

INTRODUCTION

While traveling with William Hesketh Lever and others on a lengthy tour of inspection of Lever Brothers' numerous trading stations in West and Central Africa in the mid-1920s, Thomas Malcolm Knox (1900–1980), secretary to Lord Lever, adopted an interpretive framework that is both depressingly familiar today in antihumanist discourses, and richly descriptive of the economic and emotional relationships between strangers in multicultural urban environments. The city of Lagos, Knox noted, “turns out to be a town of unspeakable squalor. It is no wonder that it is the nurse of disease. Filth everywhere.”¹ For Knox, the source of filth was easy to identify, for “everything reeks of dirty natives.”² Yet this same city, he recognized, “is the representative of a much higher state of civilization” than the “squalid” African trading posts he recently visited in the hinterland of the Belgian Congo, for Lagos boasted European shops built to supply local consumers with household products manufactured in Europe using raw materials exported from Africa’s “uncivilized” interior.³

Several scholars have commented on the circular, self-serving nature of the connection between cleanliness and civilization in the writings of European travelers during the colonial period.⁴ Perceived and narrated through “imperial eyes,” the figure of the “dirty native” legitimized European cultural and economic expansion into the most intimate corners of Africans’ daily lives.⁵ For European traders and government officials alike, “dirty natives” were far more dangerous than objects discarded by the wayside, or trash, and necessitated regimes of sanitation and urban racial segre-

gation. In countless colonial-era travelogues and memoirs by white British men, the same rhetoric of difference is mapped onto the bodies and beliefs of others through a spectrum of dirt-related words, facilitating the same dead-end conclusions about the inferiority of African cultures each time. In the 1870s, for example, the trader John Whitford described Lagos as “a filthy, disgusting, savage place and unsafe to wander about in the streets.”⁶ All across West Africa, local populations were “filthy” in his view, not because of a lack of soap and water, but because the unfamiliar appearance of people and foodstuffs elicited strong feelings of revulsion in him, not least the “hideously ugly” women who possessed “strong limbs developed by hard work, which should pertain to a man only.”⁷ Other traders adopted the same tropes as Whitford and Knox, describing local people’s unfamiliar clothing and physiques in visceral terms that conveyed their nausea as if it were a natural sense perception rather than a reaction to the culturally challenging norms of others. As one anonymous trader wrote of Nigerian villagers in the 1920s, “not only did their bodies give off a horrible smell, but their hair was tousled like dirty rope, and their skin a dull black. The bits of cloth around the loins were pregnant with filth.”⁸

These expressions of disgust at the supposed uncleanness of others offer historically specific examples of a reactionary discourse that persists into the twenty-first century, forming one of the pivots on which this book turns. Understanding these strained and failed cross-cultural relationships in past decades can help us to contextualize the antihumanist currents that persist in contemporary debates about multiculturalism and toleration in global urban environments. Whitford’s identification of African women as “ugly” in the 1870s, Knox’s disgust at the strangeness of others in the 1920s, and the similar reactions of numerous other European travelers and traders in Africa in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provide us with a historically situated prologue to an unpalatable side of discourses about globalization and urbanization that persist in the present day.

In spite of his protestations of loyalty to judgments based on the observation of “empirical phenomena” in Africa, Knox’s disgust and repulsion were not focused on unclean streets or unwashed bodies but on what was unrecognizable to him.⁹ In Jebba, Nigeria, for example, he described how “we stopped at various native stalls and examined their wares—capsicum (pepper of a particularly strong variety), chop of various sorts, extraordinary and repulsive stuff all of it”;¹⁰ at the market in Zaria, in northern Nigeria, he found that “the meat presents the most disgusting appearance. It is covered with flies and vermin and even were these absent seemed to

consist mainly of the least savoury looking parts of animals.”¹¹ Also at the Zaria market, he found that “the knick-knack stalls were the most curious of all. Little bits of stick, a few knobs of ginger, little bits of stone, a tooth pick or two, all apparently things of little or no use.”¹²

