

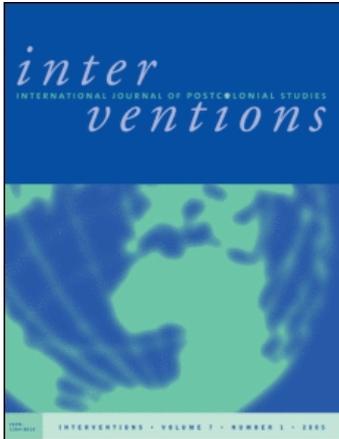
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## SURPLUS CITY

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## SURPLUS CITY

Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning, and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland*

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**IMF riots**

**informal labor**

**mega-cities**

**Nigeria**

**self-fashioning**

**structural adjustment**

*Postcolonial scholars have been slow to address issues relating to urban space and society. This essay argues for new forms of critical engagement with questions of urbanism and citizenship on a global scale. Postcolonial narratives of urbanization, I argue, represent important sites for exploring tensions between elite and popular visions of the city and of development. Moreover, narratives of formation or bildung in the city such as the one that structures Chris Abani's novel Graceland offer allegories of postcolonial hopes for economic development and political reform. In Abani's novel, set in Lagos during the era of structural adjustment in the 1980s, social and economic transformation on both an individual and collective level cannot be found within the fictional mega-city. Instead, spatial egress is substituted for temporal progress in a damning indictment of the combined forces of local corruption and global exploitation.*

.....

Near the beginning of Chris Abani's *Graceland*, the novel's 16-year-old protagonist looks out across the Lagos slum in which he and his father have been living for two years and wonders, 'How could a place be so ugly



and violent yet beautiful at the same time?’ Like the fictional Elvis Oke, millions of people move to the slums of mega-cities in the global South every year hoping to better their fortunes, only to be faced with a grim struggle to survive. So massive is this tide of striving humanity that more than half the world’s population will live in cities by the end of this decade according to United Nations demographers; humanity will, as a result, be an urban species for the first time in our history. If the predominantly rural base of anti-colonial insurgency effectively framed the identity of most postcolonial nations following independence, the last several decades have witnessed a radical transformation of postcolonial societies with global implications. Ninety-five per cent of urban population growth during the next generation will occur in cities of the underdeveloped world, whose populations are expected to double to nearly 4 billion over the next generation (Davis 2006: 3).

The mega-cities of the global South are not just historically unprecedented in terms of their sheer size. They also represent the completely novel phenomenon of urban growth radically disconnected from economic development. In much of the South, that is, urbanization is occurring at a rate far higher than that of Victorian London, but without the rising urban employment levels produced by the industrial revolution in Britain. With the important exception of cities in East Asia, urban zones throughout the global South are actually experiencing deindustrialization. During the 1980s, the era in which Abani sets his novel, for instance, Lagos grew twice as fast as the Nigerian population as a whole despite a wrenching economic recession that hit urban areas particularly hard. Extreme poverty in Nigeria, increasingly concentrated in slums such as the one in which Elvis Oke lives, ballooned from 28 per cent in 1980 to 66 per cent in 1996 (Davis 2006: 156). As Deborah Potts points out, wages have fallen so low in sub-Saharan African cities that researchers can’t figure out how the poor survive (Potts 1997: 459). Lagos, whose estimated population of 23 million by 2015 will make it the world’s third largest city, is at the centre of a West African conurbation that extends along the gulf of Guinea in what is probably the largest concentration of poverty on earth (Davis 2006: 5). As a result of such extreme statistics, Lagos has come to be seen as an archetype of the mega-city, a harbinger of urban cultures and crises to come.

Oddly, postcolonial scholars have been slow to address issues relating to urban space and society in the global South. To a certain extent, this failure to theorize the relation of cities to imperialism past and present merely reproduces the biases of the classic texts of anti-colonial nationalism. For pivotal anti-colonial intellectuals such as Frantz Fanon, Mao Tse-Tung and Che Guevara, the wretched of the earth lived largely in the countryside, which consequently served as the primary site of revolutionary insurgency (Goonewardena and Kipfer 2006: 26). In addition, however, the

1 Examples of mega-exhibitions that focused in whole or part on Lagos include *Century City* in London (2001), *Africas: the Artist and the City* in Barcelona (2001), *Documenta 11* in Kassel (2002), *Depth of Field* in London (2005), and *Lagos: STADTanSICHTen* in Berlin and Stuttgart (2004/5).

2 The Harvard School of Design's *Project on the City*, led by Koolhaas, studied and subsequently produced a monograph devoted in part to Lagos. See my comments later in the essay on their neo-organicist celebration of Lagos's informal economy.

marginalization of urban issues within postcolonial studies also reflects the identity-oriented biases of academic politics in the North over the last several decades. Thus, despite the importance of issues of spatiality in postcolonial narrative, much debate surrounding these texts has focused on factors of language, race and gender in the construction of postcolonial subjectivity rather than on representations of urbanization (Kurtz 1998: 4). Postcolonial studies has as a result largely left inquiry into these crucial sites in coming battles for and against imperialism to blockbuster art exhibitions,<sup>1</sup> high-flying architects,<sup>2</sup> and to the military, which has been zealously perfecting what it calls MOUT – Military Operations in Urban Terrain – over the last decade (Graham 2008).

