

“Why immigrant narratives?” by Alex Zito.

Anyone who is familiar with Africa knows that urbanization and the diaspora to the West are two of the most major themes shaping the present-day culture there. The Western countries loom hugely in the psyches of each individual. Every extended family, and every block in every neighborhood, has someone who has gone or still is gone abroad, seeking a better life for themselves and their loved ones. Every family and every community has been affected by the absences, the stories, the remittances, the expectations and the frustrations of leaving the homeland and going on the great adventure. Every step of the way is full of difficulties, and it seems that the whole experience is never as it had been imagined.

The power of the West pervades the air. Western development aid builds buildings, starts projects, assures the daily operations of some governmental and non-governmental sectors, and blesses or curses the futures of governments and local movements for social change. Western culture, in the form the images and sounds of music, film and television, and Western products, dazzles people with all of its novelty, its shine, and its association; the artifacts and postures of the culture, and the power of the countries from which it comes, are intertwined.

However, people on the continent are not simply oppressed by the cultural hegemony of the West. They are excited about the world opening up and becoming closer, and they are very curious about the possibilities for widening their horizons. They are eager to participate in a brand new world, one in which interactions across cultural and geographical boundaries are now greater than they ever have been at any other time in human history. It is just that as the current situation of cultural and trade flows would have it, these are the ways in which participation and interaction are offered to them: to buy Western things, or Chinese imitations of them, and to leave to the West to provide labor, usually of the least stable and least remunerative nature, is presently the largest part of Africa’s role in globalization.

“Africa!”

“America!”

Each is to the other a myth. Perhaps more than any other region on earth, our knowledge of Africa is abused by mythology – pernicious mythology that grew out of a hideous racism, centuries of slavery that utterly dehumanized and devalored African culture, perceiving the continent as a void, a great blackness, a century of empire that fantasized about filling this void. Perhaps as Americans we barely know whether or not Central Asia actually exists, because we have no contact with it, and no information about it, so we have formed no opinion. But we know Africa is real, because we are very aware of the existence of Africans. It is not that we know nothing about Africa, it is that what little we do know is dangerously wrong.

On both sides of the abyss, both “over here” and “over there,” how much do we have to learn from those brave border crossers who made it to the El Dorado they had heard so much about? Who is more expert than they in the dizzying paradoxes of the relationships between one place and another, and between imagination and reality? “Experience is the best teacher,” so the proverb says. Those who have had the experience of leaving behind the lives they knew have a perspective we can all gain from by listening. They can teach us about America and about Africa, catching things that slip past us undetected. Over there, they are seen as heroes and successes; over here, they are a marginalized minority, barely seen. Over there, the money they send Western Union is a significant source of family income; over here, a middle class college student may spend that amount on an indulgent night out.

Our ultimate purpose in seeking immigrant narratives is to provide young people in Mali and Senegal with interesting and nourishing reading material in their own mother tongues. We want to introduce them to the joy of reading, to literacy as a source of self-knowledge and personal growth. We understand that our mission is to provide something that is interesting enough to motivate them to want to read on their own. Having recognized how important the West is in the desires of young people, we would like to counteract some of the images they have received with voices from their own culture.