial instruments, banking institutions, transport, electronic and telecommunications networks that support a significant volume of traffic with like centers, over vast distances mitigated by the instantaneity of cyber-exchanges (Sassen 1999). Fundamental to their study, indeed to their very identification as sites worthy of investigation, is their imbrication in what many agree are two key features of globalization, namely the collapse of space and the concomitant collapse of time made possible by the advent of the digital age and the availability