An important exception to this critical neglect, of course, is Mike Davis's magisterial sociology of life in the slums of the global South. What Davis's work does not do, despite its manifold strengths, is to analyse systematically the *discourse* surrounding and constituting mega-cities, the central tropes in (largely northern) accounts of urbanization and the impact of such representations on space and society in mega-cities. Such critique of mega-city discourse should be the province of postcolonial theory, whose tradition of colonial discourse analysis provides a powerful analytic lens to apply to contemporary representations of urbanization. For example, as was true of stereotypical representations of the colonized, mega-city discourse is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, mega-cities tend to be represented in stridently apocalyptic terms; they are, according to such accounts, uniformly characterized by overwhelming poverty, violence, corruption, environmental breakdown, and pathological religiosity (Gandy 2005: 38). Typical in this regard is the work of journalist Robert Kaplan, whose influential analysis of 'the coming anarchy' describes West African cities such as Lagos as a hell on earth that foreshadows the dystopian future of the developed world (Kaplan 2000: 5–15). The obverse side of such eschatological representations is evident in the work of trendy architect Rem Koolhaas, who sees in the self-regulating informal sector of Lagos a precursor to new forms of homeostatic urbanism (Gandy 2005: 39). What these apparently discrepant discursive frames share is a concern to manage the perceived threat represented by metastasizing mega-cities using neoliberal paradigms of governance. Typically, contemporary mega-city discourse replaces state-centred development programmes with atomized but optimized practices of self-management (Ong 2006: 4).

In addition to anatomizing dominant discourse, however, postcolonial theory must also engage with accounts of mega-cities elaborated by the denizens of those cities themselves. To what extent do such accounts reproduce dominant discourse? Under what conditions do representations of urban life that contest the terms of hegemonic discourse emerge? Can apparent mimicry of mega-city discourse not also serve as critique, an

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assertion of common values and humanity in an increasingly Manichean global dispensation? Literary representations of urbanization offer a particularly important site for investigation in this regard for a number of reasons. Despite the relative lack of critical interest discussed above, there is a substantial novelistic tradition depicting experiences of urbanization and slum life, one that stretches back in many cases to the period shortly after national liberation (Lazarus 1990: 209). To a certain extent, this tradition overlaps with the literature of postcolonial disillusionment; in some ways, it marks an alternative to this tradition in its emphasis on the experience of the masses rather than of elite intellectuals and in its embrace of popular genres and forms of expression (Kurtz 1998: 45). As a result, the novel of urbanization has offered an important site for registering tensions between elite and popular visions of the city. Perhaps more importantly, however, the novel registers the impact of the radically morphing space/time continuum of the mega-city on the individual sensibility. Unlike other representations of urbanization, that is, the novel foregrounds the affective reaction of postcolonial subjects to the city. It thus represents a significant mediation of the social production of mega-city space, knitting together the conscious and unconscious reactions of the individual with the bricolage of pre-capitalist tradition and capitalist modernity that takes place in the urban public spaces of the global South.

3 I'm thinking here of course of the controversy sparked by Fredric Jameson's comments on the function of 'Third World' narrative. See Jameson (1986) and Ahmad (1992).

4 While I would strenuously object to the notion that urban literature from the global South simply recapitulates that of Euro-American modernism, it is nonetheless worth paying attention to literary accounts of urbanization in the North. For recent discussions, see Alter (2005), Pike (1981), Wirth-Nesher (1996) and, of course, Williams (1973).

Since no individual experience can totally encompass the multifarious reality of the mega-city, postcolonial urban narratives are by definition fragmentary, figuring the metropolis through synecdoche. This generic characteristic should dissuade us from taking novels of urbanization as wholly representative national allegories.<sup>3</sup> Nonetheless, inasmuch as the city is commonly understood to represent modernity, in literary representations of postcolonial urbanization one can discern symbols of individual and collective progress. The characteristic genre of these narratives of urbanization is therefore the novel of formation or *bildungsroman*. Tracking, as their modern European counterparts did, the insertion of provincial subjects into the urban social order, postcolonial novels of urbanization tend to depict highly ambivalent reactions to the two-faced realities of modernity in the mega-city.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, urban experience threatens to breed forms of jarring anomie and economic dislocation; on the other, the city offers the promise of liberation from oppressive tradition and clan ties, as well as access to the alluring cultural and material values of the developed world. Thus, while often figuring the pauperization of heroes of the independence struggle, postcolonial urban novels also tend to explore the alternative, non-traditional sites of community building that occur in the city (Kurtz 1998: 82).

Unlike works written earlier in the postcolonial era, Chris Abani's *Graceland* represents an unequivocal failure of self-formation and socializa-

tion. Although the novel depicts slum life in Lagos in vibrant and often comical terms, Abani's protagonist Elvis traverses a world in which hopes for economic development and political reform are systematically obliterated. By *Graceland's* conclusion, spatial egress is substituted for temporal progress. Social and economic transformation on both an individual and collective level, that is, cannot be found within the fictional mega-city represented in the novel. Instead, Abani's protagonist achieves mobility and the promise of settled community ultimately through clandestine emigration to the US. Elvis's flight from Lagos is the culminating act in a sequence of performances in which he struggles to cope with the forms of stark inequality and authoritarian oppression that characterize slum life in Lagos. While the novel may seem as a result of this bleak conclusion to ape the apocalyptic strain of mega-city discourse, *Graceland* may be read instead as offering a damning allegory for a world in which narratives of development have been abandoned, leaving, as James Ferguson puts it, 'stark status differentiations in the world system . . . raw and naked, no longer softened by promises of "not yet"' (Ferguson 2006: 186). As I argue in the following discussion, *Graceland's* anatomy of the failure of postcolonial urbanism constitutes not simply a searing indictment of Nigeria's postcolonial rulers but also of the neoliberal world order embedded in dominant accounts of mega-cities such as Lagos.

