from embarrassed comparisons of its culture with an imputed authentic English one (pp. 183–4).

Through these prisms, Pikó deftly connects the history of Milton Keynes with a broader national context and helps to explain why, despite MKDC's own shifting promotional strategies and approaches to development, the town continued to be disparaged from different ideological positions, through representational strategies that were themselves in flux yet held many unchanging points of reference. The enduring origin of such attacks, Pikó argues, is a conservative, closed-loop system of deriving value from physical spaces, which defined the national landscape's meaning in its apparent unchangingness, and thus elides how Britain's former 'greatness' was achieved through imperial expansion. Milton Keynes, by contrast, embodied Labour's post-war vision that Britain could be yet better, and that future urban development promised a still undefined value that residents themselves would take a role in shaping. This vision was increasingly assailed in pessimistic discourses that denied state planning's participatory ambitions to instead frame it as totalitarian and demanded a return to a perceived natural order rooted in private ownership and elitist, traditional built forms (pp. 184–5). For this reason, Pikó argues, Milton Keynes became caught up in a 'signification spiral' in the late 1970s, in which seemingly disparate objects of hostility could come to stand in for each other (pp. 89–93).

Lauren Pikó's excellent book highlights the possibilities offered by examining new towns as a vector of broader contemporary national political, social, and cultural trends, but also that such urban forms retain this value as objects of study when the historian turns their attention to periods when they are no longer quite so 'new', or so central to national discourse. Pikó's highlighting of the contingency and mutability of discourse around place is also pertinent, given the present political moment. So many current 'state of the nation' discussions focus on the apparent dichotomy between former industrial areas and large metropolises, rather than the suburbs and new towns that were so central to Conservative electoral hegemony in the 1980s. Such discourse can prove transient, but the locations they affix to are not, and Milton Keynes continues to retain explanatory power for understanding Britain today more broadly.

Dion Georgiou
University of Chichester

Stephanie Newell, *Histories of Dirt: Media and Urban Life in Colonial and Postcolonial Lagos*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2020. xvi + 249pp. 14 illustrations. Bibliography. $26.95 pbk.
doi:10.1017/S0963926821000961

As Stephanie Newell, an accomplished historian of West African literary culture, browsed the newspapers and administrative archives of colonial-era Lagos, she could not help but find an abiding preoccupation, among Africans and

Europeans alike, with filth. Dirt, it occurred to her, was more than mere substance. It was 'an idea – or a complex set of representations – that shaped people's perceptions of one another's cultures and bodies and influenced their attitudes toward waste, urbanization, ethnicity, and health' (p. xii). Dirt might also be a key to grasping how people today related to the urban environment, to each other, to their government and to media. Thus was born 'The Cultural Politics of Dirt in Africa' – Dirtpol for short – a remarkably ambitious interdisciplinary project launched in 2013 with a nine-person team of researchers based in the UK, Nigeria and Kenya, and initially supported by 2.2 million euros from the EU's European Research Council. According to the project's various published outputs, however, it appears that funding was eventually cut (for reasons that are unfortunately not made clear). At any rate, the Nigerian and Kenyan research teams still each interviewed more than a hundred residents in Lagos and Nairobi, respectively. Newell, Dirtpol's principal investigator, has written the first book to emerge from the project.

The first half of *Histories of Dirt* comes out of Newell's historical work on colonial Lagos. The first chapter addresses how various British officials in the early twentieth century framed the city as the epitome of filth, blaming its African residents and their supposedly unhygienic practices, when in fact the sanitation problems ultimately resulted from the administration's neglect of public infrastructure. The second chapter addresses the racist presumptions of malaria control, in which public health officials identified black bodies as the problem, rather than mosquitoes and colonial policy – prejudice that, as in many colonial cities, justified racial segregation. The third chapter offers a reading of the city's African press, demonstrating how the elite who contributed to these newspapers shared much of the biases of colonial officials. The dynamics Newell describes in these chapters will be familiar to most scholars of colonial cities. Then there's a chapter that is not about Lagos at all, but rather the hygiene education films that colonial health officials produced for people in the Nigerian countryside. The colonial film industry is well-trodden ground for scholars, as are the reactions of African audiences, who in so many different contexts interpreted films in ways quite contrary to the intentions of filmmakers – laughing at 'inappropriate' moments and uninterested in the messages that they were supposed to digest whole. What follows is a chapter dedicated to a review of the scholarship on reception theory; it emphasizes just how difficult it is for the historian of today to understand the spectators of the past, especially when the only real clues come from the reports of colonial administrators. We are now far from narrow questions of dirt and hygiene, and well into the history of cultural misapprehension, one of the animating themes of the book.

