

**Writing the Lagosian Homeland: The Ambiguous and
Precarious African Urban in Chris Abani's *GraceLand***
(2004)

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ABSTRACT

Located at the intersection of Urban Geographies and Literary Studies, this study focuses on urban geographical considerations as they are applied to the depiction of the city of Lagos, Nigeria in Chris Abani's novel *GraceLand* published in 2004. While exploring the cartographies of urban space in the novel, the study applies principles and theories of Southern Urbanisms, notably AbdouMaliq Simone, Ato Quayson, Edgar Pieterse and so much more to reading Lagos as a representation of the African urban. The study offers a critical exploration of the ways that the city of Lagos is mapped by the diasporic author – firstly, on the Noir genre and any possible connections to be made to the novel; secondly on the perception of the homeland and how this feeds into the mapping of the city in the text; thirdly on the lived experiences of those who reside in the city, particularly the perspective of the main character who presents as a type of flaneur within it. The study ultimately hopes to highlight inherent complexities and ambiguities and contribute towards a modification of global perceptions of the African urban.

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INTRODUCTION

There is no lack of literature that sees African cities as essentially dysfunctional and dangerous places. Contemporary Africa certainly has examples of city life that are nightmarish. However, there is also a counter-trend which highlights the economic rationality of much activity in African cities and sees them as well as the fount of cultural creativity as older rural-based ways of life fade or contain radically new elements. In this sense, the seed of a new Africa that can overcome present dilemmas lies there. (Freund 142)

African cities have historically been places of contention due to the spaces originally being created to serve the colonial project by excluding indigenous people from entering these centres of trade and commerce (Freund 19). And as Freund states above, this violence is widely portrayed in various texts that position the African city as the subject, in both the Global North and South, but it would be egregious to disregard the impact that these urban spaces have on the perceptions and representations of the Global South, particularly in the postcolonial and contemporary moment. The ‘counter-trend’ Freund mentions that focuses on highlighting African cities as the “fount of cultural creativity,” reiterates the focus of this study to explore Lagos as a site of cultural creativity that is evident in the extent of media and literary productions highlighting the dynamic nature of the city –although this study will be focusing on the literary.

The city as defined through the various concepts that make up the field of urban geography is a complicated and weighted subject and Debadutta Parida and Sandeep Agrawal explore these factors in their article, *Southern urbanism: a systematic review of concepts, debates, and future directions* (2023). The authors note seven characteristics of southern cities, provide the source of these characteristics and explain the ideas behind them (2599). The first characteristic that informs our understanding of the ‘city’ and ‘city-ness’ is also mirrored in some of the other texts on urban theories I will be engaging in this project, which is that ‘informality’ is the basis of urban processes and influences every level of urban functioning; another key characteristic that underscores my project is that of uncertainty, which is embedded in the experience of the city and act as the driving force behind interactions and engagements within it – residents are inherently adaptive and rely on unique solutions. The next characteristic is that labour in cities

does not always equate to capital or economic gain and, despite its extensive workforce, the formal economy does not register this impact. A characteristic also noted is that vulnerability is a dominant experience of the city population, as they are vulnerable to numerous risks, like economic, cultural and environmental risks; another is that governance regimes in cities are typically more invested in developing infrastructure rather than furthering industrial production; and, an important historically-based characteristic is that the spatial culture of southern cities is a hybrid dominated by discourses rooted in colonialism. The final characteristic of southern cities is that there is not always a correlation between the rationalities that exist within groups that occupy the space, particularly in vertical relations such as the one between governance systems and the marginalized urban populations. From the characteristics outlined above, we get a very strong sense of not just how southern cities are perceived and depicted in literature, but of the lived experiences of city residents – the ‘cityness’ of these spaces.

In “The Cinematic city: Desire, form and the African urban,” (2019), Mupotsa et al., explore the idea of ‘cityness’ within Africa as a result of these spaces always being in conversation with the standardized globalized (Western) conceptions of the urban, as well as how the dialectic of ‘lack and excess’ is embedded in the experience of the city by those who inhabit it (186). The same can be said for a novel like Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* (2004) in regard to the city of Lagos as this is one of the most prominent subjects to be found within the novel. The question this project is concerned with is what ideas about the African city space – particularly the city of Lagos, Nigeria – emerge through the text and present as vital to our understanding of the space. The discussion in this chapter of the idea of ‘cityness’ as well as that of ‘lack and excess’ are two aspects that are very apparent in the narrative of *GraceLand* – there is a very strong focus on depicting the cityscape and “cityness” of Lagos in 2004 through the eyes of the protagonist Elvis.

