WASTE MATTERS:

URBAN MARGINS IN CONTEMPORARY POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ii

Introduction 1

1. "Anything could turn out to be something":
   Gleaning Slum History in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* 27

2. "Suspended City":
   Personal, Urban, and National Development in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* 63

3. "A New Heightened Sense of Place":
   Dinaw Mengestu's Cognitive Map of Washington, D.C. 100

4. Seeing the Obvious?
   Contradictory Visibilities in Indian City Literature 132

Conclusion 166

Illustrations 172

Works Cited 174

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines how contemporary postcolonial writers commonly identify disparate urban margins as potent sites for defining and rehearsing new modes of citizenship and belonging in an unevenly globalized world. Although earlier postcolonial fiction by writers such as Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah expresses notable urban skepticism, the overwhelming global expansion of cities since the mid-twentieth century demands the reimagination of urban existence. While there are undoubtedly, to use Frantz Fanon's terms, enduring "myths of the capital" to be debunked, I argue that contemporary writers such as Patrick Chamoiseau, Chris Abani, Dinaw Mengestu, and Suketu Mehta consolidate opportunities for social and environmental justice through their particular engagement with the politics and aesthetics of "urban waste"—degraded spaces (slums, dumps, ghettos), devalued people (migrants, slum-dwellers, minorities), and discarded things (trash, garbage, remains). In their creation of a new urban imaginary which revalues that which has been rejected, sidelined or suppressed, their writing suggests opportunities for an inclusive urban politics that merits systematic analysis. My project assesses the utopian promise and pragmatic limitations of such work in light of the pressing environmental and economic challenges that render its creative interrogation of urban marginality ever more urgent.

INTRODUCTION

LOCATING URBAN WASTE

The bodies keep coming. First, the corpse of a teenage boy floats to the surface of Accra's polluted Korle Lagoon, then another is found in a muddy ditch in the city's historic Jamestown district. A young woman is thrown onto a garbage dump. Next, a dead boy is left in a filthy public latrine in one of the city's busy lorry parks. In *Children of the Street* (2011), Kwei Quartey's Inspector Darko Dawson pursues a serial killer whose signature disposal of his young, homeless victims "express[es] that these people's lives are worthless to him. They might as well be rubbish or refuse" (256). The perpetrator is revealed to be Obi, himself a former street child who is now an "all-round handyman" for the renowned psychologist Professor Allen Botswe (115). Charged with bringing children home for his employer to interview about how they cope with life on the streets, Obi suffers his own tragic and violent breakdown. After his arrest, he indignantly tells Dawson:

> He brings this *filth*, this refuse from the streets to sleep in the spotless sheets I wash with my own hands. No. Those children do not belong here. They belong in the gutter or the latrine. That is all they are worth. (321)

Having narrowly escaped the street children's poverty by finding work in Botswe's mansion, the traumatized Obi, Dawson muses, "may be trying to kill that part of them that's in him" (257).

Filled with detailed descriptions of Ghana's busy capital and its diverse residents, Quartey's gripping narrative vividly dramatizes the material and imaginative challenges produced by contemporary urbanization. While Obi's psychopathy is a deliberately heightened example, it

points to the difficulty of reconciling the extremes of poverty and wealth that characterize today's developing cities. More measured in his response, Dawson is also disturbed by the contrast between Professor Botswe's opulent mansion and the apocalyptic landscape of Agbogbloshie, "Accra's most notorious slum" (9). Many of the novel's eponymous street children who end up here are domestic migrants, attracted to the city by the promise of economic opportunity. However, as this supply of largely unskilled workers outstrips the demand for their labor, they accumulate at the literal and figurative urban margins, where they are vulnerable to the poverty, pollution, overcrowding, and crime that accompany intense urbanization. The ease with which Obi targets his victims uncomfortably highlights the risks to which they are exposed. As he tells an indignant Dawson, "Street people are sleeping everywhere. Who knows they are there, and who cares about them? Who will report anything?" (322).

Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman identifies the worldwide proliferation of displaced and vulnerable urban dwellers as the signal characteristic of an increasingly widespread global modernity. In his analysis, globalization is primarily an economic phenomenon energized by a destructive capitalism that relentlessly produces large numbers of "wasted lives" in its quest for economic progress at the expense of equitable, humane modes of production.[1] Yet what serves for Bauman as a useful critical analogy is offered as a disturbingly accurate description by Quartey's novel. In Agbogbloshie, the metaphorical distance between waste matter and wasted humans has diminished to the point of invisibility. Here, youngsters form an inverted and risky "*dis*assembly" line, dismantling "junked, unusable equipment that rich countries pass off as charitable donations" to retrieve copper that can be resold (Quartey 9-10). Exposed to environmental toxins; lacking adequate shelter, sanitation, and sustenance; and subject to both state and criminal violence; these

[1] See Bauman, *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* (2004).

slum-dwellers are literally reduced to the status of the detritus in which they live and frequently work.

Urbanist Mike Davis similarly notes that that "the principal function of the Third World urban edge remains as a human dump" (47). His compelling comparative analysis of what he terms our "planet of slums" suggests that the urban deprivations so finely rendered by Quartey's fiction proliferate throughout the developing world. Some have objected to Davis's broad application of the term "slum" to diverse locations within the global South, given its origins in middle-class Victorian discourses of urban moral decline that deployed imperial tropes to construct Britain's inner-city poor as "savage" social deviants.[2] In today's cities, Tom Angotti argues, the term still obscures the structural reasons for disproportionate urban poverty, naturalizing the decline of minority neighborhoods, and legitimating "high-minded" urban renewal (961). While acknowledging these critiques, I am persuaded by David Cunningham's suggestion that "if the term retains a productive force today, in the context of a globalizing capitalism, it is precisely—through a recollection of its roots in the nineteenth-century metropolis—in the degree to which it recalls the distinctive modernity of the social-spatial forms it now so riskily names" (16).

In this dissertation, I seek to better understand these new and unsettling city spaces by examining a range of postcolonial urban literature, which questions their origins, describes their contours, and imagines their alternatives. In this critical endeavor, I take an instructive cue from Ann Laura Stoler, whose recent call for more historically attentive postcolonial scholarship

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[2] Robert Neuwirth's *Shadow Cities* (2005) avoids the term altogether in its comparative analysis of "squatter communities" across four continents. "Slum is a loaded term," Neuwirth writes, "and its horizon of emotion and judgment comes from outside. . . . To call a neighborhood a slum establishes a set of values—a morality that people outside the slum share—and implies that inside those areas, people don't share the same principles. . . . It is a totalizing word—and the whole, in this case, is the false" (16-17).

importantly reminds us that, when thinking about the enduring impacts of colonialism, which she calls "imperial debris and ruin,"

> one is struck by how intuitively evocative and elusive such effects are, how easy it is to slip between metaphor and material object, between infrastructure and imagery, between remnants of matter and mind. The point of critical analysis is not to look "underneath" or "beyond" that slippage but to understand what work that slippage does and the political traffic it harbors. (203)

I argue that what is for Stoler an instructive cognitive "slippage" can be understood in the context of contemporary urbanization as a troubling material and metaphorical collapse, evocative as the term is not only of the inadequate shelter, physical demands, and mental challenges that proliferate at the margins of today's cities, but also the pressure that these vexed locations place on existing urban imaginaries.

While Stoler usefully conceptualizes "imperial ruin" to describe the lingering after-effects of colonialism in their many tangible and implicit forms, I draw on a necessarily flexible and expansive definition of "urban waste" to describe the degraded places, devalued people, and discarded things that feature as both symptoms and symbols of postcolonial inequity in the texts I examine. Kevin Lynch offers a useful precedent for this broad conception of waste, describing it as

> what is worthless or unused for human purpose. It is a lessening of something without useful result; it is loss and abandonment, decline, separation and death. It is the spent and valueless material left after some act of production or consumption, but can also refer to any used thing: garbage, trash, litter, junk, impurity and dirt. There are waste things, waste lands, waste time, and wasted lives. (xi)

Ubiquitous and dynamic, waste is a cultural product that demands rethinking. The texts I examine perform this revaluation, featuring urban waste and various attempts to manage it not only as a pressing theme and evocative trope, but also as formal inspiration. While early postcolonial literature by writers such as Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Wole Soyinka, and Ayi Kwei Armah expresses notable urban disillusionment, my research finds that contemporary postcolonial writers identify the margins of today's cities as potent sites for the definition and rehearsal of new modes of citizenship and belonging that eschew restrictive national and ideological frameworks. Focusing on work by Patrick Chamoiseau, Chris Abani, Dinaw Mengestu, and Suketu Mehta, I show how these authors explore opportunities for social and environmental justice through their particular engagement with the politics and aesthetics of urban waste. As the explicit violence of Quartey's novel suggests, such literature avoids naïve optimism in favor of carefully describing and deliberately problematizing the possible recuperation of the urban margins.

CRITICAL CONTEXT

In my attention to the varied forms of urban waste, both actual and imaginary, my dissertation intervenes in an emergent body of interdisciplinary humanities scholarship, which explores the ramifications of waste in a variety of contexts.[3] To date, current conversations around waste in contemporary literature have largely focused on American texts.[4] This rich and varied

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[3] See Neville & Villeneuve (2002), Hawkins & Muecke (2003), Cohen & Johnson (2005), Hawkins (2006), Gee (2010), Sullivan (2012), and Scanlan & Clark (2013). Relevant journal special issues include: *Waste and Abundance. SubStance* 37.2 (2008); *Waste. Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/11(2009); Special cluster on "waste." *ISLE* 20.3 (2013). For current news, analyses, and announcements pertinent to the field, *discardstudies.com* is a useful resource. As described on its "About" page, the website provides a "gathering place for scholars, activists, environmentalists, students, artists, planners, and others whose work touches on themes relevant to the study of waste and wasting."

[4] Drawing largely on examples from American literature and visual art, Patricia Yaeger's "The Death of Nature and the Apotheosis of Trash" (2008) persuasively argues for "the power of waste at the center of contemporary literature" (331; see also her 2010 article "Sea Trash"). See also William G. Little, *The Waste Fix: Seizures of the Sacred from Upton Sinclair*

work commonly explores how artistic engagements with trash, toxins, dirt, and excrement offer suggestive counterpoints to the social exclusions and environmental degradations routinely generated by a conspicuously consumptive Western capitalism. John Blair Gamber's *Positive Pollutions and Cultural Toxins* (2012) provides an especially resonant analysis of the ways in which contemporary U.S. ethnic literatures affirm the value of wasted city spaces in light of prevalent racialized discourses of American urban "doom." As discussed in more detail below, my third chapter reprises this concern with American urban margins by analyzing how the exilic perspective of Dinaw Mengestu's Ethiopian protagonist in *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* affords an original critique of urban transformation in Washington, D.C.

These concerns resurface with particular intensity in the postcolonial context. Sarah Lincoln's *Expensive Shit* (2008) and Kenneth Harrow's *Trash: African Cinema from Below* (2013) relatedly argue that the prevalent trope of waste in African literature and film offers an effective aesthetic revaluation of the people and cultural productions degraded by the continent's uneven imbrication with global capitalism.[5] While some might be wary of attributing "trashiness" to African art, my project endorses this multivalent heuristic.[6] Far from naturalizing the devaluation of postcolonial literature or its subjects, critical attention to (urban) waste in its many forms enables a better understanding of that precarious status and the innovative ways through which it is contested and overcome.[7]

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to The Sopranos (2002), and Mary Foltz, *An Ethics of Waste: Twentieth Century American Literature and Excremental Culture* (2009).

[5] See also Ryan Connor's "Regimes of Waste" (2013) for an analysis of twentieth-century African fiction that draws on Harrow's trash paradigm.

[6] See Agozino (2013) for a review that strongly objects to what the author perceives as Harrow's reinforcement of degrading African stereotypes through his use of "trash" as the organizing principle for his study.

[7] As Lincoln explains: "Literature is thus, in its own way, a "trash heap": a site at which waste accumulates, but also (as in many real-world African landfills) a rich source of value, creativity, nutrition, and even surprising beauty, for those who have the skill to recognize them" (4-5).

In addition to broadening the geographic scope of these existing analyses, my dissertation contributes to this ongoing critical conversation in several ways.[8] Firstly, as a crucial interface between humans and the environment, a focus on waste in contemporary urban literature enables further elaboration of a literary critical perspective that productively combines postcolonial and ecocritical concerns. The ways in which we organize discarded matter—trash, leftovers, remnants—reveals attitudes towards the environment that are inherently imperial. Yet our physical ingestion and excretion of different kinds of waste—toxins, pollutants, shit—signals the mutual permeability of our human bodies and a supposedly distinct natural world from which we are, in fact, inextricable. Recent ecocritical interventions underscore this mutuality, directing readers beyond a human/nature dichotomy towards an understanding of anthropological and environmental concerns as shared and inseparable.

Acknowledging the continuum of concerns that link people and planet has significant implications for postcolonial studies, as Stoler suggests when she urges scholars in the field to "refocus on the connective tissue that continues to bind human potentials to degraded environments, and degraded personhoods to the material refuse of imperial projects" (193). In highlighting the linked concerns of postcolonial landscapes and populations, Stoler builds on the valuable work of environmental historians such as Alfred Crosby and Richard Grove that has pointed out the ecological imperatives at the heart of European empire-building. If, as these scholars suggest, the history of imperialism is one of shared human and environmental

[8] While my projects finds in urban waste an especially useful comparative tool for a range of disparate texts, Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2010) locates in postcolonial portrayals of the "heavy waters of the Atlantic" an evocative site for "exploring waste as a constitutive process and product of the violence of Atlantic modernity" (710-11).

degradation, a postcolonial studies committed to revealing both its legacies and lived effects must be attentive to this imbrication.[9]

While, as Rob Nixon notes in an influential analysis of the two fields, environmentalism and postcolonialism have historically tended towards divergence, if not outright opposition—the latter traditionally more invested in a somewhat more anthropocentric historical and cultural critique—an increasing number of literary critics have since put them productively into conversation.[10] In keeping with Nixon's own transnational reorientation of environmental criticism, Pablo Mukherjee develops what he terms "a materialist 'postcolonial green' perspective" in his recent analysis of Anglophone Indian fiction, positing the "mutual interpenetration" of environment, history, and culture as the basis for understanding the contemporary global economy to which writers such as Arundhati Roy and Amitav Ghosh respond with notable stylistic innovation (58, 83).

Although Mukherjee focuses on contemporary Indian novels, he suggests that the far-reaching imperialism with which they engage is illustrative of a broader postcolonial experience. Significantly for my analysis, he identifies the urban margins of the developing world "where, to a virtually unprecedented degree, . . . the historical condition of unevenness is felt and lived as a toxic environmental condition—as the condition of postcoloniality itself" (90). Here, Mukherjee not only reiterates the necessarily environmentally aware nature of contemporary postcolonial critique; he further suggests the exemplary nature of the urban margins, where the material, social, and environmental inequities simultaneously wrought by contemporary imperial capitalism are

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[9] See Crosby's *Ecological Imperialism* (1986), and Grove's *Green Imperialism* (1995).

[10] See Nixon (2005); also, Slaymaker (2001), Deloughrey et. al. (2005), Deloughrey (2007), Marzec (2007), Caminero-Santangelo (2007), Huggan & Tiffin (2010), Roos & Hunt (2010), Wright (2010), Caminero-Santangelo & Myers (2011), Deloughrey & Handley (2011), and Nixon (2011).

seen and felt with particular intensity. Often, but not always located at the geographical edges of developing cities, these sites are undeniably peripheral to the formal economy and the political life of the countries in which they exist. Physically speaking, these spaces are also profoundly unstable. Whether constructed on swampland, like the Maroko slum in Lagos that Chris Abani depicts in *GraceLand*, or on the shifting, toxic ground of vast garbage dumps such as those found in cities as distant as Rio de Janeiro and Cairo, the urban margins that I consider in this dissertation are in-between places, whose shifting identity and purpose encapsulates the challenging, violent dynamism of contemporary postcoloniality.

Examining the careful and critical depiction of such sites across a range of recent postcolonial literature thus provides valuable insight into the intertwined structures by which they are created and perpetuated. While the globalization of which slums are a signal characteristic has been taken by some to spell the critical demise of postcolonial studies, which was, in an earlier incarnation, predominantly concerned with asserting the sovereignty and integrity of national cultures, my project reveals urban waste to be a crucial interface *between* the local and the global, where the desire for secure national citizenship competes with the lure of transnational social and economic mobility.[11]

DISCOURSES OF WASTE

The rapidity with which urban waste has proliferated in recent decades, coupled with the immediacy of the challenges it presents, lends, in some ways, a distinctive contemporaneity to these problems. However, they are by no means exclusively recent phenomena. As Martin Melosi explains in the comprehensive introduction to his *Garbage in the Cities*, "since human beings have

[11] For an instructive survey of the conflicts and commonalities between postcolonial and globalization studies, see Krishnaswamy (2008).

inhabited the earth, they have generated, produced, manufactured, excreted, secreted, discarded, and otherwise disposed of all manner of waste" (1). In turn, literature and the arts have long offered a means of describing and analyzing waste's prevalence. Eleanor Johnson, for example, argues that at least since the late Middle Ages, artists have "marshal[ed] poetic resources as means for synthesizing and forming an ideology of waste and its consequences for human society"—a concern that continues to preoccupy the contemporary writers I consider in this dissertation (473).[12]

The longevity of the urban waste problem should not, however, be mistaken for its timelessness. Melosi identifies nineteenth-century industrialism as a period in which refuse proliferated with particular intensity in American cities. Strategies for its management were tied to what he describes as "a unique set of circumstances," including shifting notions of sanitation, municipal responsibility, and civic engagement (2). As his historical account reveals, definitions of and attitudes towards urban waste change over time, contingent on specific social factors.

Like Melosi, anthropologist Mary Douglas also suggests that the significance of waste is socially constructed. Yet while Melosi focuses on the excessive accumulation of solid refuse in urban settings, Douglas compares "concepts of pollution and taboo" in a range of settings, asserting that the ritual production of "dirt" is used to shape and consolidate social structures. As she explains, "where there is dirt there is system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements" (35). While she has been criticized by some for the relative conservatism of her ideas, her assertion that

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[12] Focusing on bodily wastes in particular, Susan Signe Morrison's *Excrement In the Late Middle Ages: Sacred Filth and Chaucer's Fecopoetics* (2008) relatedly calls attention to the "cultural politics of excrement" articulated in Medieval English writing (2). For further analysis of the social and sexual implications of scatology in English literature from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern period, see Peter J. Smith, *Between Two Stools: Scatology and its Representation in English Literature, Chaucer to Swift* (2012), and Will Stockton, *Playing Dirty: Sexuality and Waste in Early Modern Comedy* (2011).

"pollution behaviors" are deliberately marshaled to effect social order usefully suggests how contemporary waste practices are used to strengthen particular socioeconomic hierarchies.[13] While contemporary urban waste differs in degree and in kind from the "dirt" which preoccupied Douglas, the exclusionary measures that shape today's cities—from immigration laws to urban redevelopment—echo precisely the ordering impulse that she examined. Mired in discourses of waste that call their societal contributions into question, the status of today's slum-dwellers is paradoxically precarious and immobile.

Both Melosi and Douglas offer useful precedents for exploring the distinctive discourses of waste that emerge during colonialism. Across a range of contexts, historians have identified how colonizers systematically conflate indigenous populations with unwanted matter in order to help maintain their authority. By routinely pathologizing supposedly "filthy natives," imperial racism is bolstered by sanitary paranoia. Thomas R. Metcalf's *Ideologies of the Raj* offers a useful analysis of how, for example, "India's disease and dirt became markers of its enduring 'difference', and so helped sustain the larger ideology that undergirded the Raj" (173). In his related analysis of early twentieth-century American colonialism in the Philippines, Warwick Anderson similarly demonstrates the manner in which American medical and scientific literature systematically constructed Filipinos as "open, threatening, excreting animals" in dire need of colonial "civilization" (651). Despite their historical and geographical particularities, representations of

[13] For a thorough appraisal of Douglas's "sociological conservatism," see Richard Fardon's *Mary Douglas: An Intellectual Biography* (1999).

waste thus emerge as a central mechanism of social control common to these, and other, colonial situations.[14]

Julia Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* suggests how the discursive construction of abject colonized populations performs an important psychological function for those ostensibly in power. Drawing on Douglas's work, Kristeva asserts that abjection is not a quality that inheres in a given object, but rather the crisis of self-identity produced through encounters with "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (4). Taking the corpse as her primary example, Kristeva argues that evidence of bodily decay, including pus, shit, and blood, calls into question our physical integrity, troubling both the actual and psychological borders of the self. Colonizers attempt to consolidate identity and authority through their contradictory separation from that which they ambiguously designate as waste, yet, whether material refuse, marginalized people, or unused spaces, they cannot completely distinguish themselves.

THE COLONIAL CITY

Colonial waste practices are put under particular pressure by the paradoxical nature of urban occupation. Although segregation ostensibly demarcates those in power from those subjected to it, interaction is both inevitable and encouraged by proximity, employment, desire, and resistance to the status quo. Herein lies what might, following Bhabha, be termed the "ambivalence" of the colonial city — an untenable desire for demarcation, which asserts the distinctiveness of colonial practices, ideals, and sensibilities, while simultaneously holding out the

[14] For a related example of how the U.S. government bolsters contemporary imperialism on the home front by discursively constructing the American west and its inhabitants as "waste," see John Beck's *Dirty Wars: Landscape, Power, and Waste in Western American Literature* (2009).

possibility of their subjects' assimilation into that same social order.[15] If, as Douglas reminds us, dirt is "matter out of place," colonial cities are sites of anxious displacement, in which native populations are violently uprooted and oppressively confined, sometimes simultaneously (35). Sympathetic to the complex motivations of the societies that she examines, Douglas finds that "eliminating [dirt] is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment" (2). In the colonial context, however, such spatial organization most often signifies a systematic disregard for existing inhabitants and a condescending assumption of best environmental practice.[16]

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon memorably describes the palpable tension produced by colonial efforts to maintain the spatial organization necessary to the consolidation of their authority. The oppositional colonial city that he describes is, following Henri Lefebvre, a socially produced space, compartmentalized into mutually exclusive "native" and "colonist's" sectors. Police officers and, in some cases, soldiers, forcibly maintain the division between the two, demonstrating that the colonial imposition of what Lefebvre calls "representations of space"—the abstract space conceived by urban planners, cartographers, and engineers—cannot be achieved without implied or actual violence (38). Indeed, as Fanon explains, it is precisely this threat which the colonized internalize and eventually repeat in their aggressive resistance to colonization. The colonial production of urban space thus fails to account for its inherent multi-dimensionality. As Lefebvre explains, spatial experience, or "lived space," emerges from the interaction between "conceived spaces" and "perceived" spaces; in other words, between hypothetical spaces we

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[15] Here I'm drawing on Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man" in which he famously argues that the ambivalence of colonial discourse can be seen in its expressed "desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, *as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite*" (86).

[16] See, for example, Robert Home's history of colonial urbanism, *Of Planning and Planting* (2013) for a useful analysis of how discourses of sanitation motivated racially segregated town plans in Britain's tropical colonies.

imagine and the observable and concrete world, the material world (39). Spatial abstractions cannot be realized without concessions to the plural realities of urban existence. Wasted humans—exiles, refugees, those forced into homelessness or "resettlement"—are the inevitable byproduct of any attempt to literalize abstract space. From a colonial viewpoint, they are the "collateral damage," the excess that must necessarily be eliminated in order to reach a desired ideal.

The colonized's sector that Fanon describes preempts the urban margins of today:

> [T]he "native" quarters, the shanty town, the Medina, the reservation, is a disreputable place inhabited by disreputable people. . . . It's a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized's sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light. The colonized's sector is a sector that crouches and cowers, a sector on its knees, a sector that is prostrate. (4)

Overcrowded, lacking material resources and adequate provisions, this is a place where the most basic human needs are unmet. The colonist's sector, by contrast, is:

> a sector built to last, all stone and steel. It's a sector of lights and paved roads where all the trash cans constantly overflow with strange and wonderful garbage, undreamed-of leftovers. . . . The colonist's sector is a white folks' sector, a sector of foreigners. (4)

This is a space of plenty, of excess, whose inhabitants can readily satiate their desires. Of particular interest is the abundant and enticing rubbish: to produce waste is to possess power; it is the inability to separate oneself from waste that is fatal. Those who inhabit the "native" sector, like many who reside in contemporary slums, can barely manage to feed themselves, let alone afford

the conspicuous consumption that is the distinguishing feature of urban affluence. For the colonists, waste is not wholly undesirable; whether human, environmental, or material, it reinforces the actual and figurative boundaries between their urban comfort and the harmful discrimination on which it depends.

Although Fanon convincingly depicts the untenability of the colonial status quo in *The Wretched of the Earth*, he is equally critical of the new national bourgeoisie whose acquisitive self-interest, he presciently argues, will quickly become apparent after decolonization. Dismayed by their unwillingness and inability to effect the economic overhaul that would sever neocolonial ties, Fanon notes the urban bias of the new ruling class, which prevents them from meeting the needs of the entire country, especially those in rural areas.

The apparently pestilential cities that Fanon envisages as "teeming with the entire managerial class" after decolonization preempt the urban disillusionment of mid-twentieth century postcolonial fiction by authors such as Wole Soyinka and Ayi Kwei Armah (122). As Jed Esty notes in "Excremental Postcolonialism," such authors deploy scatological metaphors to condemn the failed promises of a national elite that prioritizes personal wealth instead of collective progress. In *The Beautyful Ones Are Not Yet Born,* for example, Armah's depiction of a corrupt government minister's ultimately self-abasing desire for wealth "reodorizes money, converting it into shit and forcing readers to see wealth as polished waste" (33). No longer "strange and wonderful," as Fanon ironically noted, the excesses of the Europeanized comprador class are figured as actually and morally contaminated (4).

The excremental counterdiscourse that Esty reveals is not only directed at the neocolonial elite, however. He argues that, beyond satirizing political corruption, the trope of shit performs "an

autocritical function" for postcolonial writers (36). In works by Armah and Soyinka, together with James Joyce, their protagonists' recoil from the literal and figurative filth of public engagement dramatizes the writers' own struggle to reconcile "ethical selfhood and aesthetic freedom" with "the burden of national representation" (Esty 55). In these texts, bodily waste thus serves as an important indicator of the tension between social critique and social withdrawal that is inherent in postcolonial writing.

GLOBAL CONTACT ZONES

Whereas the literature that Esty examines expresses an urban disillusionment that is symptomatic of authorial unease with a broader national collectivity, contemporary postcolonial writing foregrounds urban waste in order to explore concerns about identity, citizenship, and belonging in an even more globalized world. As James Holston and Arjun Appadurai point out, "cities are challenging, diverging from, and even replacing nations as the important space of citizenship—as the lived space not only of its uncertainties but also of its emergent forms" (189). This is not to suggest that the national context is no longer significant, far from it—in fact, it is the tension between local, urban, national, and transnational affiliations that lends the cities I examine in this dissertation their particular energy.

The divided colonial city that Fanon so memorably described no longer exists, if it ever truly did. Whereas his urban portrait strategically subdued the intermingling of different urban populations in favor of emphasizing the oppositional tension of colonial urbanization, intermixture is, in fact, a longstanding characteristic of metropolitan life. Urban growth, infrastructural collapse, shifting employment patterns, and cultural events bring about a diverse

range of encounters between otherwise disparate urban residents. Today's cities are, following Mary Louise Pratt, distinctive "contact zones" in which the "highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" that mediate such processes of urban exchange are more pronounced than ever before (4).

While formal decolonization has resulted in the scaling back of many overt mechanisms of urban surveillance and control, imperial traces endure in the multivalent architecture of such cities as Mumbai, where prominent public buildings such as Victoria Terminus evoke British efforts to imprint colonial authority on the very fabric of the city. Renamed Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus after a 17th century Indian king in 1996, two Islamist militants fatally shot 58 people inside this iconic station during the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. At once the site of erstwhile colonial prestige and the arena for new forms of urban militarism arising from new international conflicts, the station popularly known as "VT" marks the emergence of new, complex divisions with the contemporary postcolonial city. The historical asymmetry between European colonizers and Indian city-dwellers is now overlaid by new geographies of exclusion and violence fostered by the identarian politics that have taken hold in India since the 1980s. Such conflicts do not only fall along international axes, but also produce new, shifting divisions within the cities themselves. As I discuss in my analysis of Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* in Chapter Four, the city had already been splintered along complex class and ethnic lines by the Hindu-Muslim riots of 1992-93, which preceded the 2008 violence. Fanon's Manichean city is now profoundly fragmented with residents' affiliations forming and reforming in often unpredictable fashion.

As urban margins shift and proliferate, contemporary urban scholars must seek new ways of registering this dynamism in their analyses. Guido Martinotti tellingly laments "the image of the

dormant city" produced by the empirical data on which many urbanists rely (178). If, as he suggests, "direct observation tells only a partial story about urban society," postcolonial literature complements this narrative by describing, dramatizing, and reimagining the lived experience of contemporary cities (177). The texts I examine in this dissertation movingly individualize the city dwellers who are collectively analyzed by urban scholars.

Furthermore, as James Donald notes, literature plays a constitutive role in urban life, with cities best understood as complex "imagined environment[s]" composed of the layered narratives told by their various residents, visitors, and observers (8). Çinar and Bender likewise assert that cities are inherently "imagined places" (xii). Bringing literary insights to bear on urban analyses thus allows for proper consideration of the significant imaginative component of city existence.

While strategic generalization enables urban scholars to usefully delineate common patterns or trends within and between cities—the diachronic emergence of particular migrant trajectories, for example—in the colonial context, this descriptive mode has historically been used as a means of asserting relative distinction, and therefore authority. In addition to lending affective texture to urban studies, contemporary literature thus has an important counter-discursive role in rebutting colonial stereotypes and contesting new ones. John Scanlan suggests that Western epistemology relies on the undifferentiated representation of marginal, disenfranchised, and minority groups, a process he equates to metaphorical waste-making. As he explains,

> Garbage indicates the removal of qualities (characteristics, or distinguishing features) and signals the return of everything to some universal condition, perhaps impersonal. . . At a human level a violent stripping away of (positive) characteristics consigns its victims to an indistinguishable mass, a state that ensures their

> treatment as mere rubbish—social outcasts, foreigners, *others* . . . simply stuff that can be pushed around, co-mingled with its similarly valueless and indistinguishable like. (34)

In *An Area of Darkness*, V. S. Naipaul expresses the psychic vertigo that results from such unwelcome anonymity. Shaped by his Caribbean upbringing and European education, he is unsettled by his lack of ethnic distinction during his first visit to his ancestral homeland of India:

> For the first time in my life I was one of the crowd. . . . Now in Bombay I entered a shop or a restaurant and awaited a special quality of response. And there was nothing. It was like being denied part of my reality. Again and again I was caught. I was faceless. I might sink without a trace into that Indian crowd. I had been made by Trinidad and England; recognition of my difference was necessary to me. I felt the need to impose myself, and didn't know how. (46)

Consigned to the "indistinguishable mass" that Scanlan posits as the necessary Other to Western self-identity—a theoretical move that recalls Said's *Orientalism*—Naipaul's metropolitan affiliation is unsettled. This passage reveals not only the subjective uncertainty wrought by Naipaul's imperial sympathies, but also suggests the existential crisis faced by those who must routinely struggle against the anonymity and thus worthlessness imposed by the state. Whereas, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four, Naipaul ultimately maintains a studied distance from Bombay's many urban poor, Suketu Mehta relates multiple interlinked biographical stories from Bombay's urban margins in *Maximum City*. In doing so, he constructs a compelling counterpoint to the discursive "wasting" of slum-dwellers and the poor by articulating the real, unacknowledged rights of those consigned to slums, ghettos, and degraded neighborhoods.

Although they are responding to longstanding forms of prejudice and discrimination, contemporary urban texts such as those I examine in this dissertation are not simply reactionary. Mehta's polyphonic narrative does not offer an easy celebration of Bombay's margins, instead engaging with a range of the city's poor, including gangsters who commit disturbing violent crimes, not bold revolutionary acts. In its fantastical rendering of a near-future Johannesburg, Lauren Beukes's impressive *Zoo City* (2010) goes even further to accentuate the flaws of those who reside in the city's eponymous criminal ghetto. Convicted of various misdeeds, these explicitly marginalized urban dwellers are burdened with unshakable animal familiars that serve as the constant, physical embodiment of their guilt. Beukes draws attention to the ways in which these outcasts creatively adapt to their status as urban waste, making innovative use of its material forms. On exiting her rundown apartment block, her protagonist Zinzi observes the stairwell's missing floorboards, pipes, and lightbulbs, wryly noting that this is "the way of the slums. Even the stuff that's nailed down gets repurposed" (12). In this case, however, the stolen items have been sold for heroin or refashioned into pipes for smoking meth. The growing engagement with urban waste that is evident in contemporary postcolonial literature is, as we see here, multi-dimensional—the authors that I examine invite nuanced readings of this trope, rather than simplistic praise for its recuperation.

