



# Lagos and the New Media in John Koethe's "This is Lagos" and Rashidah Ismaili's "Lagos" Online Poems

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper examines two online poems by two different poets; John Koethe and Rashidah Ismaili as they both describe Lagos to the world. This paper adopts both a Formalist approach and Reader-Response Theory to examine the way John Koethe and Rashidah Ismaili portray Lagos in their poems. These two poems were purposively selected because they happen to be the first two poems on Lagos presented when I searched the internet via Google search engine with the catchword "poems on Lagos".*

*Through formalist lenses, Lagos is projected as a place of chaos, filth, and inhabited by people who don't have regard for their heritage, and have not learned from their history; for these reasons, the present day and future of Lagos and Lagosians is jeopardized. This image of Lagos is projected by the two poets who ironically are not Nigerians more or less Lagosians, neither do they stay in Lagos, but their finite conclusion of Lagos is drawn from maybe a visit, or hearsay as explained by Koethe. Through Reader's Response Theory, instead of writers and poets in Lagosians or Nigeria countering these allegations, not even a single response and silence means acceptance to the issues raised by the two poets.*

**Key Words:** Lagos, New Media, John Koethe, Rashidah Ismaili, Formalism.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience (Ephesians 2:2)*

"There is nothing as powerful in the history of humanity as the social media". (Poju Oyemade)

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the rapid quest for knowledge and the growth in development has led to a number of discoveries in the field of science and technology. What was termed impossible fifty years ago is now possible. This can be traced to breakthrough in technology. Man's quest to have and make life comfortable for himself and his environment has pushed him to technological discoveries. With this regard, man constantly tries to improve on previous inventions to give ease to daily life and day to day communication. Based on this premise, there are lots of inventions that shaped the world we live in today, and literature has also evolved with these inventions. For example, man's first form of communication was through the oral medium, until the invention of the printing press.

The printing press dominated the dissemination of information across the world, up until the late 19th century and the early 20th century. The invention/discovery of the audio-visuals, which includes both the still photograph and the motion picture became a milestone in the literary field. This development took literature to a more interactive form, where both real-life images can be preserved and a story narrated around it. The final milestone is the invention of the computer and the internet which is categorized under an umbrella name as the New Media.

This brings us to the quote from Ephesians chapter two verse two which explains those who govern the course of this world. These are the people who determine what goes on air; the internet is the air waves. Based on this premise, it can be deduced that, the ability to explore and use the internet is one of the potent ways to shape and influence your world. This is why Poju

Oyemade (2018) tags the internet and the social media as one of the most powerful medium in the history of humanity. Literature as a whole has adapted and evolved through these three different phases or milestones; the print, the audio-visual and the internet or new media. This growth in literature is captured by Ezra Pound, quoted by Jessica Pressman (2014):

Tching prayed on the mountain and  
wrote MAKE IT NEW  
on his bath tub  
Day by day make it new  
cut the underbrush,  
pile the logs  
keep it growing.  
—Ezra Pound, excerpt from “Canto LIII” (264–5)

The evolving process of literature from the written form, to the printed form, to the audio visual form and the new media is the process of making it (literature) new. This evolution does not discredit the old instead it authenticates it and by so doing it shows the future of literature as limitless as the advent of technology. Jason Merkoski (2013) explains the revolution of the e-book as a product of culture and technology, he opines that:

Revolution is what you get when technology and culture collide. The e-book revolution is changing all the rules for reading and writing. It’s changing entertainment, and it’s allowing our culture to immortalize itself through digitization. E-books can do things print books never could. You can now download an e-book as fast as you can call a friend on the phone. You can fit a library in your pocket (xii).

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth (2012) unlike Merkoski, elaborates more on the effect of not just the e-book but the future of literature as a whole. Wurth examines the relationship between the screen and the pages of a book, churning out a similarity in the way they (screen and the page) function to promote literature as a whole:

As a body of literature, is the page not already a screen, or a ‘screenic’ mode? Screens are things to hide things with, or project things onto. Screens are frames, or rather, they frame, and framing is crucial to literature as it is a condition of possibility for fiction—a demarcation of the imaginary. In the last century, “the screen” (cinema, TV, computer) has transformed the ways in which we design and approach narratives in literature. Thus, like the page, the screen should be a topical concept in literary studies (2).