The book's second half jumps over a half century of late colonial and post-independence Nigerian history into the near present. These are the chapters based primarily on the interviews conducted by Dirtpol researchers. One finding: Lagosians distinguish between waste that is disgusting (like organic waste) and waste that might be useful to others (like debris). Another: some Lagosians charge ethnic groups that are not their own with unhygienic practices while other city dwellers are more charitable in their thinking. Another: due largely to a public awareness campaign, Lagosians now have much greater respect for waste workers; a job that once made pariahs of 'scavengers' and 'night-soil men' is now associated

with the smiling faces of young women. When the interviewers' questions turned to homosexuality, interviewees responded almost universally that it was wrong. But, unlike so many political and religious leaders in Nigeria, Newell reports, not all the respondents thought homosexuality was 'dirty'. Some thought it was merely a psychological disorder.

If such findings seem to paint a simple picture of how Lagosians see their world, one can point to the project's methodology. Focus groups and sit-down interviews in which people are asked directly, by strangers, about dirt and dirtiness (and migration and homosexuality) are hardly the best way to explore the nuances and complexities of urban life. Ethics protocols are the submerged story here. Newell and other members of the team co-authored an essay in 2018 in which they discussed the ethical considerations involved in Dirtpol.[1] They focused on the interview consent process and the suspicions it raised, and how it created its own difficult dynamics in the field. What results when Eurocentric research ethics standards are imposed on Kenyan and Nigerian contexts, with their different and often contrary notions of appropriateness, makes for a more revealing tale of cultural misapprehension than what *Histories of Dirt* can tell us.

The 2018 essay discussed the care that researchers took in interviewing young children for the project. It did not, however, fully address what I thought was a particularly troubling issue raised by one of the book's chapters. A section of chapter 6 deals with how children in Lagos as young as seven absorbed the government's public health messaging. One of the researchers marvelled at how the Dirtpol interviews gave Nigerian schoolchildren the uncommon freedom to 'say their mind about issues' (p. 102). According to Newell, here is what resulted:

> For one nine-year-old girl attending an elementary school situated in a low-income settlement where the majority of residents had no electricity and restricted access to water, the experience of sitting alone in a room under the gaze of an unknown researcher produced a description of Lagos that exceeded adult belief and reason, and, in the process, added an important layer of meaning to our project. Released from the classroom into what was an atypical and bizarre situation in which an adult asked for her opinions about the environment, and listened in all earnestness with reassurances of confidentiality, this girl reacted by weaving all kinds of fabrications into her descriptions of urban life. (p. 103)

The girl's story was a horrific tale of parental beatings, armed robbers and cut-off tongues found in pockets – a mixture of fantasy and intimations of authentic terror that resonated with the accounts of other young girls who were interviewed. 'Beginning with a description of the cruel behavior of her parents', Newell writes, 'the girl's account had grown into a picture of a monstrous world where real harm

[1]Stephanie Newell et al., 'Dirty methods as ethical methods? In the field with "The cultural politics of dirt in Africa, p1880–present"', in Celia Lury *et al.* (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Interdisciplinary Research Methods* (London, 2018), 248–65.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000961 Published online by Cambridge University Press

was done to children by adults' (p. 103). Based on Newell's description, it sounds like Dirtpol subjected young children to the kinds of stressful, 'bizarre' situations – in this case, interviews in which they relived trauma for strangers – that researchers promised to avoid. These are interviews that, to my mind, should have been halted once this dynamic became evident. They 'added an important layer of meaning' to the project, but what did they do for the girls?

David Morton
University of British Columbia

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926821000961 Published online by Cambridge University Press