The vandalized apartment block in which Beukes's Zinzi lives speaks to the tension between the individual experiences that such texts dramatize in all their complexity, and the need to forge a space for collective action. Excluded from, or in this case, severely restricted by dominant structures of power and authority, how can marginal urban residents retrieve a sense of civic responsibility? On what grounds might they form affiliations, allowing them to work together for a

communal good? While delineating individual lives is a key role of postcolonial urban literature, imagining a space for social and political cooperation emerges as an equally important task for the texts I examine. For Patrick Chamoiseau, as I discuss in Chapter One, this takes the form of a distinctive historiographical project in *Texaco*, in which he asserts the shared past of both Fort-de-France's central and peripheral residents as a means to advocate the incorporation of the city's slum-dwellers into the city proper. In Chapter Two, Chris Abani's *GraceLand* is less optimistic about the possibility of civic unity in the face of historic and current inequities, dramatizing his protagonist's eventual flight from the embattled urban margins of Lagos. What these texts share, however, together with Mengestu's and Mehta's work, is a commitment to the function of art in facilitating political consciousness and, by extension, necessary social change. Abani explicitly dramatizes this when, shortly after performing with the Joking Jaguars music troupe, his protagonist Elvis experiences an epiphanic realization of his vulnerable place as a young slum-dweller within an unevenly stacked global system. Music, as one of his bandmates remarks, has the double-edged ability to both conceal and reveal "de knife-edge beauty of seeing yourself as you are. As you really are" (276). Likewise, the texts I examine in this dissertation, foreground both the hostile reality that is the condition of life at the urban margins while also imagining its possible alternatives and solutions.

While local, grassroots activism is offered as one significant mode of articulating marginal rights in each of the texts I examine, they gesture towards the need for collaboration on a larger scale. The cities that I focus on—Fort-de-France, Lagos, Washington D.C., and Mumbai—exceed their immediate context. They are not only sites of specific imperial legacies and postcolonial dilemmas, but they are also globally connected through circuits of migration, business, and

technology. Moreover, as the literature that I examine is uniquely placed to explore, these connections are supplemented by intangible linkages of memory, desire, ambition, faith, and prejudice, which extend each city's lived boundaries. Urban simultaneity emerges as a particular hallmark of life at the urban margins, where specific, localized experience is always concurrent with actual and imagined connections to other historically and geographically disparate cities.

The impressive globality of contemporary cities vividly demonstrates what David Harvey has called the "time-space compression" of the postmodern age, the result of those "processes that so revolutionize the objective qualities of space and time that we are forced to alter, sometimes in quite radical ways, how we represent the world to ourselves" (240). However, the diverse texts that I examine trouble his understanding of contemporary cities as increasingly homogeneous, characterless places. Despite their various connections and underlying structural similarities, postcolonial cities emerge as textured, idiosyncratic, and dynamic. The representational challenge that time-space compression thus demands of these authors is that of articulating both the immediate need and also the global solidarity of the urban margins. Some NGOs are already facilitating transnational collaboration in face of the globally widespread problem of slums. Shack/Slum Dwellers International, and the Informal Waste Pickers and Recyclers Project, for example, both distribute resources to and centralize knowledge from a global network of marginal urban communities. In their creation of a new urban imaginary that couples aesthetic realism with measured utopianism, the texts I read similarly invite connections between marginal groups whose experiences, while distinctive, can no longer be understood in isolation from one another.

My analytical approach similarly negotiates these interrelated problems of scale and specificity. In noting the instructive commonalities of the disparate literary sites that I consider in

this dissertation, I am mindful of Kalpana Sheshadri-Crooks's critique of "an undifferentiated notion of the margin" that circulates within postcolonial studies to become "fetishized and reified as the dislocated and authoritative *critical* position" (66). Wary of instrumentalizing these texts in the service of a reading that assumes their uniform "resistance" to a perceived urban norm, I pair comparative generalizations with close readings that are attentive to the specific historical contexts and formal strategies of each of the texts I examine.

My chapters each focus on narratives of a different city: Fort-de-France, Lagos, Washington D.C., and Mumbai. I place these texts within their distinct national and literary traditions, but their situation within a single canon is necessarily troubled by the migrant experiences that they commonly evoke. The cities that they depict are, as I have mentioned above, infused with the material and ethereal traces of other places. Following Michael Peter Smith, I therefore examine the "transnational urbanism" that these narratives envisage, dramatize, and interrogate. By elaborating on what Smith terms the "criss-crossing transnational circuits of communication and cross-cutting local, translocal, and transnational social practices" that collide and intersect in these representations, I am able to draw connections between the various cities my texts explore (5). More specifically, by examining the relationships within and between the margins of these cities, I foreground what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih term the "minor transnationalisms" that are easily elided by comparative urban and literary studies.[17]

My transnational reading practice not only complements the themes and forms of the texts I examine, it also extends existing frameworks of urban comparison that have tended to divide the study of cities into hierarchically opposed "first-" and "third-worlds." While dominant paradigms of "world" or "global" cities strongly emphasize the degree to which different cities are integrated

[17] See Lionnet and Shih, *Minor Transnationalism* (2005).

into the global economy,[18] my dissertation as a whole responds to recent calls for more equitable terms of global urban comparison by putting narratives of "developed" and "developing" cities into direct conversation.[19] Yet whereas Jennifer Robinson proposes an "ordinary-city" approach, which eschews first world exceptionalism in favor of bringing all cities into the same analytical plane, my analysis is preoccupied by the unusual, unexpected, and, in some cases, extraordinary potential of the urban margins that contemporary postcolonial writers evoke through their engagement with urban waste.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

My first chapter examines a novel that usefully situates the urgent daily struggles of contemporary slum-dwellers within a longer history of imperial domination and metropolitan influence. In *Texaco* (1992), Patrick Chamoiseau uniquely imagines the circumstances that have led to the formation of the eponymous slum on the outskirts of Fort-de-France, Martinique's capital city. While critical accounts of urban history typically focus on official discourse and formal architectural practices, Chamoiseau explores the material and discursive challenges faced by those who lack access to protected sites of remembering. Extending existing analyses of his historiographical project, I argue that Chamoiseau develops a dynamic ecological narrative method to tell the story of the slum's emergence. Drawing on the aesthetics and thematics of what I term urban gleaning, he narrates Martinican history in a manner that seeks to protect the island's cultural integrity in the face of its traumatic colonial past and troubled neocolonial present. The tension between the novel's form and content—on the one hand, its textual excess; on the other,

[18] See Friedmann (1986), Abu-Lughod (1999), Sassen (2001; 2012).
[19] See Robinson (2006), King (2007), Nuttall & Mbembé (2008).

its narrative of material lack—troubles the simplistic recuperation of that which has been discarded, devalued and degraded. In doing so, *Texaco* refuses to naturalize or legitimate the long-standing marginalization of Martinique's slum-dwellers.

While *Texaco* concludes on a note of qualified optimism with official recognition of the slum and its residents, Chapter Two examines a novel that portrays the urban margins in a more critical light. In *GraceLand* (2004), Chris Abani extends a long tradition of Lagos literature by re-imagining the city from the perspective of its poorest population. Set in the "swamp city of Maroko" during the early 1980s when this inner-city slum was slated for destruction, the novel asks what, if anything, there is to be salvaged from this urban "wasteland." I take up this question by analyzing the education that Abani's protagonist Elvis receives when he migrates to the then Nigerian capital. By invoking and subverting the *Bildungsroman* genre through his narration of this young slum-dweller's troubled coming of age, Abani demonstrates the paralyzing imbrication of the local, national, and global discourses of development that collide at the urban margins. While *GraceLand* suggestively critiques the instability and inconsistency of the postcolonial nation-state, Abani reveals the promise of cultural transnationalism to be equally circumscribed by Elvis's immersion in a global economic system that perpetuates his marginalization.

In Chapter Three, I turn from Third World development to First World urban regeneration. However, these apparently disparate processes prove to be intimately connected. Narrated by Sepha, a profoundly alienated Ethiopian exile, Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007) portrays the extensive redevelopment of the downtrodden Logan Circle neighborhood in Washington, D.C. during the mid-1990s. I argue that by dramatizing and enacting what Frederic Jameson terms "global cognitive mapping," the novel demonstrates that

gentrification is not only a strategic manoeuver with decided local effects, but also a symptom of a globally widespread mode of order-building that rests on the violent elimination of wasted urban populations.

While my earlier chapters examine novels which seek to make urban waste visible, Chapter Four studies an ostensibly non-fiction text which problematizes this literary endeavor. Reading Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) alongside Indian film and a literary tradition of migrant writing about Indian urban waste, I argue that this kaleidoscopic text offers a persuasive critique of the contradictory dynamics of visibility that intersect the margins of contemporary Bombay. Mehta's distinctive ethnographic gaze reveals how the city's most devalued residents—criminals, slum-dwellers, sex workers—are caught within a disjunctive matrix of exposure and invisibility over which they have limited control. However, the inescapably gendered perspective Mehta brings to bear on Bombay's female bar dancers intensifies their vulnerability, troubling his representational empowerment of the urban margins.

CHAPTER ONE

"Anything could turn out to be something":

Gleaning Slum History in Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco*

In early February 2009 the Caribbean screening of an hour-long special news report exposing the ongoing industrial monopoly of "The Last Masters of Martinique" catalyzed the spread of a general strike from Guadeloupe to Martinique ("Les Derniers Maîtres").[20] The program highlighted the neocolonial economic control of Martinique's white Creole minority over the island's key industries, adding racial tensions to workers' existing calls for pay increases and reduced water and electricity bills. For over a month, gas stations, supermarkets and basic services were shut down on both islands. Martinique's capital, Fort-de-France, became the theater on which the strikers' demands were played out with thousands marching through the city to voice their protests. The gradual accumulation of garbage in the streets caused particular offense to the hoteliers, travel agents, and business owners who lost income due to cancelled tourist visits. These piles of stinking trash materialized the workers' refusal to be cast aside by an economic and social system that devalues their skills and productivity. A number of the strikers' demands were met with the signing of a resolution in March 2009, which granted salary increases to the lowest paid workers.[21] However, rates of poverty and unemployment on the island remain high.

This was a contest over economic monopolization, equitable distribution of resources, and the recognition of Martinique's colonial legacy. First colonized in 1635, Martinique has never claimed full independence from France. In 1946 the island was designated as a French "overseas

[20] See "Un reportage sur 'les békés'"; "France Faces Unrest in Caribbean."
[21] See Fidler; Nouvet.

province" (*département d'outre-mer*), securing its ongoing formal connection to the French state. Although departmentalization has arguably contributed to better standards of living in Martinique by comparison with neighboring Caribbean islands such as Haiti, critics argue that this arrangement has furthered the island's cultural assimilation and economic dependence.[22]

Patrick Chamoiseau is one of a number of prominent Martinican activist-writers to challenge the island's neocolonial status quo.[23] In *Écrire en pays dominé*, an account of intellectual life in his "dominated" home country, Chamoiseau laments the overdevelopment that has been facilitated by French loans and investments, resulting in:

> constructions in king-concrete, windows, electricity, traffic lights, television, car mania, triumphant low-income housing, sewage, Social Security, welfare, planes, roads and highways, schools, clothing stores, hotels, supermarkets, advertisements. (69-70, my translation)

This catalogue of interrelated environmental and economic transformations amounts to what Chamoiseau terms the "furtive domination" of the island by France (*Écrire* 219). Determined to a large extent by European economic interests, the form and feel of Martinican urban life is closely bound to the metropole. If, as Anthony King argues, "how people build affects how people think," French sponsorship of Martinique's *bétonisation* ("cementing over") can be seen to extend France's colonial policy of assimilation into the present (99). Based on the coerced integration of the colonized into the French nation, the assimilation doctrine demands homogeneity at the expense

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[22] See Armand Nicolas's *Histoire de la Martinique* (1996) for a comprehensive history of the island from the early seventeenth century to 1971. Laurent Jalabert's *La Colonisation sans nom* (2007) analyzes the island's neocolonial relationship to France from 1960 to the present.

[23] The particularly ambiguous relationship between Martinique and France perhaps explains why so many significant authors of postcolonial critique have emerged from this relatively small island, amongst them Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and Edouard Glissant.

of preserving cultural distinctions. As Robert Young puts it, this model of colonialism "saw difference, and sought to make it the same" (32). Martinique's recent urbanization indicates the island's profound structural and cultural ties to France, which extend far beyond a formal administrative relationship between "center" and "periphery."

The rapid development of Martinique materializes the ongoing suppression of the island's painful past. Although the French government has recently made public efforts to acknowledge the legacy of French colonial slavery in the Caribbean, Martinican history continues to be subordinated to metropolitan historical discourse. As Reneé Gosson points out, the industrial "cover-up" of the island compounds the cultural alienation of its population by disrupting access to the landscape's commemorative potential (226). In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant emphasizes the importance of this distinctive environmental archive to the creation of a unified Caribbean identity, explaining that "our landscape is all monument: its trace is visible from below. It's all history" (99). As neocolonial industry, especially tourism, continues to estrange Martinicans from their physical surroundings, the historical record embedded in the landscape becomes even harder to retrieve.[24]

This chapter considers how Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* redresses this historical impasse through its elaboration of a modern urban imaginary.[25] Instead of retreating to an idealized or exaggerated rural environment, Chamoiseau consolidates Caribbean identity by imagining the circumstances leading to the foundation of the eponymous slum, named after the oil company that

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[24] See Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988) for an especially incisive critique of the complacent historical amnesia enjoyed by foreign visitors to her home island of Antigua.

[25] Chamoiseau's commitment to urban storytelling is distinctive. In his first autobiographical volume, he recalls that "city storytellers were rare" when he was young. His own fictional work infuses Fort-de-France with the same imaginative richness that he remembers hearing in the "Creole tales from the country" brought to his childhood home by Jeanne-Yvette, a compelling "real storyteller" (*Childhood*, 70).

owns the land on which the first of its shacks (or "hutches") is built. In contrast to earlier social realist novels of Caribbean slum life, *Texaco* is a polyphonic and self-reflexive text that continually weaves together fictional and real-life events.[26] Chamoiseau himself appears in the novel as his authorial alter ego Oiseau de Cham, who is deeply sympathetic to the plight of the Texaco slum-dwellers. He explains in his afterword that he discovered the slum in the mid-1980s while conducting research for a previous novel. The main body of the text is his transcription of the oral history of the slum as told to him by its founder Marie-Sophie Laborieux, an elderly and formidable *femme-matador* who has seen off many violent and bureaucratic challenges to its existence.[27] She has already told this oral history once before to the unnamed "Urban Planner" who was sent to survey Texaco before its planned demolition by the city authorities. By telling him the community's history she successfully defends the slum from being razed to the ground. Excerpts from the Urban Planner's notes are interspersed throughout the novel, in which he repeatedly expresses his admiration for the vitality and creativity of the slum-dwellers.

For those long stretches of Texaco's history preceding her own birth, Marie-Sophie draws on stories that her father Esternome passed onto her before his death. Born into slavery on one of Martinique's sugar plantations during the early nineteenth century, Esternome is freed when he saves the plantation owner from being killed by a maroon. He migrates to the city of Saint-Pierre, which is destroyed by the eruption of Mount Pelée in 1902. This forces him to move to Fort-de-France where he meets Marie-Sophie's mother, Idoménée, also a former slave. After her parents' deaths, Marie-Sophie survives poverty, displacement, and rape while performing many grueling

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[26] See, for example, C. L. R. James, *Minty Alley* (1936); Joseph Zobel, *La Rue Cases-Nègres* (1950); Orlando Patterson, *The Children of* Sisyphus (1964); and Earl Lovelace, *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979)

[27] Derived from the Creole *matadò* meaning "one who triumphs . . . like a matador in the arena," Chamoiseau invents the French term *femme-matador* to convey that Marie-Sophie is "a strong, respected, authoritative woman" (*Texaco* 400).

jobs in the city. She eventually founds Texaco in 1950 and fights against its demolition until her death forty years later. At the close of the novel, the Fort-de-France authorities formally acknowledge the slum through an organized upgrading program that incorporates it into the city's infrastructure.

Early commentators focused on the novel's inventive language and experimental form, none more exuberantly than fellow Caribbean writer Derek Walcott whose "Letter to Chamoiseau" in the *New York Review of Books* celebrated its "combined triumph of the Creole language and of French orthography," before going on to compare Chamoiseau's "masterpiece" to Joyce's *Ulysses*.[28] Following its largely favorable critical reception on initial publication, *Texaco* was awarded the prestigious *Prix Goncourt* later that year.[29] Its translation into English in 1997 opened the novel up to a wider readership, both academic and mainstream. The subject of numerous critical articles and frequently included on college literature syllabi, *Texaco* has entered the postcolonial literary canon. In recent years, three monographs dealing with Chamoiseau's oeuvre have appeared, foregrounding his treatment of space, memory and form respectively.[30] This chapter draws on all three emphases in its particular attention to Chamoiseau's ecological narrative method, which highlights the inextricability of human and environmental histories throughout the novel.

In his unique attempt to historicize slum existence, Chamoiseau depicts a local experience with increasing global resonance. While Fort-de-France is much smaller than many developing cities (the total population of the entire island is only just over 430,000), Chamoiseau's portrayal

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[28] For additional reviews, see Phillips, Michaels, Scott Fox.

[29] Of course, the novel's reception was not universally positive. The French literary establishment's welcoming embrace of a self-professed anticolonial activist writer was an irony that did not go unremarked by some. In a cooler appraisal of the novel, Thomas C. Spear suggests that Chamoiseau's "mindlessly heavy" linguistic turns served the commercial intentions of his French publisher, rather than the entertainment of the reader (157).

[30] See Milne (2006); McCusker (2007); Chancé (2010).

of Texaco provides what critic Michael Rubenstein calls an "exemplary slum-urban vision" that vividly conveys the material hardships faced by today's "new urban subject" (35). Ashley Dawson concurs, describing the Texaco community's displacement as "paradigmatic" in an essay that highlights the direct connection between the deprivation of the slum-dwellers and the inequity of global capitalism (18). With the continuing expansion of cities around the world, their residents face heightened pressures: an increasing gap between rich and poor, unstable infrastructure, precarious housing, industrial and domestic pollution, scarce employment, state and criminal violence. In his attention to the problems faced by the island's internal diaspora—the displaced urban poor who struggle to attain not only shelter, but also a sense of belonging in contemporary Martinique—Chamoiseau depicts an increasingly common urban existence.

Not only marginalized within the city, but also peripheral to the official French history in which that of the entire island is subsumed, Texaco's struggle for inclusion in Fort-de-France bears metonymic relation to the unequal balance of discursive and economic power which binds Martinique to France. In a practical sense, the slum-dwellers must learn to live in and from the urban waste to which they have been condemned by their historical legacy and the neocolonial economy. This chapter shows how they do so by appropriating the rural practice of gleaning for their urban existence. Based on the inventive reuse of discarded or forgotten material, gleaning provides them with a unique method of environmental engagement and historical retrieval.

Although some critics have noted an equation between the countryside and cultural authenticity in Chamoiseau's early works, the slum-dwellers' revival of an agrarian foraging practice in Texaco diminishes a misleading city-country binary which falsely hold these two spheres in opposition. The intertwined nature of Martinique's rural and urban histories is further

demonstrated by the slum-dwellers' use of gleaning techniques in their construction of a legitimating historical account of Texaco's evolution. As founder of Texaco, Chamoiseau's principal narrator Marie-Sophie Laborieux is committed to defending the slum. Her memory-gleaning resists the discursive disposal of its marginal urban history, serving as an effective mode of territorial reclamation.

Chamoiseau does not only thematize the slum-dwellers' gleaning, but he does so using a composite narrative form that depends on the same revaluation of scraps, leftovers, and remnants that is essential to the slum-dwellers' survival. Often identified as an authorial *bricoleur*, I suggest that Chamoiseau can be better understood as a gleaner of diverse narrative perspectives and styles. By revaluing that which has been discarded, rejected, and overlooked, his formal appropriation of the slum-dweller's foraging techniques demonstrates an inclusive form of cultural invention and identification. Moreover, the enduring tension between Chamoiseau's stylistic innovation and the marginal condition that compels it prevents the amnesiac recuperation of the slum. The ironic gap between the novel's formal excess and thematic lack serves instead as an insistent reminder of the many losses and deprivations that precede Texaco's eventual incorporation into Fort-de-France.

URBAN GLEANING

If, as Glissant has suggested, the Caribbean landscape offers an under-examined monument to the region's traumatic past, *Texaco* indicates that the increasing urbanization of Caribbean islands further obscures this embedded history. Chamoiseau avoids essentializing the intimate connection between the island's ecology and Martinican history by describing how it is disrupted by industrial urban development. While previous generations had a conflicted relationship to the

rural plantations that were both a site of enforced labor and a source of potential rootedness, urban existence mediates the slum-dwellers' interactions with the land in new and challenging ways.

Early in the novel, Marie-Sophie reveals the new forms of environmental degradation wrought by the contemporary oil trade. She describes the location of the slum as:

> A fenced space where a smell of stale oil permeated the soul. Texaco, the oil company which used to occupy that space and which had given its name to it, had left aeons ago. It had picked up its barrels, carted off its reservoirs, taken apart its tankers' sucking pipes, and left. Its tank trucks sometimes parked there, to keep one foot on the dear property. Around that abandoned space are our hutches, our very own Texaco, a company in the business of survival (24).

This polluted terrain indicates the continued exploitation of Martinique's natural resources, which are extracted with impunity by global businesses that fail to provide reciprocal investment in the unstable sites that they leave in the wake of their quest for new markets and raw materials.

In naming the slum after the oil company, Marie-Sophie pays ironic tribute to the uneven global economy that has contributed to both her own poverty and that of her physical surroundings. However, she refuses to idealize the slum-dwellers' relationship to the land they gradually reclaim. As increasing numbers of residents start to build their "hutches" on the abandoned oil reservoir, their immediate practical concerns override environmental sensitivity. Marie-Sophie notes that Texaco's new residents are themselves responsible for the production of new forms of urban waste:

> Everyone cleaned his hutch and around his hutch, leaving the rest of the laundry to time's washing. Everyone thought that, just like in the countryside, nature would digest the refuse. I had to tell them again and again that around City nature lost some of its strength and watched the garbage pile up along with us. But we had many other worries besides that question of garbage (the waves tossed it about, the mangrove swamp stiffened it into sinister scarecrows). I would have liked to put together a few hands to take care of all that, but there were a thousand wars to wage merely to exist. After that, we learned, between the flies and mosquitoes, the smells and the miasmas, about living as straight-backed as possible. (320)[31]

Marie-Sophie cautions against the slum-dwellers' unquestioning faith in the restorative power of an idealized "nature," pointing to the inevitable contingency of human and environmental survival. The waves, the mangroves, and the buzzing insects indicate the many natural processes that impact and enable city living, but Marie-Sophie is alert to the specificities of both the urban ecology and the rural environment.

The unchecked accumulation of garbage that troubles Marie-Sophie speaks to the real material need of the slum-dwellers. Deprived of space and facilities, they can barely find space to construct their own homes, let alone cultivate what Pierre Nora calls *lieux de mémoire*—compensatory "sites of memory" that might enable them to commemorate and heal the past as needed. The ominous refuse "scarecrows" that surround the hastily constructed shacks symbolize irrepressible past trauma. Ignored by most of Texaco's residents, these mounds of waste materialize

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[31] In his authorial afterword, Oiseau de Cham explains the concept of "City" (translated from the Creole *l'En-ville*) which "designates not a clearly defined urban geography, but essentially a content and therefore a kind of enterprise" (386). City is both a specific place—Fort-de-France "proper"—but also an environment encompassing historical tensions, social currents, and cultural attitudes.

the necessity of confronting the historical circumstances that contributed to the present-day degradation of the slum-dwellers and their surroundings. Chamoiseau clearly agrees with Glissant that the Caribbean "landscape retains the memory of time past," but his depiction of Texaco's pollution highlights the labor that is necessary for its retrieval from the land (Glissant 150). More than a monument to be looked at, the landscape is an archive that demands careful cultivation. It is only through the conscientious reimagining of urban waste that Marie-Sophie is able to forge an enduring and sustaining collective memory.

In order to eke out an existence in Texaco, Marie-Sophie and her neighbors must fully engage with the material and metaphorical waste that surrounds them. Unable to efficiently dispose of their garbage nor suppress the traumatic memories of their past, Marie-Sophie models an ethics of waste which helps them to survive. Confined to the margins of the city, their first priority is establishing shelter. As Marie-Sophie explains, "in City, to be is first and foremost to possess a roof" (275). Her decision to start building on the disused Texaco oil depot is challenged by its *béké* (white Creole) landowner with increasing violence and eventual assistance from the phonetically labeled "seyaress"—the Compagnie Républicaine de Sécurité, a national police force rumored to consist of "Hitler's old henchmen whom the békés had ordered into the Colonies especially" (306). Each time they destroy her hutch, Marie-Sophie insists on building and rebuilding it, defying their attempts to displace and ultimately erase her.

As she wanders the streets of Fort-de-France scouring the ground for useful building materials, Marie-Sophie demonstrates an empathetic attentiveness to rejected objects and imperfect products:

> I walked in the streets looking at the ground. From now on anything could be useful to me, a piece of string, the grace of a nail, an abandoned crate . . . anything could turn out to be something. My cunning bustling allowed me in the space of a few weeks to gather three crates, two new tin sheets, five slabs of cracked asbestos that a milato by the sea let me have on credit. (299)

Marie-Sophie's "cunning bustling" is a mode of urban survival that recalls the creative salvaging examined by Joanna Grabski in a recent study of Senegalese *récupération*, a mode of "expressive production relying on materials culled from the urban environment" that gained particular prominence in Dakar during the 1990s (8). As Grabski explains, such art demands a particular imaginative *vision*, a mode of perceiving the cityscape anew:

> Looking for and gathering materials, the first step in *récupération*, relies on the conjunction of vision and mobility . . . [L]ooking is not a passive act of taking in or gaining inspiration; instead, it facilitates a subsequent act—that of imagination or, more specifically, *imagining objects otherwise*. (12-13, my italics)

As both means of survival and mode of artistic creation, urban salvaging rests on the creative revaluation of the city's waste. By recognizing the potential of her ostensibly degraded surroundings, noting that "anything could turn out to be something," Marie-Sophie empathetically revisions that which has been cast aside in Fort-de-France (299).

While, Marie-Sophie's reuse of discarded materials recalls urban art practices, it also resonates with older agrarian foraging traditions, which were developed under conditions of deprivation and hunger. Stooped over, her eye trained on the ground, she assumes the classic downward-looking posture of a gleaner. Derived from the archaic French verb *glaner*, *glanage* or

"gleaning" describes the ancient agricultural practice of gathering leftover produce from newly harvested fields. A right traditionally accorded to the poor and landless, gleaning is referenced in many literary and cultural texts, from the Bible to Keats.[32] While an important source of income for laboring families in seventeenth and eighteenth century Europe, the practice declined with the advent of industrialization, which led to more efficient harvesting techniques and the increasing privatization of farming.[33] Displayed in the Paris salon as French gleaning rights were on the wane, French artist Jean-François Millet's 1857 painting *The Gleaners* offers an iconic European depiction of this practice (see Figure 1.1). Critics have admired his realist portrayal of the "quiet heroism" of three peasant women who quietly forage for food under the surveillance of a landowner on horseback in a manner not dissimilar to Marie-Sophie's urban salvaging (Crummy 18).[34]

As a mode of survival, postcolonial urban salvaging, is, however, a far more hazardous undertaking than that evoked by Millet's painting, which suggests a certain agrarian calmness and order. Despite the continuities of poverty, displacement, and marginalization that link nineteenth-century gleaning to the present, today's urban gleaners handle waste materials whose quantity and toxicity eclipses anything that Millet could have imagined. For example, a number of contemporary photographers have recently been drawn to Accra's Agbogbloshie slum, which provides the dystopian setting for Kwei Quartey's *Children of the Street* as discussed in my

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[32] The biblical Ruth is the archetypal gleaner—displaced from her homeland, she provides for herself by gleaning in fields owned by Boaz, whom she later marries. In Keats's 'Ode to a Nightingale,' the speaker recalls her solitary foraging as he ponders whether the bird's song also "found a path / Through the sad heart of Ruth, when, sick for home, / She stood in tears amid the alien corn."

[33] See Peter King (1991) for a brief history.

[34] In *Childhood*, Chamoiseau's shows an awareness of Millet's work as he remembers how the Syrian shopkeepers in the Fort-de-France of his youth exploited "country people['s] . . . soft spot for Millet's *Angelus*" in order to attract them to their stores (78). This wry recollection sounds a note of caution against idealizing the humble peasantry depicted in this painting. The gleaning that Marie-Sophie and her urban peers undertake has a long history, but it is not a nostalgic practice.

introduction. The slum has developed around a dumping ground for hazardous e-waste, imported, often illegally, from richer western countries. Residents here make their living not by scavenging food, but by salvaging and burning electronic devices to retrieve recyclable metals that they can then sell on. They are exposed to dangerously high levels of lead and mercury in the course of doing so. An untitled image from a prize-winning series by the South African photographer Pieter Hugo evokes the pollution and peril in which the slum's residents live and work (see Figure 1.2).[35] While they share the downward gaze of Millet's gleaners, they are working independently of one another. The aprons in which Millet's peasants stored their gleanings have been replaced here by plastic bags—icons of the enduring waste of contemporary global consumer culture. Whereas Millet's gleaners operated under surveillance, these children are alone, inextricable from the global economy yet lacking any formal protection or personal security.

Examining the history of gleaning foregrounds the social conditions which lead to its present-day necessity. Reflecting on today's apparent acceptance of widespread need, Donna Harraway notes that "gleaning is tied to hunger. . . Hunger is tied to poverty and poverty is not a natural disaster but a political arrangement." Understanding Marie-Sophie as a gleaner prevents the naturalization of the specific social and historical circumstances that have led to the dispossession of the Texaco residents. Marie-Sophie's experience is not an exclusively modern urban phenomenon, but a socially marginalized existence with a precedent in plantation society. Her gleaning suggests a continuity between the deprivations of her enslaved grandparents and her own struggles in Fort-de-France. Chamoiseau's depiction of Marie-Sophie as a contemporary urban

[35] See Pieter Hugo, *Permanent Error* (2011); also Andrew McConnell's "Rubbish Dump 2.0," and Kevin McElvaney's "Agbogbloshie: The World's Largest E-waste Dump."

gleaner thus offers a reminder of the long history of displacement that precedes the struggles of the Texaco community.

Some critics have argued that *Texaco* idealizes this history in its sympathetic and often humorous depiction of the slum's genealogy. In a largely skeptical analysis of "Chamoiseau's radiant writing of the Creole town," Mary Gallagher challenges the "spatial creolization" which characterizes "urban space/time" by "reproduc[ing] the structures of rural space/time" in the city (198, 189). For Gallagher, Chamoiseau's portrayal of the "continuity between the plantation culture of the past and the urban future" problematically suggests the repetition of past rural struggles in the new space of the city (202). She perceives a nostalgia for an earlier "oppositional moment" in Chamoiseau's depiction of the polarized, conflictual relationship between the city and the slum (197). According to Gallagher, the slum-dwellers' subversive survival strategies, such as gleaning, are an idealistic reproduction of the "culture of ruse and resistance" that emerged on the plantations (197).

Although Gallagher detects an "agenda of dichotomy" in Chamoiseau's writing, his ironic juxtaposition of the Urban Planner's increasing enthusiasm for the slum alongside Marie-Sophie's decline into old age and alcoholism undermines the naïve celebration of its marginal status (198). In his notes, the Urban Planner effusively praises the oppositional vigor of the slum-dwellers, noting that "Texaco remembers the play of forces between the hutches and the Big Hutch, between the plantation and the market town, the rural market town and the city" (313). Whereas he excitedly proclaims the need to "arouse a *countercity in the city*," the slum-dwellers strive for incorporation (361). Marie-Sophie initially assumes an unequivocally confrontational stance towards the city, asserting her intention to "fight against City with a warrior's rage" (271). Yet

despite their many battles against the city, the Texaco residents express a persistent desire for recognition. They lament their neglect by the city's inhabitants and its authorities:

> We shoved our way about next to City, holding on to it by its thousand survival cracks. But City ignored us. Its activity, glances, the facets of its life (from every day's morning to the beautiful night neon) ignored us. We had vied for its promises, its destiny, we were denied its promises, its destiny. Nothing was given, everything was to be wrung out. . . . We saw City from above, but in reality we lived at the bottom of its indifference which was often hostile. (316-17)

If what Gallagher critiques in *Texaco* is a false or shallow spatial creolization which insists on the conflict between rather than the productive intermixture of city, slum, and countryside, the slum-dwellers' desire for incorporation arguably shares her preference for a more holistic urban space.

In its migration from the countryside to the city, the slum-dwellers' gleaning is a means of self-preservation that not only tests the island's rural/urban divide, but also the separation between City and Texaco. Marie-Sophie's foraging for food and building materials is part of a tradition of survival strategies collectively understood as *débrouillardise*, the cultural significance of which is expressed in the Creole proverb "Débrouya pa péché"—"there is no sin in making out, in turning the system to one's advantage" (Burton 468). As Richard Burton notes in a more sympathetic appraisal of his urban imaginary, Chamoiseau celebrates such small-scale challenges to the status quo in *Solibo Magnificent*. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's distinction between "resistance" which attacks a system from without, and "opposition" which "takes place of necessity within the system, on ground defined by the system, and, in the absence of any concerted strategy of resistance," Burton argues that Chamoiseau's earlier novel shows how the latter creates "an ideal intercalary

realm" within the capital city (474). Following Burton's analysis, Marie-Sophie's gleaning can be seen to foster a similarly interstitial site of opposition within Fort-de-France. Rather than reinforcing the binary between city and slum, gleaning serves to multiply urban space, opening up potential sites of opposition.