The same way the pages of a book is the interactive medium between the author and his readers, the screen also serves as an intermediary between the author and the reader. According to Marie-Laure Ryan (1999), she explains further the multi-dimensional aspect of the screen especially the computer and the way it has revolutionize the way people approach literature. She opines that the computer is a new frontier with both enticing and forbidden promises, awaiting exploration and hatching new genres of discourse. (2)

This “New Frontier” according to Ryan is what is examined as literature and the New Media, this for Ryan is due to the evolving state of literature. The different dimensions of the New Media are constantly evolving; the internet, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Virtual World, Virtual Reality, Dital Humanities, and Ugmented Reality are some examples of the New Media. This paper adopts both a formalist approach and reader response theory to examine the way John Koethe and Rashidah Ismaili portray Lagos in their poems. These two poems where purposively selected because they happen to be the first two poems on Lagos in the internet via Google search with the catch word “poems on Lagos” on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2018, by 2AM.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

They are different tool or techniques available for conducting internet based research based on design issues and choice. This paper adopts Internet-Mediated Research (IMR) following Hewson, Yule, Laurent and Vogel (2003). Internet-Mediated Research involves the gathering of novel, original data (via the Internet) to be subjected to analysis in order to provide new evidence in relation to a particular research question (Hewson et al, 2003). The IMR is a choice based research. This paper adopts the IMR methodology because the poems used as primary materials for this research happens to be the first two poems on Lagos after a Google search with the catch word “poems on Lagos” was conducted. These two poems may be due to the process of first mention, or priorities or better put frequently visited poems. The choice of the two poems was due the fact that they were the first two poems on Lagos.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

One important thing to note when it comes to Formalism is, Formalism is an intrinsic critical approach to literary appreciation. To the formalist critic the element of form—style, structure, tone, imagery, metaphor etc found within the text are important to the analysis of the poem. A primary goal for formalist critics is to determine how such elements work together with the text's content to shape its effects upon readers. This paper pays attention to two figurative elements in these poems; metaphors and imageries of Lagos presented in them.

One general definition of metaphor is as a figure of speech in which one thing is represented (or spoken of) as something else. Traditionally, metaphor is considered as part of figures of speech, being used mainly in poetry. It is saying one thing in terms of something else. Robert Frost has said, "Poetry provides the one permissible way of saying one thing and meaning another." Words do have their literal meaning, but they can also be used so that something other than the literal (Lin Ma & Aihua Liu 2008, 260). This paper also adopts William Grey (2000) definition of Metaphor. He defines metaphor as "Metaphor, then, is not an alternative way of expressing common sense but a common way of achieving new sense (4)

Imagery in literature as a literary device, imagery consists of descriptive language that can function as a way for the reader to better imagine the world of the piece of literature and also add symbolism to the work. Imagery draws on the five senses, namely the details of taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound. This paper agrees with Debbie Barry (2010) definition of imagery thus:

Imagery is the heart of literature, which allows the reader to become immersed in the story, the poem, or the play. It provides all of the "details of sight, sound, taste, smell, and touch" (DiYanni, 2007, p. 779) that elicit emotional responses from the reader, and that allow the reader to experience the settings, the characters, and the actions in the piece. Without imagery, literature would be dry and sterile, and would be hard-pressed to touch the reader's imagination (2)

By adopting both Grey and Barry's definition of Metaphor and Imagery respectively, we are examining the literary core that these two poems hinge on.

The readers response theory, which is one important theory that is prominent when it comes to the New Media, it gives the writer an immediate response or a perspective to his work from the reader. It is either to affirm what is being written or refutes it, or raise other forms of controversy based on the reader's background. This controversy is based on the issues raised by the writer in his/her writing.

## 2.3 Background of The Authors

John Koethe Originally from San Diego, was born on December 25, 1945. He began writing poetry in 1964, during his undergraduate studies at Princeton University and went on to receive a PhD in philosophy from Harvard University. Koethe served as the Elliston Poet in Residence at the University of Cincinnati and as the Bain-Swiggett Professor of Poetry at Princeton University. He is currently a Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where he resides with his wife. Koethe is not a Nigerian, and he does not reside in Lagos, but his poem is based on Lagos. His poem is hinged on maybe, his travel visit to Lagos and hearsays and like the bible verse, his poem controls the perception of people of the world on how Lagos is.

Rashidah Ismaili; Poet, fiction writer, and playwright Rashidah Ismaili was born and raised in Cotonou, Benin. She earned a BFA in voice at the New York College of Music and a Masters in social psychology at the New School for Social Research. She earned her PhD in Ethnotherapy and Psychodrama from the Herbert Holt Institute for Psychotherapy. Ismaili has taught at Wilkes University and Rutgers University and has served as the associate director of the Pratt Institute Higher Education Opportunity Program and as vice president of Pen & Brush, an arts organization for women. She lives in New York City. She has a Nigerian father and a Benin republic mother. Ismaili claims to be from Benin republic premised on the fact that her mother comes from there.

