Addis is in many ways a unique city. It is an autochthonous city and one of the few capitals in the Global South that does not trace its origin to colonialism. Unlike most capital cities that owe their origin to colonialism, looking outwards rather than inwards with their back to their own population and homelands, Addis Ababa is not a coastal city. It is located at the geographical center of Ethiopia. As a city that looks inwards to its homeland, it’s raison d’ être was not to serve European colonial interests, logics and whims, but rather a city conceived, built and essentially driven by internal forces, dynamics and motives. As an autochthonous city, Addis lacks the clearly defined spaces of the colonial/European city. Nor is Addis Ababa a city indelibly marred by the racial, cultural and symbolic boundaries and segregated spaces that are typical of the colonial city.

In this regard, just like Ethiopia itself, Addis Ababa is a space that irks both colonial discourse and post-colonial theory. The “Black” and “White” Manichean logic defining the colonial city, world and everyday life that Frantz Fanon wrote so forcefully about was not a defining characteristic of the material, lived and imagined/symbolic spaces of Addis Ababa. The Manichean logic of the colonial city epitomizes a disjuncture between body and space, self and the world, a split urban psycho-geography and schizophrenic space where the colonized native does not feel and is not at home in the colonial city. In the words of Frantz Fanon, “Because it is as systematic negation of the other person and a furious determination to deny the other person all attributes of humanity, colonialism forces the people it dominates to ask themselves

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1 Dante, *The Inferno* (Canto XXXI, 19-21)
2 The short-lived Italian occupation, I would argue, did not leave lasting imprints on the city, as opposed to colonial cities in Africa or elsewhere.
3 1968: 20
the question constantly: *In reality, who am I?* In contrast, Addis Ababa was a city unmarked by ‘white supremacist’, colonial and Manichean logic. For it has been said that, “Ethiopians are the only African people in the world who take their humanity for granted, with no inferiority complexes or anxieties about their intellectual or moral capacities”⁴.

Well, that was then. Nowadays, it is as if Addis has willfully enslaved itself. In an ironical twist of history, the capital city of a country that was never colonized is now utterly *Westoxicated*. Its elites are intoxicated with anything and everything “western”. “Colonial Furniture” to wit …

**Philosophizing with a Bulldozer⁵**

For much of its history, Addis Ababa grew in a haphazard manner, its neighborhoods growing outward from a center (the Palace, a Church and/or the house of a warlord/dignitary). The spatial structure of Addis bears the distinctive signs of a city formed by concentric rings coalescing on each other, whose ripples merged to form a bewildering maze of byways and alleyways, winding roads and dead-end streets. Addis is a city with an unruly geography, difficult to fully rein or tame. For much of its history, Addis was the ‘unplanned’ city and had managed to save itself from the scalpel of the urban planner and the geometer who loves ordered spaces and neat distinctions, whose goal is to make the spaces of the city decipherable, transparent and governable. As noted by Arturo Escobar⁶:

> … one cannot look on the bright side of planning, its modern achievements (if one were to accept them), without at the same time looking at its dark side of domination. The management of the social has produced modern subjects who are not only dependent on professionals for their needs, but also ordered into realities (cities, health and educational systems, economies, etc.) that can be governed by the state through planning. Planning requires the normalization and standardization of reality, which in turns entails injustice and erasure of difference and diversity. … Once normalized, regulated and ordered, individuals, societies and economies can be subjected to the scientific gaze and social engineering scalpel of the planner, who like the surgeon operating on the human body, can then attempt to produce the desired type of social change.

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⁴ West 1993: xiv
⁵ An allusion to Nietzsche’s ”Twilight of the Idols or, How to Philosophize with A Hammer”
⁶ 1992: 133-134
The urban planner is the antonym of chance, of the disorderly - a child of modernist philosophy, whose motto is “everything in its place and a place for everything.” Driven by the utilitarian logic and the gridded aesthetics of Euclidian geometry, modern planning wages war on the spontaneous, unwieldy and the fleeting/mobile. The modern urban planner is a storm trooper of sorts. Modern urban society and its planning rationality as Lefebvre famously averred are testaments to the death of God and Man.