### **Excremental Urbanism**

Abani wastes no time in alerting his readers to the immense pressures experienced by those trying to eke out an existence in slums such as Maroko, the Lagos neighbourhood where his protagonist Elvis Oke lives along with his father and hundreds of thousands of other people in crude wooden huts perched on rickety stilts over a swamp that serves as an open sewer. *Graceland* opens with a scene in which the coruscating rain of the region falls in sheets outside Elvis's home, clearing some of the tropical heat but also bringing with it the stink of garbage, shit and stale bodies that pervades Maroko (Abani 2006: 4). As in other postcolonial urban African texts such as Ayi Kwei Armah's novel *The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born* and Djibril Diop Mambéty's film *La petite vendeuse de soleil*, the images of dirt and decay that suffuse Abani's novel provide not simply an accurate physical account of the life-threateningly unsanitary conditions in contemporary slums, but also a symbolic register of the moral corruption that remorselessly afflicts those who dwell in such extreme circumstances. Moreover, the shit in which Elvis lives is an apt metaphor for the social status of contemporary slum dwellers. For these people are literally treated as excrement. Part of a vast mass of surplus labor, numbering around 1 billion on a global scale,

Elvis and the other characters in Abani's novel constitute the violently evacuated waste products of today's world economy. There is no official scenario for the reincorporation of this surplus humanity into the global economy.

On a more local scale, the postcolonial period in Nigeria has witnessed rampantly corrupt civilian political leaders alternating with brutal and exploitative military regimes; this corrupt and oppressive leadership has devastated the economy of what many hoped would be the titan of West Africa (Falola 1997). Like many other postcolonial regimes, Nigeria adopted ambitious plans to redress the chronic housing shortages and urban underdevelopment left over from European colonial rule after independence. Elite visions for the postcolonial city, intended to showcase the country's distinctive form of modernity, focused predominantly on prestige sites such as government buildings and housing estates for the bureaucrats who would work in these buildings (Immerwahr 2007: 172). Although the country's leaders pledged to use the soaring oil revenues of the 1970s to re-house the urban poor, less than a fifth of the housing slated for construction in the Third and Fourth National Development Plans was actually built, and most of what was actually put up was quickly appropriated by those close to the levers of power rather than the poor (Okoye 1990: 81). Thus, if, as Abani suggests through a sly reference to Elvis's reading material in the opening pages of *Graceland*, his protagonist is a contemporary version of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, he is a subject who survives far deeper in the bowels of the global social system than the brightly lit basement lair of Ellison's postwar African-American hero.

5 For discussion of the informal urban forms created by the popular classes in Lagos, see Immerwahr (2007).

Survival in slums such as Maroko hinges on the precarious cobbling together of livelihoods using the detritus of the global economy.<sup>5</sup> Abani hints at the ingenuity that this informal survivalism requires when his protagonist takes one of Lagos's infamous *molue* passenger buses. Made up of disused parts scavenged from defunct industries in Britain and Japan as well as poorly welded together scrap metal, *molues* are typically crammed to bursting point with passengers and held together only by the perilous 'magic' to which the vehicles' name refers. Certainly there is a kind of rough beauty and panache evident in the creativity that births such vehicles from recycled scraps. Yet, as Elvis notes at the outset of the novel, such creativity grows in a soil replete with violence and ordure. Indeed, the highways the hybrid *molues* use to navigate Lagos are a virtual abattoir strewn with the mutilated bodies of pedestrians. Ignoring the overhead bridges with which they might have crossed in safety, these pedestrians are periodically mown down by speeding traffic. Engaging a fellow passenger in conversation concerning the absurdity of the pedestrians' behaviour, Elvis is told, 'We all have to die sometimes, you know. If it is your time, it is your time' (57). When Elvis mutters that someone might at least remove the bodies that lie decaying

along the road, his fellow traveller replies wryly, ‘Dis stupid government place a fine on dying by crossing road illegally. So de relatives can only take de body when dey pay de fine’ (57). This exchange suggests that the apparent irrationality of the slaughtered pedestrians is animated by a kind of world-weary resignation to fate and mortality. It is no small coincidence that this fatalism coincides with absurdly punitive and authoritarian legislation whose ultimate effect is to strew public space with rotting cadavers. The city’s decaying highways, built by a prominent German engineering firm during the years of the oil boom, thus offer a gruesome token of the lack of meaningful urban democracy that has come to characterize Lagos. Perhaps more tragically, they also reflect the resignation that this lack of democracy has inspired among the citizenry.