Chris Abani’s ‘Bildungsroman’ *GraceLand* is often regarded as one of his most notable works and is the main focus of this study. The novel engages the idea of ambiguous sexualities, gender and questionable morality set within the context of violence in the city of Lagos, Nigeria (Tunca 2014). *GraceLand* was originally published in 2004, securing a Silver Medal in the Commonwealth Club’s California Book Awards, the Hemingway Foundation/PEN Award in 2005, a Hurston/Wright Legacy Award, as well as being a finalist for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize (Singer 2010). The text is seminal in numerous ways, such as highlighting the South

as a valid space of knowledge formation, as well as challenging the traditional consideration of what constitutes world literature (Hartwiger 2014). Indeed, despite the text being published in English, it surpasses – or more likely, counters – this global literary expectation by utilising pidgin English and the indigenous language in its narration, as well as including detailed accounts of indigenous practices and traditions throughout the text.

As his first major work written in exile, *GraceLand* (2004) was written at an interesting point in Abani's writing career and his political life. Tunca notes that Abani's third novel marked a sort of rebirth for the author since it is often regarded as his first distinct work of 'literary fiction' (Tunca 3). In this study, I will argue that the novel can be read as a commentary on the construction of space in Lagos and how it influences the experiences of those residing within the city, as well as how this relates quite interestingly to Abani's own understanding of the spatial construction of Lagos that he so adamantly explores in his works.

Mapping the Field: Lagos in Film, Literature and Digital Media

The city is an intrinsic site of cultural production, and this is evident in the extent of literary productions based in it, as well as the numerous dynamic authors and scholars that emerge from the space. Gazelle Mba, as part of The Booker Prizes online blog, writes about Nigerian literature in her article, *The Four Generations: Nigerian literature, the Booker Prize and beyond* (2023), where she chronologically outlines numerous Nigerian authors and their contributions to the Nigerian literary field, as well as positioning these authors in relation to the larger conversation of the African literary culture. Across these generational categories of Nigerian authors, we can comprehend the perception of Lagos (and other key African urban contexts) that emerged within the scope of literature produced in each period and the way the city is included in them. If we look at Cyprian Ekwensi's *People of the City* (1954) as an example from the first generation, the city in question is not directly named but is largely perceived to be Lagos and acts as the setting for the main character, Amusa Sango's coming-of-age story as he fights to make something of himself in the dynamic space – the city here is colonial but also at the beginning of its era of modernization and presents as its own character throughout the text that interacts with the main character as much as he does (Ekwensi 1954). As for the second generation, my analysis of Chris Abani's work in this study will add to the already existing knowledge about the perception of Lagos in texts by this group of authors. An

example of the city in texts by third generation authors, if we look at what Chimamanda Adichie did in her novel, *Americanah* (2013), we see how the city is written about comparatively and from the point of view of a character that is more familiar with the hostland than with the homeland – so the Lagos we see in this novel presents as almost new and unfamiliar (Adichie 2014).

As Nigeria's economic capital, Lagos as a subject has been the focus of many studies and various productions throughout the years, but the city's value also lies in its rich history. In *Building Lagos* (2009), a book by Kunle Akinsemoyin and Alan Vaughan-Richards that focuses on the intricacies of the architecture of the city, both authors note that the island of Lagos was initially bypassed in the first wave of colonialism imposed upon the African continent, and which was only inflicted on the island much later, closer to the end of the 15th century (4). The first form of settlement in Lagos is noted to be dependent on the materials that were available instead of on the climate of the city (Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards 6); this prompts the question of whether this persisted until the current moment as we explore the Lagos that is being presented in the novel. The first proper instance of European influence on the island (and West Africa in general) came from the Portuguese, and with them the slave trade, (Akinsemoyin and Vaughan-Richards 12) and that began the long projection to the Lagos we know today. Braimah and Onishi discuss the spatial dynamics of Lagos in their article, *Spatial determinants of urban land use change in Lagos, Nigeria* (2007) and explain that Lagos has experienced issues with environmental sustainability due to its "rapid increase in population," (507) especially in 1984 and 2000, when Lagos experienced the quickest population growth and economic expansion (503) and has not received the necessary attention to resolve this – "Inadequate housing leading to the emergence of slums, spatial inequity in access to land and infrastructure, haphazard land development, infrastructure decay, incessant flooding, widespread poverty and unemployment are some of the symptoms of unsustainable expansion of the city requiring the intervention of land use planners and managers," (503) and it is this lack or failed infrastructure that is one of the key ideas that will be engaged by the urban theorists I will be utilising in my study.

In my study, I will not be focusing on the representations of Lagos that exist in digital media forms, but I cannot ignore the contribution that this field has made to the perception and understanding of Lagos throughout the years, particularly the Nollywood film genre which emerged as a key example of this field. This should not suggest that my focus on the literary is

to counter the digital representations, but rather that the literary could build on these representations and provide more depth in this study. When considering the role that digital and visual media has played in the dissemination and understanding of Lagos, we could note the importance of ‘home videos’ which were Nollywood’s first variations of popular digital media often produced locally for local consumption that showcased life in both rural and urban spaces, and have since grown and expanded to constitute an extensive variety of media forms available across a multitude of platforms that explores the lived experiences of Nigerians not just within the country, but also within the diaspora; and through which, we could somewhat track the evolution of key urban spaces like Lagos.