Rashidah Ismaili and John Koethe, shear one thing in common, they don't live in Nigeria, which means their perspective on Lagos is hinged on visits to Lagos and hearsay. This is important in the analysis of these two poems, because it reflects the way the world views Lagos via the New Media. Another thing worthy of note is the first two poems about Lagos in the New Media via Google Search, are not written by Lagosians.

### 3. ANALYSIS OF JOHN KOETHE “THIS IS LAGOS”

The poem begins with a quote from T.S. Eliot “... hope would be hope for the wrong thing”. This extract creates an atmosphere for the poem and for the reader’s perception about Lagos and the concept of hope. Hope simply means expectation or desire, that means a person, can have an expectation or a desire for the wrong reason or thing. Indirectly Lagos and Lagosians may be having the wrong desire or expectation. This introduces the reader to the poem, and the first two lines upholds the reason for the extract from T.S Eliot

Instead of the usual welcoming sign to greet you  
There’s the brute statement: *This is Lagos*.  
If you make it to the island—if you make your way  
Across the bridge and past the floating slums  
And sawmills and the steaming garbage dumps, the auto yards           5  
Still burning with spilled fuel and to your final destination  
At the end of a long tracking shot, all of it on fire—  
You come face-to-face with hell: the pandemonium  
Of history’s ultimate bazaar, a breathing mass  
Whose cells are stalls crammed full of spare parts,                       10  
Chains, detergents, DVDs; where a continuous cacophony  
Of yells and radios and motorcycles clogs the air (lines: 1-12).

The first two lines depicts Lagos as an abnormal place “instead of the usual welcoming sign to greet you” indirectly, Lagos is not welcoming. Instead, Lagos is a place for brutes as reflected in the greeting that welcomes you to Lagos. Due to this brutality, you getting to your destination is a probability, the poet using the word “if” twice shows the certainty of the poet persona that you may not make it to your destination. He gives the reason for this probability, the first is the bridge, based on the poem, and Lagos has only a bridge this is based on the use of a definite article “the”. Or perhaps there are many bridges but Lagos is known for a particular bridge and the bridge is not safe.

The next thing that makes your movement in Lagos a probability is the “floating slums”. There are several dictionary definitions of the word slums; this paper will examine four of the several definitions of slum as it relates to the context of use in the poem. According to the *Miriam Webster’s Dictionary* a slum is defined as "a densely populated usually urban area marked by crowding, run-down housing, poverty, and social disorganization" the *Urban Dictionary* defines Slums in seven different ways, but for this paper, three out of the seven helps drive the poet's idea home. The first is "Poor quality, poor performance, not necessarily referring to poverty. A sad, destitute state. Evidence of decline (in quality)" the second entry is "a severe intoxicated mind state; the point of intoxication where fantasy becomes reality, whilst stepping outside of your usual realm" and the third comes with an analogy "It's hard to believe that some people ACTUALLY take pride in living in the slums. They sure must love the poverty, violence, and poor educational system of such an environment".

These different definition helps broaden the scope and extent of the word “slum”. It is both, physical, mental and psychological, but according to the poet what makes Lagos slums interesting and unique is that it is floating. Floating may be because Lagos is surrounded by water or the Slums in Lagos is unpredictable in nature and for that reason it is both volatile and dangerous in nature. For this reason, the poet advised that anyone going through Lagos may not get to his/her destination.

The poet further brings up the issue of the probability which hinges on the garbage in Lagos the noise, the spilled fuel from mechanic shops. The rowdiness the chaos; the best word to describe the uncertainty of Lagos is to juxtapose Lagos with “hell” where everything in and around Lagos is detrimental to the wellbeing of anybody coming to Lagos for the first time or those living in Lagos.

Across the ocean and a century away a culture died.  
The facts behind the Crow’s whole way of life—the sense  
Of who and what they were, their forms of excellence and bravery           15  
And honor—all dissolved, and their hearts “fell to the ground,  
And they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened”  
(Plenty Coups), meaning nothing they could do made any sense,  
Beyond the fact of biological survival... (13-19)

In lines thirteen and fourteen the poet talks about the death of a culture, this is due to slavery. The allusion to the Jim Crow era, their way of life, “the sense of who and what they were, their forms of excellence and bravery and honor” these lines juxtaposes the Lagosian way of life with the façade obtainable during the Crow’s life. To cover their hollowness of life, the use of brute force, oppression and impunity, leads to both depression and loss of courage to stand again. After this oppression, the ability to rise again is no more; Lagosians as presented by the poet in this poem are cowards.