When one bulldozes one’s way, s/he does not simply pave way for the new on the ashes of the old. It is not simply old dilapidated dwellings, buildings and neighborhoods that are destroyed but rather the fabric of the city. What are being reduced to dust are the very ligaments that hold sefers and urban communities together. Places are not simply physical containers, backdrops or arenas where social life is played out, as modern planners steeped in functionalism would have us believe. On the contrary, places are integral to the life of neighborhoods and cities. Places are invested with meanings, memories and identities. Places are like thick social texts, are not incidental but rather constituent of the city and urban life. All these neighborhoods that are feeling the brunt of a city that is bent on modernizing itself at any cost and is in a frenzy to remake itself anew are witnessing the destruction of their genus loci (spirit of place). Not even burial grounds have been spared from the scalpel of the planner and Macadamization. As Patrick Chamoiseau put it so forcefully:

In the eyes of the modernist (Western) urban planner, squatters, slums and poor areas in the city are like a tumor on the urban order. Incoherent. Insalubrious. A dynamic contestation. A threat. Such places are denied any architectural or social value. Political discourse negates it. Such spaces are simply a problem. Yet to raze these spaces is to send the problem elsewhere, or worse: not to consider it.

The genus loci is not something that can be dismantled here and re-assembled elsewhere at will. Worlds of myths, collective identities, memories and affinities to places are being scattered to the winds by urban renewal, gentrification and the planned displacement of urban residents in cities.

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7 1996: 149
8 1997: 268-69
like Addis Ababa. Planning rationality and practices geared towards the creation of spaces based on the principle of value maximization are inimical to the right of the city as livable space and as life enhancing and affirming space. It is a process whose culmination cannot but be a soulless city, a city that has lost its genius loci, a zombie city.

Addis Ababa must be one of the few capital cities that cannot boast to having a city park worth its name. What I saw was actually a city that is waging war on nature and urban greenery, with blocks upon blocks of high-rise buildings, with narrow pavements that gut out into asphalted streets. Is not Addis Ababa actually a city at war with itself? A willfully amnesiac city, that is bent on doing away with its past – erasing or bulldozing its hard ware, so to speak? A placeless, faceless geography is slowly swallowing the city. No sidewalk trees, no city parks, no open spaces where people can enjoy a city stroll away from the abominable traffic, no lawns or children’s playgrounds. Not even benches where young love doves may steal a kiss or two, or simply enjoy the view for that matter. Addis has waged war on open spaces, on green areas, on nature. A morbid aesthetics has taken hold of the city. It has become a concrete monotony of high-rise buildings and beehives, devoid of the slightest architectural imagination, rhyme or reason – functionalism cloned ad infinitum. It has become an amalgam of inauthentic spaces and non-places, adorned by neon lights and slick façades, the spaces of spectacle, hedonism and abandon that litter downtown and that beckons the nouveau riche as well as the moneyed diaspora. The diaspora community is a key agent of gentrification and Westoxication – Ethiopia’s post-colonial évoluté.

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9 1996: 149
10 Évolué denotes colonials who were considered “evolved/developed” – educated Africans who imbibed colonial values, manners and frames of mind, i.e., the “Uncle Tom Niggers” in the words of Malcolm X.
Down the Rabbit Hole of *Westoxication*

The spatial semiotics and the urban vernacular of Addis are testimony of the spirit and psychology of the *Westoxication* that has taken hold of the urban imagination. The spatial semiotics and the (visual) economy of signs of Addis Ababa are saturated English/Western place names, imageries and motifs. Ethiopia maybe one of the few countries in the world that boasts its own alphabet, yet the cafés, pastries, pubs, restaurants, shops, supermarkets and even barber shops in Addis, prefer English names, posters, panels or signs. Never mind if the spelling or wordings is not always right. It is English and it is the sign of suavity, which is what matters. Hilarious volumes are waiting to be written on the adventures in spelling mistakes and broken English that comprise the sign-scapes of Addis. The Ethiopian alphabet comes second or is simply tucked in. Many do not even bother to put up shop in the Ethiopian alphabet. Nor, from what I gather, does the municipality of Addis require official signs in the Ethiopian alphabet.