In his chapter titled “Dark and gritty/slick and glossy: Genre, Nollywood and Lagos” Connor Ryan more directly contemplates the ways that the city of Lagos, Nigeria is represented across various genres and the effect that these representations have on the (global) perception of the city (296). He considers how Lagos is historically positioned as a space of urban crisis through films, as well as how more recent contemplations by New Nollywood producers, which offer a wider and more dynamic representation of Lagos, could work to counter these previous perceptions (303). Ryan’s contemplation of the historical positioning of Lagos could be useful in cultivating an understanding of the city before the publication of Abani’s novel, as well as aid in situating the narrative within the already established ideas of Lagos that existed at the time; furthermore, the project could evaluate where Abani is located as a producer, in comparison to the New Nollywood producers discussed by Ryan – how the space and time that the producers find themselves in (and perhaps their own lived experiences) influence their depictions of Lagos city in their productions.

In continuing with the different forms through which the city of Lagos is engaged, we could also briefly consider the role of the internet in curating an understanding of Lagos. In another article, *Digital Cities: Investigating the Image of Lagos as a Fashion City Online Through Web Search Queries*, Dairo analyses the potential for nation-building by global cities through the utilization of the digital era, and her study is directly concerned with examining the online image of Lagos as an emerging fashion capital, as well as the extent and manner to which this could be expanded on the global sphere (20). What I find interesting about this study is that Dairo is working to draw lines between a perception of Lagos that exists online and the actual lived experience and reality of the space, and how the online perception can be manipulated to affect the reality. In some ways, this interrelatedness links to the previous point made by Dairo

about the symbiotic relationship between the story being told and the city that it is set in, because similarly, the digital or online perception of Lagos as a fashion city is based on the reality of the space, and in order for the digital perception of the city to change, the reality would have to be amended. This interrelatedness or symbiosis can also be applied to other relations that exist within the process of literary production, such as the author's positionality to the story being depicted. It makes us question the extent to which authors are influenced by their stories, in the same way that their stories are influenced by them.

Situating *GraceLand*

Born and raised in Afikpo¹ in the Ebonyi State of Nigeria to an Igbo father and English mother, Chris Abani's first published work pre-exile, was a fictional piece he wrote when he was ten years old (though he had been writing since he was six years old), but that was just a precursor to another fictional piece, – a novel he wrote when he was sixteen – a thriller entitled *Masters of the Board* in 1984. Due to the context in which the novel was published and the highly political theme of the novel, Abani was accused of political dissidence and imprisoned for six months (Tunca 1). Abani's second novel, *Sirocco* (1987) had quite a controversial reception due to the political unrest in Nigeria at the time and even led to his being incarcerated for a year at a maximum-security prison in Lagos, as well as all copies of the book being collected and destroyed and the termination of the book's publishing house (Tunca 1). Abani is also a playwright and one of his notable plays is *Song of a Broken Flute* which was composed in 1990 after his release from his second imprisonment (Tunca 1). This 1990 play maintained Abani's political dissident status as its main message is a criticism of Nigeria's political regime at the time which was perceived as not adequately upholding its peoples' human rights (Tunca 1). A staging of the play was attended by the Head of State at the time who, having been displeased by the play's message, sentenced Abani to death without trial, but Abani was fortunate to escape this through the intervention of a friend and even flee the country to escape further persecution. (Tunca 1). However, Abani's exile from his country would not limit his writing on its political occurrences and would actually allow him to further explore this topic and others in more diverse forms of writing. His own experience of a politically-charged and dangerous Nigeria is

¹ Note, this is also the hometown of Elvis, the main character in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004).

echoed in the civil unrest that the characters in *GraceLand* (2004) endured in the middle of the story.