By patiently constructing shacks from gleaned building materials, Marie-Sophie and her fellow slum-dwellers gradually establish a proprietorial claim to the disused Texaco depot, a wasteland left in the wake of the global oil trade's quest for new resources. As a small-scale means of opposing local marginalization, their gleaning provides a metonym for the larger struggle of Martinique to gain a foothold within a globalized economic system in which they are subject to metropolitan regulations and global inequities. The triumph of Texaco's eventual incorporation into the city proper is undercut by the Texaco *béké*'s unwelcome farewell visit to Marie-Sophie in which he reminds his longstanding adversary "that the war was much larger and on that level he was not losing and never would" (364). Although like many of the island's white landowners he is retreating from Fort-de-France to a more exclusive area, the *béké* retains the power of wealth even as his social and political visibility diminishes. Chamoiseau is clearly invested in the particular fate of Texaco, but he is equally concerned with the ongoing global conflict within which the slum-dwellers are imbricated.

Putting Agnès Varda's *The Gleaners and I* ("Les Glaneurs et la Glaneuse") into dialogue with Chamoiseau's novel enables the critical elaboration of gleaning's transnational dimensions. In this acclaimed 2001 film, Varda suggests that gleaning also offers a means of opposition for those situated within the metropole. Described in her own words as a "wandering-road documentary," the movie traces French gleaning practices from their rural origins to their contemporary urban

revival. Filmed entirely on hand-held camera, it features a voiceover and several appearances by the director herself, but Varda's primary interest is in the various gleaners who she interviews throughout France, some of whom gather leftovers from necessity, others for pleasure, artistic purposes, or political protest. What unites this cast of migrants, artists, and activists is a shared eccentricity. Whether imposed or intended, their social marginalization offers a compelling new perspective on the forms of urban waste that globalization generates within the First World. Extending Chamoiseau's critique of the hierarchical relationship between European "center" and Caribbean "periphery," Varda explicitly documents the potential of gleaning to open up new circuits of environmental engagement and cultural exchange that exceed, extend, and eschew those sanctioned by the global economy.

Recalling the origins of Texaco, Varda encounters a man who takes up gleaning in response to the willful wastefulness of the multinational oil industry. He claims to have lived entirely on food salvaged from rubbish bins for over a decade. For this man, gleaning is a mode of political activism. He explains that he chooses to eat leftovers because he is frustrated by the environmental damage caused by consumerist capitalism. He finds in the Erika oil spill a charged example of what he acts against. Whereas the Texaco residents have little choice but to live with the effects of such environmental carelessness on a daily basis, Varda's subject is a horrified spectator who is particularly saddened by the death of many birds as a result of this oil spill. Gesturing to his neighbors, he tells Varda that "all the others can die in their apartments under their rubbish. That's not a problem. Above all [I care about] the birds" (my translation). The misanthropic moral superiority that energizes his gleaning clearly limits his political efficacy. For this man, gleaning facilitates a self-imposed social isolation, contrary to the community building

efforts of Marie-Sophie and her neighbors. However, his surprisingly passionate defense of the collateral damage caused to the environment by the oil industry reinforces the global scope of local gleaning practices.

Towards the end of the film, Varda uncovers a more enduring model of transnational solidarity that gleaning facilitates. She identifies meeting Alain in a Parisian marketplace as one of her favorite encounters. She first notices him eating his gleanings on the spot as vendors pack up their stalls around him. Holding a master's degree in biology, as Varda later discovers, he seeks out a balanced, nutritional diet despite his meager provisions. He explains that he lives in a men's shelter in an outlying suburb, but he does not say whether this is through choice or necessity. As their friendship develops after subsequent encounters at the same market, Varda films his daily commute to the city center where he sells newspapers outside Montparnasse Station. Varda's admiration for Alain's humble lifestyle is clear from the respectful distance at which she films him. Compared to her other interviewees, she spends less time in close-up conversation with him, preferring to document what she terms his "gestes modestes" ("modest gestures") at a remove. She is particularly impressed by the nightly language and literacy classes he voluntarily teaches to his fellow shelter residents, many of whom are recent immigrants to France from Mali and Senegal. Varda captures a convivial classroom atmosphere in which Alain's students are learning to pronounce, amongst others, the French word for "success." Their shared laughter is undercut by a poignant sense that their shaky articulation of this concept marks its distance from their grasp—they try to translate it, but fail to come up with an equivalent. With a white Frenchman instructing African students in his language, this episode is initially reminiscent of a colonial classroom. However, Alain's instruction is an act of welcoming rather than enforced assimilation (the

students attend class whenever they choose; they can come and go as they please). As the next chapter will discuss further, urban immigrants are frequently characterized as social "waste" by hostile authorities, unwelcoming neighborhoods, and unwilling employers. In his effort to assist these men in their navigation of the French metropole, Alain extends his gleaning practices to redress their social alienation. Alain's evident humility and his shared social marginalization ensure that this is an empathetic exchange, not a process of indoctrination or induction into perpetual social inferiority. According to critic Homay King, Varda's attention to such moments of mutual support are central to the politics of the film; as she explains, "Varda and her gleaners are enmeshed in what Hannah Arendt calls 'the web of human relations'—in networks of individuals who help each other to think, create, and survive, and who are in fact defined by these reciprocal acts" (422).

Varda's documentation of Alain's interaction with the immigrants exposes an often obscured dimension of metropolitan life. In keeping with recent efforts to theorize the discrepant globalities of such metropolitan centers as Paris from "below," Varda reveals a productive form of what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih term "minor transnationalism"; in other words, an urban transcultural alliance which circumvents typically sanctioned interactions between first-world citizen and third-world immigrant. Putting Chamoiseau's gleaning narrative into dialogue with Varda's film further extends the transnational networks documented in the latter. In addition to creating local links between the Martinican countryside and the island's growing capital city, Marie-Sophie's gleaning implies an affinity between Caribbean urban gleaners and French rural and metropolitan *glaneurs*. Chamoiseau usefully highlights a transatlantic cultural practice that supplements the official connection between *département* and metropole. Although First and Third

World cities tend to be addressed either separately or hierarchically within urban studies, a comparative reading of the gleaning practices which intersect both puts narratives of developed and developing cities into direct conversation, pointing the way to a comparative global history of urban poverty. A mode of micro-opposition with global reach, gleaning unlocks an alternative archive which reconfigures the relationship between periphery and metropole.

MEMORY GLEANING

As Aleida Assman notes in a recent article, the purview of historians and gleaners does not typically coincide: "Archives are repositories for things that are deemed worth preserving. As such, they have a reverse affinity with rubbish dumps, where things past are accumulated and left to decay" (71). However, like the visual artists whose *récuperation* work Assman examines, Chamoiseau revalues that which has been thrown away in order to craft an alternative archive, which reconfigures the well-documented colonial history of Martinique's relation to France and the rest of the world. Unlike purposeful historical records, this history initially emerges by chance. Marie-Sophie retrieves items which have been discarded in the city dump in order to furnish her home; amongst them, "a shimmering black casket decorated with a dragon which must have been one of those curiosities that some old person had brought here from Indochina . . ." (280). In a useful analysis of this material object, Cilas Kemedijo suggests that this "treasure" exposes "the other side of globalization" (147, my translation). Discarded by an old Martinican soldier who had served for France during its colonial campaigns, this piece of furniture records the injustices of a colonial system that coerced colonized Caribbean subjects to fight against their Asian counterparts on behalf of a European power. Through such echoes, the dump becomes, as Assman further

suggests, "the emblem of a subversive counter-memory that cannot be controlled by the institutions of political power, figuring as a perpetual resource of creative energy" (81). Indeed, Qualidor, the watchman of the dump highlights its power in a monologue deployed to impress a potential lover. Not only does Qualidor show Péloponèse the many material treasures the dump has to offer, including "dressers, windows, royal chairs, spoons made of heavy silver, thick old books, ropes, strings, pieces of hard plastic, disheveled rugs . . . " (282), he also points out how they register the suppressed psychic trauma of the island:

> [T]here, look at…the fifty thousand longings of old blackmen whose bones look like tools, and over there…twelve syrian nightmares where bullets still fart, and there the pierced heart of a small Syrian girl they wanted to marry off to a faraway syrian, and there Carib sea-tongues which surface from the ocean without saying why and which howl ugly screams into the conches' pink depth…and there…the misery I tell you of the coolie souls who have not found the boat home… (281)

Here, that which has been discarded is revealed to be more than an overlooked material resource. The items which have been thrown away symbolize Martinique's sidelined histories, which extend beyond the island to other peoples and places impacted by colonialism and its continuing effects.

Following Qualidor's insight, Marie-Sophie turns her gleaning skills to the recuperation of a historical narrative that can secure Texaco's long-term survival by asserting the slum-dwellers' long and legitimate claim to a place in the city. Traumatized by their colonial upbringing, Marie-Sophie's parents are both reluctant to tell her about the past:

> Mama to avoid my questions, pretended she was wrestling with my hair she was braiding. She would drag the comb back like a farmer ploughing rocky ground who,

> surely you understand, does not have time to chitchat. Papa was more evasive. At my questions he slipped away smoother than a cool September wind. He would suddenly remember yams to pull out of the little puddles he had everywhere. (34)

On the one hand figuratively, on the other literally, both Marie-Sophie's parents are figured as preoccupied landowners, trying to protect their crops. Marie-Sophie is cast as a needy peasant, who doggedly gathers the scraps of information which they let slip. Despite their extreme reticence, Marie-Sophie eventually collects enough "bits of memory" from "an inch of recollection here, a quarter of a word there" in order to tell the history of her own family and that of Texaco (34). In his afterword, Oiseau de Cham admires Marie-Sophie's persistent memory-gleaning, noting that "she had all her life run after her father's word and the rare words of Papa Totone and the morsels of our stories which the wind was sweeping away across the land just like that" (387). Her gradual recuperation of her parents' memories painstakingly compiles a historical narrative that asserts the inherent value of a marginal urban community designated as waste.

As, bird-like, Marie-Sophie gathers up her parents' memories, she recalls her enslaved grandfather's obsession with blackbirds. By beginning her narrative with the story of his death, Marie-Sophie transforms the very inaccessibility of her ancestral history into its point of origin, making of the partiality of the historical record a generative example. A survivor of the Middle Passage, she learns that her grandfather was "one of those men from Guinea" who performed his designated tasks as instructed without ever speaking (36). All that breaks his silence is the utterance of an "inaudible Low Mass" which he repeats while "point[ing] to blackbirds and other blackbirds, blackbirds and other blackbirds" (37). Marie-Sophie reveals the meaning of her grandfather's strange mantra to be a symbolic question: "Until the end of his life the man had

wondered how birds could be and how they could fly" (38). If her grandfather perceived birds as an emblem of freedom, Marie-Sophie's gleaning highlights the tenuousness of that liberty.

In relating the traumatic memory of her ancestor's literal disposal, Marie-Sophie exhibits a restorative care for the human refuse left in the wake of slavery. Chamoiseau, in turn, demonstrates attentiveness to marginalized histories by constructing the story of Texaco from the remnants of Marie-Sophie's ancestry. Suspected of poisoning livestock belonging to the plantation overseer, Marie-Sophie's grandfather is progressively deconstructed. First, physical torture reduces him to mere body parts:

> [T]he Béké got one of the most ferocious torturers of blackmen from the city to come and unleash all the resourcefulness of pliers on [her grandfather], to braise his blood, peel his skin, shatter his nails and some very sensitive bones, only to leave vanquished by this human wreck more mute than the dungeon itself. (37)

He is then placed in an underground dungeon and left to rot, as Marie-Sophie explains:

> My papa knew the man from the dungeon to be his papa the day they pulled his remains covered with whitish fungus out of a foul-smelling hole. The Béké had it put on a pile of wood which he set on fire himself. (38)

Marie-Sophie's grandfather is dehumanized, objectified and finally reduced to nothing through his uncaring cremation. Infuriated by his slave's inaccessible knowledge, the threatened Béké seeks complete mastery of his unruly body. Unable to control Marie-Sophie's grandfather, he attempts total elimination through violence.

Marie-Sophie's careful preservation of her grandfather's memory extends the tradition of slave resistance in which he actively participated. His knowledge of natural poisons and remedies,

his vivid recollections of Africa, and his apparent ability to be in two places at once mark him as a Mentoh, the embodiment of "slave Power" (52). Mistakenly described as "necromancers, conjurers, sorcerers" by those inimical to their mysterious skills (51), these "men of strength" sought to "preserve the remnants of humanity" amid the cruelties of slavery (64). Marie-Sophie shares their impulse to salvage and protect her ancestral remains. She asserts their fundamental role in the history of Texaco, explaining that it was a Mentoh who persuaded her father Esternome to abandon the plantation after "witnessing the burning of the remains, those of his own papa" (50). In *Éloge de la Créolité*, Chamoiseau and his fellow créolistes lament the scarcity of testimonies to the "obstinate progress of ourselves," during which "those who stood up against the hell of slavery . . . left the fields for the towns, and spread among the colonial community to the point of giving it its strength in all respects, and giving it what we are today" (98). From its origins in the resistance of her grandfather and his fellow Mentohs, Marie-Sophie's history of Texaco bears witness to the creation of an urban community forged in defiance of oppression and displacement.

The social vulnerability of Martinique's slaves and their ancestors is compounded by their exposure to a volatile natural environment. Marie-Sophie alerts the reader to the inextricability of the island's social and environmental histories when she notes the atmospheric changes that strangely coincide with her grandfather's suffering:

> During that man's endungeoning the plantation awoke under the gray down of a bird flapping its distraught wings in the mushy air of its sky. But no one cared. The down settled everywhere, enhancing the landscape with the color of a full moon. It must also have covered the lungs (for everyone sneezed) and lined their dreams with feathers (for some dreamt of yellow beaked humans flying in hurricanes). (50)

The ominous reality behind this metaphor becomes clear some years later when, in 1902, the volcano of Mont-Pelée erupts, reducing Martinique's first capital city, Saint-Pierre, to rubble. A major event in the island's official national history, Chamoiseau filters its narration through the eyes of Esternome, whose first-hand account Marie-Sophie retells. The significance of the eruption is undermined by Esternome's initially careless response. Preoccupied with securing the affections of his lover Ninon, he ignores the volcanic warning signs: "[F]rom time to time the horizon became roaring and … ash from the mountain suddenly floured the land, more and more often, for a longer and longer time" (147). Reminiscent of the "gray down" seen earlier, this description invites an association between the man-made and environmental crises that impact the island. When Esternome enters the destroyed city following the eruption, he discovers a scene of biblical devastation that resonates with his father's death:

> A tide of ash. A deposit of still heat. The stone's red glow. Intact beings stuck to wall corners, going up in strings of smoke. Some were shriveled up like dried grass dolls. Children were savagely interrupted. Bodies undone, bones too clean, and oh how many eyes without looks. (150)

Evoking the burning remains of Marie-Sophie's grandfather, the incinerated bodies of Saint-Pierre's inhabitants stand for the comprehensive erasure of the city's history. Esternome moves through the ruins in birdlike fashion, "flapp[ing] his wings in silver ash" (148) and taking "side steps like a blackbird moving through glue" (149). He rescues two surviving prisoners who are trapped inside their cell, symbolically enacting the liberation which his own father lacked. In recounting this incident, Chamoiseau alludes to Martinican urban legend which claims that there were only two survivors of the earthquake. His revision of this myth suggests the malleability of

historical narration. Chamoiseau bridges the historical void left by the death of Marie-Sophie's grandfather by layering competing historical accounts within a single narrative.

With Mont-Pelée's eruption, environmental violence overlays colonial violence, depriving Martinique's marginal urban dwellers of a grounding historical narrative. Chamoiseau dramatizes their resulting disorientation though his depiction of Esternome's traumatized response to the devastating sight of the city laid to waste by the volcano. In the immediate aftermath of the eruption, Esternome suffers the troubling hallucinations characteristic of trauma victims. As he obsessively searches through the rubble of Saint-Pierre for his lost lover Ninon, he begins to see her everywhere: "in each blown-up chest, in each puddle of flesh, on each pyre" (150). The devastated city becomes the scene of psychic disintegration. In later life, Esternome is reticent about the horrors that he witnessed as a young man. When Marie-Sophie asks him about the volcanic disaster, she finds that her father "covered it with the same stubborn silence he had kept his whole life concerning the old days in chains" (149). His refusal to narrate is both traumatic symptom and mode of resistance. On the one hand, as Cathy Caruth has usefully observed, "the traumatized carry an impossible history within them, or they become themselves the symptom of a history that they cannot entirely possess" (5). Esternome, as silent witness, embodies the incomprehensible pain of the multilayered, inextricable man-made and natural traumas of the Caribbean past. As Caruth argues, survivors' silence amounts to more than passive resistance. The choice to remain silent marks an active unwillingness to translate a traumatic event into a manageable, transferable narrative, which would diminish its "essential incomprehensibility, the force of its *affront to understanding*" (154). Esternome explains that he cannot bring himself to describe his father's death in the dungeon because "certain things are not to be described. Lest we ease the burden of those

who built them" (36). Paradoxically, his silence signals not a willed forgetting or repression of the past, but rather an insistent remembrance of suffering.

Although Chamoiseau allows Esternome's silence to mark the impossibility of fully narrating Caribbean history, implicitly calling into question those historical accounts which posit themselves as truthful, *Texaco* insists on the attempt to recuperate the past despite its apparent inaccessibility. The slum-dwellers' impoverished existence may well be symptomatic of a seemingly "impossible history," but nevertheless they experience the actual, lived effects of that traumatic legacy on a daily basis. More than mere symbols of suffering, the slum-dwellers can only overcome their contemporary marginalization by articulating a history that restores their claim to a place in the city and on the island.

In Marie-Sophie, Chamoiseau locates the will to narrate history, despite its troubling content. Unlike her deliberately mute grandfather and her disturbed silent father, Marie-Sophie actively seeks language that will enable her to describe, comprehend, and commemorate the past. Whereas Esternome is struck dumb by the extent of the devastation wrought by the volcano, Marie-Sophie insistently asks "how does one mourn?" when she visits the ossuaries of Saint Pierre years later (153). Her attempt to document Texaco's history is, in part, a response to this dilemma. As Samuel Durrant persuasively suggests, "postcolonial narrative, structured by a tension between the oppressive memory of the past and the liberatory promise of the future, is necessarily involved in the work of mourning" (1). Marie-Sophie's postcolonial history is, following Durrant's description, deliberately Janus-faced: she narrates the past in order to lay claim to a better future for her fellow slum-dwellers.

Postcolonial mourning poses a dilemma of both scale and substance. Faced with the piles of

anonymous bones that literalize the weight of her ancestors' tragic past, Marie-Sophie struggles to come to terms with the extent of their loss. In asking how to mourn, she not only registers the considerable size of the task before her, but also an uncertainty about possible methods of remembrance. Although Pierre Nora suggests that archives, museums, and other *lieux de mémoire* provide compensatory historical access in a modern era that has been irrevocably severed from the past, Marie-Sophie and her fellow slum-dwellers lack the space, time, and means to construct such sites. Instead, Chamoiseau suggests that there are commemorative possibilities inherent in the Caribbean environment. Indeed, the landscape expresses trauma with an eloquence that escapes Esternome in the aftermath of the volcano. In later life, Esternome alerts Marie-Sophie to a tree which grows "above Saint-Pierre's remains . . . a massive survivor of the volcano, spread like the spirit of a man who still owns his memories" (118). Foreign to the island, the tree is an accidental transplant from Africa, which congo slaves recognize and replant wherever possible. Although the ruins of Saint Pierre offer few *lieux de mémoire*, Chamoiseau demonstrates that the landscape itself asserts living memories.

Chamoiseau's recurrent tree motif further signals the inextricable trauma of the landscape and its inhabitants. When Esternome buries his mother, a tree similarly sprouts at her grave. She is killed by vengeful ex-slaves who overrun the plantation during the 1848 freedom riots. Her loyalty to the Béké is her downfall. When Esternome returns from Saint Pierre to find her body in a makeshift grave, he crafts a coffin from mahogany in which he reburies her. He refuses to allow her to be "buried with-no-bell-a-tolling in guano sacks" (104). By doing so, he not only postpones his mother's inevitable physical decay, but more importantly, he refutes her lifelong degradation and objectification. His insistence on providing her with "some kind of funeral" asserts that she is

not merely excrement. In an excerpt from Marie-Sophie's notes Esternome further explains that:

> It should be said that the red coffins shot up roots; and one could see several agony-trees, branches contorted with pain, rise on the backside of the years. Looking at them brought back memories one didn't have. It stiffened in you like a sad muffled drumbeat. (105)

Although Esternome wishes to put his mother to rest, he overlooks the potential fertility of her remains. Like guano manure, her decomposing body literally nourishes the growth of trees whose twisted branches symbolically recall the tortured bodies of his uprooted ancestors, forcibly transported to the Caribbean as slaves. When Esternome sees these trees, he experiences the belated trauma associated with what Marianne Hirsch terms "postmemory:" "traumatic recall at a generational remove" (106). The rhythmic resonance of his grief signals its African origins. As Hirsch suggests, inherited memories profoundly shape the imaginations of those whose parents witnessed collective trauma. In seismic fashion, the emotional aftershocks of slavery are deeply felt by subsequent generations. Lacking monumental fixity, the trees express living memories which cannot be buried nor suddenly healed.

FORMAL GLEANING

Aware of the need to preserve her parents' memories after her own death, Marie-Sophie records them in notebooks that she appropriately salvages from trash. Interestingly, the retrieval of an old accounting ledger catalyzes her transcription of Texaco's oral history. A different economy is at work in her narration. By recording her parents' words in these cast-off notebooks, she demonstrates a respect for both material and discursive *rejectamenta*. Her historical narrative

revalues the stories, people, and things deemed unprofitable by the colonial system and its neocolonial form. Marie-Sophie is not interested in individual gain, but the production of a collective resource that will secure Texaco's standing in the city.

Marie-Sophie's notebooks inevitably invoke the poetic *cahier* of her famous compatriot, Aimé Césaire, who features in the novel as both an inspirational politician and a reluctant benefactor. Following his personal visit to the slum, the "Césaire effect" ensures that Texaco is protected from further police harassment (354). Despite her evident admiration for 'Papa Césaire,' Marie-Sophie's notebooks qualify the spirit of resistance inscribed in his *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Whereas Césaire stridently celebrates the African roots of the island's diasporic population, Marie-Sophie is concerned with the remembrance of a specifically Martinican identity. In contrast to Césaire's unidirectional "return" to Africa, her history pulls in many directions, drawing on multiple pasts in order to secure a future in which Texaco will be recognized as a legitimate part of the city and the island's culture as a whole. Whereas, Chamoiseau and his co-authors argue in *Eloge de la Créolité*, Césaire "restored mother Africa, matrix Africa, the black civilization" to Caribbean culture, Marie-Sophie is attentive to what Stuart Hall terms the multiple "présences" within Martinican identity: not just African, but also European and American.[36]

Marie-Sophie is concerned that the conversion of her late father's oral history into written French will arrest the necessary multidirectionality of the history he passed on to her. Her transcription of his recollections into "immobile notebooks" renders them disembodied, as if she

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[36] Chamoiseau draws on Hall's terminology in a recent interview in which he explains his understanding of Martinique's distinctively creole culture: "For my part, I believe more in what I call 'presences,' and I think we are coming out of the era of closed territories and entering the era of 'places.' The place, then, is multi-transcultural, multi-translingual; the place is inhabited by diversities and so, in that sense, there aren't any diasporas because the diverse, the "other" is already there—everywhere. So, what you have are emanations, networks, and presences.
The place of Martinique, for example, has an African presence, an American presence, a European presence across the history that it had with France—and all that constitutes the networks of solidarity and presences that sustain Martinique as a place" (Morgan).

"were burying him again" (321). Concerned about preserving the immediacy of his words, Marie-Sophie wonders:

> [I]s there such a thing as writing informed by the word, and by the silences, and which remains a living thing, moving in a circle, and wandering all the time, and which reinvents the circle each time like a spiral which at any moment is in the future, ahead, each loop modifying the other, nonstop, without losing a unity difficult to put into words? (322)

Marie-Sophie's doubts about the efficacy of written narration not only speak to her desire to preserve her father's vitality, but also to Caruth's concern about the difficulty of representing a traumatic history without diminishing its affective impact. As Sam Durrant explains, in the face of senseless, overwhelming traumas, such as slavery and the Holocaust, "postcolonial narrative is confronted with the impossible task of finding a mode of writing that would not immediately transform formlessness into form, a mode of writing that can bear witness to its own incapacity to recover a history" (6).

Chamoiseau's text embodies some of the unpredictability sought by Marie-Sophie. According to the afterword, the novel is a modified transcription of the oral history Marie-Sophie provides when he meets her during his research on the storyteller Solibo Magnifique, the subject of his previous novel. Intrigued by the matadora's "profound authority," Chamoiseau decides to compile her fragmented history of Texaco. In addition to the inevitable distance created by translating her spoken word into written form, the author explains that Marie-Sophie's account has been further mediated by her inconsistent powers of recall and his "bastard of a tape recorder" that did not capture everything she said (387). Additionally, the Creole-speaking Marie-Sophie asks

him to "'fix up' her speech into good French" (388). Marie-Sophie's narrative thus reaches the reader in multiply mediated form. Throughout his adjusted transcription of Marie-Sophie's words, Chamoiseau interweaves excerpts from the notebooks in which she earlier recorded her parents' memories. Although he carefully preserves these notebooks—he numbers them, repairs them, and stores them in the Schoelcher Library (387)—Chamoiseau does not present them chronologically in the body of the text, drawing attention to his distinctive archival practice in *Texaco*.

Many critics have noted that the resulting composite text exemplifies artistic *bricolage*, a practice first defined by Lévi-Strauss as the art of "making do with 'whatever is at hand,' that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous" (17). Maeve McCusker points out the correspondence between Chamoiseau's authorial strategy and the building techniques adopted by Esternome in his youth when he begins to make a living as a real-life *bricoleur*-handyman. Following the example of his mentor Théodorus Sweetmeat, he learns how to add "Norman knowledge to the teachings offered by the African huts and Carib longhouses" in order to construct houses uniquely suited to the island environment and available materials (57). As McCusker observes, "the text becomes itself a sort of building site, drawing attention to its multiple materials rather than to any sense of cohesion or coherence. It is the disparate and interweaving threads binding the text(ile)/*Texaco* together which are privileged over any sense of seamlessness" (110). In this view, *bricolage* defiantly celebrates the region's fragmented origins, despite ongoing hardships.

At its best, aesthetic *bricolage* is an innovative, adaptive process that captures the cultural creolization or mixture that characterizes the Caribbean. However, in a recent article, Wendy Knepper calls for a renewed understanding of *bricolage*, which is attentive to the political

motivations of such postcolonial *bricoleurs* as Chamoiseau. Following Lévi-Strauss's originally ahistorical conception, she notes that the all too easy celebration of *bricolage* can mask "possibilities for cultural impoverishment as a result of the deliberate obliteration or unconscious repression of cultural fragments" (72). Although she admires Chamoiseau's strategic *bricolage*, which serves as "not only a form of counter-cultural creativity but also as a critique: a radical ideological and imaginative reconstruction of society, at once blasting apart and reframing the context of interpretation by placing the known fragments in new arrangements" (82), Knepper highlights the uneven power dynamics involved in the creation of attractively 'hybrid' artistic products. In a recent analysis of the ways in which European modernism inflects and is influenced by postcolonial poetics, Jahan Ramazani tellingly replaces the term "*bricolage*" altogether, preferring the term "postcolonial hybridity" to describe the latter's aesthetic engagement with cross-cultural experience.

In its reference to the process of artistic composition, gleaning offers a complementary critical concept to these qualified notions of *bricolage*. Reading Chamoiseau as both *bricoleur* and *glaneur* allows for a fuller understanding of the acts of observation, selection and retrieval that contribute to his creole art, rather than limiting attention to their aesthetic outcome. Attention to his gleaning grounds Chamoiseau's alternative bricolage aesthetics in the particular context of the historically uneven modes of production from which they emerge. His composite textual format is further illuminated by Ursula Le Guin's "Carrier Bag theory of fiction," which rejects the "linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic" with which the realist novel is associated, recasting the novel as a cultural "container," the purpose of which "is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process" (153). Drawing on a playful stone-age analogy, in

which the author is figured as a female gatherer (as opposed to a male hunter), she aptly proposes that "the proper, fitting shape of the novel might be that of a sack, a bag…a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us" (153). Chamoiseau, as authorial gleaner of Fort-de-France's history, crafts just such a cultural container in *Texaco*. By combining the various strands of Texaco's long-overlooked past into a single narrative, he models a promising method of polyphonic historical narration that, contrary to the principle of cultural homogenization on which French assimilation operates, respects the "open specificity" of the Caribbean (*Éloge* 89).

CONCLUSION

Despite the critical promise of Chamoiseau's formal gleaning, it should not be forgotten that the material practice that he creatively appropriates emerges from conditions of undesirable hardship and inequity. As a means of opposition, such micro-strategies are limited in their capacity to achieve far-reaching social change, as revealed by their attempted formalization. In a recent analysis of foraging practices within contemporary American cities, Michelle Coyne examines efforts to systematize and diffuse the philosophy of freeganism, which advocates the recuperation of discarded food in a manner akin to the physical gleaning Marie-Sophie conducts. As Coyne points out, such practices are dependent on the social structure that they simultaneously challenge: "It is clear that the waste system that horrifies the Freegan has also become the sustenance upon which she depends" (14). Gleaning is always dependent on the very structures that it seeks to contest. Even if gleaning reveals local and transnational histories that productively denaturalize the

social conditions that lead to its necessity, it still always results in an asymmetrical symbiosis between the needy and the excessive.

Chamoiseau's formal gleaning is thus deeply ironic. His stylistic excess is enabled by the very conditions of deprivation that his subjects experience. His painstaking compilation of Texaco's history simultaneously highlights the cultural significance of the slum and marks its material and social degradation. However, the ironic gap between Chamoiseau's form and content—between textual excess and material lack—usefully reasserts the distance between figurative waste and actual waste. This irony is deepened when one considers the differing effects of Marie-Sophie's oral history and Chamoiseau's textual account. On the one hand, Marie-Sophie's narrative ultimately results in Texaco's incorporation into Fort-de-France: by detailing the slum-dwellers' formative role in the emergence of the city, staring with its plantation origins, she asserts a persuasive claim to full local and global citizenship for herself and her peers. Chamoiseau's gleaned narrative of the slum, by contrast, insists on its distinctiveness by highlighting the unique creativity and resilience of Texaco. As narrative method and interpretive tool, gleaning thus refuses to naturalize or legitimate urban marginalization.

The downside to the slum's incorporation, as Chamoiseau notes in his afterword, is the taming of Texaco's resistant energy, the critical force that emerges, with painful irony, from precisely those conditions of deprivation that he seeks to alleviate. The slum's absorption into the city risks new historical amnesia as the traces of Texaco's past are concealed by material developments such as the improvement of the shacks, and the gradual forgetting of younger Texaco generations. Chamoiseau's nuanced gleaning, and the narrative tension it produces, thus leaves the reader with the enduring problem of the urban margins: how can they be fully

acknowledged and accommodated if not through their absorption into the same system that created them?

In the following chapter I examine a novel that portrays the violent elimination of slums as the unwelcome alternative to their assimilation. Set in 1980s Lagos, Chris Abani's *GraceLand* dramatizes the state-sanctioned demolition of a densely populated shantytown. While his text expresses a deeper pessimism about the potential for state recognition of slum-dwellers' needs and rights, Abani shares with Chamoiseau an insistence on the restorative potential of the imaginative arts, which he reveals to be criminally censored in late-twentieth-century Nigeria.

CHAPTER TWO

"Suspended City":

Personal, Urban, and National Development in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*

Addressing the Africa Leadership Forum in 1988, Colonel Raji Rasaki, Military Governor Of Lagos State prefaced his lengthy recommendations for the better management of the then Nigerian capital with the assertion that:

> Metropolitan Lagos means so many different things to its diverse inhabitants and visitors. To some, it is the centre of civilization, sophistication, wealth, opulence and the haven of the elite. To others, it is the heart of decadence where only the fittest survive, a jungle city of chaos where nothing works but for pickpockets, armed robbers and fraudulent characters.