What drives Elvis and his family to move to such an inhospitable urban environment? Flashbacks woven throughout the novel tell the story of Elvis’s father, a prominent schoolteacher in a rural area of Nigeria, who was suckered into running for political office, in the process losing both his teaching post and the family savings. The family’s only recourse is to move to the city; they thereby join the millions of peasants from across Nigeria and around the world tossed off their land each year by the pitiless economic forces unleashed by neoliberal capitalism over the last three decades. Plunged into debt during the era of inflation that followed the oil crisis of the mid-1970s, governments throughout the global South slashed their rural modernization programmes. Farmers were left to the mercy of the ‘sink-or-swim’ economic strategies of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (Bryceson 2000: 304). In Nigeria, the Babangida military regime, battenning off kickbacks from the nation’s oil wealth in the 1980s, introduced programmes of fiscal austerity that mimicked the so-called structural adjustment programmes of the IMF without obtaining any loan money from international agencies. While they may have helped line the pockets of Babangida and his cronies, these policies decimated Nigeria’s agricultural sector; the nation, which once derived most of its foreign revenues from agricultural exports, had become dependent by the 1990s on food imports. Deregulation of national markets in Nigeria as elsewhere in the global South forced peasants to compete against the heavily subsidized farmers of the US and EU on global commodity markets, with predictable results. The result has been a global exodus from the countryside that far outstrips what Marx called the ‘primitive accumulation’ that attended the enclosure movement in eighteenth-century England. This process of rural eviction and its cognate of massive urbanization are among the most significant events, Eric Hobsbawm (1996) has argued, of the last century.

## The Vicissitudes of Urban Self-Fashioning

For Elvis Oke, however, Lagos is not simply the end of the line for those victimized by the combined depredations of international finance capital and domestic corruption. Instead, the city offers Elvis and others like him a space free from the more oppressive ties of rural kin and community, which he ultimately recalls includes his own sexual violation by his uncle. Indeed, the cosmopolitan character of Lagos allows Elvis to experiment with forms of self-reinvention that directly challenge his family's notions of appropriate behaviour, gainful employment, and, ultimately, masculinity. How better to escape an oppressive identity than to mimic another, more empowered one? For Elvis, this alternative identity comes in the form of the icon of US popular culture for whom his mother, who used to love Presley's records, named him. Abani's novel thus derives its ironic title *Graceland* from the protagonist's attempts to earn money as an Elvis impersonator on the resort beaches of the city. Appropriating the identity of an icon of American pop culture involves the painstaking application of makeup, a wig and glam clothes, as well as the cultivation of a series of intricate dance steps to be performed for sunbathing US tourists. Mimicking the King allows Elvis to reconnect with the forms of self-fashioning he remembers the maternal figures of his youth engaging in, including his mother and formidable grandmother, Oye. The feeling of makeup on his face, 'smooth like his aunt Felicia's stockings' (77), thus reminds Elvis of a world that he has lost forever as well as helping him imagine a glamorous life beyond the misery of Maroko. Like Cameroonian photographer Samuel Fosso's sensational photographic self-portraits, Elvis's American drag act speaks of the powerful subjective allure of urban life and the spectacle of modernity it seems to embody for those who wish to escape the often-stifling constraints of tradition.

Of course, urban life in Africa is not what it once was; modernity has come to seem more like a cruel hoax than a glittering future for residents of slums such as Maroko since the structural adjustment programmes of the 1980s gutted what was left of postcolonial urban development projects and, with them, the living standards of the urban poor and middle class (Rakodi 1997). Nigeria's repressive military, ubiquitous corruption, and high crime levels mean that Lagos attracts few tourists, and Elvis consequently barely scrapes together enough money to survive. Moreover, the harsh social conditions of Lagos impinge on his fantasy of self-reinvention. On his way home from work one day, for instance, Elvis witnesses a policeman confiscate the used clothes a man is trying to hawk on the street. Faced with the loss of the goods that he has borrowed money to buy, the man's sanity collapses and he immolates himself in the fire on which the police have been burning his contraband merchandise (74). Such incidents make Elvis's

dreams of transformation appear hollow. Shortly after this harrowing incident, he engages in some soul searching after applying the white makeup and wig of his Elvis persona:

What if he had been born white, or even just American? Would his life be any different? Stupid, he thought. If [his friend] Redemption knew about this, he would say Elvis was suffering from colonial mentality. He smiled. It spread across his face in fine tendrils that grew wider as he laughed until his skin showed through. I look like a hairless panda, he thought. Without understanding why, he began to cry through the cracked face powder. (78)

For Elvis, mimicry was not so much a sign of spiritual hollowness, as V. S. Naipaul would have it, but rather an assertion of his right to equality and modernity. His drag act was motivated not by a desire for acculturation, that is, but by the hope of economic self-sufficiency.<sup>6</sup> This hope runs aground in the contraction of Lagos's labour market during the mid-1980s. Elvis consequently abandons his project of performative self-reinvention and dedicates himself to the tactics of informal survivalism carved out by his friend, the street-savvy 'area boy' known as Redemption. Having grown up in Lagos, Redemption is able to connect Elvis to a series of lucrative jobs in the city's informal economy. The increasingly exploitative, criminal nature of these jobs, however, raises important questions about the sustainability of informal labor, as well as about Elvis's moral integrity amid the dehumanizing conditions of slum life.

