Navigating the Lagos cityscape in Chris Abani's "Graceland"

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Abstract
In Chris Abani’s Graceland, the city is a spatio-temporal terrain connecting diverse worlds. It is a place of dialogue and conflict, a ‘city of attractions’ (Highmore 45) and distractions, dystopia and utopia. As an urban space, Abani’s Lagos is seen through a rookery, a tenement city called Maroko and through the life story of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Elvis Oke. The plot development alternates between Lagos the city in the present and Afikpo, Elvis’s countryside home — in the past. This shift in time and space moves memory between Afikpo and Lagos, and plots the simultaneity of dystopian and utopian living in the present Lagosian cityscape. The dystopian existence portrayed in the poverty, deprivation and filth intermingles with utopia — the surreality of dreams, wishes, hopes and the connected imagination of worlds apart. Maroko’s life-blood is found in the hope of flight and the power of imagination triggered by the pervasive forms of mass media available for consumption.
Navigating the Lagos Cityscape in Chris Abani’s *Graceland*

**INTRODUCTION**

In Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, the city is a spatio-temporal terrain connecting diverse worlds. It is a place of dialogue and conflict, a ‘city of attractions’ (Highmore 45) and distractions, dystopia and utopia. As an urban space, Abani’s Lagos is seen through a rookery, a tenement city called Maroko and through the life story of the sixteen-year-old protagonist, Elvis Oke. The plot development alternates between Lagos the city in the present and Afikpo, Elvis’s countryside home — in the past. This shift in time and space moves memory between Afikpo and Lagos, and plots the simultaneity of dystopian and utopian living in the present Lagosian cityscape. The dystopian existence portrayed in the poverty, deprivation and filth intermingles with utopia — the surreality of dreams, wishes, hopes and the connected imagination of worlds apart. Maroko’s life-blood is found in the hope of flight and the power of imagination triggered by the pervasive forms of mass media available for consumption.

*Graceland* portrays Lagos through the practico-sensory experience and the imagination of Elvis’s late childhood. Elvis navigates Lagos from the micro-perspective of Maroko. The narrative plots Elvis’s experiences in the process of trying to make a living in the harsh economic and political environment of Lagos. As the plot shifts in space and time, it foregrounds connections between Elvis’s economic struggles, the history of conflict between him and his father Sunday Oke as well as the struggle to understand himself as a cultural subject in the rapidly globalising city of Lagos. The narrative therefore depicts Elvis’s struggles through the squalid conditions and life in the economic margins of the city, and the power of imagination that allows him to survive and transcend his economic conditions. Significantly, Elvis’s experience of the city — how he navigates it and becomes acquainted with its intricate cultural, economic and political maps — presents an interesting process of map-making.

This essay examines the protagonist’s navigation of the city of Lagos in light of his experience of Maroko and in the continuum of its utopian and dystopian frameworks of existence. Elvis remaps the city, through not only the ocular, but also through a construction of aural and olfactory cartographies. By foregrounding the smell-scapes and sound-scapes of the city Elvis performs what Jacques Rancière has called a ‘[re]distribution of the sensible’ (12) — as the reader engages with the narrator’s sensorial cartographies, she/he uncovers the author’s...
‘politics of aesthetics’. Elvis reveals order in the chaos of Lagosian daily life, while constructing for the reader a synthetic ‘literary city’ through the contrasting dimensions of economic dystopia and cultural utopia. Maroko is where Elvis’s experience is anchored and where his idea of the city finds interpretative and microcosmic importance.

**The ‘Literary City’**

Maroko was an actual informal settlement that existed in Nigeria, the result of a gradual process of gentrification as the aboriginal fishing community of Lagos was edged out of Ikoyi by the increasing costs of housing (Sule 83). Later it became one of the most expensive suburbs in Lagos. Elvis describes Maroko as a ‘swamp city’ which is ‘suspended’ on rickety stilts and wooden planks (6). This precariousness is symbolic of the fragility of the material, culture, moral and the general socio-economic fibre of this society. The fragility is informed by what Peter Marcuse and Ronald van Kempen describe in *Globalizing Cities* as the ‘ghettos of exclusion’, where an endemic attitude of abandonment is rife; they call this the ‘abandoned city’ (19). It is part of the city destined to be ‘illegible’ (Highmore, 18). Highmore refers here to parts of the city that exist below and beside the radar of town planning and official cartography. An overwhelming atmosphere of abandonment is evident in the unsightly sludge, dirt, mud puddles and mangrove swamps. The people of Maroko have to literally slog their way through the debased physical environment as Elvis does every morning:

> While he waited, Elvis stared into the muddy puddles, imagining what life if any, was trying to crawl its way out. His face reflected back at him, seemed to belong to a stranger, floating there like a ghostly head out of a comic book… As he sloshed to the bus stop, one thought repeated in his mind: What do I have to do with all this? (6)

Abani’s representation of Maroko may be described in Highmore’s terms as a ‘metaphor city’ (1) from which cultural readings can be made of the material and symbolic. Both Highmore and Nuttall examine the representations of the city as metaphors which not only signify symbolic capital but which are constitutive of the material cultures of actual cities. Nuttall (195) reads the city as constituted by layers of texts — billboards, newsprints, road signs and other representative textual markers. In this manner, the text is constituted as material culture and therefore the represented city — the literary city, like Maroko and Lagos in *Graceland*, becomes part of a material and symbolic culture which Nuttall argues is the symbolic ‘literary infrastructure’ that constitutes the city’s imaginary shape (33). Maroko is synecdochic to Lagos where symbolic meanings can be drawn from cultural readings. So *Graceland* becomes part of what Chris Dunton (2008) refers to as the ‘Lagos Novel’, following the popular work of Cyprian Ekwensi in the late ‘60s and ‘70s as examined by Emenyomu (1974). In addition to its stylistic genealogy, *Graceland* has also been examined in terms of its portrayal of the postcolonial subject’s identity (Nnodim, 2008). This essay’s focus on the specific
aspect of multiple sensorial cartographies of Lagos moves away from the focus on the crisis of urban subjectivity which has defined critical examination of Lagos and the general postcolonial city (Enwezor, et.al 2002; Freund, 2007). While the essay acknowledges the crisis of material (read economic) living, it highlights the symphony in the cacophony of city life, the rhythms of Lagosian ‘chaos’, in a way that, as Nnodim aptly puts it, ‘astounds the senses’ (321). Abani’s Lagos refocuses the reader’s sensorial experience of it to the percussive aesthetic of a ‘literary city’ (Nuttal 33). This is portrayed in multiple rhythms of sounds, the multiple colours and smells that the reader experiences through the creative imagination of the protagonist. As the essay will demonstrate, Elvis’s sensorial experience becomes the ‘infrastructure’ that imaginatively constructs a fascinating map of Lagos. A quick preview for instance is found in a scene where ‘the plank walkways’ of Maroko, which are described as the skeletal infrastructure of the city, ring out like ‘xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes’ (24).

Maroko is located at economic and socio-political margins within the architecture of Lagos. Materially, it is a place of despondence and abandonment, sustained by informal economies — kiosks and ‘rickety lean-tos’ (3) and establishments like ‘Madam Caro’s Bar and Restaurant’ which is described as a ‘rather grandiloquent name for the shaky wood-and-zinc shack perched on the edge of a walkway’ (25). Culturally, it is a cornucopia of positive energy (Dunton 2008), creativity and imagination. Elvis, thrives in this diverse culture. His hobby-turned-occupation of impersonating Elvis Presley allows him to draw on the creative energy that oozes out of these impoverished material conditions. His talent for impersonation is borne out of his early maternal influences, and a childhood revealed to be thriving through imagination in Graceland. Elvis’s economic deprivation (3) is only relieved by imaginative flight and cultural creativity. There is a thin line between what is material and metaphysical as revealed by the narrator’s description of the infrastructural wastage in Elvis’s neighbourhood: ‘Between the pillars, a woman had erected a buka, no more than a rickety lean-to made of sheets of corrugated iron roofing and plastic held together by hope’ (3). Indeed the idea that the dilapidated built environment is held together by ‘hope’ speaks to something more than just fanciful imagination. The hope — the metaphysical — is the engine of survival in the face of a reality of dilapidation. In the middle of desolation, the rhythm of life — in people, things and the built environment — seems to be defined by an animistic coexistence of nature and nurture, as described below:

Water, thick with sediment, ran down the rust-coloured iron roofs, overflowing basins and drums set out to collect it. Taps stood in yards, forlorn and lonely, their curved spouts, like metal beaks, dripping rainwater. Naked children exploded out of grey, wet houses, slipping and splaying in the mud, chased by shouts of parents trying to get them ready for school. (3–4)
Nature and nurture collide in a chaotic way in Maroko, and as the rain washes down in a cleansing fashion there is still an overhanging ‘smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies’ (4). Despite this fetid material world in the margins, there are many other cultural worlds in a rich and hybrid musical symphony. Abani offers a rich aural counterpoint to the dreariness of this ocular perception when Elvis listens to the city waking up. Morning in the city is defined by ‘tin buckets scraping, the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere’, there is Bob Marley’s ‘Natural Mystic’ playing and the ‘highlife music’, a ‘faster-tempered’ one by Celestine Ukwu also playing next door (4). These sounds begin to paint a picture of the culturally harmonious and diverse landscape that is Maroko, and of the multiple worlds that co-exist within the cultural imagination of this society. Using Highmore’s postulations, such acoustic cacophony reveals a different idea of movement and rhythm of the city that policy makers and urban planners of cities can never make intelligible — for according to Highmore, the advent of modernity meant the illusion of order created within cities (8–16). In this sense, as Sophie Watson suggests, there exists in such marginal and illegitimate sections of the city, ‘sites of magical urban encounters, hidden in the interstices of planned and monumental, divided and segregated, or privatised and thematised, spaces that more usually capture public attention’ (5). For Watson, the enchantments found in the politics of spatial difference find a nuanced encounter in the marginal ‘micro-publics’ that are generally illegible in the mainstream discourse of the city.

Maroko is culturally cosmopolitan, consuming global cultural products in an inventive and creative way — a manner best described by Homi Bhabha (143) as ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’. For Bhabha ‘vernacular cosmopolitanism’ is the result of what he calls ‘cultures of survival’ (247) — ways in which adoption and adaptation of cultures work to make them functional for socio-economically marginalised groups. The Lagos cityscape is therefore a terrain of worlds simultaneously in dialogue and conflict. Elvis spends his teenage years in this transformative, creative yet economically deprived environment. His earlier childhood in Afikpo gave him a fairly homogenous and stable sense of the world: he lived in a nuclear household, regularly visited the bioscope and had mastered the popular modes of expression. Now sixteen, he confronts a frenzied cultural space that plunges him into an unstable economic life with increasing expectations of growth and responsibility. Creativity becomes the substance of existence and Elvis embraces the pastiche and hybrid outlook of existence provided by the multicultural worlds which are reflected in his room:

Elvis looked around his room. *Jesus Can Save* and *Nigerian Eagles* almanacs hung from stained walls that had not seen a coat of paint in years. A magazine cutting of a BMW was coming off the far wall, its end flapping mockingly. A piece of wood, supported at both ends by cinder blocks, served as a bookshelf. (4–5)
Elvis’s reading tastes — Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet* — reflect the significance of not only imagination as a way to navigate the deprived socio-economic landscape but also ‘the therapeutic or corrective power of published knowledge’ (Dunton 74). Dunton discusses the importance of textuality reflected in the ‘Lagos Novel’ of the twenty-first century as central to a positive and creative energy, which he contrasts to the ‘low entropy’ often associated with the African city (Enwezor, et.al 2002; Freund, 2007). Moreover, in *Graceland*, Elvis’s avid reading practices are part of the author’s intertextual strategy to reveal the novels that inform this narrative. For instance, Elvis’s existential crisis can be related to that of the ‘invisible man’ in Ralph Ellison’s work. This allows the astute reader to make connections between Elvis’s choice of texts and his marginal material existence. However, his imaginative and creative power reinscribes his sense of agency.

**Navigating the City: Landscapes of Desires, Poetic Geographies Entropic Realities**

The architectural brittleness of Maroko — the suspended poise, the pastiche of building materials reflected in the interior design of Elvis’s own room — is also a reproduction of an imaginary world. The inhabitants of Maroko, like Elvis, imagine a life into actual existence. In Elvis’s case, the reality of economic deprivation is obviated by a free-reigning imagination that allows him to try to make a living out of the impersonation of Elvis Presley. Elvis’s early childhood, defined by an abusive father, sexual molestation and the loss of his mother has created a crisis of subjectivity for him, which is particularly evident in his sexual confusion in the Lagosian present. Elvis occupies, a ‘landscape of desires’ (Prakash 14) created by the consumption of images, sounds, memories and cultural artefacts. His later childhood culminates in a mixture of desire, despondency, blitheness, and therefore a dystopian and utopian framework of existence that reflects the urbanscape of Lagos.