Highlighting the different perceptions of the city in his charge, the governor's comments suggest the contrasting urban experiences of those who visit, live, and work in Lagos; experiences which have only become more divergent in recent years as Lagos has grown to a mega-city of more than 13 million people, belying its sixteenth century origins as a small fishing and farming village.[37] This staggering demographic and territorial expansion has produced both conspicuous wealth in such affluent neighborhoods as Victoria Island, together with the proliferation of slums in and around

[37] For a concise history of Lagos, see Olaniyan 88-89. For extended treatment, see also Mabogunje, Ajetunmobi, Fasinro, and Ajunam.

the city, the inhabitants of which bear the brunt of Lagos's manifold environmental, infrastructural and economic problems.[38]

The city's continued increase in size and population despite an economic downturn at the urban and national level has confounded expected trajectories of development, prompting some external commentators to suggest that there is something inherent to sub-Saharan African cities that forestalls their capacity to spark economic growth.[39] While critics argue that such measures of development are implicated in neocolonial discourses of modernization that perpetuate Western dominance of a perpetually "developing" world, the postcolonial state in Nigeria and elsewhere has frequently invoked the burden of national progress in order to pass off development initiatives that will primarily benefit an elite minority as matters of broad public interest.[40] This is especially true in Lagos, the urban landscape of which functions as a key symbol of national pride. In his address, Colonel Rasaki goes on to lament the city residents' apparent lack of cooperation with the development efforts of government during his tenure as "action governor," a nickname earned through his advocacy of modernization programs:

> To those charged with the management of the city, [Lagos] is inhabited by an articulate and fastidious citizenry quick to criticize, expecting everything free from Government, yet compounding, day-by-day, the problems that the Government faces in its efforts to improve the lives of the majority.

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[38] In a recent article, Catherine Kehinde George lists the "challenges arising from the rapid urbanization of Lagos metropolis" as "urban sprawl, encroachment on conservation zone, inadequate basic infrastructure and communal facilities, inadequate energy (electricity), inadequate potable water, formation of slums, urban road transport problems, urban traffic congestion, municipal waste management, urban violence, change of use/illegal development, and impact of industries."

[39] This "exceptionalism hypothesis" is further explained in White et al. 308-309.

[40] For critical responses to Western development discourse, see Amin, Sachs, Escobar.

Although Lagos is, as poet Odia Ofeimun puts it, "the closest Nigerian parallel to a melting pot . . . our prime city of crossed boundaries" (138), it is also a site of entrenched social, political, and economic division. As Martin Murray and Garth Myers note in their critical analysis of urban planning initiatives similar to Rasaki's, such "efforts to create and maintain orderly urban landscapes are inextricably linked with the process of *boundary-making*" (237; emphasis added). By portraying the government's attempts at civic improvement as valiant efforts in the face of intransigent local obstacles, Rasaki implies a clear divide between the citizens of Lagos and the state authorities. His invocation of paternalistic colonial discourse is indicative of a lingering top-down approach to development within the postcolonial state that endures today, making it hard to find solutions to the problems that particularly impact marginalized populations.

This chapter examines a novel that continues a long tradition of Lagos literature in its creative engagement with the immense scale and elusive substance of the city. In *GraceLand* (2004), Chris Abani employs a largely realist style that shares both descriptive power and occasional ironic humor with such early precedents as Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) and Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Like the protagonists of their respective novels, Abani's central character is a young male migrant to Lagos who struggles to navigate the financial demands, family expectations, and personal aspirations that come with living in the city. As a marginalized slum-dweller, however, his socioeconomic status is more precarious than that of Ekwensi's Sango and Achebe's Obi, both of whom have access to relatively stable housing and employment. By re-imagining the city from the perspective of its poorest population, Abani challenges elitist responses to Lagos's social and infrastructural problems. In his specific focus on the slum of Maroko, he joins a number of Nigerian writers who have chosen to represent this district in fiction, poetry,

and drama; amongst them Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark, and Maik Nwosu.[41] This Maroko corpus is broadly concerned with describing and critiquing the forced eviction of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes in what Abani refers to throughout the novel as a "ghetto" adjacent to affluent Victoria Island.[42] Although the area was decisively cleared under Colonel Rasaki's direction in 1990, Abani's novel returns us to an earlier slum clearance in 1983—a violent prelude to the more comprehensive demolition program that was to follow.[43]

Abani's extended engagement with the vagaries of slum existence creates a suggestive metonym for the instability and inconsistency of the postcolonial nation-state, allowing him to effectively diagnose and critique the causes of the disparate living conditions of Lagos's numerous residents. Specifically, through his formal and thematic elaboration of a "suspension" leitmotif, Abani demonstrates the paralyzing imbrication of local, national, and international discourses of development, especially for those who live at the urban margins. By invoking and subverting the form of the *Bildungsroman*, Abani exposes the discrepant trajectories of development that exist within a single city, suggesting the untenability of national models of development which perpetuate a "First World"/"Third World" hierarchy. Through his narration of the experiences of a young slum-dweller who fails to meet the *Bildungsroman*'s generic expectations of "formation," "education," and "coming-of-age," Abani further demonstrates that both state and society inhibit progress in their frequently violent promotion of inflexible measures of development. While the government's brutal policing of their status quo is clearly detrimental to social cohesion, Abani suggests that a reactionary recourse to invented traditions in the face of unwelcome modernization

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[41] See Soyinka's *Beatification of Area Boy* (1995), J. P. Clark Bekederemo's "Maroko" (1999), Ofeimun's "Demolition Day" (2000), and Nwosu's *Invisible Chapters* (2001).

[42] Odia Ofeimun first identifies this "Maroko Corpus" as such in his 2005 review of Maik Nwosu's *Invisible Chapters*.

[43] See Agbola and Jinadu 274-275 for a comprehensive list of Lagos evictions from 1973-1995, including three separate clearances of Maroko.

is equally inimical. Subject to the varying expectations of his father, his friends, his neighbors and his fellow Nigerians, his protagonist Elvis lives a suspended existence characterized by alienation from his urban surroundings, estrangement from his family, and an inability to take action against people and practices he knows to be wrong. Not only is he a paralyzed observer of social injustice, but his body also bears scars of abuse, exploitation and self-loathing that inhibit his psychic and physical maturation into adulthood. Although Elvis finds some solace in transnational cultural exchange, this is circumscribed by his simultaneous immersion in a global economic system that perpetuates his marginalization. In his fictional representation of Lagos's uneven development, Abani thus responds to calls for more holistic accounts of development than those which emerge from other "texts of development" such as urban plans, economic reports, political speeches, and statistical analyses (Crush 5).[44]

GraceLand narrates the troubled coming of age of Elvis Oke. Born in Afikpo, "a dusty end-of-the-highway fishing town" in southeastern Nigeria in 1967, the relative comfort of Elvis's childhood is overshadowed by his mother Beatrice's long battle with breast cancer (146). Despite hospital treatments and the application of his grandmother's homemade herbal remedies, she dies when Elvis is 8 years old. His father Sunday seeks consolation in alcohol, becoming ever more estranged from his son, whose burgeoning interest in dancing and performance enrages his

[44] As both the discourse and practice of development come under increasing scrutiny, scholars engaged in critical development studies have acknowledged "that fictional accounts of development can sometimes reveal different sides to the experience of development and may sometimes even do a 'better' job of conveying the complexities of development than research-based accounts" (Lewis et al. 6). Although one might caution against mining literary sources for objective "data," a fuller consideration of the descriptive power of literary fiction responds to the need for analyses of development that extend beyond the measurement of economic criteria. Nigerian literary critic Molara Ogundipe-Leslie notes that "development as conceived historically now in Western hegemonic discourses and activities is failing because it has no cultural face" (27). As she explains, development agendas, both internal and external, frequently ignore the beliefs, traditions, and principles respected by those whom they will most directly affect. Literary representations of development such as Abani's are uniquely placed to engage with the "creation, questioning, rejection, and restructuring" of such values (Ogundipe-Leslie 28).

masculinist sensibilities. When the military government announces its intention to step down in 1980, Sunday resigns his secure position as superintendent of schools and decides to run for office in the new civilian government, having served as a member of parliament in the first republic during the 1960s. His failed election campaign bankrupts him, forcing Elvis and Sunday to move to Lagos in search of work. They find a home, but scarce employment in Maroko, one of the city's many slums. As his father's alcoholism worsens, Elvis ekes out an existence by impersonating his American namesake for tourists on the beaches of Victoria Island. When his financial circumstances become untenable, his friend Redemption, a self-professed "original area boy" (55), takes him under his wing and introduces him to some of the more lucrative, and less legal, occupations that Lagos offers. Elvis tries his hand at escorting rich women to nightclubs and wrapping cocaine "for export" (110), but he balks at smuggling kidnapped children and human body parts out of the country. His conscientious objection attracts the unwelcome attention of the Colonel, the corrupt chief of security to the head of state who had commissioned Redemption to assist with this job. Fearing fatal recrimination, Elvis flees Lagos with the Joking Jaguars, a dance troupe led by the Beggar King, an enigmatic vagrant who befriended Elvis during his early wanderings in the city. Meanwhile, Maroko is slated for demolition during the government-sponsored "Operation Clean the Nation." Sunday heads the slum-dwellers' protest against the destruction of their homes, but he is crushed by a bulldozer when he refuses to leave his shack. The novel concludes with the orphaned Elvis poised to emigrate to America, using a forged passport that Redemption gave him, having sacrificed his own dream of leaving the country.

As this overview of the novel suggests, *GraceLand* shares many plot features commonly associated with the *Bildungsroman*: "childhood, the conflict of generations, provinciality, the larger

society, self-education, alienation, ordeal by love, the search for a vocation and a working philosophy" (Buckley 18). Although the generic instability of the *Bildungsroman* has prompted much critical debate, with Marc Redfield claiming that it is a "phantom formation" which "exemplifies the ideological construction of literature by criticism" (vii), Franco Moretti identifies this flexibility, or "morphological *bricolage* and ideological compromise," as precisely the feature which enabled the *Bildungsroman* to flourish from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century in Europe. Following Lukàcs's earlier influential definition of the genre's theme as "the reconciliation of the problematic individual, guided by his lived experience of the ideal, with concrete social reality" (132), Moretti identifies the source of this subjective challenge with the onset of modernity. In keeping with Bakhtin's assertion that the genre is unique in its depiction of a protagonist who "emerges *along with the world* and reflects the historical emergence of the world itself" (23), Moretti argues that, in the *Bildungsroman*, the transformations of youth come to stand for the challenges of modernization. Crucially, the inevitable ending of youth brings narrative closure to social changes that are otherwise deeply unsettling.

The bourgeois European *Bildungsroman* that Moretti describes confers a seemingly natural progressive temporality on social changes that produced distinctly uneven spatial formations and discrepant environmental impacts. In his pertinent reading of the colonial *Bildungsroman*, Jed Esty argues that the revised spatial imaginary brought about by imperial expansion challenges the form's ideology of synchronous progress. Highlighting what he considers to be a blindspot in Moretti's argument, namely that it is "*nationhood* [which] supplies the bildungsroman with a language of historical stability, a final form amidst the vast changes of industrialization" (413; emphasis added), he argues that the uneven processes of global modernization fostered by

European colonialism call this "cultural mechanism" into question (Moretti 9). His intervention usefully suggests the temporal contradiction inherent in colonial modernity, which demands development at the imperial "center" while the assumed "periphery" must remain in a constant state of becoming in order for this power relation to be maintained.

If European imperialism destabilized the national borders that had previously lent a reassuring structure to the unprecedented social, industrial, and cultural transformations induced by modernization, *GraceLand* extends Esty's analysis by highlighting the stark unevenness of development that persists within the postcolonial state. Abani's attention to Lagos enables him to fully engage with the multiple centers and margins that exist within Nigeria, given the city's particular entanglement in criss-crossing networks of transnational and local power. Although some have questioned whether the *Bildungsroman*, so closely affiliated with a modern European bourgeois sensibility, can adequately represent postcolonial reality, Abani joins such African writers as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Tsitsi Dangarembga in crafting what Joseph Slaughter terms a "dissensual *Bildungsroman*" that "puts in circulation a countercultural narrative that seeks to rearticulate the sociohistorical universal and the political terms of antagonism between a marginal group and the dominant group" (184).[45] By appropriating the genre in order to narrate a story of stalled urban development, Abani calls the myth of unified national development into question.

At the level of form in particular, the novel's narrative structure demonstrates the multiple temporalities which intersect the space of the Nigerian nation. The novel is divided into two books, the first of which alternates between chapters narrating Elvis's childhood in Afikpo during the

[45] See Ngũgĩ's *Weep Not Child* (1964) and Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988).

1970s and chapters which record a single year of his new life in Lagos. Although there are no flashbacks in the second book, the geography of the chapters alternates between Lagos and the various other places that Elvis visits during his adventures with Redemption and the Beggar King. The effect of these temporal and spatial inconsistencies is twofold. From the very beginning of the novel, Abani uses chapter headings to clearly and deliberately invoke a specific period in Nigeria's history. *GraceLand* opens in Lagos in 1983 at a time when the country was on the verge of another extended period of military rule. Unlike other contemporary Nigerian authors who have chosen to explore Nigeria's recent past,[46] Abani returns the reader to a moment prior to the tyranny of the Abacha regime from 1993-1998 when the full force of economic depression and government corruption had yet to be felt.[47] Although Abani situates his novel in a specific historical context, his concern is with the day-to-day impact of major events on those whose histories are often sidelined. By focalizing the country's political shifts and social upheavals through the young, curious Elvis, he provides a destabilizing alternative to the implied dominant history that shadows the actual story he tells. For example, when the military government agrees to make way for the civilian Second Republic in 1980, Elvis's skeptical reaction undermines fidelity to a single historical account. He learns of this significant political transition from the newspaper that his father is reading:

> The headline caught Elvis's attention: MILITARY TO STEP DOWN. That was strange; Elvis could not remember when the military had not run the country. His father spoke often and nostalgically about his days as a member of parliament in

[46] See, for example, Helon Habila's *Waiting for an Angel* (2002).

[47] Of course, this is not to suggest that Shehu Shagari's presidency of the Second Republic (1979-1983) was squeaky clean. See Falola and Heaton 181-208 for a detailed historical overview of this period in Nigerian history, which suggests that the ruling National Party of Nigeria was, in fact, characterized by corruption.

> the first republic, but to Elvis it sounded suspiciously like all his father's stories. Like the one about being made to walk forty miles each way to school every day as a child. Or the one about hunting a lion with his father, Elvis's grandfather, armed with nothing but native broadswords. Of course, his father did not know that in general science, Elvis had learned that lions had been extinct in this part of the country since the twenties. (174)

By aligning the newspaper's official, reported history with the personal myth-making of his father, Elvis humorously and unwittingly indicates the competition for narrative dominance on which any historical record is contingent. Benedict Anderson has argued that newspapers, like other products of print capitalism such as novels, are crucial to the formation of unified national identity because the daily "mass ceremony" of reading the news provides a common material focus for the disparate subjects of an "imagined community," the extent and content of which is otherwise difficult to grasp (35). However, Elvis's subjective reaction to the headline in his father's paper resists his interpellation into the national collective, suggesting the instability of its temporal and geographical boundaries. As Patrick Chamoiseau does in *Texaco*, Abani seems to be concerned with pluralizing history. In doing so, he fragments the "image of *man growing* in *national-historical time*" which Bakhtin identified as the central mechanism of the *Bildungsroman* (25). Although Jonathan Crush identifies "the national development plan" as "the basic liturgy of post-World War II development discourse," Abani's deconstruction of unified national time suggests the need for alternative development frameworks that take into account the micro-scale of marginalized Nigerian existence (8-9).

Abani also calls the integrity of the nation into question by narrating Elvis's time in Lagos at a slower pace than his rural childhood. This explicit formal challenge to what Esty terms "the *bildungsroman*'s basic genetic code of progressive temporality" conveys a sense of the past catching up with the present (425-426). While the reader notes the passing of earlier years, 1983 moves slowly, suggesting a slowing down of progress and a deceleration in the development of both Elvis and, by extension, Nigeria as a whole. The sense of time established by this formal structure might be described as a temporality of indebtedness, in which the past continually intrudes upon and makes demands of the present. Left unacknowledged, it threatens the present. This gradual grinding to a halt of personal and national progress is symbolically expressed by the laborious pace of life in Lagos itself. Early in the novel Elvis wakes up to "the sound of babies crying, infants yelling for food and people hurrying but getting nowhere" (4). Held back by the city's inadequate infrastructure, which is epitomized by the city's famous "go-slows" that immobilize traffic for hours, the residents of Lagos expend great energy for little returns. Their daily frustrations are symptomatic of larger systemic problems with Nigeria's development. Having borrowed vast sums from foreign lenders such as the World Bank, the leaders of the postcolonial state are perpetually looking over their shoulders, trying to retrospectively plug the gaping hole of national debt they have incurred. Fiscal irresponsibility coupled with a failure to acknowledge past mistakes results in the stagnated social situation that Abani describes. By formally arresting what Benedict Anderson in his well-known phrase described as the "homogenous, empty time" of the nation (26), he is able to demonstrate that Nigeria's decline was not inevitable, but the result of an incompetent state response to unwelcome neocolonial intrusions.

Abani's depiction of Nigeria's suspended modernization resonates with anthropologist James Ferguson's recent analysis of African modernity in *Global Shadows*, in which he argues that the failure of many African societies to advance up the global political-economic hierarchy in the period following decolonization—a failure that has multiple intrinsic and extrinsic causes—indicates that "modernity" can no longer be understood as the teleological outcome of a supposedly natural process of national development, but rather as "a standard of living, as a status" that is available to those who are already rich and powerful, but perpetually denied to the poor and marginalized (189). Of especial significance for my analysis of *GraceLand* is his assertion that:

> in a world of non-serialized political-economic statuses, the key questions are no longer temporal ones of societal becoming (development, modernization), but spatialized ones of guarding the edges of a status group—hence the new prominence of walls, borders and processes of social exclusion in an era that likes to imagine itself as characterized by an ever expanding connection and communication. (192)

Through his characterization of both Elvis and his mentor Redemption, Abani engages with both sets of questions. Resisting generic convention, Abani portrays Elvis not as an increasingly mature *Bildungsheld* (protagonist), but as an uncertain teenager who fails to live up to the standards of self-formation set by his community, his family, and himself. If, for Esty, the "frozen youth" of protagonists in such colonial *Bildungsroman* as *Kim*, *Lord Jim*, and *An African Farm*, represents the necessarily stalled development of the periphery, Elvis's halting self-awareness similarly reflects the contradictory discourses of development by which he is interpellated (423). Whereas Elvis lacks the ability to read the city and interpret its many boundaries, Redemption navigates them with confidence, demonstrating a spatial awareness more appropriate to the suspended modernity that

Abani depicts. Like Ferguson, Abani recognizes that transnational cultural exchange can facilitate the crossing of apparently intransigent borders. However, as will be seen in my later discussion of the novel's conclusion, he has similar reservations about advancing a narrative of global mobility that obscures the mediating influence of restrictive social and economic conditions.

Nigeria's contradictory temporality of indebtedness is materialized in the urban structure of Lagos itself. In keeping with Abani's formal rendering of the deceleration and eventual stagnation of national progress through the differently paced narration of Elvis's Afikpo childhood and his time in Lagos, the structure of the city he describes is similarly uneven. Urban development is staggered according to the economic geography of the city, which Elvis perceives as "half slum, half paradise" (7). On the one hand, he notes, "Lagos did have its fair share of rich people and fancy neighborhoods" characterized by "beautiful brownstones in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ocher, elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings and foreign cars" (7-8). The residents of such properties can afford both the time to carefully plan the layout of their homes and the space in which to execute their elaborate designs. The carefully cultivated aesthetic of such houses provides a stark contrast with the cramped, haphazard construction of the shacks found throughout the city's slums, like Maroko and Aje, "one of Lagos's oldest ghettos" that "had no streets running through it, just a mess of narrow alleys that wound around squat, ugly bungalows and shacks" (51).

Although the slums' comparative disorder appears to be in total opposition to the city's wealthier neighborhoods, Elvis quickly learns of their intimate connection. Sitting outside a local bar one evening, Elvis and Redemption gaze across the lagoon at the lights of Ikoyi, one of the

most affluent parts of the city. Amused by the proximity of the slum-dwellers to their wealthy neighbors, Redemption asserts that this is why he likes Lagos: "Because though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we won't go away" (137). Although Redemption is more than aware of the perils that his social marginalization entails, his cynical humor correctly identifies the huge contradiction on which that exclusion rests. Although Lagos's rich might willfully ignore the residents of slums such as Maroko, theirs is a precarious denial for they are massively indebted to their less fortunate urban neighbors. The luxuries of the city's wealthiest residents are made possible by the physical labor of urban immigrants like Elvis who accepts tenuous and poorly paid employment to make ends meet. On arrival in Lagos in 1983, his job prospects, like those of many rural to urban migrants, are particularly bleak. Although the oil trade had brought relative wealth to Nigeria in the 1970s, Elvis moves to Lagos during a period of severe economic depression following a sharp decline in oil prices and increased interest on Nigeria's IMF loans. With few jobs available, he seeks out casual work on a construction site: "Lagos was littered with sites like this one, because new high-rise apartment complexes and office blocks were going up seemingly overnight" (27). Before long, Elvis loses his job on the pretext of his being a "habitual latecomer"—ironic in the context of his own stunted development—but the nepotistically appointed site manager has actually been instructed by his father to "lay off as many people as he could—something about being over budget" (72). Clearly, the construction of desirable living conditions for the rich is made possible by exploiting the livelihoods of the city's poor. However, this episode further demonstrates the tenuousness of the conspicuous wealth signaled by the new buildings. Reading the changing urban landscape as a symbol of Nigeria's social order, this poorly managed construction site suggests the dangers of sacrificing long-term plans for immediate profits.

When Elvis loses his construction site job, he finds himself in an economic predicament that is characteristic of what Mike Davis terms "urbanization without industrialization" (14). Although he is relatively educated, there is little demand for Elvis's literacy skills. Like numerous other slum-dwellers, he has only his physical labor to offer, of which there is a surplus because Nigeria's industrial development has not kept pace with the urban growth of Lagos. In view of the accumulation of unemployed and casual workers in the slums of sprawling mega-cities such as Lagos, Davis observes that "the principal function of the Third World urban edge remains as a human dump" (47). In a pertinent reading of *GraceLand*, Ashley Dawson makes the related claim that "Elvis and the other characters in Abani's novel constitute the violently evacuated waste products of today's world economy" (20-21).[48] The slum-dwellers' physical surroundings certainly seem to affirm their outcast status. As Elvis wakes up in his shack in the very first scene of the novel, he notes that "the smell of garbage from refuse dumps, unflushed toilets and stale bodies was overwhelming" (4). Constructed on low-lying swampland that is dangerously prone to flooding, the entire slum occupies ambiguous territory. Elvis notes that he and his father are fortunate to "live in one of the few places where Maroko made contact with the ground" (165). However, "their short street soon ran into a plank walkway that meandered through the rest of the suspended city" (6). Despite the abundance of "green swampy water that the ghetto was mostly built on" (4), the slum-dwellers have inadequate drinking water. Sanitation standards are predictably poor, exacerbated by the large number of people living in a small area.

Although, as Dawson argues, "the shit in which they live is an apt metaphor for the social status of contemporary slum dwellers" (20), Abani identifies some potential for resistance in their

[48] For an extended sociological analysis of the "wasted lives" created by global modernization, see Bauman.

creatively improvised construction techniques. Headed to work one morning, Elvis, in a characteristically reflective moment, muses that,

> nothing really prepared you for Maroko. 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 wooden 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)

Clearly, the precarious living conditions of this so-called "suspended city" materialize the social vulnerability of the Maroko residents (6, 24). The unstable composite homes described here mark their literal absence of a foothold in the city. However, their tenacity in the face of desperate conditions is reflected in the aspirational quality of those shacks built on solid ground. Literally dragged down by their environment, the slum-dwellers seek and find means of survival.

Although the slum-dwellers demonstrate a resourceful ability to cope with their degraded physical surroundings, Abani suggests that their apparent reduction to human "waste" is most pernicious in its disturbing psychological effects. Downtrodden by their economic, social, and spatial marginalization, some urban poor internalize their seeming lack of value, resulting in a nihilistic disregard for their own personal safety. Elvis encounters this fatalistic mentality while traveling home from work. During his journey, the bus he is on hits and kills a pedestrian. Such accidents are depressingly commonplace because numerous pedestrians ignore the many overhead bridges that cross the city's deadly motorways, leaving the "the road littered with dead bodies at regular intervals" (57). Frustrated by his fellow Lagosians' willingness to concede their status as trash by putting themselves in mortal danger, he asks the old man sat next to him: "Why do we

gamble with our lives?" (57). The response he receives confirms the city residents' dogged resignation to their fate: "We all have to die sometimes, you know. If it is your time, it is your time. You can be in your bed and die. If it is not your time, you can't die even if you cross de busiest road" (57). Although critics of urban culture such as Michel de Certeau have optimistically suggested that "ordinary practitioners of the city" subvert imposed power structures by using spaces in ways that were unintended (93), what we see here is in fact a downtrodden compliance. Convinced of a dismal fate, the marginalized of Lagos are depressingly carefree. Ironically, Matthew Gandy suggests that the "crumbling remains" of the city's "concrete network of bridges, viaducts, flyovers, and cloverleafs . . . represent perhaps the most striking legacy of the oil boom" (44). Initiated in the 1970s, such infrastructural programs fell into disrepair during the early 1980s as a result of increasing national debt. While the bridges symbolize the arrested development of the nation as a whole, it is the urban poor who most directly confront Nigeria's economic decline. The state's absolute disregard for these people is further emphasized by the old man's reminder that the State Sanitation Department is too busy using its ambulances to fulfill private deals to collect the bodies from the road. The dead are left to rot like trash, while local authorities continue to profiteer in the face of social collapse.

Unlike his bemused traveling companion, Elvis vocally critiques his fellow Lagosians' apparent submission to their dire circumstances: "That is the trouble with this country. Everything is accepted. No dial tones or telephones. No stamps in post offices. No electricity. No water. We just accept" (58). His frustration with the city's deep-rooted structural problems prompts the old man to ask "Is dis your first day in Lagos?" (57), a question which indicates Elvis's naivety about the metropolis. However, his seeming inability to "get up to speed" with how Lagos operates is also

indicative of Elvis's struggle to come to terms with the city's arbitrary laws and obvious deficiencies. Unable to relinquish the idea that things could get better, Elvis holds on to the notion of possible progress that many of his urban peers, including Redemption, have abandoned. As Achille Mbembé explains, many Africans who find themselves in a "situation of chronic scarcity" are compelled to relinquish long-term plans and gradual accumulation in favor of a "course of life [that] is assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonized by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations" ("African Modes" 271). Indeed, exhibiting a mentality closer to that of the pedestrians, Redemption is an avid gambler who regularly wins enough money to pay his rent. Elvis on the other hand always loses, underlining his inability to assimilate to the risk-taking mentality of the metropolis. Whereas Redemption takes lucky chances as meaningful signs—for example, when the two of them walk away from a motorcycle accident unscathed it is a "good omen" (194)—Elvis seeks to impose meaning on the chaotic urban landscape which leaves little room for interpretation. Even at the very end of the novel, he thinks, "there is a message to it somewhere, he mused, a point to the chaos. But no matter how hard he tried, the meaning always seemed to be out there beyond reach, mocking him" (307).

In his refusal to accept the status quo, Elvis exhibits the "special sensitivity" characteristic of many classic *Bildungsroman* protagonists (Vázquez 86). Although an outsider, he sees Lagos with a clarity that many of its residents lack. Alluding to the subgenre of the *Künstlerroman* that narrates the formation of a central artist figure, Abani suggests that it is Elvis's own artistic inclinations that lend him his distinctive perspicacity. After his conversation with the old man on the bus:

> Elvis could hardly wait for his stop and trudged home wearily, shoes ringing out on the walkways. It was late and much of Maroko was asleep, awash with moonlight. In the distance a young woman sang in a sorrow-cracked voice that made him catch his breath, stop and look around. In that moment, it all seemed so beautiful like a sequence from one of the films he had seen. Then the silence was broken by the approach of menacing steps. He turned and saw several figures running towards him. (58)

The ominous interruption of this cinematic moment echoes an earlier episode in the novel during which Elvis's directorial musings on how best to frame the "unflagging" energy of another shantytown are cut short by the attempted mugging of a young woman (29-30). By positioning Elvis as a spectator, Abani emphasizes his detachment from his surroundings. His desire to direct the scenes before him speaks to a latent desire to control the city which he does not yet fully understand. By translating the chaos of Lagos into visual art, Elvis recasts reality in a manageable form. Yet in both instances, his artistic impulses are curtailed by the actual violence of street life. Here, Abani suggests the limitations of art as solace. On the one hand, the sympathetic perspective of his protagonist locates a poignant serenity in a slum that is painted in apocalyptic terms by the local government. Yet, if Abani himself is concerned with counteracting development discourse by presenting a more sensitive depiction of the urban margins, his self-reflexive characterization of Elvis as budding artist suggests the dangers of detached aestheticization. Indeed, as his protagonist is exposed to more extreme acts of urban violence, the capacity of aesthetic form to make sense of such atrocities is increasingly called into question.

Although Elvis fails to successfully integrate into the city, he continues to serve as a voice of conscience throughout the novel. His exchange with the old man on the bus is echoed later in the novel when he witnesses the disturbing administration of street justice to a suspected marketplace thief. Horrified by the thief's subjection to a fatal "necklace of fire" in which a burning tire is placed around his neck, Elvis looks to Redemption for an explanation of the crowd's unrelenting vengeance. In response to Redemption's assertion that their collective anger results from a lack of food and money, Elvis ponders, "How long can we use the excuse of poverty?" (226). In a direct echo of the bus passenger's words, another unnamed witness to the thief's punishment interjects by asking Elvis, "You dis man, you just come Lagos?" (226). Once again, Elvis's refusal to accept the dehumanizing effects of poverty by conceding to an act that is "purely animal" marks him as different, although he too shares the crowd's hunger and uncertainty (225).

Despite Elvis's concerned question, "Nobody moved or spoke, not in the crowd, the buka or at the police checkpoint" (227). This collective immobility suggests the disturbing consensus that the challenging urban environment has produced. The police who "watch the scene with bored expressions" represent the apathy of a state authority that has beaten its citizens into acceptance of their own worthlessness. They tolerate this act of ritual scape-goating because it redirects anger away from themselves. Yet as Elvis leaves the scene, his reaction suggests that the spectators' seeming apathy is symptomatic not of dull subjection, but collective trauma:

> As he climbed into the truck, Elvis was shaking. This scene had affected him more than anything else he had seen, though he wasn't sure why. Maybe it was the cumulative effect of all the horror he had witnessed; there was only so much a soul

> could take. As they drove off, Elvis watched the spreading fire through the tinted glass. It was horrifying, yet strangely beautiful. (228)

Elvis's physical reaction to the thief's death suggests how deeply disturbed he is by this incident. The fact that he is able to find beauty in the flames is therefore surprising. In a recent interview, Abani explains that "a theme you'll find running through my work is the notion that the road to the sublime is through the grotesque" (7). For Elvis, witnessing the "necklace of fire" marks a significant step in his self-formation, as indicated by Abani's lengthy description of this brief scene at the very beginning of the novel's second book. If, according to Abani, *GraceLand* "is a story about a loss of innocence, and yet that being some sort of redemption," this episode marks the beginning of Elvis's own loss of innocence (8). When Elvis sees the flames as "strangely beautiful," his reaction is not inhumane, but it is instead a paradoxical assertion of his humanity in spite of the horror to which he has been exposed.

Although Elvis's critical urban gaze provides the reader with valuable insight into the routines, idiosyncrasies, and dangers of Lagos, it sets him apart from the various social spheres in which he operates. Alienated from his family, his fellow slum-dwellers, and Lagos at large, Elvis lives an unfulfilled half-life, unsure of his surroundings, but lacking an escape route. His existential uncertainty resonates with Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa's "liminal model" of the Francophone-African *Bildungsroman.* Drawing on cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's analysis of traditional African rites of passage, which he characterizes as moving from social separation to marginalization, culminating in incorporation, Wangari argues that the protagonists of African *Bildungsromane* "remain suspended in the middle stage" (3) which is characterized by "symbolic invisibility or

death" (2). Abani underscores Elvis's marginalization through the recurrent motif of spectrality. Elvis spends his time "haunting markets and train stations, as invisible to the commuters or shoppers as a real ghost" (14). When he catches sight of his reflection in a puddle, his face "seemed to belong to a stranger, floating there like a ghostly head" (6). Not only is Elvis estranged from others, but he is also unsure of himself. His detachment from his own reflection suggests a profound confusion about his own identity. The working out of such existential uncertainty is typically central to the *Bildungsroman*, as critic John Walsh explains:

> The picture [*Bild*] one has of oneself helps form an understanding of the world. The hero of the *Bildungsroman* builds an image of himself in his society and is ready to live in it, and this is how the novel ends. (187)

In the same way that Elvis attempts to reframe the city around him in order to better understand it, he also tries to remold his own identity throughout the course of the novel. However, in contrast to the classic European *Bildungsroman*, his ability to project a satisfactory self-image is constrained by both local and global limitations on his self-realization.