The poet’s reference to “(Plenty Coups)” talks about the larger society; Nigeria. Coups can be defined as the violent overthrow or alteration of an existing government by a small group mainly done to salvage a situation caused by the government in power in order to create a better environment for the citizens of that community. But in the case of Lagos and Nigeria as a whole, the different coups are meaningless just a group of people trying to survive depicting Lagosians as people who can do anything just to benefit their selfish interest.

... It’s easy to forget  
How much of ordinary life, of what we value, long for, and recall— 15  
Ambition, admiration, even poetry—rests on things we take for granted,  
And how fragile those things are (13-16).

Due to the brute nature of Lagos and the greed of Lagosians, the poet depicts them as losing their humanity. The ordinariness of human life and cultural value, the arts and appreciation of humanity is taken for granted and since these virtues are fragile, they don’t exist in Lagos. Instead they try to cope, with the way life presents itself to them and hope for the future;

They could have tried to cope. Instead they found their solace  
In an indeterminate hope, a hope for a future they couldn’t yet imagine,  
Where their ways of life might somehow reemerge in forms 20  
Of which they couldn’t yet conceive, or even begin to understand.

The poet equally questions the future of Lagos. This is because Lagosians do not have a future plan, they live day by day the way it comes to them. Lagos robs Lagosians of the dream-life one imagines. The poet uses the simile to present a hopeless state full of emptiness “Like listening to a song with no sound, or drawing an imaginary line/In the imaginary sand in an imaginary world without boundaries” (45-46) this further spells out the hopeless future; the chase for the wind, the vanity in the life of the Lagosians. The existentialist mindset of the Lagosians whose premise of morality is faulty because what he thinks is good may not be good at the end because he lacks the understanding or moral compass to decipher good and evil. For Lagos is a postmodern state that has blurred the line between good and evil, real and unreal, a state that has no boundaries, for that reason, everything and anything is permitted and possible.

It feels compelling, and I even think it’s true. But these are things  
I’ve only read about in magazines and book reviews, and not experienced,  
Which was Plato’s point—that poets don’t know what they talk about.  
It doesn’t matter though, for most of what we think of as our lives  
Is lived in the imagination, like the Crows’s inchoate hope, or the fantasies  
Of those who leave a village in the country for the city in the smoke.

In these lines the poet tries to give a disclaimer of what he is writing by saying he has not experienced all what he is saying but the irony is glaring because of his references to books and magazines as his primary source, and he, the poet, “thinks” it is true. The poet also make reference to Plato’s structure of the society, where poets due to the influence they have and can create in the lives of the citizens should be excommunicated/banned from the society. The poet hides under Plato’s observation and gives a disclaimer that he may actually not know what he is writing about. Despite the disclaimer, the poet and the poem is still on the net he also justifies his point with the concept of human existence, “for most of what we think of our lives/is lived in the imagination”. That means if life is imagined, the life of the migrant, who thinks leaving his village to Lagos will better his lot, based on his imagination of what he (the migrant) thinks of Lagos, has embarked on a futile journey, because Lagos is a smoke, a chasing of the wind, a place that cannot be grasped.

And when I look in my imagination for the future, it isn’t hope and restoration  
That I find but smoldering tires and con men in a world of megacities  
And oil fields, where too much has been annexed to be restored.

The poet now refer back to his imagination of Lagos and equally the future of Lagos and the only conclusion that he finds is not hope and restoration instead he sees a place of fast “con men” who have annexed the oil fields to the point that it cannot be salvaged. In simple words, Lagos is a harbinger of con men, and embezzlers of the oil fields of the nation. Relating his life experience to that of the Lagosian, the poet gets scared;

...What scares me is the thought  
That in a world that isn't far away this quaint ideal of the personal  
Is going to disappear, dissolving in those vast, impersonal calculations  
Through which money, the ultimate abstraction, renders each life meaningless,  
By rendering the forms of life that make it seem significant impossible.

The choices made by the Lagosian does not bring to consideration his past or his future what is the driving force is money, and through the poets consideration, the kind of life the Lagosian aspires to live will disappear, finding out that through his actions and inactions he (the Lagosian) has just been existing and never lived the kind of life he desired because the means to keep such a life going is significantly impossible.