This landscape of desires is culturally contiguous with and concretely manifested in the discordant architecture of the built environment. The narrator has a particularly demonstrative and sensational way of mixing images of the built environment with ocular and aural senses to construct a discordant yet artistic image of Maroko:

> The plank walkways, which crisscrossed three-quarters of the slum, rang out like xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes. In the mud underneath this suspended city, dogs, pigs, goats and fowl rooted for food. Somewhere in the vicinity, the congregation of a Spiritual Church belted out a heady, fecund music that was a rhythmic, percussive background to their religious ecstasy. (24)

The image of a ‘suspended city’ invokes a metaphysical phenomenon of material isolation, desolation and alienation. But the acoustic images (‘rhythmic, percussive’) invoke a wealth of alternative economies that characterise and therefore ‘support’ this suspended city. Moreover, the alienation of Maroko
from the mainstream economy of Lagos has created informal economies such as Elvis’s impersonation activities, Benji’s ‘hooking up services’, which involve ‘hooking people up with others seeking a service or a favour or a thug’ (26), and Okon who sells his blood to earn money for food. Benji and Okon are part of the struggling masses in the city who try their hands at anything to eke out a living. ‘De King of de Beggars’, one of the more visible of Elvis’s acquaintances, turns out to be a politically conscious hobo who tragically mobilises masses in the city against the military regime (299–303). Within the perceived chaos, there exists an intricate internal order, as Rem Koolhaas describes Lagos. As Elvis navigates the city he builds networks with people like ‘de King of de Beggars’ and Okon. Lagosian formal economy is beyond the reach of the inhabitants of ghetto cities like Maroko. They are no more than a source of cheap labour for the mainstream. Elvis’s experience in a construction job that Benji ‘hooked’ him up with, illustrates the sheer alienation and irony that exists in the contiguous images of development and decay within the Lagos cityscape (27–29). For example, while Lagos is awash with ‘new high-rise apartment complexes and office blocks’ (27), the army of construction workers who provide the labour cannot even afford lunch. Indeed the masses of labourers are zombified ‘bodies’ described as ‘Masons with cement-dusted bodies’ and ‘hands of used sandpaper, the backs wrinkled, the palms scoured and calloused’ (28).

There is a symbolic hierarchy of habitation within the cityscape, as modernity, represented by the ‘sweeping flyovers’, seems to tear across the skies of the shantytowns beneath them. The narrative provides a worm’s eye view of the position of marginal persons through Elvis’s actual position on the ground. It is interesting that as the power of the image registers in Elvis’s mind, he is buoyed into leaps of cinematic imagination — he imagines himself a film director:

What shots would he line up? Which wouldn’t make the final edit? Ending up on the cutting-room floor? It frustrated him to think this way. Before he read the book on film theory he found in the second-hand store, movies were as much magic to him as the strange wizards who used to appear in the markets of his childhood. Now when he watched a movie, he made internal comparison about what angle would have been better, and whether the watermelon shattering in the street of a small western town was a metaphor for death or a commentary about the lack of water. (9)

Elvis uses the ocular sense to paint the disparate images of the city within the same street — he describes a customer ‘reading a book on quantum physics’, who he thinks is probably a ‘professor down on his luck’, and a ‘thief stalking a potential victim with all the stealth of a tiger’ (30). However, Elvis is equally vulnerable to the vagaries of the city’s underbelly as a one-eyed beggar with a ‘long scar, keloidal and thick’ accosts him. The beggar’s ‘hair was a mess of matted brown dreadlocks, yet he was clean, and his old clothes appeared freshly washed’ (30–31). This beggar turns out to be ‘de King of de Beggars’, one of Elvis’s seminal acquaintances who has a strong sense of moral probity, is a revolutionary and an intellectual of sorts, and who expresses himself in pithy aphorisms.
There is something defamiliarising and alienating yet fulfilling about the landscape and the city that he calls ‘half-slum, half-paradise’, a place ‘so ugly and violent yet beautiful at the same time’ (7). There is, as Elvis reckons, a constant revelation about Maroko that ‘nothing prepares you for’ (48). The ragged built environment suspended above the filth of the mangrove swamp seems, according to Elvis, to be in a perpetual sense of becoming:

Half of the town was built of a confused mix of clapboard, wood, cement and zinc sheets, raised above a swamp by means of stilts and wooded walkways. The other half, built on solid ground reclaimed from the sea, seemed to be clawing its way out of the primordial swamp, attempting to become something else. (48)

The primordial swamp is a constant background of the haphazard construction that is symbolic of the slog and plod that characterises the existential condition. Furthermore, in the scatological portrayal of Maroko there is much that concerns Elvis: ‘a little boy, sank into the black filth under one of the houses’ and ‘a man squatted on a plank walkway outside his house, defecating in the swamp below, where a dog lapped up the faeces before they hit the ground’. Much to Elvis’s disgust, he ‘saw another young boy sitting on an outcrop of planking, dangling a rod in the water’ (48). The narrator employs these images of filth and food to characterise the cyclical conditions of a ‘miasmal city’ that is adjacent to the ‘garden cities’:

Looking up, Elvis saw a white bungalow. Its walls were pristine, as though a supernatural power kept the mud off it. The small patch of earth in front of it held a profusion of red hibiscus, pink crocuses, mauve bachelor’s buttons and sunflowers. The sight cheered him greatly. (48)

Lagos becomes a collage of images of poverty and affluence, a ‘dual city’ of conflicting material realities which maybe observed in the aural images of this city, as well as the cultural energy that it generates. This cultural energy is found not only in the imaginative landscapes that are, as in the case of Elvis leaping out of the material boundaries, but also in the cultural production and circulation of artefacts around the cityscape. Music, food, clothing, books, magazines and paintings are the concrete products of Lagos’ cultural landscape that tell a different narrative of movement and circulation, different from the static, sluggish, almost immobile nature of the built environment of Maroko. It is these cultural products — mediated through communication networks like radio, television and video — that speed up the idea of Lagosian rhythm and movement. The pervasive nature of these particular forms of mass media allows the cultural energy of Maroko to be realised. One of the sites for the mobility of cultures and artifacts is the market, and Elvis’s navigation of the built environment takes him to the market within the Lagosian cityscape.

As in the fiction of Chinua Achebe and other early Nigerian writers, the market place is a significant network of the movement of people, goods, ideas and general cultural artefacts. The representation of the market place here reveals the apex
of cultural tastes, mobility and creativity where the cultural landscape overlaps the Lagos cityscape. The market constructs networks for the informal economies that make such miasmal cities as Maroko thrive. Their situation within the dual economy of the city of Lagos erases the compartmentalised movement of ideas, people and goods that urban planners envisioned for the city. While its location within the physical precincts of the city implies an act of planning, the circulation of the cultural products, artefacts and ideas continuously inscribe and re-inscribe cultural boundaries. The products in circulation include both indigenous and imported items, which signify the market place as a site of competing cultures and knowledges. Albani demonstrates the mobility and circulation of knowledge in the most unlikely of places. Describing the second-hand books as being sold via a cart, he refers to the ‘dog-eared Penguin Classics’, giving the example of *A Tale of Two Cities* by quoting the first line, ‘It was the best of times, it was the worst of times’ (1). This reference also captures Elvis’s perception and experience of the city which he described earlier as ‘half-slum, half-paradise’ (7).

Through this market scene, the reader is made aware of Elvis’s reading tastes as well as how the idea of the text and the narrative as cultural product in a circulation network reflects the co-existence of ‘high’ and ‘low’ canon and popular culture within the space of the market. As Elvis walks around the book carts he discovers works by Chinua Achebe, Mongo Beti, Elechi Amadi, Camara Laye, Mariama Ba, ‘thrillers’ by Kalu Okpi, Valentine Alily as well as works by Dostoevsky and James Baldwin. Through the text’s presence within this market, it gains a central role as not just a representation or a reflection, but actually a product being represented and referenced by Abani, alongside food, music and clothing — an actual cultural product, a good like any other within this multicultural and transcultural network of the city. Abani also takes this chance to reference, as part of a material culture, the Onitsha market literature, giving a vignette of its historical importance in the epistemological history of Eastern Nigeria:

> These pamphlets, written between 1910 and 1970, were produced on small presses in the eastern market town of Onitsha, hence the name. They were the Nigerian equivalent of dime drugstore pulp fiction crossed with pulp pop self-help books. They were morality tales with their subject matter and tone translated straight out of the oral culture. (112)

The sub-cultural relevance of these works is underscored through the politics and morality of daily living within the cityscape. However, the notion of ‘landscapes of desires’ is portrayed in the escapist ideals of beauty, money and American imagery:

> The covers mirrored American pulp fiction with luscious, full-breasted Sophia Loren look-alike white women. Elvis had read a lot of them, though he wouldn’t admit it publicly. These books were considered to be low-class trash, but they sold in the thousands. (112)

Abani then quotes a whole section from one of the pamphlets ‘Beware of Harlots and Many Friends’. The reference to Onitsha market literature allows
the city to be explored through a textual landscape. The texts here — books and pamphlets — are being represented as consumer products in circulation within the cityscape, as part and parcel of goods within the networks of the city. The material culture nature of the goods in circulation, and their representation, underscores their relevance as not only academic or sentimental products, but also as products that speak to the condition of the subject in the postcolonial city. Their sub-cultural relevance and their mass consumption reflect a creative imagining of literacy within the miasmal, informal city networks. It also gives Abani the chance to re-inscribe the culturally creative nature of literary activity within the informal city network as well as reference a history of popular cultural products in postcolonial Nigeria. In this activity, Abani uses the novel to demonstrate the potential of the text as an archive of the metropolis. As Mbembe and Nutall suggest, the text or the act of writing can be understood to portray the ‘metropolis as an archive’ (52). The ‘Lagos novel’ includes both popular and canonical novels in light of the protean nature of cultural politics within the marginal cityscape. The Lagos novel therefore lends itself to the malleable nature of cultural rhythms in the city.

The daily issues dealt with in this popular literature reveal a gendered perception and representation of the city. With titles like ‘Mable the sweet honey that poured away’ and ‘Beware of Harlots and Many Friends’, laws governing morality are spelled out, making conspicuous the female body — the ‘harlot’ — as subject and object of derision. This literature attempts moral and cultural gate-keeping, and assumes social entropy is the norm within the city. At the same time, the cityscape is reflected through a hierarchy of gendered labour division, in which even within an informal economy where theft, drug-dealing, extortion and trade in human parts is rife, the sex worker is exaggeratedly criminalised. There is in this idea of the popular, a patriarchal, ultra-masculine framework of interpretation. Informal economies are the result of the state’s failure to provide food, shelter and clothing. These economies thrive by sheer cultural creativity, but are also overseen through a patriarchal perception of morality, decency and rules of behaviour.

Therefore, the market is a bastion of cultural knowledge, societal rules and policies on appropriate behaviour. The market in this sense becomes a ‘micro-public’ as Watson says of those marginal public spheres that are never the sites of theoretical and practical consideration in matters of policy, design or planning (18). It is also a place of ‘enchantment’ and of ‘phantasmagoria’, reflecting the psychic state of the city. Occupied by free-flowing imagination and subjects who bear the brand of what Mbembe and Roitman call ‘the subject in times of crisis’ (99), the market is a conspicuous meeting place in the landscape of the city, allowing its inhabitants an illusion of choice and agency and the ephemeral catharsis found in spending power that the market offers to clients.

Yet the market, populated mostly by petty traders is subjected to surveillance as portrayed in the ironic urban planning efforts to clear the city of informal
traders, hawkers and food sellers. It restricts even further, the movement of those in the margins of the city. During his regular escapades in the city, Elvis sees the police battle with street hawkers in an effort to clear them from the streets of Lagos. In one instance, a hawker whose wares are thrown into a fire by a policeman commits suicide by throwing himself into the same fire used to burn his wares (74). A collective sense of dystopia, anger and despondency emerges in the informal settlements, as police ‘man’ the cityscape. This angst is located in the period of disillusionment in the postcolonial African city, where ‘crisis’ has become central to the politics of daily life. As Membre & Roitman argue, the collective anger is borne of a ‘crisis in space and matter’ leading to such acts as suicide and mob justice. Considering decay in the built environment, a condition that results from ‘historical violence’, subjects are plunged into a ‘prolonged state of anxiety and perplexity’ (Membre & Roitman 125). Elvis witnesses inexplicable incidences of mob-justice as micro-public spheres turn into avenues for venting the helplessness of the masses against the juggernaut of repressive state apparatuses in their attempts to police the crisis.