Elvis's desire for self-refashioning is evident in his dream of becoming a professional dancer. Lacking the confidence to audition for a proper dance troupe, he attempts to earn some money by impersonating his American namesake for the foreign tourists that visit Lagos. Although they do not appreciate his talent, offering him chocolate in return for his "spellbinding" routine (12), Elvis finds comfort in putting on his costume and make-up. After a difficult day, his worries "slip away" as he applies powder, mascara and lipstick in the privacy of his bedroom (77). Hidden from view, Elvis takes great pleasure in manipulating his appearance. Wearing make-up lends him some illusory control over the image (*Bild*) that he presents to the world.

The fact that Elvis wishes to make a living by impersonating a white American rock and roll singer might be interpreted as a symptom of Nigeria's neocolonial subjection to the import of American popular culture. The comfort Elvis derives from his make-up is short-lived since he can never truly resemble his namesake. Frustrated with the visible limitations of his meticulously applied maquillage, Elvis asks himself whether his life would have been any different "if he had been born white, or even just American" (78). Without allowing himself to fully reflect on this question, he abruptly reminds himself that "if Redemption knew about this, he would say Elvis was suffering from colonial mentality" (78). In his desire to mimic the famous looks and dance moves of Elvis Presley, Abani's Elvis seems to pander to a widespread desire for the replication of American culture in Nigeria. Indeed, the entire city in which he lives is apparently in thrall to the fashion, architecture, and cars of the United States, as the reader learns early in the novel: "Name it and Lagos had a copy of it, earning it the nickname 'One Copy'" (8).

However, as with any cultural export, the arrival of American popular culture in Africa is a mediated process. Elvis's interest in dancing is, in part, a tribute to his mother who chose his name because she was a Presley fan. Furthermore, Elvis is inspired to become a professional Elvis impersonator when, as a young boy, he witnesses some Ajasco dancers performing to Presley's "Hound Dog" in the Afikpo market. It is their striking outfits —"high wigs, dark sunglasses, and white long-sleeve shirts, gloves, trousers and white canvas shoes"—and "fluid" dance moves that entrance Elvis, persuading him of "what he wanted to do more than anything else" (65). The Elvis that he wishes to impersonate is a vision that has been refracted, indigenized and transformed during its importation to Nigeria. As Jacob Patterson-Stein suggests, Abani uses Elvis's fixation with an icon of American music to demonstrate the untenability of static national cultures.

American music, he argues following Homi Bhabha, creates a de-nationalized "third space" in the novel, which suggests the possibility of forging more flexible, transnational cultural identities. In this view, Nigeria is not the passive recipient of a more "developed" American culture, but rather an agent in a process of mutually transformative cultural negotiation.

In addition to challenging the fixed locations of national cultures, Elvis's dance routine provides him with a significant opportunity to experiment with the performance of his own gender identity. In doing so, he refuses the social conformity that the classical *Bildungsroman* advocates. In Moretti's understanding of the genre as an inherently conservative "symbolic form" in which the benefits of bourgeois socialization outweigh those of unrestricted individuality, the protagonist must learn to live with "the *interiorization of contradiction*. The next step being not to 'solve' contradiction, but rather to learn to live with it, and even transform it into a tool for survival" (10). In contrast, by displaying a range of masculine and feminine attributes through costume and performance, Elvis makes visible his own fluid gender identity.

By disrupting conventional gender codes, Elvis highlights the dangerous reactionism of men like his father who turn to prohibitively conservative cultural models in response to the social changes produced by neocolonial modernity. As a child, Elvis takes part in a confusing male initiation ceremony, intended to mark "his first step to manhood as dictated by tradition" (18). Too young to comprehend why his father and uncle "strapped a grass skirt on him and then began to paint strange designs in red and white dye all over his body" (17), Elvis's later make-up routine is foreshadowed when the elders "blew chalk powder in his face" (20). Although Sunday later expresses outrage at Elvis's apparent betrayal of his essential masculinity through his supposedly effeminate dancing, the element of costuming and make-up central to this earlier ceremony affirms

the inherent contingency of gender identities, which always emerge from complex social performances rather than inherent physical or psychological traits.

Instead of killing an eagle during the ceremony as his ancestors did, his father hands Elvis an already-pierced chick that he has strung onto a homemade bow. As his uncle Joseph explains, "eagle is too expensive" (19). Although Sunday informs him that "dis is about being a man," the nervous Elvis is hesitant to accept this poor substitution (18). In her reading of *GraceLand* as a "trauma novel," Amy Novak identifies this scene as an example of how "the erasure of traditional culture by colonialism is followed by the inroads of Western culture in post-Independence/neocolonial Nigeria" (37). It is not only Elvis who is confused and scared; more interested in consoling himself with whiskey than Elvis's well-being, Sunday is similarly struggling to come to terms with the cultural estrangement wrought by colonial occupation and its enduring effects. Daunted by the uncertain future for which the ceremony ostensibly prepares his son, Sunday thus resorts to an essentialist notion of masculinity in an ultimately damaging attempt to delineate a stable social role for himself and Elvis.

Abani furthers his critique of Sunday's cultural conservatism through the inclusion of textual fragments which preface each chapter. Apparently taken from an ethnographical work, these brief excerpts first describe the Igbo kola nut ritual from an insider's perspective then analyze it from the perspective of a sympathetic outsider. Performed on many occasions, the ceremonial breaking of the kola nut welcomes visitors, blesses gatherings, and seals covenants. The ostensible effect of these short paragraphs is to celebrate the richness of Igbo culture in all its complexity. Cultural commemoration is inherent to the ritual itself, which is "part hospitality, part etiquette, part protocol and part history lesson" (172). As the ethnographic narrator explains: "Every time

the ritual takes place, the history of all the clans present, and their connections, is enacted. This helps remembering" (240). Unlike the temporality of indebtedness to which national history and the postcolonial present are tethered, this ritual provides a sense of comfort and stability by marking social continuity in a recognizable, cyclical fashion.

Although broadly sympathetic to Igbo culture, Abani's inclusion of these excerpts resists the simplistic idealization of Igbo tradition. In a recent interview, he explains that the "irritating voice" of the ethnographer captures the cultural simplification of anthropologists who "believe that if you can figure out this one ritual, you can understand the Igbo. . . [I]f you figure out one aspect of this complicated place, then that gives you the key to everything" (Aycock 8). By ironically juxtaposing these excerpts alongside Elvis's undignified Lagos existence and his failed coming of age, Abani quietly asserts a further critique. Not only does he highlight the contemporary degradation of Igbo traditions, but he also suggests flaws in the gender divide on which they are based. The kola nut ceremony is exclusively male, as the ethnographer notes: "Women take no part in the kola nut ritual. In fact, female guests are never presented with kola nuts" (172). Although, according to the ethnographer, "the kola-nut ritual provides a ritual space for the affirmation of brotherhood and mutual harmony" (208), Elvis's contrasting experience of the initiation ceremony has the opposite effect, alienating him from his male relatives and peers.

"Ritual space" is even more compromised in 1980s Lagos than it is in the Afikpo of Elvis's early childhood. Indeed, it is almost entirely absent. The cultural coordinates provided by such rituals as the kola nut ceremony have largely disappeared in Maroko, where Sunday's veranda becomes the site of "the routine most evenings" with various neighbors gathering there to drink alcohol after nightfall (80). Abani punctures the frequently made distinction between supposedly

modern urban lifestyles and a more traditional rural way of life by highlighting the tenacious marginalization of women that persists even in Maroko:

> The women sat like shadows behind the men and seemed to use the fact that they needed the light to darn, or shell melon seeds, to justify their presence. For the most part, the men ignored them. Those brave enough to call their husbands' attention to something were rewarded with a gruff and impatient answer, as though they were keeping the men from some important philosophical breakthrough. (80)

The Maroko residents' recourse to these unequal, but familiar gender roles suggests a desire to preserve a minimal amount of social control despite their changed circumstances. The nightly gatherings on Sunday's veranda lend the Maroko residents some social cohesion, albeit in a problematic form. Whereas the kola nut ceremony facilitated deep reflection, this nightly "palm wine ceremony" promotes little more than loud arguments and casual gossip. With the contraction of lived space in Maroko comes the dilution of collective rituals. Even if an argument might be made in favor of gender division upholding social harmony in the past, the Maroko residents exhibit a willful reluctance to accept the inherent flexibility of Igbo tradition, which, as the ethnographer notes, "is fluid, growing. It is an event, like the sunset or rain, changing with every occurrence" (291). Unable or unwilling to adapt to their new urban environment, the residents of Maroko insist on outdated gender roles. These are as inimical as development discourse in their recuperation of false traditions. This is especially problematic for Elvis, who is held to a redundant model of masculinity that inhibits his pursuit of the professional dancing career he wants.

Although Elvis's performative desires allow Abani to hint at the constructedness of cultural and gender identity, the economic pressures to which Elvis is subjected as a slum-dweller curtail their liberating potential. Chastised by his father and dismissed by the tourists who are his potential audience, Elvis realizes that his dance routine cannot secure him the regular income necessary to fulfill his basic needs in Maroko. Having decided to look for a steady job, Elvis reflects on the temporary postponement of his artistic aspirations: "It wasn't that he was giving up on his dream to be a dancer, he rationalized; it was more like he was deferring it for a while. Maybe with the money he earned he could save up to go to America. That was a place where they appreciated dancers" (24-25). Elvis's attempted self-reassurance invokes Langston Hughes's 1951 book-length poem *Montage of a Dream Deferred*, a polyphonic expression of the frustrations and aspirations of a marginalized black urban population in segregated postwar America. By implying a comparison between Elvis's own arrested development and that of mid-twentieth-century African Americans, Abani cultivates a transatlantic and transhistorical network of diasporic cultural resistance that is at once liberating and limited. While African artistic solidarity with black American writers is potentially inspirational and motivating, the fact that Elvis remains trapped in similarly oppressive circumstances in 1983 indicates the extent of the global struggle for equal human rights still to be fought. His dream of emigrating to America is ironized by the long history of stateside inequality that Abani alerts us to, in which the economic and social discrimination to which Elvis is accustomed intersects with racism. By suggesting the common historic legacy of marginalization to which both the residents of Harlem and those of Maroko are subject, Abani invites the reader to see Elvis's struggles through a global lens. Unlike development advocates who posit African "exceptionalism" as the cause of the continent's economic decline, Abani suggests that the

perceived "backwardness" of such cities as Lagos does not result from local cultural inclinations, but that it is instead symptomatic of a global system of oppression that casts the urban poor aside.

Hughes anticipates Abani's challenge to the suspended temporality of urban marginalization, notably in the "Harlem" section of his poem:

> What happens to a dream deferred?
>
> Does it dry up
> like a raisin in the sun?
> Or fester like a sore—
> And then run?
> Does it stink like rotten meat?
> Or crust and sugar over—
> like a syrupy sweet?
>
> Maybe it just sags
> like a heavy load.
>
> *Or does it explode?* (268)

The subtle defiance of Hughes's initial question is gradually reinforced by the subsequent inquiries that evoke images of decay, pollution, and death. The final lingering inquiry, "Or does it explode?" is particularly disturbing in its understated threat of violence. The cumulative effect of the questions posed in "Harlem" is that of the speaker's restrained aggression, held back by the

disappointment evoked in the opening line. The final section of *GraceLand* offers several responses to these questions in its depiction of the different fates of Elvis and his father as they both encounter the crippling intransigence of the state and its willingness to exert violent force in order to suppress dissenters.

Sunday's role in the novel culminates in his ultimately suicidal protest against the government's demolition of Maroko. The destruction of the slum is an undeniable act of violence that is, following Ferguson, designed to "guard the edges of a status group" (192); in this case, both the physical and figurative boundaries of the state authorities and the urban elite. Refusing to accept this blatant disavowal of his own status as an urban resident, Sunday is finally spurred into action. However, the fatal consequences of his protest suggest that more than a sudden "explosion" is needed to preserve dreams—long-term planning is necessary.

The terms under which Maroko is slated for destruction demonstrate the postcolonial state's extension of imperial development discourse. Rasaki's government pathologizes the slum in the manner of European colonizers concerned with maintaining boundaries between putatively dirty and dangerous "native" areas of the city and those in which whites resided. Reading the newspaper one morning, Sunday notices that what he refers to as "dis crazy government" has plans to flatten the slum. As he explains, "dey say we are a pus-ridden eyesore on de face of de nation's capital" (247). He is immediately alert to the discursive artillery that the government intend to mobilize alongside their bulldozers, observing that "Dey even have a military sounding name for it—Operation Clean de Nation" (247). Despite the government's attempt to pass off the destruction of the slum as an effort to ensure public health, Sunday recognizes the sanitation initiative as an

attack on his home and neighbors. The martial character of the government's development initiative echoes the observation of Mama Put, a character in Wole Soyinka's play *The Beatification of Area Boy*, which also portrays the forced evacuation of Maroko. A survivor of the Biafran War who has moved to Lagos, Mama Put observes that the demolition of Maroko is "war of a different kind. It is war of a kind governments declare against their people for no reason" (76). By inviting a similar comparison between the forced removal of thousands of slum-dwellers and the displacement of wartime refugees, Abani characterizes the demolition of Maroko as a form of senseless civil conflict which further belies the unity of the Nigerian nation. The vision that Lagos's military government holds for a clean, modern city cannot be materialized without multiple acts of violence. Implementation of its plans mandates not only crushing the slum-dwellers' grassroots resistance to their removal, but also the discursive erasure of Maroko's long history. In seeking to implement what Michel de Certeau has described as the "Concept-city" produced by city planners—a two-dimensional urban map that figuratively flattens the space of the city—they must literally eradicate all traces of the slum's palimpsestic urban history (95). In his detailed account of the Maroko residents' opposition to the slum's demolition, Abani adds to the critique of this developmental amnesia initiated by the structure of his novel.

Sunday emerges as the accidental leader of a grassroots campaign to prevent the demolition of Maroko. The veranda on which he spent many hours drowning his sorrows becomes the site of revolutionary strategizing, much to Elvis's bemusement (253). Although latent gender discrimination persists in his allocation of different roles to male and female protesters, Sunday succeeds in marshaling significant community support by using the canvassing skills that earlier failed to ignite his election campaign in Afikpo. The subordination of his self-interest to the

protection of the entire community suggests one possible reason for his positive reception. Although the state authorities are far better equipped than the slum-dwellers with a raft of bulldozers on hand to rapidly crush the shacks, the Maroko residents succeed in sabotaging their initial demolition attempts. Drawing a parallel between the Maroko demonstrations and contemporaneous "IMF riots" that took place during the 1980s, Ashley Dawson suggests that "this strand of *GraceLand* highlights the power of spontaneous popular organization and protest" (30). However, as Dawson notes, it is a power that is quickly exhausted by unrelenting state violence. Indeed, Abani implies that the spontaneous resistant energies catalyzed by this moment of crisis need to be harnessed for more sustained collective organization. The manner in which he narrates Sunday's death suggests that doing so requires a response to not only developmental amnesia, but also the cultural forgetfulness of the slum-dwellers themselves. Having refused to move from his veranda, he is shot by a policeman and subsequently crushed by the bulldozer that destroys his home. However, at the moment of his death, Sunday assumes the form of the leopard totem that he thinks he has been hallucinating: "Sunday roared, leapt out of his body and charged at the back of the policeman, his paw delivering a fatal blow to the back of the policeman's head" (287). The fact that Elvis later discovers the policeman's body covered in claw marks even though "there were no animals of that size anywhere near Lagos or Maroko" invites the reader to take this inexplicable moment seriously. Gwendolyn Etter-Lewis has argued that Sunday's death implies the decline of the "older, traditional African masculinities" that his totem represents (171). However, this unique moment of magical realism in the novel implies a necessary reconnection with ancestral wisdom. As his depiction of Igbo gender roles suggests, Abani does not idealize traditional cultural

knowledge, but nor does he wholly dismiss it. He suggests that there is a place for the ancient and ineffable in a modernizing global society.

Elvis is absent from Lagos during the slum clearance, but on his return he participates in a protest performance in Tinubu Square, intended as a peaceful, but powerful call for democracy. Ironically the site of Nigeria's Amalgamation Ceremony in which the North and South protectorates were united to form a single nation in 1914, the square "erupts" into civil violence when soldiers arrive to disperse the crowd, recalling Hughes's poetic premonition of explosive social unrest (287). Caught unawares, Elvis is "completely confused" by what is happening, again demonstrating his naivety about the extreme means the government is willing to deploy in order to maintain control. This naivety is compounded when he is accosted by a soldier and ordered to identify himself. Only able to stutter "I…I…" in response, he is taken into custody (288). His uncertainty about who he is and where he is proves near fatal as he taken for questioning at Tango City, the Special Military Interrogation Unit.

Elvis's imprisonment provides the novel's most explicit dramatization of the manner in which the postcolonial state not only inhibits, but also actively prevents the development of Nigeria's marginalized urban poor. Held for days without charge, Elvis is relentlessly tortured by the military police who want him to reveal the whereabouts of his friend the Beggar King who they believe to be the protest ringleader. He is thrown into a cell where he is "hung from the metal bars on the window, feet dangling six inches from the floor, suspended by handcuffs" (288). His literal suspension at the hands of the military police renders the state's inimical effect on his personal development explicit. Abani details their particular callousness as they use various techniques, such as smearing him with industrial disinfectant, to ensure he experiences the maximum possible pain

when they beat him.[49] Prior to his arrest, the reader has witnessed Elvis's struggle to comprehend his urban surroundings and the postcolonial power dynamics that intersect the city. In prison, his quest for understanding is reduced to actual unconsciousness through flogging and torture. His "tormentors" further work to undermine Elvis's tentative *Bildung* by challenging his maturity. They refer to him as a "stupid boy" who is "young and confused" (296), suggesting his lack of formation. They further challenge his masculinity by subjecting him to a perverse male initiation ceremony which they claim to have adopted from Fulani tradition in which young men are whipped "to test who be man enough to marry" (295). Those who do not make a sound are considered to have reached adulthood. Although they beat Elvis to within an inch of his life, he cannot provide the information they want. The Colonel concludes that "dis one is just a child" who can be "thrown back," like trash, onto the streets (296).

After his release from prison, Elvis returns to Maroko to find his home destroyed and his father dead (305). He eventually makes his way to another slum that has suddenly increased in size owing to the influx of refugees from Maroko. For the "food sellers, soft-drink hawkers, tire vulcanizers, small-time car mechanics, women and men lying on top of their belongings and hundreds of beggar children" that crowd Bridge City, Operation Clean the Nation has only served to further tighten their living conditions (306). The slum clearance program not only displaces the Maroko residents, but also those who have to make way for them in the other ghettoes around the city, suggesting the limited scope of the urban development it achieved.

[49] Abani no doubt draws on his own experiences as a teenage political prisoner in Kiri Kiri maximum security prison here. As he explains in the author's introduction to *Kalakuta Republic* (2000)--his harrowing collection of poems dealing with his confinement and torture—he was imprisoned three times between 1985 and 1991, having been arrested for writing putatively treasonous literature (9-10).

In keeping with his role as Elvis's mentor, it is Redemption who provides Elvis with a way out of the depravity in Bridge City where young children are frequently "beaten, raped, robbed, and sometimes killed" by giving him a forged US passport that he once intended to use for his own escape to America (309). However, Elvis's imminent departure from Lagos is far from an uplifting conclusion to the novel. Although this final scene suggests that he is about to achieve some liberation from the pressures of Lagos, he is doing so in the guise of someone else. Elvis's own identity remains insecure, contingent, and concealed. While relocating from the Third to the First world suggests a forward trajectory up the global hierarchy, Elvis's reluctant emigration uneasily evokes the painful transatlantic ties established by the Middle Passage, a traumatic history that is explicitly invoked by Elvis himself who identifies with the character of a lynched black American in James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*, which he is reading as he waits to board his plane. Adding another layer to his already troubled sense of self, Elvis's identification with "a dying black man engulfed by flames" suggests the intransigence of the social inequalities that he will still have to navigate despite his departure from Lagos (319). Elvis's reluctance to leave stems from an unwillingness to relinquish what he describes as "something essential" that he cannot explicitly describe (319). This ambiguous, but deep sensation recalls his response to the pain he experienced during his torture at the hands of the state police, the intensity of which made him feel like "It was part of him now. It seemed like he couldn't remember a time when it was not here. It had become essential to him" (294). In his anticipation of further trauma in America, as symbolized by Baldwin's lynching victim, Elvis reaches a tentative understanding of his place in the world. Horrified by the genital mutilation of the man in the short story, Elvis sees himself as "that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face" (320). Like the thief who was

subjected to the "necklace of fire" by a "mob of lynchers" (228), Elvis is figured as a scapegoat. Cast out of Lagos, he signifies the failure of the local, national, and international discourses of development that intersect postcolonial Nigeria. When the airline clerk calls Elvis's new name, he responds in the final sentence of the novel with "Yes, this is Redemption" (321). His reflection on Baldwin's harrowing story ironizes the promise of this new identity by indicating the precarious salvation from persecution that America offers to young black men. Although Elvis knowingly considers that "nothing is ever resolved, . . . it just changes," the ambiguous conclusion to Abani's novel avoids unsatisfactory quietism in its call for more diligent historical awareness (320). In her reading of the open-endedness of many third generation Nigerian novels, Madhu Krishnan argues that "flouting the traditional conception of closure allows these narratives to block any simple resolution to the past and its traumas and instead forces a lasting engagement with history and its effects" (186). This claim is further strengthened by considering Abani's particular disruption of the *Bildungsroman*'s expected resolution. Elvis's uncertain departure from Lagos defies what Apollo Amoko terms the "retrospective logic" of the African *Bildungsroman* (206). As he explains in a comparative analysis of African autobiography and *Bildungsroman*,

> Both genres seem, at some level, to begin at the end. . . . Notwithstanding any number of plot twists and turns, the *Bildungsroman* invariably seems to require, in the end, the protagonist's formation (or *Bildung*). The fact of eventual, if not inevitable, *Bildung* becomes anterior to, if not determinative of, the innumerable twists and turns that constitute the rest of the narrative. (196)

As previously discussed, Elvis fails to mature according to generic convention. His rather hesitant *Bildung* takes the form of a gradual loss of innocence as he is exposed to the violent dynamics of

contemporary postcolonial urban life. Reflected in the liminal shacks of the Maroko slum, his suspended development is analogous to that of the nation itself, which, as indicated by Abani's narrative structure, stalls and declines as a result of incompetent postcolonial government. By refusing narrative closure at the end of *GraceLand*, Abani rejects a conciliatory retrospective moment that would offer a benevolent resolution to the trials Elvis has experienced. Instead, he asserts the multidirectional histories of marginalization that have been obscured by linear trajectories of urban, national, and international development. Leaving the reader to speculate on Elvis's uncertain future, Abani calls for new measures of progress that do not selectively ignore the enduring wreckage of the past, but rather engage with, learn from, and cautiously come to terms with it.

CHAPTER THREE

"A New Heightened Sense of Place":

Dinaw Mengestu's Cognitive Map of Washington, D.C.

This chapter examines a novel that, in many ways, picks up the narrative thread that Chris Abani leaves poignantly hanging at the end of *GraceLand*. The latter concludes with the image of its protagonist Elvis poised to flee Nigeria and enter the United States under a false identity. This uncertain final scene uncomfortably evokes the precarious global mobility of marginal urban migrants whose successive experiences of displacement accumulate to a harmful and alienating degree. As Elvis's identification with the lynched figure in the James Baldwin short story he is reading in the airport departure lounge suggests, his next destination is riven by its own histories of violence and discrimination, which evoke and intensify the hardships that he has already experienced in Lagos.

In *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* (2007), Dinaw Mengestu portrays the experiences of an Ethiopian exile whose seventeen years in the United States have borne witness to the disappointment of the American dream to which Elvis tentatively clung. Set largely in Washington, D.C. during the early 1990s, the novel is narrated in the first-person by Sepha Stephanos, who fled to America in 1977 at the age of sixteen after his father was murdered by government soldiers during the notorious Red Terror. Orchestrated by Mengistu Haile Mariam, leader of the ruling military government at the time, this violent political campaign brutally repressed those suspected

of opposition to his regime.[50] As is revealed midway through the novel, when soldiers find flyers publicizing the activist group "Students for Democracy" during a raid on Sepha's home, his father takes the blame, knowing that his son would be killed if found responsible. Sepha's subsequent flight entails not only the loss of his family, but also the relative privilege of his middle-class upbringing in Addis Ababa. He spends his first year in America living in a high-rise apartment in a poor Maryland suburb with his uncle Berhane, himself a refugee, before deciding to move to Logan Circle in Washington's northwestern quadrant. At that time, the neighborhood is "predominantly poor, black, cheap, and sunk in a depression that had struck the city twenty years earlier and never left," but Sepha manages to eke out a living by running a shabby grocery store (35-36).[51]

Sepha's only two friends are Joseph and Kenneth, fellow African immigrants from the Congo and Kenya. Together they jokingly refer to themselves as "the children of the revolution," an initially optimistic moniker that is gradually, tragically ironized by their cumulative experiences of personal and professional disappointment and mistreatment in America.[52] Forced out of their homelands and marginalized within their "host" country, Sepha and his friends daily experience the "condition of terminal loss" that Edward Said identifies as that of the "true exile" (173). By

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[50] In *A History of Ethiopia*, Harold G. Marcus notes the "unspeakable horrors" perpetrated during this period, which forced "thousands of Ethiopia's best-educated and idealistic young people" into exile (196). Nega Mezlekia's *Notes from the Hyena's Belly* (2000) offers a compelling non-fiction account of the eruption of this "political volcano," which sees the author's initial support for the revolution falter in the face of what he describes as a "calamity beyond anyone's wildest imagination" (293-294). Maaza Mengiste also explores this violent political transition in her novel *Beneath the Lion's Gaze* (2010).

[51] While there are certainly autobiographical influences on the novel—Mengestu's own parents left Ethiopia for America in 1978 when he was two years old—he has repeatedly resisted the conflation of his protagonist's experience with his own, explaining in a 2010 interview with *The Rumpus* that he is "always troubled when people want to know what's real in fiction, to parcel things out into the parts that are true and not true." He wrote *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears*, his debut novel, before returning to Ethiopia for the first time at the age of twenty-five, an experience he describes in "Returning to Addis Ababa" (2010).

[52] The first UK edition of the novel was published under the title *Children of the Revolution* in 2007.

turns nostalgic, homesick, and bitter, they regularly meet in Sepha's store where "inevitably, predictably, [their] conversations find their way home" (9). The well-trodden paths of these reminiscences fulfill a desire for rootedness that is missing from their daily lives. When remembering the past becomes too painful, they spontaneously interrupt their discussions by testing each other's knowledge of Africa's coups, wars, and leaders with reference to an old map of Africa that Sepha keeps taped to his shop wall. The game deflects their longing for home with characteristic dark humor. As Sepha explains, "no matter how many we name, there are always more, the names, dates, and years multiplying as fast as we can memorize them, so that at times we wonder, half-jokingly, if perhaps we ourselves aren't somewhat responsible" (8). Elsewhere, Mengestu has written of the damaging impact that uneven Western accounts of Africa's conflicts can have, noting that "the words 'hell' and 'horrific' all too often serve as the starting point for a narrative" about the continent ("Children" 60). For these three refugees, however, irreverently remembering the excesses of such dictators as Bukassa, Amin, and Mobutu indicates not the beginning of yet another story about Africa and its supposedly all-encompassing violence, but rather a stand-in for an explanatory narrative. As Caren Irr suggests, "the terrible, exhausted expertise that this routine creates" is suggestive of "a stagnant form of immigrant melancholia" (51, 50). Whenever their conversations demand a full accounting for their respective traumas, the exiles' shared game provides a preferably superficial means of imposing a semblance of order onto the chaos they have left behind and the uncertain situation in which they now find themselves.

While the friends' game speaks to their conflicting emotions about their respective home countries—places that they simultaneously love and despise—they are equally unable to situate themselves within their immediate urban surroundings. Racial and national others, according to

the putative norms of American society, they can neither assimilate nor return. Sepha perceives this existential disorientation as a crisis of representation. "How did I end up here?" he asks himself, "Where is the grand narrative of my life? The one I could spread out and read for signs and clues as to what to expect next" (147). His struggle to understand both his geographical setting and historical situation reflects what Fredric Jameson identifies as the "spatial as well as social confusion" characteristic of contemporary globalization's disorienting effects (54). The "enlargement of capital," he argues, produces "a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure" (348, 349). As modes of production become increasingly dispersed, so too do the factors that influence individual lives. In turn, the impacts of local, subjective decisions and behaviors are felt further afield than ever before. These disjunctures are perhaps nowhere more intensely experienced than at the margins of contemporary cities, whose disenfranchised populations Zygmunt Bauman describes as "the human casualties of the planet-wide victory of economic progress" (63). Despite this bleak diagnosis, Mengestu refuses to write them off, choosing instead to explore the transformative potential of these embattled urban dwellers throughout his novel.

Faced with the discrepant globalities produced not only by transnational trade and technology, but also conflicts, migration, environmental concerns, and cultural connections, Jameson calls for "an aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system" (54). In doing so, he builds on insightful earlier work by urbanist Kevin Lynch who argues that individuals orient themselves within ungraspable urban totalities by identifying and recalling notable buildings, environmental features, and other landmarks. These elements allow them to

construct a mental image of the city that enables them to move through it physically. Extending the scope of cognitive mapping from individual cities to the world at large, Jameson suggests that the "alarming disjunction point between the body and its built environment," so keenly felt by multiply displaced subjects such as Sepha, "can itself stand as the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the great global multinational and decentered communication network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects" (44). In light of this cognitive challenge, Jameson argues, the fundamental role of art is to provide a representational bridge between local and global experience that will enable a better understanding of their mutual imbrication.

Although Jameson deems this new mode of representation to be "as yet unimaginable," this chapter reveals how Mengestu's novel rises to this challenge by elegantly exploring the conditions that both limit and facilitate our ability to "grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle" in the contemporary global era (Jameson 54). In keeping with Jameson's pedagogical imperative, Mengestu's self-reflexive narrative points to the particularly instructive experiences of those who exist at the global urban margins. Sepha's exilic perspective on the American capital affords an especially useful reconfiguration of what, following Michel de Certeau, can be understood as an ideologically charged "Concept-city," originally designed to consolidate a unitary national identity (95). Sepha bears critical witness to the gentrification of his historically poor downtown neighborhood, a paradoxically divisive process that undermines its own professed cosmopolitan intent. If urban redevelopment fails to effectively reimagine the urban space of D.C. in the context of its undeniable globalization, local efforts to resist unwelcome neighborhood transformation are similarly hampered by an incomplete

understanding of their broader context. By dramatizing Sepha's own struggle to cognitively map his individual experience through a symbolic account of local travel, Mengestu offers a more enduring representation of the relationship between the particular struggles of D.C.'s urban margins and the globally widespread mode of order-building from which they are inseparable.

By focalizing the novel through Sepha's marginal perspective, Mengestu harnesses the particular social and spatial insight afforded by his protagonist's exilic condition. If, as Jameson asserts, "our insertion as individual subjects into a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous realities" defines contemporary globalization, an unwilling migrant like Sepha experiences these social and psychic disturbances with particular intensity (351). In a well-known essay, Edward Said more optimistically identifies "originality of vision" as one of the possible "pleasures of exile" arising from the inevitable "awareness of simultaneous dimensions" to which displacement gives rise (148). For Sepha, frequent memories of Ethiopia not only interrupt, but largely mediate his experiences in America. While such an expansive worldview can enable a unique perspicacity, Said does also acknowledge that such a positionality is "both wearying and nerve-wracking" (148). When struggling to concede the loss of his earlier life to the reality of poor migrant existence in D.C., Sepha himself regrets that he "never could find the guiding principle that relegated the past to its proper place," highlighting the disorienting effect of his reminiscences (127).

The overall structure of the novel reflects its narrator's fractured subjectivity, conveying to the reader the inherent angst of global cognitive mapping, especially for an exile such as Sepha, who is nevertheless so uniquely placed to do so given the duality of his perspective. The text alternates between various asynchronous and dispersed narratives, indicative of Sepha's temporal

and spatial confusion. The immediate action takes place over the course of several days in early May 1993, during which Sepha receives an eviction notice from his rented store that prompts him to take a spontaneous journey around D.C. on foot and by public transport. This storyline is interspersed by Sepha's memories of the personal and political circumstances leading to his flight from Ethiopia, and recollections of his early years in the U.S. The fourth narrative thread addresses the more recent past of Logan Circle, during which the once blighted neighborhood has been markedly redeveloped, leading to evictions of many long-standing residents, mostly African Americans, who can no longer afford to pay the increased rents on what were once their homes. Amongst the influx of new affluent white homeowners is Judith, a divorced academic to whom Sepha is tentatively attracted. Charmed by her precocious daughter Naomi, the three form a friendship that comes to an unwelcome end when Judith is forced to relocate after her beautifully restored home is burned down in protest against the gentrification of the neighborhood.