The global proliferation of informal labour is largely a product of the neoliberal programmes of structural adjustment which gutted formal-sector employment in the global South following the debt crises of the early 1980s (United Nations Human Settlements Programme 2003: 46). The statistics concerning informal labour are truly hair-raising: according to the UN, informal workers make up two-fifths of the economically active population of the developing world; informal employment, it is projected, will have to absorb 90 per cent of urban Africa's new workers over the next decade (United Nations Human Settlements Program 2003: 104). The 1 billion-strong global informal working class, Mike Davis (2006: 178) notes, is 'the fastest-growing, and most unprecedented, social class on earth'. As Lagos's *molue* buses suggest, the remarkable survival strategies of this global informal working class challenge common perceptions of the mega-cities of the South as examples of failed urbanism. Such condescending attitudes are not simply flawed, but present a major obstacle to coping with the social conditions in mega-cities. Indeed, AbdouMaliq Simone argues in *For the City Yet to Come* that the nugatory attitude of government officials, urban planners and development workers towards the informal networks that keep African urban society running precludes the advancement of projects to

6 On the significance of mimicry in contemporary Africa, see Ferguson (2006: 156–74).



remake African cities with the involvement of those who inhabit them. ‘Self-responsibility’, Simone (2004: 5) argues, ‘has opened up spaces for different ways of organizing activities’. The implication is that these strategies of informal adaptation and innovation should be embraced by those with the capital and political power to help catalyze a more socially just urbanism in the global South.

Despite his contrarian air, Simone’s antagonism towards top-down modernist planning schemes and his concomitant embrace of informal survival strategies has in fact become quite modish. Rem Koolhaas’s recent work with the Project on the City at Harvard, for example, sets out to map the acts of architectural *bricolage* through which denizens of Lagos create homespun order in a situation in which the state is not simply absent, but often actively engaged in white elephant projects that disrupt and destroy the urban fabric (Koolhaas 2003). Given the forms of tyranny and dysfunction that characterize many postcolonial states, this populist embrace of the informal sector is certainly quite seductive. Indeed, the work of Koolhaas and company is clearly indebted to that of John Turner, the British anarchist architect whose fascination with the creative genius he saw at work in squatter housing in authoritarian countries such as those of Latin America during the 1970s led him to embrace the self-help programmes of then World Bank president Robert McNamara.

As Mike Davis notes in his scathing critique of Turner, however, such advocacy of bootstrapping helped to obscure the massive abdication of the promises made by both postcolonial states and their more developed partners to relieve poverty and homelessness (Davis 2006: 71). While they are surely right to marvel at the resiliency of slum dwellers and other residents of mega-cities, advocates of self-help strategies tend to ignore the fact that the vast majority of informal labourers are not on the bottom rungs of a stepladder that leads smoothly upwards towards the formal sector and prosperity. Rather, despite myths to the contrary, informal labour ensures the absence of rights and formal protections, is predicated on the fragmentation of existing work and incomes rather than the generation of new jobs, and involves highly exploitative work for others rather than independent micro-entrepreneurialism (Davis 2006: 180). The world of the 1 billion people who have been turned into surplus labour around the globe today resembles that of Thomas Hobbes far more than that of Samuel Smiles, and it hinges on the super-exploitation of the most vulnerable, who in most cases are women and children.

Elvis’s descent into a Darwinian hell of clandestine work limns the predatory character of significant segments of the informal sector. After being fired from an extremely precarious job at a construction site for being late, Elvis accepts Redemption’s offer of help. The first *sub-rosa* job Redemption arranges finds Elvis working as an escort for well-off female

members of the Middle Eastern and South Asian bourgeoisie in a nightclub. After a nearly mortal encounter with a psychopathic Colonel who runs the state security forces, Elvis is forced to quit his job as a gigolo and join Redemption in work that, while it might not immediately damage anyone, is clearly criminal. The two friends take part in Nigeria's booming business as a way station in the international drug trade by spending the night wrapping cocaine in condoms for delivery by mules to the US (108). When his powerful but mysterious sponsor switches to another trade, Redemption offers to fix Elvis up with an even more remunerative job. While initially reluctant to become involved in further criminal exploits, the lack of any other job opportunities and his desire to escape his father push Elvis to partner once again with Redemption. After a long journey out of the city in a black pickup with two strangers, Redemption and Elvis discover that they are to play the role of bodyguards for a group of kidnapped children who will be transported, along with two coolers filled with kidneys and heads, to Saudi Arabia for dismemberment in the international black market in human organs (235). Although neither of the two friends expressed much moral scruple about their participation in the drug trade, they balk at being involved in this most goulsh sector of the informal labour market, and escape back to Lagos, leaving the children to a crowd that has discovered the pickup's 'spare parts'. Once back in Lagos, Elvis learns that he and Redemption have been working for the homicidal Colonel who almost dusted him off at the nightclub. The Colonel uses his position as head of state security forces not simply to assassinate dissident writers, lawyers, musicians and thousands of other less prominent Nigerians, but also to run the vast, violence-driven underground economy of Lagos. He is, clearly, a stand-in for the thugs who ruled Nigeria during the 1980s and 1990s, the worst of whom, Sani Abacha, imprisoned Chris Abani for his criticism of the government.