The poet concentrates on another group of Lagosians which he calls “Urban destitute”

*Face me I face you*: packed into rooms with concrete beds  
And not a trace of privacy, subsisting on contaminated water, luck,  
And palm-wine gin, with lungs scarred from the burning air, 65  
These are the urban destitute, the victims of a gospel of prosperity  
Untouched by irony or nostalgia—for how can you discover  
What you haven't felt, or feel the loss of things you've never known?

“*Face me I face you*” is a name for a kind of house structure in Lagos, mostly for the poor who cannot afford to live in the highbrow areas. These kind of houses are common in the slums. One thing the poet mentions about the *Face me I Face you* kind of building, is they lack privacy, who manage to survive on contaminated water, which juxtaposes the fact that there are no good water system or basic amenities in Lagos. These same people (*Face Me I Face You dwellers*) don't have a life for that reason their lives is a gamble; since they survive via luck and gin. They are the most affected by the environmental pollution of the city. One thing is they believe in a gospel of prosperity, we can't say if they hear these in the church or in the mosque since it is not stated in the poem. They believe in the dream and news of prosperity despite being destitute or penniless. In line 67 and 68, the poet makes reference to “irony or nostalgia”; irony here is used to explain the complaisant life of these Urban destitute who cannot phantom the life they are living that they are destitute. The second is the use of the word “nostalgia” a longing for home; indirectly most of the people that live in such places are the rural urban migrants that desire a better life in Lagos, and they are so engrossed in the quest for this better life that they lack empathy or desire to go home. Further depicting the way the hustle and demands of Lagos is.

I write because I can: talking to myself, composing poems  
And wondering what you'll make of them; shoring them 70  
Against the day our minor ways of life have finally disappeared  
And we're not even ghosts. Meanwhile life regresses  
Towards the future, death by death. You to whom I write,  
Or wish that I could write long after my own death,  
When it's too late to talk to you about the world you live in, 75  
This is the world you live in: This is Lagos.

The poets ending lines juxtaposes three different realities side by side. The first being the poet's personality. He addresses the reason why he writes, which is the ability to bring things that are weak together as a memory to the way one perceives his/her minor way of life. The second is the poet leaves evidences to the reader to interpret these assemblage of his findings. The poet becomes a reminder of the things we fail to understand and know about our environment. The third is the truth he presents about the future “...life regresses/ towards the future death by death.” For this three different reasons, the environment he finds himself, the things he could find out about the environment and the way life is short, he wishes he could write long before he is gone, but before it is too late for him (the poet) to talk, he presents the world we live in, which he narrows down to the world “you” (the Lagosian) lives in.

He concludes this poem with the same emphasis he begins the poem, which is, the Lagos he presents in his poem is based on his quest to preserve the minor ways of life before they disappear. To him Lagos is a melting pot of everything bad and uncertain.

#### 4. ANALYSIS OF RASHIDAH ISMAILI'S "LAGOS"

Rashidah Ismaili in her poem "Lagos" equally presents a similar picture of Lagos. She personalizes Lagos and with subtle and personal diction she presents a Lagos someone should abhor. Her opening lines talks about the surroundings

Lagos you are dirty  
Your sand is soiled  
Your fruits pithy.

The opening lines presents Lagos as a dirty place due to the garbage dumps on the sands. Depicting Lagos as a place that lacks hygiene and a sense of sanitation. Her next lines presents a personal connection and attitude towards Lagos "I am tied to you". She explains why she is tired of Lagos in lines 5-15, she narrates her tale of being in a strange land where they queue to buy foodstuffs meant for Lagosians is shipped off. This singular act results in the high cost of living in Lagos. The poet is left in awe at the cost of one Paw-paw, one mango:

...marvel  
at the cost of one  
paw paw, just one mango  
singular, along and apart  
from you my dirty city.

The poet still ends the thought with emphasis that Lagos is a dirty city, where the cost of just one mango, a singular mango makes her marvel. The poet focuses on the streets of the city and expatiates on the dirty environment. This time around focusing on air pollution, she presents it in a way that it chokes her

O Lagos, your streets  
are packed and pollute  
the air while here in  
a smug smogged city  
I choke.

The way the houses are arranged, according to the poet, it shows a city that is not planned. This makes Lagos packed, suffocating and choking due to lack of ventilation. The poet becomes personal and associates herself with the Mami market mothers, who are repeating the same cycle day after day with their foodstuff, no progress no future just the same tin pots. Depicting the struggle to survive in a harsh environment, where their food is rotting and ought to be thrown out. Food meant for beast of the forest, becomes an option for survival due to the poverty rate and the corrupt state of the city. The poet likened their suffering to cord that cuts her throat.