After fleeing Nigeria, Abani published his first collection of poetry, *Kalakuta Republic* (2000) about his turbulent experience of political dissidence and incarceration in Nigeria. The title given to this collection of poetry is taken from the name of a prison cell that Abani was held in, which in turn was actually named after the residence (an expansive private communal compound located in Lagos, Nigeria) of Fela Aníkúlápó Kuti² whom Abani met during his first imprisonment (Tunca 2). *Kalakuta Republic* and some of Abani's other publications can be seen as being influenced not just by his overall experience of a turbulent and distressed Nigeria at the time, but also of his experience in prison, which Abani notes as representations of both his disbelief in the "inherent goodness of humanity" and also simultaneously, his appreciation of "the effort it takes to be good" ("Author's Note", *Kalakuta Republic* 10) (Tunca 2). But it is essential to note that this preoccupation, although relevant, does not dominate all of Abani's publications. As an exiled writer, Abani has written a number of poetry anthologies. *Dog Woman* (2004) an anthology of poetry based on paintings by Paula Rego, a Spanish artist from whom Abani drew inspiration (Tunca 2014) and *Hands Washing Water* (2006). Daria Tunca notes that Abani uses this anthology as a vessel to share the stories of his travels throughout the years, as well as "emphasize the ties that bind places and cultures and assert the fundamental oneness of human experience" (Tunca 4). In his next anthology titled *Sanctificum* (2010), Abani discusses spiritual traditions as they relate to masculinity and war, particularly the spiritual traditions of the Catholic, Igbo³ and Yoruba⁴ (Tunca 5). A similarity can be found between this anthology and the novel *GraceLand* (2004) because they both reflect in some way the impact of music. *Sanctificum* (2010) works to express what Tunca terms "the expressive potential of music" and in *GraceLand* (2004), music is a powerful thread that connects the main character, Elvis, to his mother and his tradition, so much so that it is evident in his name. After this exploration of religion in 2010, Abani circles back to his exploration of art in his anthology *There Are No Names For Red* in the same year. This anthology features thirty poems by Abani inspired by the works of an African American artist and fellow writer, Percival Everett and Abani's publication *Feed Me The Sun* released in 2010, is a compilation of selected poems from all his anthologies published after 2003. Abani's interest in traditional beliefs and rituals,

² often regarded as a pioneer in African music, Fela Kuti was a Nigerian musician, composer, and bandleader, as well as a political activist and Pan-Africanist

³ An ethnic group of Nigeria, primarily found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States

⁴ An ethnic group of Nigeria with smaller groups found in Benin and northern Togo

as well as the role language plays in it, is a theme that can be found underscoring most of his poetry, – including those published in exile – as well as his novel *GraceLand* (2004). In the novel, the main character very clearly works to reconcile his memories which are full of ritualistic and traditional practices he experienced as a child in his village before he relocated to the city. It is almost as if it represents Abani's own memories of a traditional and political Nigeria that was left behind due to the forced relocation through exile.

In exile, Abani's prose fiction includes *Becoming Abigail* (2006), a novella about a teenage girl named Abigail who moves from Nigeria to London in search of answers about her deceased mother and namesake who passed during childbirth, as well as simultaneously escape her alcoholic father (Tunca 4). However, Abigail's hunt for information about her mother is tainted as she experiences severe negative and traumatic events while in the new and foreign space of London (Tunca). Returning to the Nigerian context, Abani's next publication, *Song For Night* (2007) is set during the context of the Biafran War that took place in Nigeria 40 years prior. The text offers some grim or intense accounts as do a lot of Abani's works (*GraceLand* included) especially those to be found within the context of war and could be Abani's own attempt to reconcile his own experiences and trauma of war (Tunca 5). Leaving the Nigerian context, *The Virgin of Flames* (2007), Abani's next publication is one that takes a more abstract approach in its narration as it tells the tale of a Nigerian-Salvadoran artist who dresses as the Virgin Mary in order to gain inspiration for his art (Tunca 1). This 2007 novel can in many ways be linked to Abani's earlier work in 2004, as both the main characters in *Virgin of Flames* and *GraceLand* use the act of mimicry or impersonation as a means of expression and to support their livelihoods. But more importantly, this impersonation is not only pertinent to his main character but is also pertinent in the story of Lagos that Abani highlights in *GraceLand*, which I will consider more closely at a later point in this study.

Research Questions

Throughout this study, I will aim to answer a main question that outlines my specific curiosity about the city of Lagos that Abani crafts in the novel, as well as three sub questions that arise as a subsequent result of this exploration and direct my navigation of this topic. The main question of this study interrogates the prevailing depiction of the African urban through an Afropessimistic lens and proposes an ambiguity and precarity apparent in the space which is

highlighted through a more nuanced reading of both the concept of Afropessimism and the African urban itself. When I speak of the African urban in this context, I understand it through the context of Debadutta Parida and Sandeep Agrawal's definition of southern cities and the concept of southern urbanisms. The first subquestion of this study is focused on the Lagos Noir genre and all its attributes as a possibly Afropessimist imaginary, particularly how *GraceLand* fits into this category and the ways in which its themes influence the perception of the African urban, especially Lagos; the second subquestion to guide this study is about the different elements that are found to make up the homeland in *GraceLand* and formulate complex and dynamic ecologies of African urbanity in the process; by paying close attention to the devices and structural aspects of the novel, the third subquestion is concerned with the way the author intricately maps Lagos through the content of the novel and the flow of the narrative, by analysing the lived experienced of the characters in the text, all the while centring the main character, Elvis.