The association of dirt with “useless” matter demonstrates the ways in which dirt, as a category, names matter that is no longer regarded as having economic, social, or productive value, and is not therefore recognized as part of human social systems. In Knox’s case, the “useless” matter comprised locally manufactured African products, the purpose of which he simply failed to recognize. These products were useless because he wished to supplant them with imported alternatives. All the way from Casablanca to the interior of Congo, the marked preference of local people for locally produced commodities—unrecognizable to the traveler—rather than imported commodities purchased from the European companies operating in the region filled Knox with revulsion, and rendered local people nauseating “others” who resisted assimilation into the global economy represented by European traders. Their visceral responses had little to do with dirt as an empirical substance and more to do with white traders’ subjective reactions to local consumption practices. What revolted Knox was the entire public habitus: the busy local streets and the messy, protuberant local commodities displayed for sale in the markets. What revolted him, in short, was the presence of the foreign body as a consuming entity that participated in a cash economy but desired merchandise that was completely alien to his own trade interests. The powerful feelings of revulsion that he experienced marked the moment at which he recognized the other’s humanity as a consuming subject—eating, drinking, socializing, purchasing goods—and instantaneously dismissed the other’s tastes as unpalatable to himself and, crucially, beyond his economic control.

The examples of Whitford and Knox illustrate how dirt is far more than an empirical substance: it is also an interpretive category that facilitates moral, sanitary, economic, and aesthetic evaluations of other cultures under the rubric of uncleanness. Operating through categorical oppositions between the (clean) self and the (filthy) other, dirt has a place in histories of reactionary social and political thought. Dirt sticks: it attaches to bodies and ranges from colonialist understandings of “native” domestic hygiene through to contemporary rejections of nonbinary sexualities and global media representations of poverty in postcolonial cities. As a category of interpretation, dirt has a vibrant historicity that reverberates through the decades, changing with the times, but permeating how the bodies of

strangers are produced by those with the power to tell stories and to be heard in contemporary global contexts.

Knox's dystopian vision of an Africa—with “children romping heedless of the endless flies and vermin,” where “thoroughly repulsive” people and “degenerates” live in “dirt, grit, dust,” where “deformed men and crippled children” intermingle with “people wandering about suffering obviously from loathsome and unspeakable diseases”—is an iteration of reactionary Western responses to African urban environments during periods of famine or epidemic.¹³ With its remarkable staying power, this deployment of the category of dirt has marked the status and proximity of an other whose presence is embedded in the desire for exclusion or segregation on the part of observers. Whitford's and Knox's descriptions conform to theorizations of dirt as that which society expels, excretes, or treats as abject or excessive.¹⁴ Their interpretive framework matches Mary Douglas's resonant assertion that dirt marks the limits of a society's understanding of itself, signifying people's need to withdraw from any habitus that is perceived to be dirty, and, in reaction, to reassert their own social and behavioral boundaries.¹⁵ For Douglas, as Richard Fardon notes, “ideas of impurity and danger hold members of a society to account to one another, and they do so with a character and intensity that stems from and rebounds back upon that particular form of society.”¹⁶ From this perspective, dirt represents a type of excess that can never be valued or conceived of in positive ways. For Knox and his peers, dirt signified disorder, inefficiency, unfamiliar bodies, and the unrecognizable; as a discursive category, it mediated between the margins and the mainstream, facilitating the expulsion of particular types of matter from the realm of social approval.

Several scholars have noted how dirt was a key ingredient in the making of imperial identities and in the marketing of imperial products to global consumers in the colonial era (fig. Intro.1).¹⁷ Out of it grew new global markets to the extent that, in one advertisement at least, soap as a commodity replaced the Victorian moral principle that “cleanliness is next to godliness.” A famous advertisement from the Pears Soap Company in 1890 starkly reminded consumers, via a misquotation from Justus von Liebig, that “the consumption of soap is a measure of the wealth, civilisation, health, and purity of the people” (fig. Intro.2).¹⁸ Significantly, this advertisement was printed on the back cover of a special “Stanley Edition” of the *Graphic* celebrating the recent Emin Pasha Relief Expedition led by Stanley from 1886 to 1889. Through numerous vivid drawings of Stanley's expedition from the east coast of Africa into the interior of the continent, the

Lux Will Wash Locks.



[Photo by M. Frost, Biddenden.

Here is a lady of colour, hailing from Africa, preparing to wash her luxuriant locks in Lux, which, of course, is famous as a shampoo soap. The jolly subject of the photograph uses Lux regularly, and, judging by the crop shown around her head, it acts as a fine tonic for the hair.

FIGURE INTRO.I. Advertisement for Lux. *Progress Magazine: The Magazine of Lever Brothers and Unilever Ltd*, July 1925, n.p. Reproduced with kind permission of Unilever from an original in Unilever Archives.