Your cord cuts my throat.  
...  
Their food is rotting and  
ought to be thrown out to  
the birds and beasts of  
the forest/ but the lines!  
O God, these lines are so long  
and between the houses and  
the foodstuffs so many palms  
must be oiled.

The poet focuses on the environment again, this time around, she highlights the natural resources found in Lagos, "Black Gold". This is another name for crude oil, still in its natural state, unrefined and a few Lagosians are enjoying these resources in abundance, and yet the state of the common man is the same:

Nairas are dripping with black gold  
and yet a beggar man's lot is the

same/ He covers his shame as best  
he can and little boys skip school.

The common man is ashamed of his state or position, because he is subjected to a beggar in a land of plenty. The poet concludes this thought with little boys skipping school, and she doesn't give reasons why they skip school. The poet then focuses our attention to the security of the city. She explains the role of the policeman in the city:

A policeman holds his right hand out  
a green car passes him dash. And we go  
dash you dis and we go dash you dat  
and mek we do business.

The job of the policeman as presented in the poem is to get hand-outs, not to protect the people. The poet in a bid to drive home her point with the police officer ends up using a dialogue, from the people patronizing the police force; "... and we go/ dash you dis and we go dash you dat/ and mek we do business" (39-41). This dialogue presents the policeman as a business man who sells his services to the highest bidder and not as a civil responsibility. The poet also uses the same dialogue to express her frustration with Lagos; "O Lagos, Lagos, ah say, you don tyah/ fo dis? Yousef wey you de com fom?" (42-43) but the poet's background is equally asked and in a bid to answer this question, the poet introduces us to another aspect of Lagos the poet longs to see and juxtaposes it with the present realities;

Me, I long for the cleanliness of  
sand roads that breathe long in carefully  
spaced intervals between cars running  
wild like mustangs roaming the plains.  
There are no drivers to speak of.  
They have vanished over the hills and  
into gulleys (sic).

The poet longs for a clean road, which means the roads of Lagos are not clean. She talks about the drivers who know how to drive "... in carefully/ spaced intervals between cars running..." (45-46). The poet likened the drivers as running wild like mustangs roaming the plains. The use of simile shows the lack of direction and order in the way the drivers drive. Due to this recklessness, the poet ends this flow of thought with a statement of certainty, that there are no drivers to speak of./ they have vanished over the hills and into gulleys" (48-50). That is to say, the good drivers are no more due to accidents, over the hills or into gullies to meet a not too pleasant fate.

The poet tries to give a rationale for the happenings in Lagos and comes with her conclusion;

The seeds have been planted. It is a  
bitter harvest we reap. The deeds have  
been done. What has been sown is the  
flower of our calabashes on the eve of  
harvest. ...

55

According to the poet, present day Lagos is the fruit of what was planted, and the deeds has been done. The deeds in this case is the seed, and the seed as explained by her is not a seed but "...the/ flower of our calabashes..." (53-54). That means Lagos had no foundation from the onset, it had no seed to follow in order to bear fruit for a better Lagos. The poet further gives reasons for the lack of seeds to plant. She relates it to the harbor of oppression named after a queen;

My harbour is named after a queen whose  
son's footprints are planted like a bad  
seed on the headdress of my children.

60

This aspect of the poem talks about the queen in this case signifying colonization and the legacy of colonization is still oppressive on the children of the colonized.

The poet concludes her poem with an advice to Lagos, for her let Lagos lay her plans carefully, signifying that prior to the poem, Lagos had no plans, and for that reason these havoc and quagmire is happening.

Lagos, lay your plans carefully. There  
is no way to stop the rise of bicycles  
and lorries, hopeful bodies and empty  
pots. ...

65

The call for Lagos to have a plan will help accommodate the growth that is happening around her and also deal with the problem that comes with this growth. The people will still acquire things leaving Lagos rowdy, noisy and polluted. Not only that, Lagosians still hopeful that Lagos will do them good and others who will still go home to meet hunger “empty pots”. The poet cries out to Lagosians in the last lines of the poem;

... We are not an oasis in a  
dying desert/ Have we not learnt, o  
Lagos, the sound of seductive songs  
and sights that blind us  
between need and life there must be hope/ 70

The poet identifies with Lagosians reminding them they are not a fertile spot in a dying desert, indirectly they are not a fertile place in Nigeria, they shouldn't be carried away by the things around them and the music/ praise songs they hear for these things (the praise songs) blind them at the end. They should not just want to satisfy their needs or survive or live, they should have hope. This hope may be the Lagos she longs to see even though the poet did not explain the hope.