Theoretical Framework

This project is situated at an intersection of urban studies and literary studies, with a focus on Nigeria. These texts will also inform the language I use throughout the enquiry of my project

In literary studies, *The Cambridge Companion to the City in World Literature* (2023) by Jini Kim Watson and Ato Quayson break down some ideas around cities and the potential embedded in these spaces, by noting that cities function in two ways – as sites where theories based in world literature are formulated and engaged, and as spaces that are a result of world literature. The former means that cities function as spaces where local and global phenomena are translated to be understood practically because they work to “make the strange knowable” (Quayson and Watson 5). This idea of cities as complicating traditional nodes of understanding is vital in our consideration of the work Abani does in his use of noir and interaction with Afropessimism. Robert Tally's chapter in the same book, “Urban Itinerary and the City Map,” notes the implicit power and knowledge that exists in the ability to manoeuvre and map the city and that a subject of the city cannot truly know the city without being able to map it. In a similar reflection, Tally discusses the idea of counter-mapping, a liberatory practice that is rooted in the global southern experience where groups “reclaim and modify representation structures”

(60). World literature is noted as being included in a cartographic project of mapping and remapping (61).

In the field of Southern urbanism, contributions made by AbdouMaliq Simone – whom I will be utilising extensively throughout my project – in his article *People as Infrastructure* (2004), asserts that because African cities are so fragmented, the built forms cannot and do not often constitute the traditional or normative sense of a city according to Western perceptions. Instead they are made up of makeshift urban infrastructures that lack essential services and are riddled with inefficiencies – “half-built environments” that are “underdeveloped, overused, fragmented” (425), and in response to that, the inhabitants if the ‘inner cities’ expiate this lack, particularly in the economic sense but also as it feeds into the overall sense of the city. Simone claims that the use of people as infrastructure in African cities is a kind of mediated experience of the city that is essential to but lacking in non-African cities (410). This notion of “people as infrastructure” is particularly productive in my study of the representation of Lagosian city dwellers in *GraceLand*.

AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse contribute further to this field in their book, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (2017), specifically the chapter, “Paradoxes of the Urban” explicates the paradoxes that are inherent to the city space. In the chapter, the authors explain cities as spaces filled with paradoxes so much so that it actually reconstructs what can be understood as ‘urban’ and constantly works towards the “remaking of abstract worlds” (3). Simone and Pieterse also propose the idea of re-description which calls for a reappraisal of the eclectic structure and built forms that make up the urban – that instead of viewing this form as competitive, it should be viewed as a ‘friction’ or resource that is informative of the space, as well as a means to continuously understand or perceive the potential of the urban (especially in the case of those cities that are typically excluded from the global narrative of development) (182). The method of re-description could prove useful as it allows us a way to understand these cities for the potential that is immersed in them, and viewing cities as a network of stories also gives us a practical way to perceive the potential of these cities and its inhabitants.

The final AbdouMaliq Simone text that I will be utilising in this project, is his chapter “The Politics of Urban Intersection: Materials, Affect, Bodies” as part of *The New Blackwell Companion to the City* (2011). In this chapter, Simone discusses how friction and tension as a result of intersections as embedded in and constitutive of the politics that make up urban engagement. The word ‘friction’ denotes some kind of contact and this is set within and made

possible because of the urban space where individuals are forced into interaction. He also notes that urban residents are constantly enveloped in the task of observation and surveillance as a means of survival within the city, stating that “It is a way of finding new angles to earn money, and get information and opportunity” (360). The basis of this ability is once more based in a certain ambiguity inherent in the urban space where there is uncertainty about the boundaries of individuals who are all thrust together in a kind of boundary-transgressing existence. The idea of ‘intersection’ that Simone discusses is framed as a contemporary form of politics, and he notes that these intersections are intrinsically ambiguous – “Part of every intersection is the prospect that things will not come together and take something from each other; rather that some fundamental divides and impossibilities of translation will remain.” (362). This idea of intersections can be applied alongside that of the city as a network of stories that intersect, as well as a method through which “people as infrastructure” can be activated.

Literature Review

There has been an extensive scope of writings on *GraceLand* (2004) because the novel deals with so many important concepts throughout its narrative, such as the depiction and perception of the African city space, the idea of crossdressing and how it relates to identity formation, the role of war in the construction of the African urban, and so much more. In an article titled *The Chris Abani Bibliography* (2014) Daria Tunca notes the importance of Abani’s main character, Elvis Oke, when considering the intersections of culture that are visible throughout Abani’s works, perhaps due in part to his own experience of different cultures at a young age after fleeing Nigeria. As Daria Tunca explicates, Abani begins the novel by providing a critical look into Elvis’ life in Lagos where he lives with his unsupportive alcoholic father and struggles to make a living performing as an Elvis impersonator for different White tourists who visit the city; and as he is unable to sustain himself through this, we then see Elvis pushed to desperation and partaking in illegal activities guided by his friend, Redemption (Tunca 5). Tunca states that there is much appreciation to be given to Abani because of the sensitive way in which he narrates Elvis’ life, as well as the dynamic and distinct way that the novel is structured (Tunca 5). She explains that “the book’s narrative sequences are padded with recipes and descriptions of medicinal plants (presumably extracts from Elvis’s mother’s diary), religious texts and even an excerpt from a popular Onitsha Market romance” and that these “transitory sections echo or obliquely anticipate episodes in the narrative, and more generally reflect and enhance some of

the novel's main themes: the cultural and social significance of rituals, maturation and transformation, and gender roles and expectations in a patriarchal society" (Tunca 5).