The Colonel's criminal pursuits dramatize the extent to which the truly lucrative sectors of the informal economy work not as some alluring alternative to existing power relations, but rather are a conscious construct of those who hold the reins of society and, doing so, use their authority to remove all barriers to violence, exploitation and degradation in their lust for material gain and power. Surely this can be no revelation to students of Nigerian history, which is made up of a succession of dictators who clung to power with all sorts of transparent excuses simply in order to siphon off oil money into Swiss bank accounts. Elvis's complicity with the Colonel and all that he stands for dramatizes the corrosive moral impact of the informal economy on the rest of society, including on those who, like Elvis, live far from the centres of social and economic power.

## Prophylactic Policies and Austerity Riots

Confronted with growing numbers of their increasingly impoverished and restive urban compatriots, postcolonial elites have tended to behave exactly as did their colonial predecessors: they mobilize the state to demolish the squalid quarters of the poor and thereby remove them from sight if not mind. Indeed, in Lagos, colonial-era statutes governing urban space cast the informal dwellings in which the majority of the postcolonial city's denizens lived into the realm of illegality. As a result, virtually the entire urban population could be represented as law-breakers (Immerwahr 2007: 177). The continuity in strategy across the colonial and postcolonial periods is underlined by the homologous rhetoric used to legitimate such operations, which were usually described using a language of prophylactic expulsion of unsanitary elements from the urban body politic. During the mid-1980s, for example, the government's twinned War Against Indiscipline and War Against Filth essentially targeted poor citizens, imposing a form of martial law on the slums in the name of national hygiene (Immerwahr 2007: 179).

It is one such exercise in urban cleansing that forms a pivotal moment in Abani's *Graceland*. Near the end of the novel, state authorities launch 'Operation Clean the Nation' by announcing the impending demolition of Maroko, the slum neighbourhood where Elvis and his father have made their home since arriving in Lagos. Maroko is located near the heart of downtown Lagos, just opposite the chic neighbourhoods of Victoria Island and Ikoyi. It is prime real estate that had come to be coveted by the Nigerian elite and foreign investors. Ironically, Maroko developed beginning in the late 1950s when poor residents of Victoria Island and the neighbouring area of Ikoyi were displaced by development of those areas for Europeans and wealthy Africans. In 1990, in a tragic repetition of this history, 300,000 Maroko residents were displaced when bulldozers backed by the military government of Lagos governor Colonel Raji Rasaki moved in to crush their vivacious but untidy and informal neighbourhood at the behest of developers (Peil 1994: 178). Abani's novel is but one of the many works of Nigerian literature to memorialize this notorious act of destruction, which many compared to the demolition by South Africa's apartheid government of vibrant multicultural neighbourhoods such as Sophiatown and District Six.<sup>7</sup>

Abani's novel focuses on the resistance to eviction mobilized by the residents of Maroko. The threat of displacement galvanizes the colourful but politically quiescent and disorganized members of the Maroko community into self-defence, with Elvis's father Sunday at their head. Earlier in the novel, Sunday's political defeat in the family's rural hometown of Afikpo destroyed not only his family fortune but also his ambition and self-respect. While living in Lagos, he has depended on the independent entrepreneurial activity of his new wife, Comfort. The impending destruction of Maroko

7 Other works of Nigerian literature that discuss the destruction of Maroko include Balogun (1995), Clark (1997) and Nwosu (2001).

offers him a chance to regain his role as a prominent spokesperson for the community, and, with it, the sense of honour that was crushed in Afikpo. When Sunday hears that Maroko is the target of phase one in ‘Operation Clean the Nation’, he firmly refuses to capitulate to the developers and military goons:

I am not leaving dis place. We just managed to buy dese few rooms we own, and now dey want to come and destroy it. Why? So dat dey can turn dis place to beachside millionaire’s paradise? No! And den we will all move to another location and set up another ghetto. Instead of dem to address de unemployment and real cause of poverty and crime, dey want to cover it all under one pile of rubbish. (248)

The resistance campaign that develops against the impending demolition of Maroko belies the widespread belief that slum dwellers are incapable of organizing themselves and asserting their collective agency. The informal action committee set up on the communal veranda Sunday and Elvis share with their neighbours develops a plan to slow the bulldozers’ advance into Maroko. In tandem, the group plans to attract the attention of the news media to the residents’ outrage over their unjust eviction from their homes by the military government. Sunday goes door to door using the strategy of community mobilization that failed him in Afikpo in order to garner support for the collectively organized resistance strategy (265). On the day the police arrive to conduct demolition operations, Sunday and his comrades are waiting for them behind three-feet thick flaming barricades with protest banners and crowds of noisy neighbourhood residents, all of them singing along to Bob Marley’s rebellious anthem ‘Get Up, Stand Up’ (266). Despite this heroic stand, however, the barriers are eventually broken down; Sunday is shot in an offhanded manner by one of the soldiers brought in to clean up the neighbourhood. True to history, *Graceland* dramatizes the crushing of popular protest by state power.