Mengestu's carefully constructed and explicitly self-reflexive text repeatedly enacts the "dual thinking" that Jameson posits as essential to formulating effective resistance to the material and social inequities that are so intensified by contemporary global capitalism (360). Local activism, Jameson argues, must "always take place at two levels: as an embattled struggle of a group, but also as a figure for an entire systemic transformation" (360). The disjunctive form of the novel reveals Sepha's acute awareness of these different experiential scales. However, his profound sense of loss and displacement suggests the real difficulty of their reconciliation.[53] Moreover, Mengestu demonstrates, the spatial and temporal shifts necessary to the production of a cognitive map

[53] Mengestu himself is similarly wary of critical attempts to reconcile the inherent tensions of his work by labeling it as "immigrant literature," a category that he finds both marginalizing and immobilizing. His work, he asserts in a 2010 interview with *The Paris Review*, is "American and African at all points and times," demanding its readers' continual engagement with disparate geographies, experiences, and traditions.

exceed the clear duality that provides Jameson with such productive critical purchase. As discussed below, the novel deliberately pluralizes "local space," telescoping back and forth between idealistic city plans, private homes, and small commercial spaces. "Global" space is similarly reconfigured from Sepha's marginal perspective, revealing how currents of violence, desire, memory, and grief shape the coordinates of cognitive maps in addition to economic circuits.

The discontinuous structure of Mengestu's novel enacts a form of representational contingency that not only suggests the necessary dynamism of any cognitive map, but also directly undermines the static national ideology inscribed into D.C.'s urban form. Designed in 1791 by the French architect and engineer Pierre L'Enfant and officially established in 1800, Washington, D.C. exemplifies what Michel de Certeau refers to as a "Concept-city," an ideological space "founded by utopian and urbanistic discourse" (95, 94). This description has clear resonance with Henri Lefebvre's theory of "conceived space": ordered, two-dimensional representations of the city, created by "scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers, and social engineers," whose productions of space conceal "its 'real' subject, namely state (political) power" (38, 51). As Sarah Luria explains in her fascinating analysis of the relationship between nineteenth-century Washington's architecture, politics, and literature, "discussions surrounding the design of the nation's capital suggest that the planners saw the city as a strategic opportunity for the bodily education of citizens in new political behaviors," including the adoption of a national mindset (xxiv). The grandiose National Mall, for example, both inspires and subdues those who enter and interact with this space through its display of centralized power. Attention-grabbing national

landmarks, such as the Capitol, similarly publicize governmental authority to both a domestic and international audience.

Despite the lofty ideals embedded in the capital's early plans, the city itself has always been a contradictory space. In Andrew Holleran's short novel *Grief*, a sensitive portrayal of an unnamed man's temporary residence in the city while mourning the death of his mother, the narrator observes that "there's something still halfhearted about Washington . . . a city that, block by block, weaves in and out of grandeur and shabbiness" (26). This juxtaposition of the "high" and the "low" is, de Certeau asserts, inherent to the Concept-city, the realization of which rests on the attempted "repress[ion] of all the physical, mental, and political pollutions that would compromise it" (94). As in other idealized cities, such as the morally and materially "clean" Lagos envisaged by the Nigerian government of Abani's *GraceLand*, the desire for order coincides with the production of waste. That which cannot be successfully eliminated—rundown neighborhoods, alienated residents, illegal and informal economies—appears and circulates in the Concept-city as notable reminders of its inevitably partial nature. Commenting on the poverty "just blocks away" from the National Mall, Sarah Luria notes that "rather than providing an airtight patriotic experience, the capital has an uncanny habit of highlighting the nation's flaws with a kind of confessional zeal" (xxi). Contemporary globalization further intensifies the representational inadequacies of the Concept-city. National ideology decouples from urban spaces as cities becomes increasingly important nodes in transnational circuits of migration, business, and technology. As Holston and Appadurai note, "there are a growing number of societies in which cities have a different relationship to global processes than the visions and policies of their nation-states may admit or endorse" (189). In light of such transformations, the flexible aesthetic of the cognitive map emerges as essential.

Through Sepha, Mengestu charts D.C.'s ideological fault-lines, directing attention to marginal spaces and people that bespeak the "multiple forms of wretchedness and poverty outside the system and of waste inside it" that de Certeau identifies as the inevitable, atrophic losses generated by the Concept-city (95). Taking the rundown neighborhood of Logan Circle as its primary setting, the novel directs the city's urban imaginary away from its most well-known buildings, thereby casting a critical light on the exclusive national identity embedded therein. In doing so, he evokes a tradition of Washington writers, such as Edward P. Jones and Marita Golden, who have focused on the daily lives of marginal urban residents rather than the experiences of those central to the city's public political machinations. In his useful anthology of D.C. literature, Christopher Sten describes how

> two traditions—the one local, the other national—have developed side by side, often with a good deal of interplay between them, making Washington writing an unusually rich and resonant, if sometimes schizoid, body of work, with the national government serving as a backdrop, or foil, to the featured lives of local residents. (2)

Mengestu's novel, with its deeply transnational perspective, fragments this urban imaginary even more, demonstrating how seemingly "foreign" places and politics are an equally formative influence on the fabric of Washington life. Just as the Concept-city must necessarily expand to accommodate its undeniable globality, so too must characterizations of the city's literary canon.[54]

Ironically, the closer Sepha moves to the center of Washington, the more distant he feels from the political ideals enshrined in the city's monumental architecture. When first living with

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[54] In his foreword to *Literary Washington*, Alan Cheuse observes that "part of this peculiar city's sense of place is that it serves as a capital for people who have no permanent sense of place" (vii). It is notable, therefore, that neither this nor Sten's anthologies excerpt contemporary migrant writing about Washington. Mengestu is absent, as is V. S. Naipaul, whose short story "One Out of Many" offers an unsettling account of an Indian domestic's migration from Bombay to D.C. with his wealthy employer, which places him as a critical witness to the city's 1968 riots.

his uncle in Silver Spring, a Maryland suburb north of D.C., Sepha enrolls as a student and enjoys the sense of identity this gives him, which was, he notes with retrospective irony, "akin to being the citizen of a wealthy foreign country" (98). However, the casual racism of his part-time employer, the monotony of the back-breaking work he has to perform as a hotel porter, and the soul-destroying sight of his dejected uncle "turn[ing] himself off every morning" in order to endure his own tedious workdays soon dispel "the liberal idea of America" in which Sepha briefly and naively believes (98). His decision to move to Logan Circle in downtown D.C. is both an act of self-preservation and silent protest, as he explains:

> When I moved into the neighborhood I did so because it was all I could afford, and because secretly I loved the circle for what it had become: proof that wealth and power were not immutable, and America was not always so great after all. The neighborhood, and by extension the city, had fallen, and every night I could see that out of my living-room window. (16)

Not only the site of putative moral decline, the figuratively "fallen" Logan Circle is suggestively described as a territory to be reclaimed in the Concept-city's implicit war against such social contaminants as crime and poverty. During the course of the novel, the view from Sepha's window changes as "squadlike formations" of workers arrive to begin restoring newly acquired properties, their martial appearance a further indication of the ideological struggle that is playing out in the circle (16).

The self-serving redevelopment of Logan Circle by affluent white newcomers demonstrates a strategic effort to arrest the decay of the national Concept-city. As this parochial urban ideal is

increasingly put under pressure by the realities of globalization, the priorities of city governance must necessarily shift. Beyond the symbolic promotion of a national collective, John Rennie Short argues, a fundamental concern for cities such as D.C. becomes "the maintaining, securing, and increasing of urban economic competitiveness in a global world" (7). Gentrification plays a key role in this reconceptualization of urban space, enabling local authorities to maximize their city's ideological and financial capital through the attractive packaging of "culture, consumption, cool, and cosmopolitan" (Short 7). In Washington as elsewhere, urban branding campaigns seek to attract new downtown residents by emphasizing the affordability and social potential of once liminal ethnic neighborhoods.[55] The goal is that, by renovating dilapidated houses in such areas, new residents raise property prices and secure their own economic clout, transforming neglected neighborhoods into desirable locales and globally promoting the updated Concept-city as they do so. Thus, de Certeau suggests, city governance attempts to "transform even deficiencies into ways of making the networks of order denser" (95).

Michael Thompson's *Rubbish Theory* further illuminates the way in which this kind of gentrification acts as a form of social control. He argues that most objects, houses included, can be classified as either "transient" or "durable," the former referring to that which decreases in value over time, such as most mass produced consumer goods; the latter to that which retains and even increases in value over time, for example unique works of art. Buildings such as those in the Logan Circle neighborhood, however, belong to a significant third category, that of "rubbish" (7). Such objects have exhausted their value, but not their life-spans. In other words, they "continue to exist

[55] See Gibson (2006) for a useful analysis of the "City Living, DC Style" initiative launched by Washington Mayor Anthony Williams in 2003, in which the author argues that such "campaigns are best viewed as a form of semiotic warfare pitched against an amorphous enemy: the image of 'urban decay' that has monopolized American discourse about the city since at least the 19th century" (261).

in a timeless and valueless limbo where at some later date . . . [they] have the chance of being discovered" (Thompson 10). Rubbish is therefore characterized by what Thompson calls "social malleability"; the status of objects that fall within this category has the potential to change according to social demands and pressures (10).

The extravagant renovations to which Sepha bears witness dramatize the control mechanism in action as he watches the neighborhood literally moving from "decay to respectability" (190). From the vantage point of his store, he observes "the plumbers, the electricians, the heating guys, the painters, the roofers, and the architect," who come to repair Judith's house (16). To a resident like Sepha, who has lived in Logan Circle for a decade without being able to afford the services of any tradesmen, such thorough restoration might seem excessive. However, as Thompson explains:

> The amount of maintenance that is deemed reasonable is not a quantity deriving naturally from the intrinsic physical properties of the house and its environment. The level of maintenance that is deemed reasonable for a building is a function of its expected life-span and its expected life-span is a function of the cultural category to which that building is at any moment assigned and, if its category membership changes, so will its expected life-span and its reasonable level of maintenance. (37)

It comes as no surprise that those with access to stronger social networks, financial resources, and political power control the assignment of durability and transience to different objects (Thompson 8). In determining Logan Circle worthy of redevelopment, privileged gentrifiers recast its buildings as durable objects, pulling them out of the rubbish category. However, this selective revaluation of

urban space does not extend to the neighborhood's downtrodden residents, ensuring the perpetuation of existing race and class segregation.

In its striving to preserve the idealized space of the Concept-city, gentrification must necessarily flatten the social and historical conditions of its possibility. Thompson suggests that these amnesiac tendencies are characteristic of our relationship to waste in general. As he explains, "rubbish is always covert, in that we strive quite successfully at all times to deny its existence" (20). Its recovery through gentrification is a similarly covert operation in that it too requires a denial, which masks its origins. Like other gentrifiers, Judith acknowledges urban waste when it furthers her personal aesthetic and domestic goals, but she is otherwise content to ignore it, as evidenced by her habit of reading on one of the benches in Logan Circle, "undisturbed by the drunk men sleeping or stumbling around her" nor the "whirlwind of fallen leaves and trash that would occasionally rise . . . and flit about in the air as if deliberately calling attention to itself" (20). Compare her indifference to the neighborhood's signs of neglect to the behavior of Mrs. Davis, a widow and long-time resident of the circle who "in desperate moments of restlessness was known to sweep the sidewalks and street free of litter" (22). Sympathetic to her loneliness, Sepha explains that "she was not mad, only bored and looking for the attention of her neighbors" (22). "Confident and oblivious to the world," Judith misses the opportunity to engage with her new neighbor, instead inciting a curiosity that quickly becomes hostile (21). Although, as Jon Binnie notes, "the global habitus of gentrifiers, superficially at least, seems to reflect the attitudes and practices of cosmopolitanism, including an active celebration of and desire for diversity," Judith's privileged detachment demonstrates how the process "in fact produce[s] an exclusion of difference by drawing symbolic boundaries between acceptable and non-acceptable difference" (16). Although

living in a culturally distinct area carries with it a certain cachet for this incoming class of white professionals, their engagement with alterity does not extend beyond their artfully restored homes.

Judith's assured yet selective re-appropriation of rubbish suggests, if not total ignorance, then certainly a damaging naivety regarding what Henri Lefebvre describes as the social production of space. Not only does this blind-spot prevent her from compassionately relating to her marginalized neighbors, it also ultimately inhibits her relationship with Sepha, a shared attraction that briefly holds out the promise of a mutually fulfilling relationship across Logan Circle's divisive barriers of race and class. Self-aware to some extent, Judith nevertheless enjoys a sense of belonging that Sepha lacks. Drawing on the trope of furniture, so highly prized by the gentrifying classes, Mengestu exposes Sepha's spatial insecurity. Again demonstrating the necessary scalar shifts that cognitive mapping must perform, the narrative emphasizes how arranging and furnishing the private realm of the home is central to understanding our position in relation to a public, global space.

When Sepha accepts an invitation to dinner at Judith's house, he is finally admitted to the beautifully restored building that he has admired from afar. His restrictive self-doubt gradually emerges as he observes:

> An old record player and radio the size of a desk, made of wood and with a dozen chrome knobs, sat in the hallway. The living room had a heavy black wall-mounted phone from the early twentieth century, and a silver clock stuck permanently on two-twenty. The leather couches, chestnut colored and densely packed, were separated by a wooden coffee table that had at least fifty small drawers along its side.

> It was all so solid, comfortable, and familiar, as if Judith had deliberately picked only pieces of furniture that had proven their ability to withstand time. (53)

Here, Sepha mistakenly attributes inherent durability to Judith's carefully chosen, but outdated devices. In fact, her artful recuperation of practically obsolete items such as a broken clock demonstrates her ability to re-categorize technological "rubbish" as valuable and beautiful. Impressed by Judith's tasteful retro aesthetic, Sepha perceives a timeless beauty in her possessions. Yet these objects do not so much "withstand time" as evade history. Judith's recovery of these once functional things ignores their past valueless status and the reasons for it.

In contrast to Judith, Sepha's recuperation of material rubbish serves to accentuate its transience and, by extension, his own struggle to secure a permanent sense of belonging in Washington. When he returns from dinner, he is struck anew by the shabbiness and smallness of his own apartment. Although many of his belongings are "scavenged from the trash," his recycling does not bestow durability upon these secondhand items (60). Far from fulfilling an idealized retro aesthetic, Sepha's obsolete technology simply doesn't work properly—his old television with "knob dials and terrible reception" is neither functional nor visually appealing (60). Similarly,

> The rug in the center of the room had been left by the previous tenant, who had most likely inherited it from the tenant before him. The ends were so frayed that at least twice a month I had to trim a piece off to keep from tripping on the loops of extended thread. Five years later now and one end of the rug was noticeably longer than the other; the corners had been rounded off, and then cut like a pie sliced into at odd, uneven angles. (60)

There is some humor in Sepha's knowing admission of this pointless battle versus the disappearing rug, but the latter's finite life-span underscores the impermanence not only of the apartment's contents, but also their owner's contingent status in the city. His home is literally vanishing from beneath his feet. Whereas Judith, a newcomer, immediately stakes a proprietorial claim to her Logan Circle house owing to her relative wealth, Sepha's residence is, like that of his apartment predecessors, dependent on the demands of his landlord and the property market. Bearing "the stamp of too many lives and too many people," his furniture signals the many marginalized histories that gentrification erases and ignores (60).

Unlike Judith, Sepha is acutely conscious, at all times, of the way in which divisions of race and class are spatially articulated. When Judith does visit Sepha's apartment, she compliments his "great sense of space," the inevitable outcome, Sepha counters deadpan, of not having anything to fill it with (85). Sharing a drink together, they raise a toast to "furniture," after which Judith falls asleep on Sepha's "hideous couch" (87, 86). The failure of Sepha's admittedly "deliberate act of seduction," which he never has the opportunity to retry, can, in a sense, be attributed to the very furniture that they jokingly acknowledge. The contrasting condition of their living room décor makes explicit the social distance that blocks their intimacy.

The ease with which Judith compliments Sepha's bare apartment despite his evident poverty demonstrates her adherence to what Lefebvre calls "the illusion of transparency"—an illusion that the detailed nature of Mengestu's narrative deliberately contests. Ignoring the fact that "(social) space is a (social) product," Judith maintains that space is "luminous . . . innocent, free of traps or secret places" (Lefebvre 27-28). She literally propagates this illusion by continually leaving her house "fully lit," an extravagant gesture that Sepha perceives as "distinctly unjust" (60).

Together with the other circle newcomers, their conspicuous displays of wealth proclaim their legitimate, unencumbered presence in the neighborhood—they have nothing to hide. As Sepha observes:

> It was the same thing with all of the other newly refurbished homes in the neighborhood; curtains provocatively peeled back to reveal a warmly lit room with forest green couches, modern silver lamps that craned their necks like swans, and sleek glass coffee tables with fresh flowers bursting on top. There was something about affluence that needed exposure, that resisted closed windows and poor lighting and made a willing spectacle of everything. The houses invited, practically begged and demanded, to be watched. (52)

All surface and light, these artfully staged interiors demand an audience. Although the narrator of Andrew Holleran's *Grief* asserts that "there was nothing more agreeable in Washington than walking around circles and houses like these—looking at places other people lived," Sepha's own "window shopping" is somewhat more conflicted (Holleran 72; Mengestu 53). His description of the houses' sensual appeal clearly bespeaks his unrequited desire for Judith, as well as the lifestyle she enjoys. Yet there is something troubling about this un-gratifying form of voyeurism. Sepha explains that "rarely did I ever see the people who lived in those houses, as if each were merely display-case props of revitalization" (53). There is an eerily lifeless quality to this supposed renaissance, which undercuts the initially enticing appearance of the restored houses. Commenting on gentrification's containment of desire, Nikolas Rose explains how the process creates,

> not so much a complex of dangerous and compelling spaces of promises and gratifications, but a series of packaged zones of enjoyment, managed by an alliance of urban planners, entrepreneurs, local politicians and quasi-governmental "regeneration" agencies. (qtd. Binnie et. al. 18)

Rather than forging novel alliances, communities, and intimacies between their new occupants and poor neighbors, the ostensibly "transparent" homes around Logan Circle erect new barriers of race and class, thereby eroding the very cosmopolitan promise on which gentrification is founded.

Reduced to spectators while their surroundings change, longstanding residents of Logan Circle anxiously comment that "the neighborhood's changing, things are changing, it's not like it used to be, I can't believe how much it's changed, who would have thought it could change so quickly, nothing is permanent, everything changes" (23). These are, Sepha notes, "the passive and helpless observations of people stuck living on the sidelines" (23). Faced with the sudden appearance of ostentatious and seemingly unattainable wealth, it is unsurprising that this marginalized urban population experiences an initial sense of hopelessness. As Michael Thompson notes,

> The operation of [the] control mechanism would seem inevitably to give rise to a self-perpetuating system. . . Those people near the top have the power to make things durable and to make things transient, so they can ensure that their own objects are always durable and that those of others are always transient. They are like a football team whose centre-forward also happens to be the referee; they cannot lose. (9)

Yet while the odds might seem impossibly stacked against the circle's existing residents, Michel de Certeau suggests that resistance to the implementation of the gentrified Concept-city can be found by directing attention to the "microbe-like, singular, and plural practices which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer or suppress, but which have outlived its decay" (96). The difficulty, as Jameson notes, is extrapolating from these local struggles a cohesive collective challenge to the uneven system of global capitalism with which gentrification is intertwined. Mengestu dramatizes this dilemma through his narration of the varied acts of resistance implemented by both Sepha and his neighbors. While "these multiform, resistance, tricky and stubborn procedures elude discipline without being outside the field in which it is exercised," the perspectival shifts enabled by Mengestu's fiction allow the reader to newly see that same field as textured and dynamic, indicating the pedagogical promise of his thoughtfully imagined cognitive map (de Certeau 96). Both the content and form of the novel thus reveal the crucially instructive role that the transnational urban margins play in developing an understanding of the global conditions that subtend these local sites of discrimination and struggle.

Sepha can be seen to perform some of what de Certeau terms these "surreptitious creativities" from within the space of his store (96). Not only does the disillusioned commentary that he offers from behind his register identify the material and social decay of the Concept-city, but his personal and professional decisions actively promote its unraveling. Whereas Kenneth—polite, hardworking, and unassuming—plays the role of a model migrant so well that Joseph accuses him, in a moment of drunken cruelty, of behaving like "the perfect house nigger," Sepha makes no attempt to fulfill such expectations (182). He is a reluctant shopkeeper, opening his store at odd hours, conceding to shoplifters, ignoring customers, neglecting maintenance, and allowing

his stock to expire and rot on the shelves. Indeed, he treats his job as an opportunity "to read quietly, and alone, for as much of the day as possible" (40). In a useful comparative analysis of conspicuous consumption in Mengestu's novel and V. S. Naipaul's *A Bend in the River*, one of Sepha's favorite books, Dayo Olopade suggests that Sepha's conversion of his shop into "a hybrid working and living space reclaim[s] the psychic terrain destroyed by the capitalist schism between laboring body and self" (149). By refusing the capitalist imperative to accumulate, Olopade argues, Sepha thus reasserts his agency on his own terms. Yet confining analysis to the "resistance strategies" that Sepha enacts in the space of his store fails to address the broader context for Sepha's ennui (Olopade 149). Sepha's relationship to this local space cannot be understood in isolation from his position relative to America and Ethiopia. His apathy towards his profit margins is symptomatic not only of his disinterest in life as a Washington shopkeeper, but also his disorientation relative to his global circumstances.

By inserting a narrative of local travel into the plot, Mengestu dramatizes how migrancy facilitates both the practice and aesthetic of cognitive mapping. The inseparability of Sepha's neighborhood store from the transnational route that brought him there is made explicit when, like many other long-standing circle residents, he receives an eviction notice due to failure to pay rent on the property. Facing anew the threat of persecution or displacement, Sepha impulsively takes flight, embarking on an unplanned day-trip around the city by foot and on public transport. Unlike his earlier traumatic departure, the strategic repetition of his refugee route enables Sepha to newly understand his physical and social location within a global context. Not only does his itinerary re-map the city itself, exposing the plurality of this dynamic space, but it further

reconfigures D.C.'s relationship to Addis Ababa, suggesting previously unexamined connections between nominally distinct "First" and "Third" world cities.

Sepha's journey around Washington begins when two middle-aged white tourists enter his grocery store to buy provisions for their self-guided walking tour of the city. Like gentrification, tourism promotes superficial engagement with an idealized city. The practice of sightseeing, as its name suggests, assumes the primacy of optical knowledge: to look at the city is to understand it. They admire the statue of General Logan that can be seen from Sepha's store, but their glorification of this single Civil War hero does not take into account the multiple displacements and acts of violence on which such a selective historical account rests. They are unaware that just one month previously, the statue was "chipped, defaced, and smeared with human, dog, and bird shit" until the newly formed General Logan Circle Statue Association commissioned its restoration (36). As Sepha observes, wryly noting the circle's newly imposed standards of moral and material cleanliness, the general now "looks down on all of us with the glimmering sheen of a privately funded cleaning job" (36). Like the once omnipresent "drunk old men," the prostitutes who used to work around the circle have now "vanished not into thin air, but into a different space or reality" (36, 38). These alienated urban residents, treated like the expendable commodities that their customers "had supposedly left home for," are further displaced by the neighborhood's supposed "renaissance" (38). Their destination unknown, these missing and degraded women haunt the triumphant history announced by General Logan's shining statue.

If the sights that the tourists admire encourage historical amnesia, so too do the "enormous fold-up maps" that they rely on to navigate the metropolis (71). The path that the couple follows regulates their physical and, by extension, psychological interaction with their

unfamiliar surroundings. De Certeau argues that, by transcribing myriad urban itineraries into legible routes, maps produce "fixations [that] constitute procedures for forgetting" (97). By following the tourists and embarking on his own impulsive walk around the city, Sepha reverses this process and reinstates the spontaneity of what de Certeau calls "pedestrian enunciation" (99). Traveling west along P street, for example, the tourists pass "town homes being built on the left and a two-story organic grocery store being built on the right," sure signs of the neighborhood's increasing value (75). Sepha, however, recalls the small-scale businesses that used to occupy this territory. While perhaps not quite as wholesome, the "grocery store that sold wilted vegetable and grade-D meat, the auto repair shop, and black owned bookstore called Madame X" served a self-sustaining marginal community (75). Whereas following a singular cartographic route limits where the tourists go and what they see, Sepha's unplanned journey opens up other pathways through the city and its history, thereby illuminating the "ensemble of possibilities" concealed by the map's controlled spatial order (de Certeau 98).

The urban knowledge Sepha has acquired over the years both ironizes and laments the tourists' naïve perception of the city. As he follows the couple, he reveals his personal disillusionment with the exalted buildings on which they gaze. While the visitors are awestruck by their first glimpse of the White House, Sepha thinks of its presidential occupant as "a great Santa Claus" (76). The "higher power" which is supposed to emanate from the Oval Office has been eroded by his first-hand experiences of Washington's more marginal spaces. Having traveled to the city limits, he knows the "dirty secret about D.C.": "For all its stature and statuses, the city could just as easily have been one of the grander suburbs of America" (101). While the tourists are obediently impressed by the sights, Sepha implies that the White House is not that far removed

from what he imagines to be their home: "a split-level ranch in the suburbs of some midsize city" (78).

The striking landmarks that the tourists compliantly admire lend what urbanist Kevin Lynch terms "legibility" to Washington (2). His influential study of urban navigation, to which Jameson's conception of cognitive mapping is indebted, posits that individuals find their way through cities by drawing on a "generalized mental picture of the exterior physical world" that helps them to situate themselves within an otherwise inconceivable urban totality (Lynch 4). Striking monuments, marked paths, and clear boundaries are some of the urban features that facilitate the production of what Lynch eponymously refers to as the "image of the city." This subjective mapping procedure resonates with de Certeau's assertion that "ordinary practitioners of the city," such as Sepha, who "live 'down below,' below the threshold at which visibility begins" articulate dynamic and unique versions of urban space that escape conventional cartography by making individual choices about how they interact with their surroundings (93). Lynch further notes the psychic significance of these mental maps, explaining that "a good environmental image gives its possessor an important sense of emotional security. He can establish an harmonious relationship between himself and the outside world" (4). The tourists' visual focus on D.C.'s official architecture reaffirms their presence within a national collective. By sticking to a controlled route through the city, their interpellation into this seemingly coherent totality remains unquestioned.

However, contrary to the unified imaginary that Lynch deems essential to urban harmony, Sepha's mental image of Washington is inherently transnational. In fact, neither Lynch nor de Certeau fully acknowledge the particular challenges that a fragmented, migrant subjectivity poses

to urban interaction. When, for example, de Certeau asserts that walkers insert "a migrational, or metaphorical, city . . . into the clear text of the planned and readable city," he is speaking in figurative terms to suggest how the idiosyncrasies and unpredictabilities of actual urban movement destabilize the Concept-city's cartographic trace (93, original emphasis). Conscious of his own alienated state, Sepha recognises how important it is "to consider [Washington] not in fragments or pieces, but as a unified whole" (173). However, he is unable to do so without recourse to memories of his home city of Addis Ababa. Whereas the tourists compliantly observe predictable landmarks, Sepha notes that

> As a capital city, it doesn't seem like much. Sixty-eight square miles, shaped roughly like a diamond, divided into four quadrants, erected out of what was once mainly swampland. Its resemblance to Addis, if not always in substance, then at least in form, has always been striking to me. As a city, Addis wasn't much larger. Ninety square miles, most of which was a vast urban slum built around the fringes of a few important city centers. The two cities share a penchant for circular parks and long diagonal roads that meander and wind up in confusion along the edges. Even the late-afternoon sun seems to hit D.C. the same way. (173-74)

In keeping with Jameson's assertion that subjective urban navigation is analogous to global cognitive mapping, the itinerant formation of Sepha's expansive mental image of D.C. suggests the inseparability of these two processes.

Sepha's unplanned journey around D.C. suggests important linkages between the American capital and its Ethiopian counterpart, which have been neglected by dominant world

city discourse.[56] Whereas existing frameworks of urban comparison which have tended to divide the study of cities into hierarchically opposed "First-" and "Third-world" spaces, Sepha's memories imply a discomforting parity between Addis Ababa and Washington D.C. Not only does this further trouble the coherence of the national Concept-city, it also deepens Mengestu's critique of gentrification's exclusionary social violence.

Sepha's imaginative excursions to his home city of Addis Ababa imply that official power structures are equally corrupt in both cities, undermining the moral exceptionalism implied by D.C.'s official architecture. After Sepha gives the tourists "an enthusiastic wave good-bye" (78), he lies on the grass in Dupont Circle surrounded by office workers having lunch (91). He hears the sound of approaching sirens and, within seconds, a "parade of police motorcycles, cars, massive black SUVs, and black limos" appears (92). As audibly intrusive as the Capitol is visually impressive, this disturbing spectacle of power instantly reminds Sepha of Ethiopia where "troops used to line whatever route the emperor took hours in advance. They swept the street clean of beggars, cripples and trash, and had faithful loyalists stand on the side of the road, ready to bow as he passed" (93). Despite this insight, Sepha feels an immediate affinity with the other mesmerized observers who "all have the sense that someone of great import is passing" (93). When the police cars disappear, Sepha goes on to imagine "an entirely empty motorcade whose sole purpose is to remind people of what they are up against." If, as Achille Mbembé has argued, a notable feature of the postcolonial state is its tendency towards excessive spectacle even in the most mundane of circumstances—what Mbembé terms the "banality of power"—Sepha's observation makes it clear that such posturing is not restricted to sub-saharan Africa alone (*Postcolony* 102). Sympathetic to

[56] Jennifer Robinson's *Ordinary Cities* (2006) offers a notable challenge to these divisive existing paradigms, in which she "proposes a post-colonial urban studies in which scholars of wealthy, Western cities learn about their cities by thinking with scholars and artists from other places" (xi).

the plight of those marginalized Addis residents who are literally treated like waste to be removed from sight and mind, Sepha's memory implies a current of transnational urban solidarity that persists despite the repressive power structures common to both locales.

Sepha's encounter with the motorcade reveals a structural connection between Addis Ababa and Washington D.C. that extends beyond mere formal resemblance. But more disturbing than this common symbolic expression of power is the continuum of actual state violence that links both cities. Towards the end of his journey, Sepha reflects on the physical resemblance between Logan Circle and a small park in Addis where he used to take walks with his father. Originally a place for them to escape from the bustle of urban life and "block out the world in order to live quietly for half an hour or so with [their] thoughts," this sanctuary is shattered during the Red Terror when "seven bodies [are] neatly lined up in the center of the grass" as a warning to other potential "traitors" to Mariam's revolution (217). The figurative human trash swept from the streets in order to make way for a presidential motorcade is here rendered literally abject. The haunting of Logan Circle by this site of violence is, of course, symptomatic of Sepha's personal trauma. As a teen, he was no doubt profoundly disturbed by this shocking encounter with the Ethiopian state's easy elimination of boys his own age who had supposedly dared to question the government's authority. Yet this irrepressible memory further suggests the implicit violence of the gentrification that his present neighborhood is experiencing. Sepha's transnational cognitive map, almost complete by this stage in the novel, thus recontextualizes the redevelopment of Logan Circle as an act of state violence, albeit different in kind to that Sepha experienced in Addis. Viewed from this perspective, Mengestu again emphasizes that gentrification needs to be seen not only as a strategic manoeuver with decided local effects, but also a symptom of a globally

widespread mode of order-building that rests on the violent elimination of wasted urban populations.

For Sepha, the connection between the struggles of his new neighborhood and that which he unwillingly left behind in Addis Ababa are made explicit when Mrs. Davis brings him a "stack of flyers" to distribute in protest against Logan Circle's gentrification (194). Reminiscent of those "inconsequential" student flyers that had provided the catalyst for his father's beating and presumed death at the hands of the Ethiopian military, Sepha notes: "I knew that there were patterns to life, but what I had never understood until then was how insignificant a role we played in creating them" (126, 194). Here, he acknowledges the totality of the global system that yokes together urban violence in both Addis and D.C., but, as his somewhat defeatist response to this insight suggests, organizing effective communal resistance to such oppression presents seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Displaying an energy that Sepha lacks, Mrs. Davis and "the other widows of the neighborhood" instigate a meeting of the newly formed Logan Circle Community Association with the intention of developing a plan of action against the illegal evictions that have been taking place, which includes gathering signatures for a petition to the city council (195). Portrayed from Sepha's jaded viewpoint, the sparse audience that gather to hear Mrs. Davis's "rehearsed and scripted" speech in a cold church basement seem unlikely to achieve the results they desire (198). Yet, through his portrayal of the "grievances and frustrations" expressed during the meeting, Mengestu suggests that the ultimate failure of the community association is not a question of political experience or aptitude, but rather an inability on their part to imagine the true contours

of their struggle; in other words, a failure to cognitively map their situation (199). Unlike Sepha, who enters the meeting with the insight painfully gained through coerced migration, the longstanding residents of Logan Circle cannot precisely articulate the actual causes of their unwelcome change in circumstances. Understandably preoccupied with their immediate security and safety, they nevertheless construct this particular dilemma in more general terms, as Sepha notes: "The grievances and frustrations came quickly. Some had to do specifically with changes in the neighborhood, others were more general and came from a deeper, longer-standing frustration with life" (199). In the absence of a cognitive map that would allow them to better understand the relationship between these seemingly disparate concerns, the residents turn to generalizing those responsible for their newly precarious living conditions. Sepha recalls,

> I don't know who used the word 'they' first. . . . Once the word entered the meeting, it seemed to trail onto the end of every sentence. I don't know who they think they are. What are they doing here anyway. They have their own neighborhoods and now they want ours too. It's bad enough that they have all the jobs and schools. I was convinced that if given enough space and time, a conclusion would have been drawn that held "them" responsible not only for the evictions in the neighborhood, but for every slight and injury each person in that room had suffered, from the children who never made it past junior high to the unpaid heating bill waiting in a dresser drawer. (200)

The indignant tension in the room is exacerbated by Judith's presence at the meeting. The only white person there, she quickly becomes the target of her neighbors' anger, being told to "shut up" when she ventures to express her opinion (200).