Based on the formalist reading of the two poems; “This is Lagos” and “Lagos” by John Koethe and Rashidah Ismaili respectively, introduces a kind of Lagos that is not welcoming to the world at large. The picture of Lagos painted by both poets in the canvas of their poem programs how the world sees Lagos and Nigeria as a whole. To be direct and formal, Lagos is really presented as a “Shit Hole”, through formalist reading of Koethe's “This is Lagos” and Ismaili's “Lagos” they both came to this same conclusion. Koethe writing his poem from an observer's perspective paints Lagos as a shit hole, Ismaili writing hers from a participant perspective equally arrives at the same conclusion, that Lagos is indeed a shit hole. Ironically these two writers represent the two different genders. To have a holistic analysis of the two poems, the second theory Reader Response theory is important.

With Readers Response theory, we are able to get the views of different people about the same subject, whether they agree to the views presented by both Koethe and Ismaili or disagree totally to what these two poets have presented in their poems. One thing that amazes me is that, there is not even a single response by Lagosians to refute what Koethe and Ismaili have presented in their poems and for this reason, silence is acceptance. This silence can be because there is no place created for comment in the supposed websites that hosted the two poems, even though it is not a reason enough. Or Lagos is really a place to abhor, or simply explained, Lagos is a shit hole.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The world may not come to Lagos to know Lagos on a one on one basis. Secondly, not everyone will buy novels and poetry collections that presents Lagos in a positive light or maybe the way we think or know Lagos to be. For me, since as a little child and even in most Nigerian Home videos, when I started to hear of Lagos, Lagos is painted as an Oasis, and to most of my friends in the South. A dream place to be, a heaven where you can make it overnight. Our own America. The truth is, that was then, now, the world is connected through the internet, and every knowledge is a click away, this equally applies to Lagos, Lagos is a click away. He that controls the airwaves rules the world; Koethe and Ismaili have controlled the airwaves of Lagos and how the rest of the world should view Lagos by being the first two poems on and about Lagos I saw in the net. In their poems, Lagos is a “shithole”.

One theory that the new media brings life is the reader response theory, this serves as a backdoor for Lagosians to counter what has been written; and all we see is silence. When Lagosians are silent about Lagos, others will help describe Lagos to the best of their insufficient knowledge. When people outside who have not lived in Lagos, Nigeria or Africa comes on air and call us a “shithole” they don't just fabricate the word, Koethe and Ismaili told them in their poems and our silence justifies their claims.

## APPENDIX

### Appendix 1

JOHN KOETHE

THIS IS LAGOS

. . . hope would be hope for the wrong thing

—T. S. Eliot

Instead of the usual welcoming sign to greet you  
There's the brute statement: *This is Lagos*.  
If you make it to the island—if you make your way  
Across the bridge and past the floating slums  
And sawmills and the steaming garbage dumps, the auto yards  
Still burning with spilled fuel and to your final destination  
At the end of a long tracking shot, all of it on fire—  
You come face-to-face with hell: the pandemonium  
Of history's ultimate bazaar, a breathing mass  
Whose cells are stalls crammed full of spare parts,  
Chains, detergents, DVDs; where a continuous cacophony  
Of yells and radios and motorcycles clogs the air.  
They arrive from everywhere, attracted by the promise  
Of mere possibility, by the longing for a different kind of day  
Here in the city of scams, by a hope that quickly comes to nothing.  
To some it's a new paradigm, "an announcement of the future"  
Where disorder leads to unexpected patterns, unimagined opportunities  
That mutate, blossom, and evolve. To others it's the face of despair.  
These are the parameters of life, a life doled out in quarters,  
In the new, postmodern state of nature: garbage and ground plastic  
And no place to shit or sleep; machetes, guns, and e-mails  
Sent around the world from Internet cafés; violence and chaos  
And a self-effacing sprawl that simply makes no sense  
When seen from ground zero, yet exhibits an abstract beauty  
When seen from the air—which is to say, not seen at all.