Iain Lambert's article *Chris Abani's Graceland and Uzodinma Iweala's Beasts of No Nation: Nonstandard English, intertextuality and Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozaboy* (2011) is more concerned with Abani's use of language in *GraceLand* (2004) and notes that Abani utilises intertextuality in many forms as a literary device in the novel, which very directly links the text with and positions it in relation to other English Nigerian literary productions (290). Lambert notes that not only do some of the characters mirror other characters in different texts by various Nigerian authors, but certain texts also actually feature directly in the narrative (291). In addition to the use of intertextuality, Abani also utilises nonstandard forms throughout his novel, particularly his use of Nigerian Pidgin English and irregular sentence or paragraph structures, which mirror other texts of the same genre and positions it within the larger scope of this field (Lambert 292). The ideas that Lambert brings forth are quite useful in the scope of my project because they speak quite directly to my own quest to understand how Abani's framing of Lagos in his novel is situated in relation to the general depiction of the city within these media forms. Through Lambert's approach, we already understand that Abani's text is closely connected to other texts of similar narratives, with certain characters being drawn directly as inspiration. Whereas, in terms of the structure of his text, Abani situates himself differently to some extent (seen in the unique structure of each chapter) but also connects to the wider literary scope with his use of nonstandard forms. The delicacy of Abani's manoeuvring of the literary field within which his text is situated, adds meaning to the narrative, and thus to our understanding of Lagos. It makes us question what aspects of the city Abani meant to keep similar to other representations, as well as which parts he aimed to differentiate.

In the article *Strangers in/to the World: The Unhomely in Chris Abani's GraceLand* (2014), Alexander Hartwiger unpacks the idea of the 'unhomely' in Chris Abani's *GraceLand* (2004) and its critical role in our understanding of the postcolonial and the identities that are constructed within this period. His article explains that the nation is so critical in the formation of 'modern identities,' as well as in depicting when these identities are displaced and alienated (Hartwiger 233). He also writes towards a re-understanding of the idea of 'cosmopolitanism' through the lens of the 'unhomely' in an attempt to produce a 'political component' and 'counter-hegemonic narrative' that "questions what it means to be at home in the world" (233). The 'unhomely' space that Hartwiger refers to is seen at the end of *GraceLand* (2004) when

Elvis has neither completely fled Nigeria nor officially entered the United States, but instead is depicted mid-transgression of boundaries, in a space that Hartwiger describes as ‘interstitial’ and ‘stateless’ (233). It is in this space that Hartwiger locates the unhomely and its population “whose dislocation, displacement and disenfranchisement mark a different experience of being in the world” (233). Hartwiger’s use of ‘unhomely’ is originally sourced from Homi Bhabha’s article, “The World and The Home,” but the term has even deeper roots and is connected to Freud’s use of the term in *Das Unheimliche* (“the uncanny”) in 1919 (234). In the case of Bhabha, the unhomely exists due to a “collapse of the distinction between public and private” that leads to a kind of shock or trauma that results from these two spaces crossing, as well as a “paradigmatic post-colonial experience” (Hartwiger 235). In a similar way, Freud understands the ‘unhomely’ as a psychological condition in which trauma is invoked after something that should be hidden is exposed (Hartwiger 235). In his article, Hartwiger offers numerous epithets for Abani and even refers to him as one of the “many third-generation African writers” who “address the problems of dislocation and disintegration” that are produced through the “ambivalent relationship with the nation-state” (Hartwiger 233). But this is to be expected from an author that Hartwiger calls a “child of the postcolonial” due to Abani’s having directly experienced Nigeria as it transitioned into its postcolonial period (236). Hartwiger’s idea of the unhomely here is such an essential part of understanding Abani’s construction of Lagos in *GraceLand* because it once again speaks to Abani’s own experience of Nigeria – the unhomeliness of the space due to his exile where he experiences his own “paradigmatic post-colonial experience” (Hartwiger 235). Thus, in this project, I will contemplate the unhomeliness of Lagos to the characters that dwell in it, and how commonly the essence of the unhomely features in certain depictions of Lagos in print and film media.