Nomenclatures and western signs taken for wonders: this is not mimicry á la Homi Bhabha\(^{11}\) - no puns, jests or witticisms are intended by the billboards of the *Westoxicated Yarada lijoch!* Sad to say, but what we have here is fetishism, the adoration of anything and everything “whitey”. The vernacular of Addis is a bizarre mixture of Amharic and English. The Amharic sports programs announce upcoming English Premier League football dates in English: “bemiketilew – January, be February degmo …” Football fans in Addis know more about the comings and goings of English Premier League Soccer than the local football clubs. Bumper stickers with emblems of Arsenal, Manchester U or C, Liverpool FC, etc., adorn private cars and taxies. *Wey Addis Ababa boy!*

Yet, it is not just the realm of the banal and everyday vernacular of Addis that is saturated by copious *Westoxication*. The western signs taken for wonders have seized the spiritual life of the city as well. Like many other cities in Africa and beyond, the *Metie Haimanot*, literally religious implants (Pentecostals and Jehovah Witnesses) have made unmistakable inroads into the body

\(^{11}\) Bhabha 1994
and soul of Addis. In a manner of speaking, Addis is now possessed by the ghosts of alien religions – apparently God is not dead yet, eh? Making headway in Ethiopia - the oldest Christian nation on earth, is no mean feat. So now Addis “boasts” of having its “pastors”, “ministers”, “preachers” Always dressed in suits, the young apostles of Metie Haimanot brandish English bibles in leathered purses, fish for souls lost in the wilderness of the city. It is no coincidence that they remind one of technocrats and businessmen, than pious disciples. For, the new religionists are indeed in business. As the Comaroffs wryly note,

inner-worldly asceticism has been replaced with a concern for the pragmatics of material gain and the immediacy of desire. The return on capital has suddenly become more spiritually compelling and imminent . . . than the return of Christ. For them, and for their many millions of members, the Second Coming evokes not a Jesus who saves, but one who pays dividends. Or, more accurately, one who promises a miraculous return on a limited spiritual investment.”

Invest in Jesus and cash in salvation, with placards advertising the yields in store for the believers. One could say that the “temples” and “churches” are but spiritual shopping malls. Many of their Churches are in those areas of Addis that have undergone large-scale gentrification. And they too know how to get the real deal from the herd - pastors John, minister David and preacher Michael. Evidently, female co-religionists have no titles or positions in Metie Haimanotoch. And so we have the bizarre spectacle of celebrating the Ferenj Christmas with flashing neon lights to boot, and the run of the mill adornment of Ethiopian shops and homes by “Father Christmas” or “Santa Claus” during the Ethiopian Christmas! “Pity the nation that is full of beliefs and empty of religion … an whose art is the art of patching and mimicking”

What of the poor that make up the majority of the city’s inhabitants? Well, one thing is for sure. The meek are neither blessed, nor shall they inherit the earth (pace Wengel Matieos 5:5). For ”the people in the slums know that eviction and life in these flats would reduce their means of reproduction and the possibilities for subsistence production. Furthermore access to work is more, difficult due to the location of these flats. This is the simple reason why the slum dwellers prefer to stay in the slum and are starting to fight against eviction. For them the slum is the place where production under deteriorating circumstances is still possible.”

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12 Comaroff & Comaroff 2001:35
13 Gibran 1934
14 Davis 2007: 64
“Gilded Captivity”

Fortified, fantasy-themed enclaves, dis-embedded from their own social landscapes … the Third World urban bourgeoisie cease to be citizens of their own country and become nomads belonging to, and owing allegiance to, a super terrestrial topography of money; they become patriots of wealth, nationalists of an elusive and golden nowhere.\textsuperscript{15}