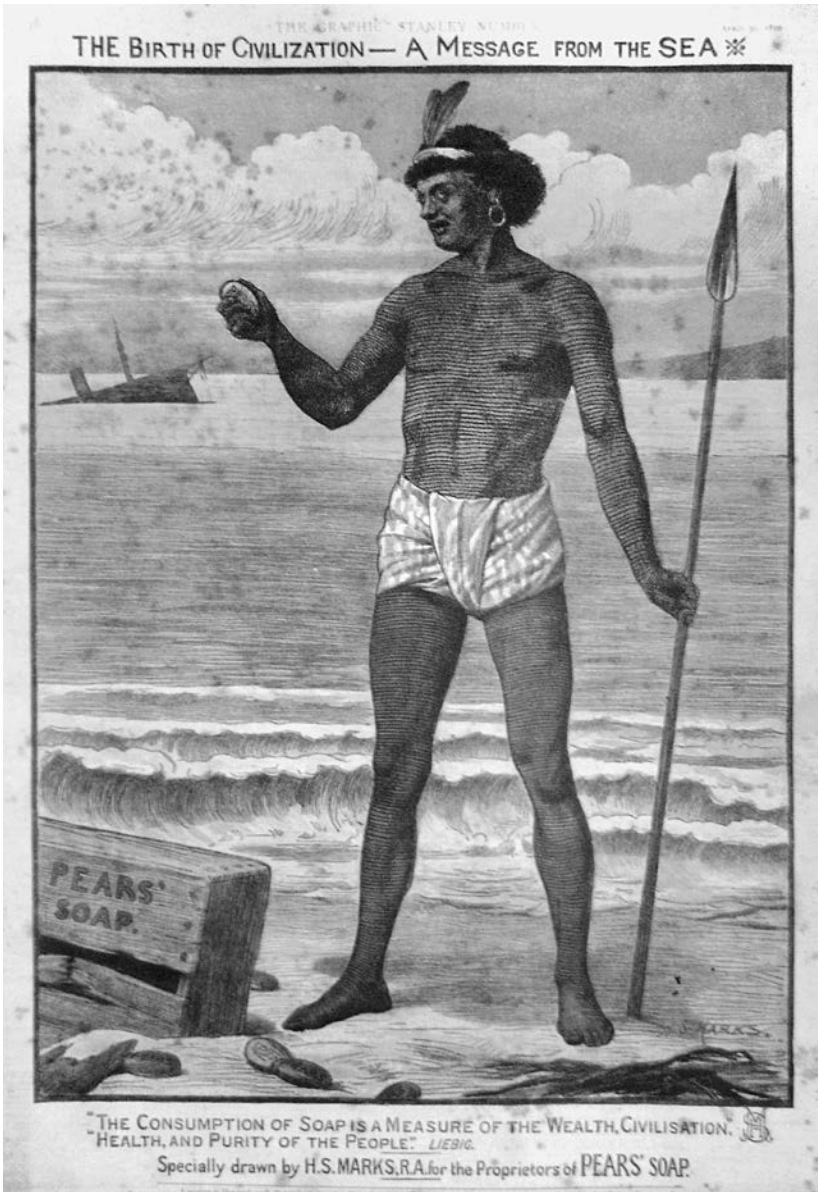


FIGURE INTRO.2. Advertisement for Pears Soap. *The Graphic*, April 30, 1890, 36. Author's collection.

special issue illustrates the contrasts between the moral authority, bravery, and leadership of British men, and Africans' lack of control, made evident not least by their lack of clothing (fig. Intro.3). Appearing in the wake of these images and reports, the Pears Soap advertisement on the back cover is a tangible by-product of the "dirty native" ideology.