While his father is helping organize resistance to the eviction of Maroko, Elvis is spirited out of the city in order to avoid the Colonel’s manhunt, going on tour with a performing troupe organized by the King of Beggars, a cultured if poor man who has become the pole star of resistance to the Colonel’s oppressive military regime. Earlier in the novel, the aptly named King has tried to offer an alternative to Elvis’s failed dreams as a celebrity impersonator and to the sinister schemes in which Redemption involves him by taking him to a Yugoslavian film whose central message seems to be the risibly banal line ‘people are important’ (134). Character-centred and ruminative, the Yugoslavian movie contrasts radically with the macho world of the cowboy films of Elvis’s youth, in which he and his friends identified with amoral and violent men of action. The King thus seems to be offering Elvis an alternative to the brutal mores on display not just in racist US

popular culture, but also in the behaviour of his father and of the military regime that rules the country. During Elvis's tour of the countryside with the King's performing group the Joking Jaguars, the King deepens his role as mentor to Elvis by explaining the complicity of the nation's military in the structural adjustment programmes that are immiserating the people of Nigeria:

De majority of our people are honest, hardworking people. But dey are at de mercy of dese army bastards and dose tief in the IMF, de World Bank, and de US . . . Let me tell you how de World Bank helps us. Say dey offer us a ten-million-dollar loan for creating potable and clean water supply to rural areas. If we accept, dis is how dey do us. First dey tell us dat we have to use de expertise of their consultants, so dey remove two million for salaries and expenses. Den dey tell us dat de consultants need equipment to work, like computer, jeeps, or bulldozers, and for hotel and so on, so dey take another two million. Den dey say we cannot build new boreholes but must service existing one, so dey take another two million to buy parts. All dis money, six million of it, never leave de US. Den dey use two million for de project, but is not enough, so dey abandon it, and den army bosses take de remaining two million. Now we, you and I and all dese poor people, owe de World Bank ten million dollars for nothing. Dey are all tiefs and I despise dem – our people and de World Bank people. (280)

It is the King's lucid understanding of the combined international and local forces that are despoiling the country behind the rhetoric of restoring order to the nation that makes him such a threat to the military and such a dangerous person to know. Indeed, when the Joking Jaguars return to Lagos, Elvis is promptly arrested and subjected to torture by the Colonel, who has forgotten Elvis's role in the trafficking of human organs in his zeal to track down the King of Beggars.

The King's quest to retrieve Elvis from police custody turns into a massive protest march across Lagos that culminates in a confrontation between the King and the Colonel. Because of the presence of the media, the Colonel is unable to simply gun down the King. Instead, he calls the King to parley midway between the crowds of protesters and police. When the King recognizes the Colonel as the officer who massacred his family as a young man, he whips out a long dagger and plunges it into the Colonel's neck. This act of personal revenge would seem to vindicate Sunday's cynical reading of the King's resistance to the military; seeking to protect Elvis earlier in the novel, Sunday tells him that the King is using demonstrators for his own end of gaining revenge on the man responsible for his family's death. This reading fails, however, to acknowledge the King's global understanding and critique of the Colonel's repressive rule. It also elides the connection between protests in Lagos such as those led by the King and what John Walton and

David Seddon call the ‘austerity riots’ that flared up around the globe during the decade in which Abani’s novel is set.

For Walton and Seddon, the demonstrations that tore through urban areas around the global South during the era of structural adjustment were a response to the dismantling of the economic and social structures of the modernizing postcolonial state. In their drive to ensure a renewed round of accumulation, global elites sparked a wave of place-specific uprisings (Walton and Seddon 1994: 3). The urbanization programmes of postcolonial regimes had not only helped to stifle popular discontent, but, Walton and Seddon argue, also established an implicit moral pact between the urban poor and middle classes and the developmentalist state. When leaders such as Nigeria’s General Babangida embraced structural adjustment programmes, those over whom they ruled viewed such behaviour as an abrogation of the social contract established in previous years, according to Walton and Seddon (48). In response to this perceived destruction of the bonds of moral reciprocity, crowds took to city streets across what at the time were called the Third and Second Worlds, demanding the accountability of leaders to the populace rather than to international financial institutions such as the IMF and World Bank. These so-called IMF riots thus helped spark a transnational movement for democratization in the late 1980s and early 1990s. While these riots largely achieved their aim, political liberalization has not been accompanied by economic change, producing a form of hollow democracy as the new global norm (Walton and Seddon 1994: 334).

The protest march led by the King of Beggars clearly conforms to the pattern of global austerity demonstrations described by Walton and Seddon. Absent any legitimate outlet for popular dissent, the behaviour of the crowd that follows the King offers a classic instance of what Eric Hobsbawm (1952) describes as ‘collective bargaining by riot’. Paralleling Sunday’s uprising in Maroko, this strand of *Graceland* highlights the power of spontaneous popular organization and protest. The frustration of the King and his followers with the immiserating conditions produced by structural adjustment in Lagos translates not simply into immediate demands for higher living standards, but for political accountability for the leaders who have betrayed the nation. Thus, as they march towards the police barricades, protesters shout ‘Yes, democracy, no more army!’ (300). Following the melee between the King and the Colonel, however, the outcome of the protest movement is far from clear. The King, killed in a hail of bullets after he stabs the Colonel, ends up virtually deified by the unfortunate citizens of Lagos, some of whom take to associating him with the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie, the Rastafarians’ Lion of Judah (310).