Gentrification processes offer clues into processes of economic and social restructuring of cities and societies at large. Current gentrification processes taking place in Addis Ababa are driven by a whole gamut of key players or agents, viz., the municipality/state, private/speculative capital, construction companies and real estate agencies. Addis is currently experiencing uneven but substantial gentrification, primarily along its South and Eastern axes (corridors). One can discern the basic contours of a wedged city in the making, with a posh and modern southern half and an older and down-market northern half. Gentrification processes are part and parcel of the global neoliberal restructuring of cities over the past three decades or so. Interventionist state policies with view to assist developers, not least by removing hinders to “urban renewal” and creating proper investment climates for the second circuit of capital are central to the process. The second circuit is relatively autonomous from the primary circuit of manufacturing or industrial circuit of capital\textsuperscript{16}. It is the sphere of risk or venture capital, loans and mortgage banks, real estate and construction companies, as well as private investors. In the post-political present, urban planning has been subordinated to the logic of value maximization, credit and speculation. The construction boom in Addis Ababa is testimony to the huge amounts of financial capital in circulation in the urban secondary circuit. Yet, the many unfinished buildings, with construction either abandoned or on hold (often in upscale areas of the city) that dot Addis Ababa, telltale some of the shady and unsavory founts behind the building boom.

Gentrification, urban renewal and redevelopment “strive to simultaneously maximize private profit and social control. The contemporary scale of population removal is immense: every year hundreds of thousands, sometimes millions, of poor people - legal tenants as well as
squatters - are forcibly evicted from Third World neighborhoods. The urban poor, as a result, are nomads, transients in a perpetual state of relocation.”⁴¹⁷ The spatial restructuring of the city is actually a war waged on the poor and their livelihood strategies. As noted, gentrification offers insights into wider spatial, economic, political and social restructuring of cities and societies. What we are witnessing is the radical revamping of city life and urban spaces. A palpable effect of this in Addis is that the city is witnessing “… a drastic diminution of the intersections between the lives of the rich and the poor, which transcends traditional social segregation and urban fragmentation.”⁴¹⁸ Once a city that offered ample venues for ‘natural’ social intercourse between the haves and have-nots, as well as other social divides, Addis is now fast becoming a city segregated along class and spatial lines.

The gated community phenomenon, i.e., “the explosive growth of exclusive, closed suburbs on the peripheries of Third World cities”⁴¹⁹, has descended on Addis. Riviera in Abidjan, Zamalek in Cairo, Victoria Island in Lagos, Orange County and Beverley Hills in Beijing are some examples from the Global South. We might add “Top View Mansions”, unabashedly called the Beverly Hills of Addis, or the Jacross gated community or the Old Airport area to the list. Gated communities are “off worlds” (ibid.) – bizarre implants on the corpus of the city and the safe havens that only the rich can escape to⁴²⁰, sealed off from the rest of the city. The residents of gated communities may physically be in the city, yet to all intents and purposes are not of the city. They are literally hemmed in, living in a bubble where the latest celebrity gossip, fashion and gadgetry spewed forth by Americana are “the talk of the town” and the symbolic/cultural capital of the elite. Sadly enough, it is said that Amharic is not the mother tongue in these capsular

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¹⁷ Davis 2007: 98
¹⁸ Ibid. 119
¹⁹ Davis 2007: 115
²⁰ Ibid.
worlds. The rich and upper classes have, Mike Davis notes in his inimitable way, “seceded from public space - as well as from any vestige of a shared civic life with the poor.”

How can one then speak of the *polis*, the urban polity that strives for the greater good, in a city where urban *public* spaces are de facto privatized, where individuals can put-up speed breakers or bumps set-up on public roads or street as if these were their private lanes, as in Sunshine Row? A city where individuals act as sovereigns and cordon-off pavements and hinder pedestrian traffic? Can we speak of the urban square, where citizens can meet and deliberate, when private LED or electronic billboards (for ex Edna Mall billboard) literally spews out deafening adverts of the latest Hollywood action film onto a public space?

**Addis Redux?**

Urban life has yet to begin. Or else there is nihilism. For if man is dead for whom will we build? What is beckoning out of the ashes of the old is an “urban society and the human as *oeuvre* in this society which would be an *oeuvre* and not a product.” So how and what is to be done? For Chamoiseau, what is needed is a resounding “No, we must dismiss the West and re-learn to read: learn to reinvent the city”. In plain language, Ethiopian planners or for that matter intellectuals, have to learn to think in Geez. To form our cities to fit our histories, desires, imaginations, dreams and myths of who we are, what we will and might be.

Mekonnen Tesfahuney
Meskerem 2006 EC

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21 Ibid: 119
22 Lefebvre 1986 149-159
23 Ibid.