The first two chapters of *Histories of Dirt* ask about the extent to which the imperial culture's myths and beliefs about the supposedly dirty tastes, habits, and practices of Africans were carried over into the practical application of scientific discoveries, legitimizing racial segregation in the name of public health. The archival materials examined in these chapters reveal how British West Africa narrowly escaped formal racial segregation of the type successfully imposed by town planners in East and South African British colonies in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

Colonial town planning did not, however, avoid institutionalized racism at the levels of the interpretation of science and the implementation of policy. A homogeneous African "native" was produced in West African public health discourse in the early twentieth century, standing in for, in the case of malaria, replacing political responses to the problems of sanitation and disease. As the archives examined in chapters 1 and 2 indicate, in the face of white traders' fears of contamination from African residents, and in the absence of funds for what Dr. Henry Strachan of Freetown termed "sanitary salvation" in colonial cities, British West African governments carefully considered adopting a formal policy of racial segregation in order to protect Europeans from the panoply of tropical diseases and global "filth diseases" associated with urbanization, on the one hand, and the proximity of "natives," on the other.¹⁹

These two chapters discuss how British officials wished to transform Africans into recognizably clean and healthy subjects through legislation backed by teams of sanitary inspectors with powers to enforce municipal rules.²⁰ In a manner similar to that of the European travelers and traders in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British officials in West Africa used their own moral and material categories of dirt to develop a set of criteria that marked the boundary between unacceptable and acceptable local domestic behaviors. Government intervention was deemed legitimate and necessary in the case of "dirty" local practices in expanding African cities, not only to protect European officials from contagion, but also to protect Africans from themselves.

How African urban residents reacted to these public health measures—and the opinions that underwrote them—is a key concern in this book.

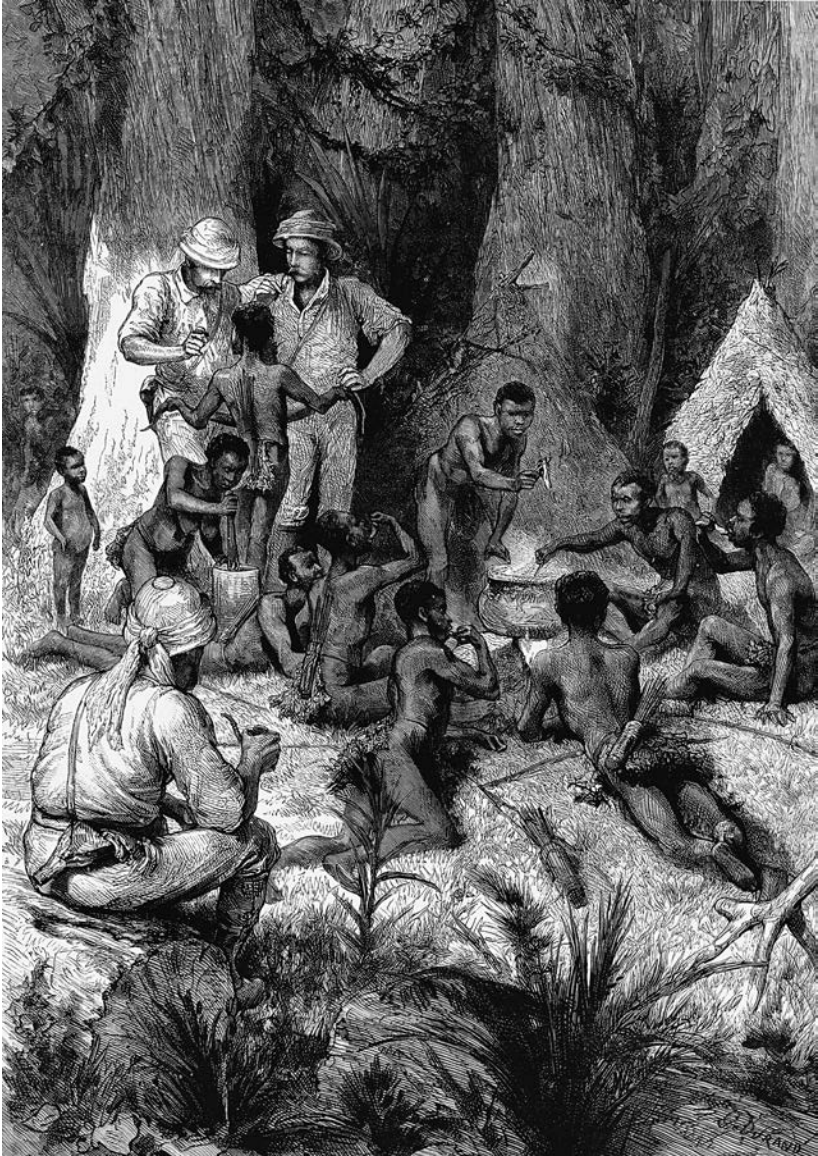


FIGURE INTRO.3. "Forest Dwarfs Eating Snakes." *The Graphic*, April 30, 1890, 10.
Author's collection.