The transfiguration of the King into a secular saint suggests that it may not be so easy to distinguish popular protest against tyranny and oppressive

social conditions from the turn to magical solutions to misery that all too often feeds into ethno-religious violence within poor communities today. As Nigerian novelist Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2005) has suggested, there is a strong link between the new brand of get-rich-quick evangelical religion, which large sections of the middle class have enthusiastically embraced, and the suppression of political alternatives during the 1990s. The conflicts in Nigeria over the imposition of Shari'a over the last two decades have demonstrated the grievously fissiparous and bloody results of such movements with their claims to divine sanction. Absent a viable, democratizing outlet for popular protest, the temptation to embrace such Manichean solutions to the sapping realities of the present may be overwhelming. As Elvis finds out when he is unable to claim his father's corpse from the rubble of Maroko because of the gratuitous bullying behaviour of a policeman, brute force and pathological power still rule Nigeria, despite the efforts of the King, Sunday and their followers to open avenues toward egalitarian democracy.

### **Conclusion: A Way Out?**

After he is freed from the clutches of the military, Elvis returns to the company of the beggars and other internal exiles towards whom he has gravitated in the course of the novel. Although little seems to have changed in the country's political circumstances, Elvis has grown as a result of his experiences. Throughout the novel, Elvis has remained passive in the face of oppression; now, having endured the harrowing experience of torture by the Colonel and lost his father, he seeks to redeem himself by playing the role of 'caretaker' for the army of beggar children who live beneath one of the flyover sections of the city's highways. Yet this new role of protecting the children as they sleep at night is an unsustainable one for Elvis; he fails once again to intervene when his fellow caregiver Okon extracts sexual payment from a pre-adolescent girl named Blessing and he falls ill soon thereafter with a near mortal fever. When Redemption returns and offers him his passport stamped with a visa for the US, Elvis decides that he must leave Lagos or perish. Later, as he waits for his flight at the Lagos airport, Elvis reads an old copy of James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man* and identifies with the figure of a lynched African-American man described therein. Elvis's tragic history has left him, Abani writes, feeling like the scar cut into this man when his genitals were hacked away, a scar 'carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face' (320). Bullied at the airport by yet another irrationally belligerent soldier, Elvis nearly misses the heavily symbolic calling of his friend's name by the airline clerk before he boards his flight.

What does it mean that the protagonist of *Graceland* can only find redemption on a flight to the United States? Surely this reflects the harsh reality of the exodus that resulted from Nigeria's increasing impoverishment as a result of decades of corrupt civilian rule, brutal military repression, and structural adjustment. Thousands and thousands of Nigerians, Abani among them, have fled into exile as a result of the horrendous conditions of their homeland. Yet we should remember that this is not an option for the vast majority of the immiserated masses decanted by the international and domestic policies of the last several decades into the mega-cities of the global South. Given the increasingly draconian immigration policies implemented in the EU and US since the economic downturn of the 1970s began, slums such as Maroko are the terminal point in most of these people's lives, the dead end for their hopes and dreams. As inequality worsens on a global scale and within particular nations across the global South, slum dwellers face an increasingly perilous struggle for survival. Chris Abani's novel *Graceland* suggests that spontaneous protest and brutal repression are the nearly inevitable outcome of such conditions. Rather than simply parroting mega-city discourse, Elvis Oke's futile efforts to forge a life for himself in Lagos constitute an indictment of the system that is producing the global slum.

The need for new forms of critical engagement with questions of urbanism and citizenship on a global scale could not be more pressing. Despite the impressive expansion of wealth over the last thirty years, global inequality has been growing at unprecedented rates. Urbanization is causing a massive increase in the amount of resources consumed and pollution generated in the global South. Predictably, the world's highest levels of pollution and political instability are to be found in cities with the greatest degree of inequality. Despite the efforts of global elites to barricade themselves in guarded compounds and behind rigorously patrolled borders, the disruptive effects of inequality cannot be contained. Nigeria, for example, is the world's fifth largest supplier of petroleum, and, along with the other countries of West Africa, provides 15 per cent of the oil consumed within the US. By 2015, experts predict, this region will account for 25 per cent of US oil imports. Moreover, it is the political and economic linchpin of the greater part of sub-Saharan Africa (Silverstein 2002). Conflicts over resources, ethnicity and religion that roil Nigeria cannot but have a pan-African and even global import. As a result, despite their seeming economic and political marginality, events taking place in slums such as Maroko will have just as determining an impact on human history in coming decades as the machinations of Wall Street financiers, Pentagon military planners or White House policy wonks.

Indeed, as James Ferguson has suggested, the disconnected, segmented and segregated spaces of African cities and nations may be a kind of avant-garde of globalization, the endgame of neoliberal modes of governance and 'adjustment' (Ferguson 2006: 41). Contrary to the pathologizing tropes of

mega-city discourse, the key nodes of the global economy, the glittering but increasingly stratified capitals of New York, Tokyo and London, are tied intimately to the historically unparalleled poverty and suffering generated in cities such as Cairo, Sao Paulo and Lagos. Because of policies penned in the global cities of the North, sub-Saharan Africa pays almost \$15 billion in debt service to wealthy nations and financial institutions every year. The external debt burden of this region has increased by nearly 400 per cent since 1980, when the IMF and World Bank began imposing SAPs. Between 1982 and 1990 the citizens of the global South transferred a net \$418 billion to the North. As the Fifty Years is Enough Network puts it, 'because no one pulls a trigger or pushes a button, we act as if the undeniable violence of enforced, needless poverty has no source and cannot be changed'.

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