If, as previously mentioned, one of the critiques of gentrification is that, despite its professed desire for diversity, it actually promotes discrimination, the community association meeting reproduces these imposed prejudices. Judith and her fellow newcomers undoubtedly show a superficial appreciation for the social and cultural distinctiveness of Logan Circle, but their engagement with the conditions of its production extends only to property restoration, not community rebuilding. They are only interested in buildings, not people. However, the community organizers are also selective about which social boundaries should be breached. Here, Sepha's critical outsider's perspective is once again crucial. He, like Judith, is an outsider, who "had snuck into the neighborhood" to take advantage of its affordable rent at the time (189). His presence at the meeting is tolerated on the basis of a superficial racial identification that, in this instance, inhibits rather than advances effective local protest.

The community association's rapid circulation of accusations against an amorphous racialized enemy evokes Jameson's assertion that "conspiracy plots" are "the poor person's cognitive mapping in the postmodern age" insofar as they substitute "sheer theme and content" for a fully realized account of the totality in which such inequities occur (356). The Logan Circle residents are clearly not just being paranoid—their livelihoods are at stake and they have good reason to understand this persecution in the historic context of African American oppression in D.C. specifically and in America as a whole. Race and class have long intersected to marginalize these urban residents. Yet by failing to give a specific form to their oppressors, characterizing the parties responsible simply as "they," the community association members hamper the creation of a truly effective plan of opposition. They can only conceive of solutions to their problems in similarly general terms. When someone begins to throw bricks through the windows of property

owned by newcomers (Judith's car; the lobby of an apartment building), hearsay substitutes for a detailed narrative of resistance. The residents begin to hear and spread "rumors of marauding men in black touring through the neighborhood," formulating yet more conspiracies (219). When the perpetrator of the brick-throwing is revealed to be "only one desperate, lonely man," the narrative of resistance quickly expires, as Sepha explains: "Following Frank's arrest, the marauding men in black retreated to the corners of the imagination that had created them" (224, 226). Lacking the detail of Mengetsu's own nuanced fiction, these stereotypes are a temporary imaginative fix for an enduring representative problem. Instead of enabling productive social action, they offer short-lived consolation for the Logan Circle residents.

Although Joseph anticipates the emergence of "an entirely new neighborhood" in the wake of these micro-protests against gentrification, towards the close of the novel Sepha observes that "in the end, nothing changed" (224). Judith and Naomi leave the circle and with them the promise of romance and friendship, newcomers continue to move into the neighborhood, and older residents such as Mrs. Davis still live with the threat of eviction. Jameson offers the consolation that,

> successful spatial representation today need not be some uplifting social-realist drama of revolutionary triumph but may be equally be inscribed in a narrative of defeat, which sometimes, even more effectively, causes the whole architectonic of postmodern global space to rise up in ghostly profile behind itself, as some ultimate dialectical barrier or invisible limit. (352-53)

The novel's concluding scene, which sees Sepha admiring his store from the steps of Judith's old house, explicitly stages this global haunting of local space. Directly addressing his dead father,

Sepha offers an aphorism of his own to match those his parent used to pass onto him: "Father: a man stuck between two worlds lives and dies alone. I have dangled and been suspended long enough" (228). Unlike Chris Abani's Elvis, whose social and spatial orientation remains uncertain at the end of *GraceLand*, Sepha's plot concludes with a degree of resolution. Having acknowledged the global extent of his displacement—the "two worlds" he experiences—he observes with great precision that "there are approximately 883 steps between these steps and my store. A distance that I can sprint in less than ten seconds, walk in under a minute" (228). With the stylistic deftness demonstrated throughout the novel, Mengestu here switches spatial scales to reveal how Sepha can now, having completed his instructive journey around D.C., start to reconcile his immediate experience to its broader context. Infused with loss as the acknowledgement of his father suggests, this concluding scene can nevertheless be read as a productive moment of utopian projection. "Right now," Sepha asserts, "I'm convinced that my store looks more perfect than ever before" (228). While by no means a story of unmitigated "revolutionary triumph," Mengestu's narrative succeeds where those of both the neighborhood's gentrifiers and its longstanding residents fail. Whereas they both project limited visions of Logan Circle that variously deny the true causes and content of this urban space, Sepha's marginal perspective lends nuance to the neighborhood itself, the city of Washington, D.C., and its transnational relations. *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* thus successfully dramatizes and enacts global cognitive mapping, revealing through the scalar shifts of its content and form the inherent pain and instructive potential of this imaginative endeavor.

CHAPTER FOUR

Seeing the Obvious?

Contradictory Visibilities in Indian City Literature

BOMBAY'S CONTRADICTORY VISIBILITIES

In a memorable early scene from Danny Boyle's 2008 hit movie *Slumdog Millionaire*, set in contemporary Bombay, the young protagonist Jamal is trapped in a filthy public outhouse when the helicopter of the movie star Amitabh Bachchan lands nearby.[57] So desperate is the 5-year-old slum-dweller to procure the autograph of his idol that he escapes by plunging into the stinking cesspit below the latrine. Covered from head to foot in human excrement, he trudges towards his hero, successfully parting the assembled crowd of clamoring fans in order to gleefully obtain the actor's coveted signature.

Bachchan himself does not actually appear in the film, but he was one of many observers to comment on the rapturous global reception of its vivid portrayal of Indian poverty.[58] A widespread critical and commercial success in Europe and America, the film's Western embrace was signaled by the eight Oscars it won at the 2009 Academy Awards. However, some viewers raised concerns

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[57] Although Bombay was officially renamed Mumbai in November 1995, I retain the use of the former throughout this chapter in keeping with the preference of Suketu Mehta, whose nonfictional account of the city I analyze below. He, like many others, sees the renaming of the city as a political move on behalf of the then newly elected Shiv Sena nationalist party to strengthen Hindu identity throughout the Maharashta region and the country as a whole. If the Anglicized name "Bombay" bespeaks an unwelcome European colonial legacy, "Mumbai" is, in Mehta's view, allied with an equally unwelcome ethnic chauvinism that results in the intra-urban violence which his *Maximum City* seeks to better understand. Historian Gyan Prakash further analyses this narrative of the city's transition from secular cosmopolitanism to intolerant nativism in the opening chapter to his *Mumbai Fables* (2010). For more on Bombay's "descosmopolitanization," see Appadurai, "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing."

[58] In a widely reposted entry on his personal blog, *bigb.bigadda.com*, that has since been removed, Bachchan noted that "the [*Slumdog Millionaire*] idea, authored by an Indian and conceived and cinematically put together by a westerner, gets creative globe recognition" whereas similar Indian films do not (Ramesh). Many interpreted this as a direct criticism of the film by one of India's most celebrated actors, although "Big B," as he is popularly known in his home country, has denied that this was his intention.

not only about the production's potentially exploitative use of inexperienced child actors, but also its dismissive treatment of the actual hardships faced by Bombay's slum-dwellers.[59] Although the film itself mocks the naivety of European and American tourists regarding India, it arguably turns deprivation to diversion in comic scenes such as the above. Whereas, for Boyle, an encounter between a shit-covered slum kid and a godlike movie star provides humor through contrast, the absence of adequate toilet and sewage facilities in slums such as Dharavi, where much of the filming took place, is a massive ongoing affront to the health and dignity of the city's poorest residents. Despite Boyle's own longstanding fecal fixation—a notably Pynchonesque scene from his earlier *Trainspotting* (1996) features the heroin-addicted protagonist Renton diving into "Scotland's worst toilet" to retrieve his stash—he seems bemused by the practical and personal problems that Bombay's lack of toilets presents. Discussing his time spent filming in India, he recalls that

> There's nowhere to shit; people shit everywhere. Although you never see the women shitting. . . You see men doing it all the time. Men and boys. All the time—and you have to get your head around that. But you never see women. There were all these rumours: 'Oh, they get up in the night'—but I was up in the night, and I never saw them. ("Danny Boyle on *Slumdog Millionaire*")

Boyle's failure to see the female slum-dwellers who must, of course, find time and space to relieve themselves, suggests the particular difficulty that women face in maintaining the personal privacy that is routinely denied to the urban poor. As Mike Davis notes, "being forced to exercise body functions in public is certainly a humiliation for anyone, but, above all, it is a feminist issue" (140).

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[59] The intense media interest in how much the young slum-dwellers chosen by Danny Boyle and his producers to play key roles in the film earned for their work prompted the director and his distributors to release public statements, which can be read in full online: http://thinkprogress.org/politics/2009/01/28/35422/slumdog-millionaire-child-actors/

A lack of toilets does not just expose slum women to disease and embarrassment, but also harassment and assault.

The ironic distance between Boyle's toilet humor and the uncomfortable reality from which it takes inspiration demonstrates the contradictory dynamics of visibility to which Bombay's slum-dwellers, especially women, are subject. *Slumdog Millionaire* joins a recent spate of films, TV shows, exhibitions, and books in exposing Dharavi to a global audience.[60] Internationally recognized as the signs of an "exotic" poverty, the residents of Bombay's slums are nevertheless, as Arjun Appadurai notes, "socially, legally, and spatially marginal" within the city and the nation-state ("Deep Democracy" 35). Both global signifiers and "invisible citizens," they experience multiple discrepant degrees of exposure, which render them vulnerable in different ways (Appadurai, "Deep Democracy" 35).

In contrast to the reductive images of the slum purveyed by recent artistic and academic works, local popular protests have sought to reassert control over how and by whom Bombay's urban poor are seen. Appadurai praises the "toilet festivals" organized by the Mumbai Alliance, a coalition of the city's grassroots urban activists who invite state and World Bank officials to celebrate the inauguration of public toilets as part of their broader commitment to achieving effective political recognition of India's slum populations ("Deep Democracy" 39). The inability to separate oneself from one's own waste conditions poverty, resulting in the degrading conflation of marginalized people with their own shit. As public spectacles, the toilet festivals "are a transgressive display of this fecal politics," in which "humiliation and victimization are transformed into exercises in technical initiative and self-dignification" (39). As Gay Hawkins notes in her related

[60] Smita Mitra critiques some of these interventions in a recent article that suggests visiting artists' lack of lasting engagement with the slum ("The Slum of all Parts").

analysis, "by refusing to shit in public, members of the Mumbai Alliance use waste to create a private personhood and with it a nascent citizenship" (68). Whereas a young slum-dweller's willing immersion in shit is offered up for comic effect in *Slumdog Millionaire*, the toilet festivals effect a celebratory reversal of this naively self-degrading gesture. By taking control of how and where they produce, dispose of, and display their bodily waste, these slum activists importantly differentiate between their private lives and their public exposure—a highly personal problem thus forms the basis for significant collective action. By doing so, they claim an individual agency that merits social recognition and state protection. Here, urban waste practices define and test Bombay's contradictory dynamics of visibility, demanding more equitable and respectful treatment of the urban margins.

MEHTA'S MARGINAL VANTAGE POINT

This chapter examines a text that attempts to harness the performative energy of the toilet festivals for a sustained literary critique of the contradictory dynamics of visibility that intersect the margins of contemporary Bombay. Whereas the actions of the Mumbai Alliance foster generative instances of spectacular slum solidarity, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* (2004) contextualizes the need for such interventions while addressing a broader, transnational audience. Widely praised on publication for its lively content, absorbing detail, and elegant style, this work of creative non-fiction provides a kaleidoscopic account of those people and places that exist at the jarring interface of material exposure and social invisibility in Bombay. Mehta's compelling three-part analysis of the "power," "pleasure," and "passages" that shape the margins of the city combines reportage with memoir, ethnography, and travel writing to produce a fragmented, multi-genre text

that embodies metropolitan kinesis. An experienced journalist, Mehta draws on interviews, observation, and lived experience to inform his various portraits of slum-dwellers, gangsters, political activists, bar dancers, movie stars, and urban migrants. In keeping with the fecal politics asserted by the Mumbai Alliance, he reveals Bombay's urban waste, in the form of its polluted places and their dejected occupants, to be an important testing ground for new forms of citizenship in contemporary Bombay.

Whereas Dalit literature in Marathi, Hindi, and other Indian languages has a long tradition of representing marginal urban existence across genres, *Maximum City* marks a new departure for Anglophone Bombay writing, which has in the past focused on the introverted dramas of the urban middle class.[61] In Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, for example, the first-person narrator Jaya feels an affinity with her poor female relatives and domestic maids, but her own middle-class crisis of identity ultimately supersedes the struggles of these working women. More recently, Aravind Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* offers a comic fictionalization of the threat that urban redevelopment poses to the proudly middle-class residents of a northern Bombay apartment block. Mehta is likewise concerned with the shifting physical and social characteristics of the city in the twenty-first century, but he assumes the distinctly marginal vantage point of Bombay's "wasted" people and places in order to examine them.

In *Maximum City*, Mehta's self-reflexive narrative of Bombay goes beyond urban explanation to encourage critical reflection on the ways in which the city comes to be known. He does not simply illuminate its frequently misrepresented margins, but he also interrogates different perceptions of them. As I discuss below, his sustained engagement with the Bollywood imaginary

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[61] Debjani Ganguly's *Caste and Dalit Lifeworlds* (2005) offers a useful overview of Bombay's representation in Dalit literature from the eighteenth to the late twentieth century (178-92).

lends the text a distinctive cinematic optic, but he avoids lazy appropriation in favor of exploring the kaleidoscopic interactions of various illusory Bombays with their material counterparts. In addition to popular cinema, he further draws on a literary tradition of migrant writing about Indian urban waste, which, in light of the city's recent seismic shifts, invites an updated account of Bombay's margins and suggests strategies for doing so. Assuming a multi-focal narrative perspective, Mehta reveals the deep structural and historical interconnectedness of the city, which is denied by its paradoxical visibilities. A deliberately self-conscious writer, Mehta models his own inseparability from the marginal subjects of his text through his adoption of an engaged ethnographic narrative method. However, although he successfully describes and critiques the contradictory dynamics of visibility that shape life at Bombay's margins, his inescapably gendered perspective also unwittingly perpetuates them.

THE BOLLYWOOD IMAGINARY

Given Bombay's significance as both the dramatic setting and site of production for numerous popular Hindi films, it is perhaps unsurprising that criticism of *Maximum City* has to date focused on Mehta's formal and thematic allusions to Indian cinema. Like recent novels that embrace the suspense of Bombay's nightlife and underworld, such as Gregory David Roberts's *Shantaram* (2005) and Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* (2007), *Maximum City* has earned criticism from some quarters for what has been perceived as its melodramatic, Bollywood-inflected portrayal of Bombay's crime, corruption, and systemic violence. Mukund Belliappa, for example, argues that Mehta reproduces "sloppy myths about the city" in his reliance on testimony from "stock characters, [who are] listened to uncritically and portrayed without nuance" in his account of the

city's margins (348, 358). Favorable readings of Mehta's narrative, of which there are many—*Maximum City* earned Mehta a Pulitzer Prize nomination in 2005—also identify the merits of the book with its "tactile sensationalism," suggesting that Mehta's engagement with cinematic paradigms is an inevitable response to confronting the reality of Bombay (Mazumdar 149).[62]

The ready dismissal of Mehta's references to Bollywood narratives does a disservice to the complex cultural critique offered by both popular film and *Maximum City*. A striking feature of recent Bollywood scholarship is the suggestion that these visual texts not only provide an entertaining escape from the demanding realities of South Asia's pre-eminent mega-city, but that they also facilitate urban existence by providing explanatory frameworks for those who daily confront Bombay's challenging mixture of cultural creativity, infrastructural weaknesses, threatening violence, and social transformation. In an important essay on the analogous relationship between Indian cinema and Indian slums, Ashis Nandy identifies the crucial political education offered by the former, noting that "popular cinema not merely shapes and is shaped by politics, it constitutes the language for a new form of politics" (12). In a more recent essay, Vyjanathi Rao, makes the similarly compelling suggestion that "the cinematic might be more than a mere lens—it may also serve as a specific way of engaging with the city," asserting that it is best understood as a "perceptual technology" that can render unpredictable city existence legible to a broad audience (9).

Alert to the formal possibilities of Hindi film, Mehta finds in cinematic fragmentation an appropriate mode through which to capture the excess and intensity of contemporary Bombay, a city that he initially finds difficult to grasp. *Maximum City* starts out as the personal memoir of a

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[62] See Hochschild, Kapur, and Kumar for characteristically favorable reviews of *Maximum City*, which commend Mehta's skillful handling of his potentially overwhelming subject matter.

returning migrant eager to rediscover the "city that has a tight claim on [his] heart" (3). Having emigrated to America at the age of fourteen, Mehta has cultivated, in exile, a longing for the country of his birth and the city of his childhood, which is shattered by the reality of return. The memories of Bombay that he has nurtured in absentia turn out to be, like those of another well-known Bombay emigrant, "fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind" (Rushdie 10). Just as Salman Rushdie turns his expatriate's alienation to authorial advantage in *Midnight's Children*, making of the past's irretrievability a compelling theme and spur to formal innovation, Mehta likewise responds to the elusiveness of past and present Bombays with stylistic experimentation. Although he declares his personal quest at the very beginning of the text, it does not follow a well-defined linear trajectory, in much the same way that Hindi cinema, according to film scholar Rosie Thomas, places "emphasis on emotion and spectacle rather than tight narrative . . . on a succession of modes rather than linear denouement" (29). Autobiography joins journalistic reportage, oral anecdotes, historical narration and occasional storytelling in *Maximum City* to produce an impressively composite text that shares what Thomas describes as the "slippage between registers" characteristic of Bollywood films, most notable in their use of what can seem—to some uninitiated Western audiences at least—discontinuous song and dance routines (28). Mehta identifies in Hindi cinematic form a rhetorical invitation to polyphony and generic multiplicity that allows him to better explore the multi-dimensionality of Bombay's urban margins.

Although popular cinema provides Mehta with an important navigational tool, urban scholars Thomas Blom Hansen and Oskar Verkaaik caution that "some urban spaces are so heavily mythologized and enframed through circulating images and narratives that they suffuse, if not

overdetermine, any empirical or sensory experience" (6). Indeed, many Indians throughout the nation and diaspora come to know Bombay best through Bollywood movies. Although popular gangster films such as *Parinda* (1989), *Satya* (1998), and *Company* (2002) introduce Bombay's strugglers, slum-dwellers and criminals to a broad audience, there is a risk that such films supplant urban actuality with urban fantasy, in contrast to Indian art-house films such as Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!* (1998), which document the hardships of marginal urban existence in a more realist fashion. In a manner not dissimilar to *Slumdog Millionaire*, popular cinematic representations of Bombay thus intensify the paradoxical visibility of the city's margins. The contrast between the sizeable cinema-going audiences they attract and their subjects' actual lack of acknowledgement by the state highlights the disjunctive value accrued by urban waste within discrepant cultural and social economies.

Rather than simply appropriating popular cinematic themes and tropes as some have claimed, Mehta therefore offers a critical engagement with the Bollywood imaginary throughout *Maximum City*, deliberately highlighting both its revelatory promise and concealing effects. He frequently notes discrepancies between the world of the cinema and the "real world," telling the reader, for example, that the professional criminals he meets "don't look anything like their movie counterparts" (165). In his dramatic eyewitness account of a violent police interrogation, he further signals the gap between imaginary and actual experiences of life at Bombay's margins. While conducting research for a movie script he is working on, he visits a police station with his friend the film director Vinod Chopra, and Chopra's wife Anu. Two counterfeiters who have been caught driving a car carrying hundreds of fake 500-rupee notes are being questioned. With pace and immediacy, Mehta describes in detail how two policemen beat the accused all over their

bodies and faces with their own belts and "a thick leather strap, about six inches wide, attached to a wooden handle" (151). The recently appointed Additional Commissioner of Police, Ajay Lal, whom Mehta describes as having the "towering good looks" and charisma of a movie star, oversees proceedings, liberally cursing the criminals and barking orders at his team, which Mehta quotes directly for full impact (132). Eventually, the two counterfeiters are dragged from the office in order to be electrocuted out of sight.

When leaving the police station, a shocked Anu remarks that "There's a whole world around us that we know nothing about. . . . I just want to watch my Hindi films and be safe" (153). By including this admission, Mehta allows an ironic joke at the expense of himself and his similarly bourgeois friends. His acknowledgment of his own privilege versus the deprivations of the marginal urban figures he encounters is characteristic of his self-aware narrative style. However, beyond deflecting potential criticism of their privileged standpoint, Anu's acknowledgement of the gap between the cinematic entertainment that she enjoys (and her own husband purveys), and the visceral scene they have just witnessed suggests the distance between the world of the movies and the reality of Bombay. It is this disjuncture that Mehta seeks to bring to the fore in his engagement with Bollywood in order to caution against naïve investment in the apparent "truths" offered by the movies. By repeatedly qualifying the dramatic urban imaginary fostered by popular Hindi film, Mehta's polyphonic narrative encourages a more scrupulous analysis of the sidelined people and places that are too often passively consumed as disposable entertainment.

URBAN WASTE FROM "THE IDEAL POSITION": MULK RAJ ANAND'S UNTOUCHABLE

While a number of critics have identified the cinematic intertextuality of *Maximum City*, drawing attention to Mehta's literary depiction of Bombay's visually arresting urban dramas, few have considered his place within a tradition of Indian urban writing that similarly encourages more careful analysis of the mutually constitutive real and imaginary geographies that shape the margins of India's cities. In writing about his childhood home after spending twenty-one years in the USA and Europe, Mehta joins a number of literary predecessors to offer a hybrid migrant's perspective on India's cities. Mulk Raj Anand initiates this tradition with *Untouchable* (1935), a short novel that offers an important critique of the social inequalities perpetuated by the Indian caste hierarchy. This longstanding mode of social stratification divides people into thousands of endogamous hereditary groups. Under this system, evident filth—animal dung, human excrement, household trash—is collectively ignored by the upper castes who defer responsibility for its management and removal to the Dalits or "untouchables" who perform an essential, but unacknowledged social function. While significant measures have been taken since the adoption of the Indian Constitution in 1950 to address the discriminatory treatment of Dalits, with many scholars arguing that British colonialism is responsible for not only manipulating, but in some cases manufacturing social division, the historical allocation of material waste management to symbolically "unclean" social groups provides a formative context for the contradictory dynamics of visibility that pervade contemporary Bombay.[63] To be an untouchable, as Anand reveals, is precisely to inhabit the jarring simultaneity of material exposure and social invisibility that affects contemporary slum-dwellers.

As a Cambridge-educated Indian writer, immersed in early twentieth century literary culture, Anand offers a useful bifocal perspective on the caste system. E. M. Forster's preface to

[63] See Dirks, Snodgrass.

Untouchable, itself a testament to Anand's affiliation with the Bloomsbury Group, notes that the novel:

> could only have been written by an Indian, and by an Indian who observed from the outside. No European, however sympathetic, could have created the character of Bakha, because he would not have known enough about his troubles. And no Untouchable could have written the book, because he would have been involved in indignation and self-pity. . . . Mr. Anand stands in the ideal position. . . . He has just the right mixture of insight and detachment. (vi-vii)

Here, Forster repeats the condescending definition of Dalits as something other than Indians or Europeans; they are identified by their untouchability and implied emotional immaturity. Ironically, despite his own recourse to polarizing social categories, Forster identifies in Anand's unique viewpoint a critical insight that his own commentary lacks. From his liminal perspective, Anand can persuasively critique the rigidity of a caste system that disavows the shifting social determination of both literal and figurative waste, even as modern urbanization drastically reshapes these categories. Moreover, as Ben Baer notes, Anand's novel expresses "the desire to carry the periphery to the metropolis so as to inscribe and make visible the unknown, excremental abjection of the colonial margin in the aesthetic heart of the center" (577). While both the upper castes and colonial classes invoke Indian urban waste as the marker of social boundaries, Anand's engagement with Dalit experience reveals these categories to be inadequate to both local reality and the broader transnational context through which they were produced.

The pernicious psychological effects of the caste system are focalized through the eighteen-year-old Bakha, a sweeper and latrine cleaner whose innate pride, curiosity and sense of social

injustice leads him to question the actual and imagined boundaries that maintain his social marginalization: "He was a sweeper, he knew, but he could not consciously accept that fact" (Anand 39). Both figuratively and physically marginalized, Bakha lives with his family in the outcastes' colony adjacent to the small city of Bulashah. However, it is when he ventures into the urban center to sweep streets on behalf of his unwell father that his social standing is most destabilized. Here, in the city, the boundaries that maintain Bakha's lowly untouchable status are thrown into confusion by the sensual and visual distractions of urban modernity. Treating himself to some confectionery from a corner store, the pleasure of Bakha's physical indulgence combines with his voracious visual consumption of the city's commercial spectacles to inspire his intellectual and social ambition:

> It was wonderful to walk along like that, munching and looking at all the sights. The big signboards advertising the names of Indian merchants, lawyers and medical men, their degrees and professions all in broad, huge blocks of letters, stared down at him from the upper stories of the shops. He wished he could read all the luridly painted boards. . . . Then his gaze was drawn to a figure sitting in a window. He stared at her absorbed and un-self-conscious. (46)

His freedom is short-lived however; distracted by the unnamed woman—Anand hints very lightly here at the sexual awakening attendant on Bakha's entrance into the city—he walks into a higher caste man, thereby violating the symbolic distance that is supposed to be kept between untouchables and those higher up the social ladder. The man responds with violent physical and verbal abuse, repeatedly casting Bakha in bestial, non-human terms: "Keep to the side of the road, you low-caste vermin! . . . Why don't you call, you swine, and announce your approach! . . . Dirty

dog! Son of a bitch! The offspring of a pig!" (46-47). This traumatic accident renews Bakha's painful consciousness of his untouchable status: "Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him" (52). His eyes drawn to the pleasures and possibilities of city living, Bakha literally fails to look where he is going and, in doing so, he forces an inter-caste contact which shatters his socially constructed invisibility. By touching someone of higher social standing, he destabilizes the collective ignorance of waste maintained by his social "superiors." The "defiled" man is compelled to recognize Bakha and the filth in which he works; thus, he is compelled to acknowledge his own role in the production of that filth in both its physical and figurative aspects. By portraying this eruption of social tension from Bakha's perspective, Anand artfully highlights the constructedness of the caste system, suggesting the need for an alternative, more equitable mode of social organization that is in keeping with the new possibilities engendered by urban modernity. This crucial episode reveals not only the pressure that urbanization places on the caste system's allocation of filth and cleanliness to different groups, but also the particular visual register in which this occurs.

V. S. NAIPAUL'S INDIAN VISION

In keeping with Anand's appraisal, Trinidadian author V. S. Naipaul expresses distaste for the "dangerous, decayed pragmatism" of the caste system in his Indian trilogy: *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *A Wounded Civilization* (1976), and *A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) (*Area* 85). Yet if, as Baer suggests, Anand draws on his bifurcated perspective to problematize the gap between metropole and colony, the similarly European-educated Naipaul asserts what some critics have argued is a deeply imperial viewpoint throughout his Indian travel writing. Instead of writing *to* a

metropolitan audience, he writes *for* them, in what Rob Nixon calls "a language that resonates with traditions of discursive power that assert the visual and political ascendancy of metropolitan knowers over the peripheral and underrepresented known" (80). Indeed, Naipaul himself openly commends the "Western way of perceiving" as superior to Indians' "shallow perception" of reality (*Wounded* 108, 119). He laments the supposed inability of Indians to analyze their situation objectively and, in doing so, ameliorate not only the material deprivations of their rapidly modernizing country, but also what he sees as its postcolonial intellectual poverty. His critique of independent India's confused, imitative culture—ironic in the context of his own imperial mimicry—meets with a visceral disgust for the messy reality of the country, especially Bombay, to produce what many have read as a darkly pessimistic account of his ancestral home.

While *A Wounded Civilization* extends Naipaul's critique of the Indian "defect of vision," the third volume in his Indian trilogy, *India: A Million Mutinies Now*, has been read as a "kinder, gentler" account of the country (Naipaul, *Wounded* 101; Nixon 159). Although the opening section, "Bombay Theatre," rehearses some of the same tropes of urban filth that characterized his earlier portraits of the city— shortly after arrival, for example, he notes buildings weathered by both "excessive sun, excessive rain, excessive heat" and "human grime" (1)—he does acknowledge the "old neurosis" revived by his earlier visits to India. As he explains, confronting the poverty that his emigrant grandparents had sought to leave behind in moving to Trinidad destabilized the dignified collective identity they had so carefully cultivated in diaspora. His first trip to India thus profoundly undermined the idealized cultural heritage through which the young Naipaul had identified himself. Yet despite acknowledging the deeply personal anxiety that previously filtered his view of India, Naipaul can still not bring himself to fully engage with the most abject of urban

existence. His account of Bombay does document the political rise of the Dalits through interviews with representatives of their caste, which take place in their modest homes. Yet for all its clear-sightedness, his urban portrait retains a significant blindspot with regard to the least appealing areas of the city. Glimpsed in passing, the infamous slum of Dharavi appears to Naipaul "so sudden, so obvious, so overwhelming, it was as though it was something staged, something on a film set, with people acting out their roles as slum-dwellers" (58). A subsequent drive past the slum makes a similarly surreal impression on the author; seen from the taxi, "Dharavi looked artificial, unnecessary even in Bombay" (59). While his choice of cinematic metaphor is both understandable given the shocking extent of Dharavi, where an estimated 1 million people live in an area of approximately 1.7 square kilometers, and apt in the context of Bombay's thriving film industry, it also speaks to Naipaul's reflexive retreat from the urban waste which he has earlier criticized Indians for ignoring. Elegant description here substitutes for full engagement with Bombay's margins. By comparing Dharavi to a film set viewed through the "screen" of his car window, Naipaul self-defensively restores the cinematic distance that is shattered for Anu in the police station. Whereas Mehta calls attention to the limits of filmic mimesis to encourage greater sensitivity to the challenging reality that popular films often mask, Naipaul invokes cinematic artificiality to avoid precisely such engagement. Instead, the Bombay that emerges from his account in *A Wounded Civilization* consists in finely rendered portraits of individually aspiring characters in various carefully described interiors, the interconnections between which are not fully elaborated. Bombay's urban waste remains sidelined as the city's dirty secret that Naipaul is unwilling to reveal.

SEEING "THE OTHER BOMBAY"

Having seen, and smelled, Dharavi from a distance, Naipaul expresses his "relief to leave that behind, and to get out into the other Bombay, the Bombay one knew and had spent so much time getting used to, the Bombay of paved roads and buses and people in lightweight clothes" (59). The urban divide he references here is perhaps not entirely lacking in self-deprecating irony, but it is also characteristic of Naipaul's inability to reconcile his singular expectations of India with the unpredictable, divided reality he confronts.

Suketu Mehta also invokes Bombay's duality in *Maximum City*, announcing his intention to explore "the other Bombay" in a phrase that directly recalls Naipaul. However, his account of the city quickly reveals its interconnectedness, the denial of which produces the slums' paradoxical visibility as those who do not wish to confront the evident social inequalities before their eyes must engage in mental and moral contortions in order to repress what they have witnessed. On his return to India after living abroad for 21 years, Mehta literally confronts the space between reality and recall. He is struck by Bombay's rapidly changing physical and political landscape, exemplified by the inescapable encroachment of informal housing throughout the city, such as the shantytowns that have sprung up on the beach where he fondly remembers playing as a child. Unlike Naipaul who, throughout *Area of Darkness*, cultivates a personal distance from what he repeatedly refers to as the "obvious" poverty of India, Mehta decides to investigate the marginal, unplanned, and informally regulated city of slums and criminal activity that is gradually encroaching on the insular world of the Bombay elite to which he belongs as an educated, cosmopolitan writer. Whereas his predecessor finds that his "eye had changed" during the course of his travels around the country, enabling him to "separate [him]self from what [he] saw, to separate the

pleasant from the unpleasant," Mehta develops a more nuanced view of India that troubles the binary terms of Naipaul's Indian vision, which so readily distances spectator from subject, clean from dirty (Naipaul, *Area* 48). As both a material problem and a symbolic category, Mehta finds waste in contemporary Bombay to be multidirectional and multiscalar.