In addition to the above, Hartwiger explicates in his article that in the postcolonial moment, the space that is considered ‘home’ (the “local or national”) and the external space of the ‘world’ (the “global public sphere”) become entwined and this entanglement in turn forces the local or national individuals to form mediated communities where their “shared experience of dislocation provides the basis for affiliation” (Hartwiger 234). Hartwiger’s focus on *GraceLand* in his article is based on his belief that the novel can be viewed as a means through which to understand or engage the idea of the ‘unhomely’ as more than just a concept, but as a lens through which we can frame ‘world literature’ (234). He stresses that his article’s focus on Abani’s writing and on Nigeria as a case study is just one part of the larger study that explores this previously disregarded viewpoint of experiencing the world, the “viewpoint of the

marginalized, diasporic, refugee, migrant worker, etc.,” that is highlighted in the works of others like Raqi Hage, Junot Diaz and Teju Cole (Hartwiger 236). To Hartwiger, *GraceLand* and other similar texts present a challenge in that they force us to re-evaluate how these texts are considered on the global scale and can positively impact world literature, instead of being “fixed as postcolonial” or being considered simply as “national literatures” (Hartwiger 238), and this study will build on this idea.

Similar to Hartwiger’s assertion that texts like *GraceLand* are vital to the reimagining of the larger scope of world literature, Ashley Dawson’s article titled *Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning, and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's Graceland* (2009) argue for the understanding of the novel as offering “allegories of postcolonial hopes for economic development and political reform” and this is especially critical in the moment the novel is written when postcolonial scholars were not adequately addressing issues of society and urban space in the global South (Dawson 17). For Dawson, Abani’s *GraceLand* explicitly highlights the need for urban geography discourse and ‘citizenship,’ especially in the context of the global South where the urban was undertaking a transformation in the postcolonial and there was no precedent for this (32). Following a similar thought pattern, Sarah K. Harrison’s article “*Suspended City*”: *Personal, Urban, and National Development in Chris Abani's Graceland* (2012) discusses how Abani’s novel, through its narrative, outlines the prevalent issues that are encountered once “local, national and global discourses” are made to intersect with the idea of the urban, and consequently critiques the “instability and inconsistency of the postcolonial nation-state” (95). For Harrison, the regression of Elvis’ *Bildung* and his inability to “mature according to generic convention” as the novel progresses is a result of his exposure to the “violent dynamics of contemporary postcolonial rule” which in turn is due to the inability of the “incompetent postcolonial government” (111). Harrison notes the takeaway from *GraceLand* as the need for new ways to appraise the progression of the nation-state without disregarding its traumatic history, but instead, consolidating it (111). I agree with Harrison’s proposal of consolidation because it allows us to understand Elvis’ story as more than just a disjointed tale of trauma experienced by one individual, but rather as a representation of a national condition – a condition that is actually seen experienced by every character in *GraceLand* due to their situation within this particular nation space.

Adopting a slightly different approach in his article *Chris Abani and the Politics of Ambivalence* (2011), Matthew Omelsky writes more directly about the ‘ambivalence’ that

seems to populate a lot of Abani's works and explains that in *GraceLand*, despite the brutal lives that the characters lead, they (particularly the youth) have a type of 'euphoric optimism' that filters through the narrative (84). For Omelsky, this ambivalence is what marks the novel as one of Abani's "greatest contributions to contemporary thought" (94). He argues that Abani simultaneously depicts the traumatic reality of living on the margins of society but also offers a glimpse of hope through the possibility of escape. Furthermore, Omelsky noted that Abani "fuses the aesthetic and the political" and deliberately portrays his novel in this ambiguous manner as a means to complicate how we "think and imagine African youth resistance" (84). The resistance that is mentioned here seems to be a resistance against the restrictive context that Abani's characters find themselves in where they have "little room to negotiate the constraints of their bleak lives in the slums of Lagos" and in retaliation focus on a type of optimism that is not familiar with their context but is rather "undergirded primarily by idealized non-African spaces" (Omelsky 85).

Another line that Omelsky draws through Abani's work is the violence represented in the text as an allegory for state-sponsored oppression, as both aspects permeate not just through the spaces, but also the lives of those who reside in it; and this violence then becomes not just the "terrain upon which the characters in *GraceLand* navigate" but also becomes the "core of their precarious existence" (85). The violence is so potent that Omelsky discusses it as a 'decay' that spreads through several characters and leads to their psychological and corporeal deterioration (86). Omelsky observes that we see Abani frame the idea of escape as the means of redemption to be achieved through non-African spaces and their cultural capital," particularly the United States (Omelsky 87). And this is apparent in the various representations of American popular culture throughout the text, which Omelsky terms as 'euphoria-of-the-outside' (87). However, Omelsky notes that this is not a dismissal of the value of third-world spaces by Abani but is rather tied to the economic growth and "mass influx of imported commodities" into Nigeria in the 1970s (87). Abani uses this historical context as a tool for his characters to utilise in their imaginings of what constitutes an improvement of their current experience, but Omelsky in turn questions the effect this idealization has on the youths in *GraceLand* and questions whether this empowers or disempowers them (90). This task Abani undertakes to subtly portray the fixation on Western culture as a natural side-effect of modernity (and a legacy of colonialism) and simultaneously as a possible hindrance from a holistic experience of the African urban, which is so key to our understanding of the text, as he depicts his characters desire for a world outside Africa as both ambitious and futile. Similarly, another ambiguity located in Abani's