Across the ocean and a century away a culture died.  
The facts behind the Crow's whole way of life—the sense  
Of who and what they were, their forms of excellence and bravery  
And honor—all dissolved, and their hearts "fell to the ground,  
And they could not lift them up again. After this nothing happened"  
(Plenty Coups), meaning nothing they could do made any sense,  
Beyond the fact of biological survival. It's easy to forget  
How much of ordinary life, of what we value, long for, and recall—  
Ambition, admiration, even poetry—rests on things we take for granted,  
And how fragile those things are. "I am trying to live a life I do not understand,"  
A woman said, when the buffalo and the coups they underwrote were gone.  
They could have tried to cope. Instead they found their solace  
In an indeterminate hope, a hope for a future they couldn't yet imagine,  
Where their ways of life might somehow reemerge in forms  
Of which they couldn't yet conceive, or even begin to understand.  
It was a dream of a different life, a life beyond the reservation  
Without any tangible location, predicated on a new idea of the good  
With no idea of what it was, or what achieving it might mean—  
Like listening to a song with no sound, or drawing an imaginary line

In the imaginary sand in an imaginary world without boundaries.

It feels compelling, and I even think it's true. But these are things  
I've only read about in magazines and book reviews, and not experienced,  
Which was Plato's point—that poets don't know what they talk about.  
It doesn't matter though, for most of what we think of as our lives  
Is lived in the imagination, like the Crows's inchoate hope, or the fantasies  
Of those who leave a village in the country for the city in the smoke.  
And when I look in *my* imagination for the future, it isn't hope and restoration  
That I find but smoldering tires and con men in a world of megacities  
And oil fields, where too much has been annexed to be restored.  
I have the luxury of an individual life that has its own trajectory and scope  
When taken on its terms—the terms I chose—however unimportant it might seem  
From the vantage point of history or the future. What scares me is the thought  
That in a world that isn't far away this quaint ideal of the personal  
Is going to disappear, dissolving in those vast, impersonal calculations  
Through which money, the ultimate abstraction, renders each life meaningless,  
By rendering the forms of life that make it seem significant impossible.  
*Face me I face you:* packed into rooms with concrete beds  
And not a trace of privacy, subsisting on contaminated water, luck,  
And palm-wine gin, with lungs scarred from the burning air,  
These are the urban destitute, the victims of a gospel of prosperity  
Untouched by irony or nostalgia—for how can you discover  
What you haven't felt, or feel the loss of things you've never known?  
I write because I can: talking to myself, composing poems  
And wondering what you'll make of them; shoring them  
Against the day our minor ways of life have finally disappeared  
And we're not even ghosts. Meanwhile life regresses  
Towards the future, death by death. You to whom I write,  
Or wish that I could write long after my own death,  
When it's too late to talk to you about the world you live in,  
This is the world you live in: This is Lagos.

## LAGOS

BY RASHIDAH ISMAILI

Lagos you are dirty  
Your sand is soiled  
Your fruits pithy.

I am tied to you  
in a strange land  
by lines that queue up  
for foodstuffs you  
should be eating but  
ship off to me here  
where I stand on check  
out lines and marvel  
at the cost of one  
paw paw, just one mango  
singular, along and apart  
from you my dirty city.

O Lagos, your streets  
are packed and pollute  
the air while here in  
a smug smogged city  
I choke.

Your cord cuts my throat.  
I am hurt and I cry like  
my Mami market mothers  
who go home night after  
night with the same tin pots.  
Their food is rotting and  
ought to be thrown out to  
the birds and beasts of  
the forest/ but the lines!  
O God, these lines are so long  
and between the houses and  
the foodstuffs so many palms  
must be oiled.

Nairas are dripping with black gold  
and yet a beggar man's lot is the  
same/ He covers his shame as best  
he can and little boys skip school.  
A policeman holds his right hand out  
a green car passes him dash. And we go  
dash you dis and we go dash you dat  
and mek we do business.

O Lagos, Lagos, ah say, you don tyah  
fo dis? Yousef wey you de com fom?  
Me, I long for the cleanliness of  
sand roads that breathe long in carefully  
spaced intervals between cars running  
wild like mustangs roaming the plains.  
There are no drivers to speak of.  
They have vanished over the hills and  
into gulleys.

The seeds have been planted. It is a  
bitter harvest we reap. The deeds have  
been done. What has been sown is the  
flower of our calabashes on the eve of  
harvest. If only the waters in the Marina  
If only the waves would whisper  
louder the secrets of her beaches I would  
know all/

My harbour is named after a queen whose  
son's footprints are planted like a bad  
seed on the headdress of my children.

Lagos, lay your plans carefully. There  
is no way to stop the rise of bicycles  
and lorries, hopeful bodies and empty  
pots. You divert dash for food, care

for business. We are not an oasis in a  
dying desert/ Have we not learnt, o  
Lagos, the sound of seductive songs  
and sights that blind us  
between need and life there must be hope

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