The viewpoints of educated local elites are preserved in the ample newspaper archives of the colonial period. In spite of substantial differences of opinion among themselves on the topic of home rule, when it came to town planning in the early twentieth century, Nigerian newspaper editors were unanimous in their adoption of government public health frameworks. While the radical, Afrocentric press published outspoken criticisms of colonial failures to implement town-planning schemes that would benefit the majority and responded to racial discrimination with calls for self-rule, conservative and pro-British newspapers such as the *Nigerian Pioneer* and the government-backed Nigerian *Daily Times* published regular polite requests for sanitary improvements and offered advice about the sources of filth in Nigerian towns. In spite of the pseudo-racial science that underwrote colonial public health policy, discussed in chapters 1 and 2, for a variety of reasons none of the Anglophone African newspapers rejected public health discourse per se. But, as chapter 3 shows through a case study of the conservative *Nigerian Pioneer*, editors worked hard to replace colonial racializations of dirt with other explanations for “native” filth, swapping out one maligned category of person for others and, in the process, splitting and contesting the hegemonic African produced by colonial discourse.

Focusing on the *Nigerian Pioneer* during the bubonic plague epidemic of 1924–31, chapter 3 asks how and why a newspaper owned and edited by an unofficial African member of the Legislative Council and a key participant in municipal affairs offered such sparse underreporting of this critical epidemic.²¹ In highlighting the work of the conservative *Pioneer* rather than its radical and anticolonial peers, this discussion underscores the ambivalent role of imperial loyalists—regarded as collaborators by their anticolonial rivals—who attempted to retain positions of social and political power during the period that witnessed the rise of “new imperialism” in British colonial policy. The extent to which these members of the educated elite used the press to displace the discourse of dirt from the colonial figure of “the native” and shift it onto other urban bodies is the focus of discussion in this chapter, with the aim of determining whether, and how, they changed the terms of the colonial discourse of dirt.

Not all concepts relating to dirt produce the adverse standpoints described above. In the early twentieth-century examples discussed at the start of the book, as much as in the midcentury examples in chapters 4 and 5, and the early twenty-first-century examples in the concluding chapters, the identification of urban dirt often opens up spaces for curiosity and speculation on the part of observers, as well as failures to comprehend other

people's behavior. *Histories of Dirt* is characterized by people's efforts to create narratives that attempt to understand the motivations and behavior of people labeled "dirty." Within and behind discourses of disease eradication, public health, and moral sanitation lie their speculative stories about dirt, often incompatible with and uncontainable by mainstream ideological oppositions between health and filth, and often resisting the binary, aggressive "dirty othering" performed in mainstream and official media. Time and again, this book finds that people pour their imaginations into stories about the dirt of others, even as they ostensibly endorse a desire for cleanliness or purity. So frequent and sustained are these moments of curiosity and creativity in conjunction with the discourse of dirt that, as many chapters will demonstrate, the category of dirt begins to stand for the failure, rather than the achievement, of the ideological processes of othering it manifestly endorses.

In the long twentieth century covered by this book, Nigerian urban identities and relationships are shown to be marked and transformed by changing categories denoting dirt as people's perceptions of who and what are useful and good shift over the decades. Moving from early twentieth-century colonial archives in the first three chapters to Nigerian media and midcentury audience research in chapters 4 and 5, and, finally, to interviews and focus group discussions with contemporary Lagosians in chapters 6 to 8, the book offers an increasingly localized account of diverse historical actors' perceptions of dirt in urban environments.²² Whereas the opening chapters turn to Anglophone African newspaper producers and consumers in the early twentieth century for examples of local reactions to externally imposed categories of dirt, and while the middle chapters attempt to retrieve rural Nigerians' responses to colonial public health media from the written archives of the 1940 and 1950s, the final part of the book turns to a multicultural living archive of urban residents in order to pursue the question of the extent to which Lagosians process official and media messages through their own aesthetic, spiritual, moral, economic, and political value systems.

A key question relates to appropriate methods for researching Lagosian cultural history in archives that often exclude African subjects and filter local perspectives through a racist colonial optic. The possibility of finding non-Eurocentric methods for approaching historical sources that are saturated with British colonial constructions of Africans is a central problem in the book. How can local residents' values and opinions be identified in Anglophone archives whose authors were British government officials, often

with powerfully anti-African visions of how urban environments should look in order to be free from what they identified as dirt? The book as a whole attempts to prioritize African responses to government policies in tension with official representations of public health initiatives. In so doing, it attempts to chart a path through voluminous colonial archives by focusing on Africans as media consumers, commentators, interpreters, householders, and producers of public opinion.