These forms of mass violence are turned eventually into mass resistance and political mobilisation, when the state decides to raze Maroko. The forces of gentrification attempt to redefine the spatial politics of the city, while a Fanonesque revolutionary lumpenproletariate resists it. The police hold sway and spatial politics within the city of Lagos are redefined at the cost of hundreds of lives, including Elvis’s father Sunday Oke. Meanwhile, Elvis’s escapades end in his arrest, torture and release, and he finds he has nowhere to call a home anymore, as he confronts the debris of buildings and people, including the mangled remains of his father. The imagery here is visually disturbing in its representation of death, debris and scavengers. It is the end of an era, borne out of revolutionary efforts from the lumpen against the police. As an anatomy of destruction, Maroko has come full circle, in its creation and destruction and even in its decaying moment, the imagery of a putrefying eco-system is visually powerful, collapsing the images of life and death and putting human and animal within egalitarian food chains:

All around, scavengers, human and otherwise, feasted on the exposed innards of Maroko. They rummaged in the rubble as bulldozers sifted through the chaos like slow-feeding buffalo. Here some article of clothing still untorn; there a pot; over there a child’s toy with the squeaker still working. There was a lot of snorting coming from a clump of shrubs as a pack of hungry dogs fed. The hand of a corpse rose up from between the snarling dogs in a final wave. (303–304)

This is the height of dystopia for Elvis and as he walks around in delirium, having been literally alienated from what he previously identified as a home, the city looks destitute to him. The spatial practices of Lagos have been re-configured in what the government ironically calls ‘Operation Clean the Nation’. The imagery of destitution is presented through the mass of beggar children:
His eyes caught those of a young girl no more than twelve. She cut her eyes at him and heaving her pregnant body up, walked away. He glanced at another child and saw a look of old boredom in his eyes. Elvis read the city, seeing signs not normally visible.

The re-configuration of the city has suddenly rendered things visible for Elvis and the usual signposts have been defamiliarised. In the city, the people are anxious and delusional:

a man stood, then sat, then stood again. Now he danced. Stopped. Shook his head and laughed and then hopped around in an odd birdlike gait. He was deep in conversation with some hallucination. It did not seem strange to Elvis that the spirit world became more visible and tangible the nearer one was to starvation. The man laughed and his diaphragm shook, Elvis thought he heard the man’s ribs knocking together, producing a sweet, haunting melody like the wooden xylophones of his small-town childhood.

There is a thin line between dystopia and utopia, the spiritual and material. Other worlds suddenly seem in dialogue with the living. In this state of delirium:

Elvis traced patterns in the cracked and parched earth beneath his feet. There is a message in it all somewhere, he mused, a point to the chaos. But no matter how hard he tried, the meaning always seemed to be out there somewhere beyond reach, mocking him.

Later, Elvis finds himself in ‘Bridge City’, another ghetto under the massive Lagos bridges. Space and time fuse into each other as Elvis falls in and out of consciousness. In this community of beggar children, ‘Time lost all meaning in the face of that deprivation’ (309), and surviving the evening seems like the goal of a lifetime. The city here is a jungle with a vicious law of survival of the fittest. In this part of the city, despondency is synonymous with images of children begging, selling and basically sustaining the day-to-day running of their destitute homes. The city has reached a nadir, basically grinding to a halt when the floods come sweeping through. These conditions eventually coincide with Elvis’s reunion with Redemption. In a fortuitous and serendipitous turn of events, Redemption gives Elvis his passport with an American visa. This becomes Elvis’s final act of impersonation, one that eventually sees him travel to ‘Graceland’ — America.

CONCLUSION

In Abani’s Graceland, Lagos is seen through the eyes of a sixteen-year-old who leads an impoverished material existence but who constructs a rich cultural environment through his desire for flight and survival. While Abani constructs the structural dialogue of time and space (Afikpo and Lagos as Country and City), the narrative focuses on the city to plot contemporary conditions of the character’s postcolonial childhood. The squalor, filth, hunger, begging, sexual molestation and assault is borne by the children in the numerous instances that Elvis witnesses or is involved with. These childhoods are constructed within the dystopian and utopian planes of existence that speak to the socio-cultural and economic duality...
of Lagos. These planes of existence are in a conflicting dialogue with each other, reproducing liminal identities characterised by what Mudimbe has referred to as a ‘precarious pertinence’ (5).