Somewhat ironically, Mehta comes to acknowledge the interconnectedness of the city through what might be described as a Naipaulian frustration with the city's inadequate municipal services. Early in the text, he expresses in humorously exaggerated terms the perilously unsanitary water supply to which his not inexpensive rented apartment is connected:

> The food and the water in Bombay, India's most modern city, are contaminated with shit. Amebic dysentery is transferred through shit. We have been feeding our son shit. It could have come in the mango we gave him; it could have been in the pool we took him swimming in. it could have come from the taps in our own home, since the drainage pipes in Bombay, laid out during British times, leak into the freshwater pipes that run right alongside. There is no defense possible. Everything is recycled in this filthy country, which poisons its children, raising them on a diet of its own shit. (28)

If, as Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, the domestic space is "an inside produced by symbolic enclosure for the purpose of protection," Mehta's emphatic sentence-end repetition of "shit" conveys his horrified realization of the inadequacy of this construct in the face of Bombay's systemic sanitation problems (71). To live in the city is to acquire an unwanted, cellular intimacy with its many residents. With "no defense possible," he feels besieged by the filth of the city. By noting the colonial origins of the city's profoundly inadequate sewage and water supply, Mehta shifts

characteristically from the microscopic to the macroscopic, reminding the reader that Bombay's most immediate and intensely personally experienced problems have a long history and a global context. He offers little indication of any solution to the problem, noting that fecal matter is embedded in the very structure of the numerous new buildings that are proliferating in the city: "The sand used in the concrete comes from the creeks around Bombay, which contains salt, silt, and shit, so new buildings look weather-beaten, moth-eaten" (120). Shit circulates through both the bodies and the buildings of Bombay, connecting humans and their housing through an inescapable cycle of waste that the wealthy wish to ignore and the poor cannot.

If Bombay's infrastructural weaknesses expose the fault-lines in the carefully constructed social boundaries between the city's wealthy and working classes, the riots which break out in late 1992, shortly prior to Mehta's return, explicitly dismantle them. Catalyzed by the destruction of a northern mosque by Hindu fundamentalists, violence exploded in Bombay with the leader of the Shiv Sena Hindu nationalist party Bal Thackeray inciting the city's disaffected Hindu poor to systematically eliminate the city's Muslim residents, homes, and businesses. In March 1993, a series of bombs planted by the Muslim underworld were detonated throughout the city, in apparent revenge for the losses inflicted upon Bombay's Muslim community. Many consider the riots to be "a milestone in the psychic life of the city," marking the transition from the secular cosmopolitanism of Bombay to the ethnic chauvinism of Mumbai (Mehta 56). With the eruption of street violence and the subsequent bombings of prominent public places, Bombay's most marginalized urban residents became dramatically visible to the city's richer inhabitants. An educated man from a family of Gujurati diamond merchants, Mehta enjoys relative wealth and privilege. Yet while he is sufficiently self-aware to recognize the tenuousness of his social status

after the riots, he notes that many of his peers share "a sense that the barbarians have been let into the city gates and are sleeping on the footpaths outside their palaces. There is resentment that Bombay has to deal with the country's detritus" (76). What these detached upper classes fail to account for in their ongoing dismissal of the supposed human waste that accumulates in the city is the very real political power that the urban poor yield in local and national elections by their sheer numbers alone. Although Naipaul does not fully engage with the reality of Bombay's slums, he correctly identifies them as key sites of this sociopolitical shift. Dharavi intimidates not only because it is a reminder of the struggles that Naipaul and others serendipitously evade, but also because it is "a vote-bank, a hate-bank, something to be drawn upon by many people" (Naipaul, *Million* 60). As Mehta bluntly puts it, "In India, the poor vote" (68). Surplus they may be to the global capitalist system in which Bombay is embedded, but the city's slum- and street-dwellers are not afraid to reclaim their outcaste status by "getting [their] feet dirty in politics" (75). Although, Mehta notes, "the monster came out of the slums" during the riots, he resists the dismissive sensationalism this metaphor implies, choosing instead to investigate the motives of those who got involved (56).

Mehta's re-vision of the city draws on lived experience, not removed observation. As a result, he is able to perceive the kaleidoscopic reality of Bombay, whose endless shifts refuse simple typologies. In the course of his investigation into the causes of the riots, Mehta inhales the "stench" of the slums in which the majority of the Shiv Sena supporters live (53); he treads the "pitch-dark alley[s]" where illegal settlements are being constructed (77); he drinks "rich thick buffalo milk" in the home of Amol, a tapori ('street punk') who incites violence on behalf of the Shiv Sena (85); and he hears first-hand accounts of the riots from a range of victims, instigators,

and witnesses. Unlike Naipaul, he ventures into precisely those parts of the city that are habitually ignored by class and caste outsiders. In doing so, he reveals the rich multipurpose nature of putatively wasted areas. One day, for example, Raghav, a private taxi operator and unofficial Shiv Sena troublemaker, takes Mehta to what he describes as

> A very large open patch of ground by the train sheds, a phantasmagoric scene with a vast garbage dump on one side with groups of people hacking at the ground with picks, a crowd of boys playing cricket, sewers running at our feet, train tracks and bogies in sheds in the middle distance, and a series of concrete tower blocks in the background. (44)

As Mehta explains, this is the no-man's land between Hindu- and Muslim-populated slums. With characteristic detail, Mehta's description populates a tract of land that appears as vacant industrial storage space on official city plans. He later meets with an architect who identifies these spaces as ideal for redevelopment. What such conceptions of Bombay's wasteland fail to accommodate are the multiple uses to which such land has already been put—this is a recreational space for the slum kids who have nowhere else to play and a site of potential income for the scavengers who sort through the trash. Most significantly, this is a site of trauma and oral history, as Mehta's discusssion with Raghav reveals. During the riots, Raghav and some Sena loyalists beat and burned two Muslims on this site. He further explains that, for ten days, "the police wouldn't take the bodies away, because the Jogeshwari police said it was in the Goreagon police's jurisdiction, and the Goreagon police said it was the railway police's jurisdiction" (45). In their refusal to dispose of the victims' bodies, the various civic authorities expose their petty and damaging adherence to a rigid conception of urban space that cannot accommodate the "phantasmagoric"

region that Mehta exposes. Like the Shiv Sena, who are only concerned with policing the ethnic content of their slum, the police attribute a damaging singular value to this urban edgeland, which results in further social and environmental degradation. By revealing the many valences of this urban space, Mehta brings to light marginal areas that others deliberately ignore. In doing so, he vividly illustrates the inimical capacity of rigid urban borders to produce new forms of waste.

MEHTA'S ETHNOGRAPHIC AUTHORITY

Despite his efforts to witness the slums from the "inside," Mehta is still a privileged outsider who relies on a series of "native informants" like Raghav to provide him with "a tour of the battlegrounds" (40). Indeed, in his desire to find out more about the causes of the riots—"I wanted to speak to the rioters themselves. . . . I wanted to find out how the business of rioting is actually planned and carried out" (40-41)—Mehta repeatedly expresses an extractive desire for knowledge about the slums, which casts him in the role of a colonial fact-finder surveying unfamiliar terrain. However, to dismiss his project as imperialist would be unfair to the careful manner in which he draws attention to his own limited vision on a number of occasions. Concerned with revealing differing perceptions of Bombay's margins, Mehta rejects the role of omniscient narrator. This is evident, for example, in his interactions with Sunil, a Shiv Sena agitator who calmly describes setting fire to a Muslim bread-seller whom he used to pass on a daily basis before the riots began. When Mehta asks "what does a man look like when he's on fire?" Sunil responds, "*You* couldn't bear to see it" (39). The two men have entirely different perspectives on Bombay. They see the city differently and, in doing so, produce multiple lived versions of that city. Indeed, when Sunil enters the apartment in which one of their interviews takes place, he "immediately check[s] out

the strategic value of its location, its entrances and exits" (42). Differently attuned to urban space, Mehta is reliant on Sunil's first-hand knowledge to produce a convincing account of the riots. Using a form of free indirect discourse, he thus transcribes large portions of Sunil's oral testimony, which explain how and why this disaffected young man committed murder.

As James Clifford notes in his highly influential essay "On Ethnographic Authority," even such commendable attempts at diffusing the false claims of experiential omniscience are tempered by the very fact of ethnographic authorship. As he explains, "While ethnographies cast as encounters between two individuals may successfully dramatize the intersubjective give-and-take of fieldwork and introduce a counterpoint of authorial voices, they remain *representations* of dialogue" (43). Although directly quoting Sunil's words marks an attempt on Mehta's part to distribute the authority of his account, he nonetheless remains the arranger of those words—he chooses what to include and omit, and, most importantly, he translates Sunil's words from Hindi into English, lending him a textual eloquence that belies writerly detachment.

Interestingly, Mehta is willing to withhold such eloquence from other informants, such as Bal Thackeray, the notorious Shiv Sena leader whom Mehta, like many others, holds largely responsible for the 1992-93 riots. When the two finally meet in Thackeray's heavily guarded urban compound, they converse in what Mehta describes as "fractured English" (97). Whereas the direct quotations that Mehta includes from Sunil encourage, if not sympathy for, then at least some understanding of his participation in the riots, the inclusion of extended oral testimony from Thackeray serves to make a mockery of the Shiv Sena leader. Mehta reproduces long pronouncements from Thackeray which fully display his struggling command of English, their overall effect being to diminish his intelligence. Mehta admits to "entertain[ing] the suspicion that

he is not all there" when Thackeray embarks on soliloquies concerning what he perceives as Bombay's infrastructural and immigration problems (101). Mehta refuses dialogue in this section of *Maximum City*, withholding the narrative compromise that he allowed Sunil and his other less powerful interlocutors. While Thackeray personifies a dangerously essentialist cultural ideology that imagines a renamed Mumbai as the capital of an exclusively Hindu nation, it is ironically by adopting the party's policy of non-negotiation that Mehta is able to undermine him. Lacking sympathetic translation, Thackeray is ultimately condemned by his own, rambling words.

Mehta's encounters with Sunil, Satish and Thackeray derive tension from his self-dramatization. Whether wandering through the slums, meeting with gangsters in confined hotel rooms, or entering the politician's heavily guarded compound, Mehta conveys to the reader that he is himself in some kind of jeopardy. This authorial approach contrasts with that of Katherine Boo, whose *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* (2012) is an elegantly written and thoroughly researched narrative of life in Annawadi, "a single, unexceptional slum" squeezed between the luxury hotels adjacent to Mumbai international airport, the inhabitants of which make their living from scavenging and sorting waste (249). A renowned journalist like Mehta, Boo's text expands her previous work on poor American communities in an attempt to illuminate the "infrastructure of opportunity" in Indian society (247). Whereas Mehta's own experiences lend drama to his text, suggesting another subjective Bombay to be taken into consideration, Boo effaces herself from her narrative, reserving self-disclosure for her concluding author's note in which she explains her careful attempts to compensate for the limitations of her outsider's perspective "by time spent, attention paid, documentation secured, accounts cross-checked" (249). Although she asserts that she "was mindful of the risk of overinterpretation," her decision to withhold her own experiences

from the text in favor of assuming a third-person narrative voice at times lends her narrative the tone of mythic omniscience (250). It begins, for example, in *media res* as she relates the dramatic self-immolation of a disabled Annawadi resident: "Midnight was closing in, the one-legged woman was grievously burned and the Mumbai police were coming for Abdul and his father" (ix). This effective opening sentence grabs the reader's attention and lends her slum-dwelling subjects an air of epic significance. Her narrative style effectively makes of her Annawadi subjects a universal drama. This broad relevance is in keeping with Boo's stated interest in the patterns of "profound and juxtaposed inequality" that form "the signature fact of so many modern cities" (248). While Mehta's personal narrative occasionally touches on narcissism, Boo's conscious distancing from her subjects avoids this pitfall of an otherwise insightful self-reflexivity. However, the fluency with which she reconstructs the stories of the slum-dwellers by retrospectively paraphrasing their thoughts and words risks obscuring the actual difficulty that these marginal urban residents face in their daily struggles to be seen, heard, and recognized on their own terms.

GENDERED CITY

Boo not only provides a useful stylistic complement to Mehta's narrative, she also offers a female counterpoint to his male perspective on the city. One of few women to write so extensively about slum existence, her sympathetic attention to the struggles faced by female slum-dwellers, specifically documenting a spate of female suicides motivated by gendered inequities in slum society, provides an informative contrast with the male-dominated world of criminality and violence that Mehta largely engages. If Mehta exhibits a self-reflexiveness that Boo chooses not to articulate in the body of her text, this is limited by his blindness to the gendering of his own gaze.

Mehta's well-intentioned attempts to diffuse his own ethnographic authority are compromised by his interactions with an exotic dancer who performs under the name of Monalisa. Whereas Mehta tries to cultivate neutral detachment when dealing with the male Shiv Sena agitators, he casts an undeniably masculine gaze on Monalisa, which compromises the objectivity of his narrative. The uneven power differential exposed by the interactions between male author and female subject further highlight Monalisa's limited ability to rescript her own status as urban "waste." Unlike the male Shiv Sena agitators who enjoy a degree of autonomy through their strategic embrace of their "wasted" status, the urban freedoms of Monalisa and other marginalized women like her are more tightly circumscribed by gender expectations. Indeed, Bombay's contradictory dynamics of visibility are dramatically inscribed on her gendered body, which is at once exposed to objectifying gazes and concealed from the respectability of public view.

Monalisa is a dancer in what is known in Bombay as "the bar line"—the collective term for the many "beer bars or ladies' bars or dance bars" throughout the city in which "fully clothed young girls dance on an extravagantly decorated stage to recorded Hindi film music, and men come to watch, shower money over their heads, and fall in love" (265). If Bombay is a site for the acquisition and consolidation of "power," as the title of Part I suggests, Part II reveals the city to be a complementary locus of "pleasure" where other desires may be satiated. However, Mehta's separation of these two aspects of Bombay is quickly exposed as a falsehood since his narration of the city's indulgent and luxurious nightlife repeatedly points to the manner in which soliciting pleasure always entails the negotiation of power differentials for all involved.

Mehta claims curiosity as the initial catalyst for his investigation into the bar line: "I started going to the beer bars because I was puzzled. I couldn't figure out why men would want to spend

colossal amounts of money there" (269). Before long, however, this bemused outsider not only understands the bar's male clientele, he epitomizes them in his newfound role as "best guide" to the bar scene, enjoying VIP treatment at Sapphire, the bar where he meets Monalisa (338). He identifies a marginal form of urban democracy in the bar, observing that:

> This is the one place where the classes meet, where the only thing important is the color of your money. Because it's not just the mechanics and the taporis; it's also the rich traders and merchants of South Bombay, who are surrounded by men during the day and their by their fat wives in the evening. . . . The moment the customer walks in, he's the star in his own custom-made Hindi movie song. No matter how old or ugly or fat he is, for the two hours he's in the bar he's a movie star, he's Shahrukh Khan. (271)

This idealized description of the bar's escapist promise obscures the uneven access to power enjoyed by the male customers and the dancers who meet in this apparently democratic nighttime space. Whereas the men who can afford to frequent the bar are at liberty to gaze upon "beautiful young girls, young enough to be their daughters," the women are have limited control over their self-presentation (271). Bollywood scripts are again invoked to mediate and mask the degradation of Bombay's margins. In living out their cinematic fantasies, the bar line's male customers perpetuate the social exclusion and financial dependency of those women who fulfill them. As Mehta later explains, even those dancers who are justifiably proud of their choreography, performance skills, and physical beauty are nevertheless demeaned by their occupation.

Mehta's description of first being taken to the bar further suggests the limited control that the bar line dancers have over their working conditions. He is inducted into the bar scene by a

male friend who escorts him to a "completely dark alley" in Worli (269). When they reach the Carnival Bar that is supposed to be closed, various men appear from the shadows to park their car and usher them into what turns out to be a bar "ablaze with light and music and flowing with liquor and filled with people at 3 a.m." (270). Although Mehta suggests that the women who dance in the bars may enjoy the attention they receive to some extent, the power they wield on stage is tightly circumscribed by the male-dominated urban world in which they live. Men are the gatekeepers, managers, and consumers of their dances—without them, the women would be unable to make money. Their dependent situation epitomizes the contradictory dynamics of visibility that run through Bombay; although the women are highly visible within the bars—indeed, they make money based on how skillfully they reveal their physical beauty—the bars themselves are a covert space where men indulge their fantasies of being movie stars.

While, as Altaf Tyrewala suggests, Mehta is "astute" in his account of bar line life, portraying as he does both its sensational and mundane realities, his narrative also exerts additional authority over the bodies of the dancers, especially that of Monalisa (16).[64] Just as the men who manage Sapphire control when, how, and by whom Monalisa is seen, Mehta's words similarly manipulate the way in which she is presented to a new, literary audience. Although his account is both attentive and sympathetic to the details of Monalisa's troubled life, its effect is ultimately to offer up an additional performance for his readers, compounding Monalisa's struggles to achieve a coherent identity.

[64] In his introduction to the short story anthology *Mumbai Noir*, Tyrewala notes the profusion of "overly romanticized" and "exaggerated" portrayals of the bar line in recent Bombay literature (16). By contrast, Avtar Singh's contribution to this volume, "Pakeezah," is an effectively understated dramatization of the sexual and emotional obsessions that the city's secretive nightlife provokes.

Like the bar clientele who enjoy, for a short time, the illusion of "star[ring] in [their] own custom-made Hindi movie song," Mehta's interactions with Monalisa blur fantasy and reality from the outset (271). He recalls that when he first saw her, "all the other girls blurred and faded, as in a movie when the heroine suddenly comes into sharp focus as she's walking in a crowd of people in the street" (273). By casting himself in the role of a hopelessly attracted and naïve suitor, who "has to make a conscious effort to keep [his] hand from trembling" when he shows her into his apartment for an interview, Mehta lends Monalisa a power over him that she does not in reality have (283). His attraction to her is surely genuine—she is young, beautiful and expert in the art of seduction. However, it is Monalisa who reveals herself completely to Mehta, and not vice versa. She exposes herself physically and psychologically to him, confiding secrets, aspirations, and disappointment, whereas he withholds information from her during their intimate liaisons, including the fact that he is married and has two children. Mehta professes paternal responsibility for doing so, explaining that Monalisa "is of the shadow world; I keep my family insulated from such people" (295). However, he does not extend such protectiveness to his equally vulnerable female interlocutor. The metaphor he uses here is telling, suggestive as it is of the way in which Monalisa's visibility is always partial and fleeting. Although she is inseparable from Mehta's world, she does not control her connection to it. Like the men who control access to the bars, Mehta also acts as a gatekeeper, maintaining distance between his family and Monalisa, barring access to his wife.

Mehta's first-hand accounts of Monalisa's on-stage performances make his authorial staging of her body explicit. Although his descriptions speak to the dancer's powerful seductive charms, the narrative also reproduces the uneven power dynamics of the bar, offering her up for visual

consumption by an unseen audience. The reader gazes upon Monalisa from Mehta's own guarded perspective, voyeuristically watching as "this girl . . . turn[s] her back to the audience, bend[s] forward, and slowly rotat[es] her buttocks" (273). Monalisa enacts the fantasy of sexual availability while her onlookers remain anonymous in the privacy of the bar. Although Mehta elsewhere expresses a seemingly genuine interest in her story, his gaze, like that of the other male spectators, objectifies Monalisa. His tendency to catalogue her physical features as he watches her reduces her to an assortment of attractive body parts: "She had big bee-stung lips, a high neck, large eyes, and a snub nose" (273). Taken in by her act, he essentializes what he perceives as her primal energy: "This young Gujurati girl becomes, on the dance floor, an animal with not enough space to move" (281). Interestingly, even as he "get[s] to see [Monalisa's] nice side" over time, Mehta tells himself not to "forget her core, which is based on sex, on lust" (303). In his eyes, her sexuality is her primary identification.

Mehta tempers the intrusiveness of his gaze by insisting that Monalisa "likes being looked at, likes being noticed" (281). Indeed, she expresses legitimate pride in her ability to command attention. However, Mehta also mistakes Monalisa's learned survival instinct for her public self-confidence. Monalisa's success in the bar line, which she calls "a world of lies," depends on her ability to project an assured sexuality even when she feels tired, vulnerable or uncertain (293). Living as she does "two lives"—"one is her life in the bar and the time she spends with her customers. Then there is the other life: her time in the discos, watching TV, sleeping all day"—Monalisa is adept at role-play, expert in fulfilling the fantasies of the men who come to watch her and concealing her professional persona in public (293). Her personal life similarly demands the suppression of her emotions. Having experienced multiple family traumas, Monalisa has learned

how to keep her feelings in check: "If Monalisa were to allow herself to cry every time she felt the weight of pain or heightened emotion, she would be all dried out from the crying" (313). Monalisa's continual subjection to intense scrutiny demands great composure on her part, an effort that Mehta overlooks in his celebration of her life lived "on the extreme of spectacle": "The attraction, the immense relief, of total breakdown, a renunciation of order in one's life, of all the effort required to keep it together!" (538). Where he sees "freedom" and "a life unencumbered by minutiae," he misses the strain under which Monalisa's bifurcated existence places her.

Mehta is seemingly unaware of the way in which his own narrative actually makes Monalisa vulnerable in a way that even bar dancing does not. Attractive as her body is, it also disappoints him, as is revealed when he arranges for his fashion photographer friend Rustom to take some test shots of her. Again, Mehta enumerates her physical features, but this time it is the flaws that appear in the brightly lit studio:

> Under her black velvet top, I notice for the first time that she has a small paunch, a belly that has popped out. Her smile is crooked; her lips curl up at the extreme left of her mouth. (296)

Although relating the studio episode signifies a self-aware and humorous puncturing of Mehta's own fixation with Monalisa, it also destroys the carefully cultivated bar line persona that enables her to earn a living in challenging circumstances. There is a cruelty to Mehta's dismantling of the alluring image that Monalisa seeks to maintain. In this instance, again, the power dynamic implied by their different gazes is made evident. What, for Mehta, is a moment of knowing narrative exposition, is for Monalisa, a moment of extreme vulnerability. His critical gaze wrests control of her image from her.

Especially troubling are "the marks all down [Monalisa's] arms [that] can be seen clearly under the glare of the powerful studio lights" (286). Mehta has earlier observed that her "wrist is scarred and pitted like a dirt road"—the result of multiple suicide attempts. Monalisa habitually cuts herself during episodes of high emotional stress, literally inscribing the pain of being a young, marginalized woman in Bombay onto her body. Her potentially fatal behavior is sadly not unique to her situation. While at Rustom's studio, Monalisa encounters Marika, "the hottest model in the country," and immediately notices her similar scars, which both the male writer and male photographer present have overlooked (282). The extent of hidden female suffering in Bombay suddenly visible to him, Mehta realizes that:

> There must be a citywide sorority of these women who've slit their wrists and survived, who recognize one another automatically. A sisterhood of the slashed. The top model in India and the top bar dancer in Bombay have this in common: Their arms are marked with their anguish, like gang tattoos. (283)

Again, Bombay's realms of "pleasure" and "power" are conflated. Whereas Mehta openly professes his enjoyment of the "beery fraternity" that Sapphire fosters among its diverse male customers, this scarred "sisterhood" levels the city's hierarchy in a far more troubling manner (313). With painful irony, Monalisa and her female peers resort to self-harm in an attempt to assert control of their own bodies and identities. Mehta's casual equation of the women's scars to "gang tattoos" reinforces the fact that many of Bombay's marginalized men strategically embrace their "wasted" status to wield relative power as gangsters, criminals, dealers, and pimps. Women, however, experience heightened vulnerability. Even when they are as successful as the model Marika, they

struggle to achieve their desired self-presentation, valued as they are by many for their sexuality alone.

For Mehta, however, narrative desire ultimately sublimates sexual desire for Monalisa, as the final paragraph of this section reveals:

> At some point the Monalisa I'm writing in these pages will become more real, more alluring, than the Monalisa that is flesh and blood. One more ulloo, Monalisa will think. But imagine her surprise when she sees that what I am adoring, what I am obsessed with, is a girl beyond herself, larger than herself in the mirror beyond her, and it is her that I'm blowing all my money on, it is her that I'm getting to spin and twirl under the confetti of my words. The more I write, the faster my Monalisa dances. (314)

Ironically, this denouement both exposes and conceals Monalisa. By suggesting that she is naïve to assume that he has fallen for her, Mehta retains the upper hand in their relationship. His assertion of authorial control undermines her attempts to be seen and heard on her own terms. In Mehta's narrative, as in the bar, on the streets, and in the studio, the "real" Monalisa is relegated to the shadows while her body becomes a site for the projection of male fantasies.

CONCLUSION

Mehta's narrative staging of Monalisa's marginal body reveals the precarious task undertaken by authors of the contemporary postcolonial city. On the one hand, in keeping with his other thoughtful portrayals of Bombay's strugglers, outliers, and transients in *Maximum City*, Mehta's account of Monalisa's marginal bar line life directs attention to a hidden dimension of

urban reality, the necessarily covert nature of which inhibits legitimate claims to full social recognition and rights on the part of such women. However, the gendered gaze through which Mehta perceives Monalisa compromises his critique of the contradictory dynamics of visibility to which such female urban residents are subject, instead intensifying their capture within a disjunctive matrix of exposure and invisibility over which they have limited control.

Although problematic, the inherent ambiguity of Mehta's narrative highlights his contention that Bombay existence emerges from the dynamic interplay between urban reality and urban fantasy. As his critical engagement with popular Hindi film suggests, any account of Bombay, whether literary or cinematic, should not be taken at face value. Following in the migrant literary tradition of both Mulk Raj Anand and V. S. Naipaul, both of whom demonstrate, albeit in contrasting fashion, the ways in which Indian urban modernity disrupts the visual dynamics that keep city margins in place, Mehta offers a compelling critique of how, why, and by whom Bombay's most degraded places and their dejected occupants come to be seen as urban "waste." Through careful description, qualified ethnography, and personal reflection, he thus demands their immediate revaluation both as legitimate actors within the modern Indian state and as disenfranchised participants within an uneven global system that reinforces their continuing marginalization.

CONCLUSION

In *Maximum City*, Mehta finds evidence of a "mediocre imagination" at work in the design of the many new postmodern apartment blocks that rise up from land once occupied by Bombay's textile mills (125). Offering "cramped rooms and unnaturally large windows," these buildings are ill-suited to their environment "in which the sun is the enemy for much of the day" (125). Here, the imposition of a city conceived at a remove by designers, investors, and profit-driven city authorities is once again out of step with the lived experience of that same urban space. Neither the constraints of the physical environment nor the needs of the millions who once worked here factor into the redevelopment of these former commercial areas. Haunted by colonial occupation and industrial decline, the "mediocre" reimagining of this urban wasteland perpetuates the unequal social and economic structures through which it was first produced.

Throughout this dissertation, I have examined a series of texts that cultivate a more promising reimagination of urban waste, which interrogates its origins and reveals its manifold existing forms. There is a danger, David T. Fortin suggests, that by lending descriptive form to the urban margins, "slum fictions" consolidate these dynamic and ambiguous places as concrete "site[s] for intervention," which can therefore be managed in isolation from the complex socioeconomic networks that connect them to other urban and rural spaces both nearby and distant. However, by focusing on displaced and migrant figures, the literature I have analyzed repeatedly demonstrates that marginal urban existence is inseparable from a continuum of local, national, and transnational concerns.

If, in the eyes of city government, the apparently irreducible difference of urban waste legitimates its redevelopment through more or less violent means, others have tended towards the celebration of its distinctive cultural potential. In his reading of "garbage aesthetics" in Brazilian film, Robert Stam applauds waste as "the ideal postmodern and postcolonial metaphor . . . mixed, syncretic, a radically decentered social text" (40). My project has likewise sought to assert the critical potential of contemporary postcolonial engagements with urban waste. However, as Kenneth Harrow points out, Stam's construction of "oppositional trash" does not challenge its definition as such (14). Pitted against the system by which it is produced, Stam's urban waste demands recognition and reincorporation rather than total transformation. What is needed, Harrow elegantly puts it, is a representation of waste that provides "the troubling factor, the grain of sand or dirt within the oyster's shell, that remains without being absorbed or transformed into the pearl" (14).

My dissertation locates this insoluble "grit" in the often conflicted relationship between the politics and aesthetics of urban waste in contemporary postcolonial literature. The preceding chapters have demonstrated how contemporary writers from the Caribbean, Africa, India, and the United States not only unsettle neocolonial city discourse, but further suggest new ways of conceiving urban space that eschew violent instigation. These representational spaces, to use Lefebvre's terms, are attentive to the imbrication of human and environmental histories, the polyphony of contemporary cities, and the necessarily comparative nature of urban existence. Neither dystopian nor blindly idealistic, the texts I have analyzed succeed in identifying new sites of collaboration and belonging while also critiquing the material and discursive obstacles to the creation of a truly inclusive urban politics.

In Chapter One, my reading of Patrick Chamoiseau's *Texaco* highlighted the long, transnational histories of slum existence, which are sidelined by colonial discourse and further suppressed by neocolonial sponsorship of urban transformation in the developing world. This detailed history of the Texaco slum, which battles for a foothold in the hills above Martinique's capital city of Fort-de-France, dramatizes how its marginal residents must learn to live in and from the urban waste to which they have been condemned. By practicing urban gleaning, the slum-dwellers inventively construct homes from materials they find in the streets and municipal rubbish dump. Expressing a similar regard for that which has been discarded and forgotten, the protagonist Marie-Sophie pieces together a marginal urban history from her parents' partial memories, which persuasively asserts Texaco's territorial claim. Chamoiseau formally appropriates these foraging techniques by gleaning diverse narrative perspectives and styles in order to produce a polyphonic account of the slum's emergence. Whereas Texaco is eventually incorporated into the so-called city "proper" at the end of the novel, marking the containment of its autonomous resistant energy, the enduring tension between Chamoiseau's inventive composite text and its narrative of lack troubles this easy rationalization of the slum.

While the organized upgrading of Texaco rests on an implicit assertion of urban control, Chris Abani returns to explicit state-sanctioned violence in *GraceLand*. Elimination is portrayed as the alternative to incorporation in this novel, which reveals the embattled Lagos slum of Maroko to be both symptom and symbol of Nigeria's nervous post-independence condition. In Chapter Two, I showed how Abani's revision of the *Bildungsroman* genre effectively critiques the inimical multi-scalar discourses of development that produce and perpetuate urban waste. Unable to assimilate to his immediate urban context, the novel's alienated protagonist Elvis stands as the

troubling remnant of the socioeconomic inequity that thwarts his attempts to establish a home, career, and sense of belonging in the city. This is too much for him to bear. The conclusion of the novel thus sees Elvis anxiously poised to flee to America, a self-identified "scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face" (320).

Chapter Three anticipates some of the new challenges likely to be faced by Elvis on arrival in America. Dinaw Mengestu's *The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears* destabilizes the vertical hierarchy implicit in its protagonist's ostensible flight from Ethiopian peril to American sanctuary by portraying the profound disillusionment that Sepha experiences as an African exile in Washington, D.C. Unable to return home, his persistent memories of Addis Ababa reconfigure the relationship between First and Third world cities, exposing the disingenuousness of development discourses that insist on Africa's cultural and economic indebtedness to the West. I argue that both the form and content of the novel successfully enact the "global cognitive mapping" that Fredric Jameson identifies as essential to understanding and resisting the inequities of contemporary imperial capitalism. Sepha's migrant subjectivity is central to this process, revealing as it does the intertwined local and global formants of urban waste in Washington, D.C.

While Mengestu's Sepha cultivates nostalgia for Addis Ababa from afar, Chapter Four examines a text that is written from the perspective of a migrant returning to his home city after a long absence. A highly self-reflexive urban ethnography, Suketu Mehta's *Maximum City* invited me to consider the extent to which marginal urban narration exposes as well as empowers the vulnerable people, places, and things to which it deliberately calls attention. In particular, Mehta's textual handling of the female dancers who work in Bombay's shady "bar line" problematically falters between admiration and exploitation. Mehta himself acknowledges that the women activists

he meets who are working to improve their slum conditions are the "hope of Bombay" (55). However, his reinscription of the dancers' marginality suggests that the struggle for autonomy initiated by Chamoiseau's Marie-Sophie still needs to be urgently fought.

Although each of these texts addresses the specificities of urban waste in a different literary and geographical context, they commonly assert the transformative potential of the artistic imagination. At times, this is explicitly dramatized: Marie-Sophie is sustained by listening to poetry—her "literary therapy"—when the demands of Texaco threaten to overwhelm her (366); in *GraceLand,* Elvis begins to comprehend the far-reaching global context for his marginalization through reading, storytelling, and performance. At others, this is expressed through the distinctiveness of the literary form itself: the scalar shifts of Mengestu's cognitive map, for example, which hold local experience in constant dialogue with its broader context; or the polyphony of Mehta's Bombay ethnography, which individualizes the marginalized "masses" ignored in plain sight by the city's affluent classes.

Imaginative production is not without constraints in these texts. Elvis's tortured body bears agonizing witness to the manner in which creative protest is violently censored by the postcolonial state. Elsewhere, Mehta's narration of the bar line demonstrates how performance is further shaped by gendered economic imperatives. As urban waste proliferates through increasingly violent means—one thinks here of the recently militarized cityscapes of Baghdad and Mogadishu, for example—the creation of inclusive urban imaginaries is an ever more urgent and difficult task. Attentive to both the utopian promise and pragmatic limitations of their work, I have demonstrated how contemporary postcolonial writers persuasively interrogate urban marginality

through their formal and thematic revaluation of that which has been rejected, sidelined, and suppressed.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1.1 *The Gleaners* by François Millet. 1857.

Figure 1.2 “Untitled” from *Permanent Error* by Pieter Hugo. 2011.

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