In attempting to read for African perspectives, the book evaluates not only the cultural histories of specific “dirty” discourses, but also the theoretical and methodological directions that the concept of dirt generates as a starting point for comparative historical case studies over a long twentieth century. This includes a consideration of problems relating to the translation, or translatability, of the variety of local language concepts relating to dirt, which change over time and get lost in transcription. Rather than wishing to retrieve impossibly pristine African subjects from the written archives, the book tries to identify colonial mediations of African subjectivity and African responses to these mediations. Examples of African reactions to media—albeit untranslated and nonverbal—are pulled from colonial files and strung together into a series of questions about how mass media texts such as public health movies and newspapers contributed to local perspectives on dirt and urbanization. Colonial public health policy, town-planning initiatives, and propaganda films are treated as contributing to African public opinion in public spaces that include people’s preexisting practices and values. Underlying this method is the conviction that in West Africa, as elsewhere, “public opinion has a life of its own.”²³

Chapters 6 to 8, with their attention to over 120 interviews with people from diverse age groups and backgrounds, demonstrate how actively ordinary Lagosians create narratives through which they mediate and judge mainstream media material. Time and again, the interviewees for this book treated news stories not as stopping points but as templates to be embellished with individualized accounts of dirty behavior. In the process, as these chapters suggest, interviewees often produced empathetic and ventriloquistic accounts of people who are popularly labeled dirty, such as *agbépòò* (night-soil workers), or stigmatized in mainstream political and religious discourse, such as people with nonbinary sexualities.

Dirt has been a potent category in Eurocentric representations of Africa for more than a century and remains a source of such fascination for Western publics. To adopt it as a research theme runs the risk of perpetuating, rather than countering, simplistic binary oppositions that support

negative Eurocentric stereotypes of the continent.²⁴ As demonstrated by the widespread discontent among Nigerian viewers of the BBC's three-part documentary *Welcome to Lagos*, screened in 2010 and discussed in more detail in chapter 7, which represented Lagos through exclusive attention to waste workers and so-called slum dwellers, the vector of dirt risks distorting and misrepresenting the complex totalities of people in postcolonial cities. As an outsider's way of seeing the other, the category of dirt risks skewing other outsiders' views of people, places, and objects, magnifying the "worst" features of other cultures and ignoring their complexities in favor of stark oppositions with whatever is perceived to be clean.

Whether they be the "natives" of colonial discourse or the LGBTQ+ bodies of contemporary homophobias, bodies officially marked as dirty become ripe for removal. For good reason, therefore, until recently Africanist scholars in the arts and humanities have tended to avoid the topic of dirt in studying the continent's cultural and social histories.²⁵ With significant exceptions in anthropology, where disgust has been a prominent topic since the work of Mary Douglas in the 1960s, and in the study of African visual cultures, where aesthetic revaluations of "trash" have become the subject of considerable recent interest in film studies and art history, scholars with an interest in the politics and aesthetics of dirt in Africa have tended to focus on purification, soap, and sanitation in their discussions of social history and the postcolonial city.²⁶ Can a politics and poetics of dirt be composed for West Africa that avoids the Eurocentrism of Knox and his peers, while acknowledging the impact of colonialism in the history of postcolonial cities?

This book recognizes the tenacity of dirt as a Eurocentric category for the negative evaluation of people, objects, and places, but it also seeks to historicize dirt in dynamic multicultural contexts and disconnect it from a binary relationship with cleanliness. Dirt is a discursive field in its own right with histories that may be traceable to colonial encounters, but neither begin nor end in the deadening logic of the travelers and traders described in preceding pages. In Lagos, a multitude of words exists in Yoruba, Nigerian Pidgin, English, and other languages to describe dirt and dirtiness, dating back well before the colonial encounter. As chapters 6, 7, and 8 will show, people's interpretations of sexual and (im)moral activities, ethnic otherness, environmental pollution, waste management, physical contagion, and contamination combine with positive evaluations of dirt through proverbs about waste and vermin, and applause for the transformation of trash into useful and valuable new commodities. At a practical

level, Lagosians' responses to globalization include frugality and the recycling of trash, changing their relationship with waste in ways that prevent the materialization of disgust. Likewise, the artistic transformation of rubbish into beautiful, symbolic, or useful objects also breaks the cycle of colonialist conceptualizations.²⁷