The interaction and dialogue between realism and surrealism in the life of the city is dizzying, blurring the material conditions of existence and the imaginative ones. The city becomes therefore in Abani’s case, the toponym for contemporary identities. It is within this dystopia/utopia, slum/paradise binary that contemporary childhoods are increasingly being constructed. Hence, as Lefebvre’s (1996) prescient Writings on Cities posits, urbanisation has indeed blurred the binaries between city and country and the production of space has extended beyond the built environment to the cyber-environment and therefore to thought processes which construct ‘representative spaces’, reflected in imagination and the landscapes of desires that we see in Graceland.

Abani’s idea of space and place works through a scatological imagery and non-attachment expressive of a fast and furious rhythm, through what in borrowing the words of Mbembe and Nuttall can be described as ‘technologies of speed’ (369). The movement between cultural worlds is sped up by the power of imagination, the desire for survival and flight. The city, for Abani, is a place in which identities are in constant and dizzying mutation: mobility is critical to these (post)modern identities — circulation, translocation and transculturation are analytical terms for these forms of identity represented by the protagonist Elvis Oke. The idea of place and space is defined by circulation and mobility because of a transcultural and multicultural milieu.

Childhood in Abani’s Graceland is a dialogue of multiple worlds in rapid and dizzying interaction within the time, place and space of the city. A childhood in the cityscape is constructed through navigation, mobility and circulation of bodies, goods, music, magazines and books. The cityscape allows for the blurring of imaginative and concrete conditions. The city is a place in which modernity, through technology and forms of mass mediation, affects identity formation. It is a highly unsettled space that constructs postcolonial subjects who, in the wake of the increasing mobility of cultures, are spoilt for imaginative choices. A pastiche of cultures, the postcolonial African city is the site of contemporary postmodern identities within an increasing global order. The postcolonial condition of the cityscape — survival, flight, utopia, dystopia, desire and imagination is an influential foundation for postmodern constructions of the self.

NOTES
1 Chris Abani is a Nigerian writer who lives in Los Angeles in the United States. Abani lived in exile in London before moving to the United States. He has also published two novels (Masters of the Board [1985], Virgin of Flames [2007]), two novellas (Becoming Abigail [2006], Song for Night [2007]), as well as five collections of poetry.
2 See Sarah Nuttall, ‘Literary City’.
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3 Emenyomu examines Cyprian Ekwensi as one of the first novelists to engage with Lagos as a represented city. Ekwensi’s popular works like Jagua Nana and People of the City are considered some of the earliest literary engagements with Lagos. For other work on Lagos the city see Obiechina (1973) and Echeruo (1977).

4 Chris Dunton’s article ‘Energy and Entropy: City of words’, traces the historiography of the ‘Lagos novel’ from the 1960s and talks about the idea of positive energy in contemporary novels set in Lagos.

5 Dunton’s idea of the text and published knowledge as a diacritical feature of the contemporary Lagos novel is illustrated in Abani’s referencing of a variety of texts, which include the pharmacopeia and recipes that find their relevance within the structural organisation of the central narrative (as material culture of memory sourced from Elvis Oke’s late mother) as well as the strategic referencing of Onitsha market literature as the authentic textual product of the popular urban Lagos space.

6 Okome (2002) ‘Writing the Anxious City: Images of Lagos in Nigerian Home Video Films’ examines the history of the city through the cultural products in circulation. Okome points out ‘Thus, it was the Onitsha market literature that began the critique of citiness as opposed to rurality, which became amplified in the city novels of Cyprian Ekwensi’ (321). Hence it is through the text that discourse on Lagos began and Abani’s description of Onitsha market pamphlets goes back to, arguably the origins of the ‘Lagos novel’.

7 Mbembe and Roitman refer here to figures that are constituted by the crisis of socio-cultural, economic and political fragmentation — a crisis of what they refer to as ‘space and matter’.

8 The forcible displacement of residents of Maroko led to the destitution of over 300,000 people with the parcel of land that was Maroko given to high ranking military officers as well as private developers (Ahonsi 137).

WORKS CITED


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