Put simply, dirt should not be regarded only as the binary opposite of cleanliness or purity: it is a dense cultural category with histories of its own, through which locally situated understandings of identity and interpersonal relationships may be filtered. If dirt is often used as a category in official discourses to mark a reactionary desire for the removal (or symbolic "cleaning up") of the targets it identifies, this book will show how dirt is greater than this usage and plural in a manner that exceeds black-and-white hegemonies. When Lagosians' opinions and languages are added to the melting pot of colonial and postcolonial urban interactions, a proliferation of additional connotations and concepts arise around the category of dirt, sometimes providing respite from (post)colonial discourses of animosity and antihumanism.

A focus on dirt helps to make visible how people produce and make use of supposedly natural, universal, biological concepts in response to specific and changing types of urban encounter, and how these concepts change over time. Chapter 7, for example, historicizes public opinion about hitherto stigmatized professions such as refuse and sewage removal, particularly in relation to how urban residents' perceptions were transformed by a combination of public relations interventions and investments in waste management infrastructure in Lagos in the early twenty-first century. The emphasis throughout the book is on the ways in which urban publics are informed by mediated visions of the city and the urban environment, whether through religious doctrine, newspapers, movies, social media, and advertisements, or through discussions, disagreements, and the exchange of opinion.

Public opinion is complex and nebulous, but it is not detached from the publics whose opinions it proclaims, nor is it from the different types of media and communication that contribute to urban dwellers' attitudes and values at different historical moments. Rather than adopting a simple model of audience reception through which mass media consumers are regarded as readily influenced by messages from mainstream, official, and online sources, this book provides evidence throughout that Nigerian audiences articulate independent lines of reasoning as they interpret the environments in which they live and work. As shown in chapters 6 to 8,

religious institutions and the media play a crucial role in helping urban residents to double-check the truth and accuracy of their perceptions and judgments about their own and others' "dirty" behavior, but people form opinions in collaboration with these messages as active media consumers who configure interpretive systems on the ground, among themselves. In this space of public opinion, urban residents are commentators as well as media consumers whose independent responses can be traced back over more than a century of intercultural encounters in West Africa.²⁸ Indeed, in discussing the urban environment and their perceptions of dirt, the Lagosians we interviewed often situated themselves at one remove from public opinion, checking their individual actions and attitudes against it, using it as gauge of socially acceptable behavior and a reference point when asked to describe what they regarded as dirty professions or dirty behavior.

This book is as much about local audiences in diverse historical settings as it is about the different media texts they consume over time. The emphasis on grassroots African opinions and interpretations of media is designed to seek out counternarratives to colonial—and, to some extent, middle-class West African—definitions of dirt, and to continue the methodological experiment started by historians such as Ann Laura Stoler and Antoinette Burton, who decentralize official archives, and seek alternative methods and sources for compiling cultural histories of Europe's imperial territories.²⁹ Lagosians' opinions about urban relationships are at the forefront of the study, including public responses to international media portrayals of Lagos as one of the "least livable cities in the world" and the BBC's documentary *Welcome to Lagos*.³⁰

In the face of archival constraints for this type of research, my overarching aim is to consider a history of urbanization from the perspectives of non-elite and sub-elite urban residents alongside elite Africans and colonial and official commentators.³¹ Using a range of historical examples—from debates about sanitation and town planning in African newspapers to Colonial Film Unit strategies for communicating health and hygiene messages to intended audiences—the book asks about the ways in which ordinary, daily texts about public health and the urban environment have contributed to the identification of dirt in the urban imaginaries of Lagosians over the decades. If the study necessarily depends on British colonial archives as a historical starting point, it tries to problematize the information such archives yield by attempting to read them for African perspectives: Anglophone sources are scoured for instances of African praxis and the presence of local opinions, and contrasted with African sources,

wherever available, on the same topics from the period. In this way, the book tries to honor the project called for by Andreas Huyssen, to develop “deeper knowledge about the ways in which modernity has historically evolved in the cities of the non-Western world, what urban constellations and conflicts it has created there, and what such developments might mean today for city cultures at large.”³²