novel is that of agency and Omelsky notes it is “hardly evident or cohesive” because the characters in *GraceLand* are portrayed as both empowered in their vision to escape but are also disempowered due to their socio-economic context (90). I perceive this ambiguity as underscoring very directly the experience of the African city/urban, premised in modernity but still excluded from it as a whole.

Omelsky argues that another process which Abani uses to complicate the idea of agency as ambiguous, is through that of social normativity, which is constantly thrown into flux by Elvis as he enacts the ambiguity of his sexuality and gender through his Elvis impersonation, his desire to cross-dress in earlier instances in the novel, the imitation of queer sexuality with his friends, and so on (Omelsky 91). Likewise, Tunca compares *GraceLand* to Abani’s *Virgin With Flames* (2007) which also engages the idea of cross-dressing in its narrative. Here, the character of Black from the latter text who regularly dresses as the Virgin Mary from the Catholic religion, almost presents as a trans-gendered version of the trans-cultural and trans-racial cross-dressing that Elvis performs in *GraceLand*. Tunca notes that Black’s performance of cross-dressing as a transgression of gender boundaries can be viewed as an actualisation of his ‘undecided sexual orientation,’ as well as his “search of identity on his part, both as a person and as an artist” (Tunca 5). I will be engaging this idea further throughout my study.

Methodological Considerations and Chapter Outline

In my study of Abani’s novel, it is necessary to note that I am less concerned with the chronology of events in Nigeria as a setting, rather I am more concerned with the various and dynamic articulations of space and place within it. Three main sections will form part of the analysis of my research project and shape my exploration of Abani’s perception and depiction of Lagos.

The first chapter will be exploring the noir genre (its origin and mediation from a cinematic genre into a literary genre) and after establishing what makes up the understanding of the genre (its themes, subjects, properties), will consider the ways that this genre is enacted through the *Lagos Noir* anthology, and if there are any similarities to be noted in Abani’s work across the anthology and in his novel, *GraceLand*. This chapter is particularly concerned with the framing of the noir genre as Afropessimist, and if *GraceLand* is a noir text, what this means for the categorisation of the city it depicts. By looking at the specific contributions made by Abani to

the collection – its curation, the introductory chapter and his own story, “Killer Ape” – I will hopefully gain some insight into the author’s understanding of the genre and if he carries these principles through his 2004 novel. Throughout this chapter, I will utilize AbdouMaliq Simone’s *People as Infrastructure* to understand the representation of characters in relation to the built environment around them.

Chapter two of the study will focus more closely on Abani and his imaginary of Laos in the novel, particularly his position as a diasporic writer and how this influences the text., I will also apply Edgar Pieterse and AbdouMaliq Simone’s ideas from *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (2017) where they explain that cities are inherently paradoxical, and we can see some paradoxical elements in Abani’s novel. Lagos in the text functions as a space where all dichotomies are entwined in a complicated interaction. I will also be applying Pieterse and Simone’s idea of redescription in this chapter and read it into the city that Abani crafts in the novel, as it is a depiction of the fractured stories noted by both Pieterse and Simone that make up the city space.

Chapter three of the project will delve more deeply into the itinerary constructed by Abani in his novel through the eyes of his main character, Elvis, and his mapping of the space as a Lagosian flaneur. This section will be more concerned with the ways in which Elvis navigates the Lagos in *GraceLand* and the implications of this navigation on the conceptualisation of the urban space. Additionally, in this chapter, I will survey Abani’s mapping of death in the city and the quest for redemption as a driving force behind its residents. The chapter will follow Elvis’ movement from Maroko to Bridge City and finally to the United States in his process of redemption and the way his relationships influence this process. Simone’s discussion of ambiguity echoes Matthew Omelsky’s idea of ambivalence that could be directly read into Elvis’ experience of the city in *GraceLand*. Simone’s idea of surveillance from “The Politics of Urban Intersection” is also applicable in this chapter as I will apply it to the representation of relationships between the characters which allow a level of surveillance in the city space.

CHAPTER 1: Lagos and the Noir Genre as an Afropessimist Imaginary

Morolake Dairo's article *The City in Literature: The Image of Lagos City in Lagos Noir* (2021) is concerned with understanding the representations of cities within literary productions as a way to understand the positioning of cities, as well as the experiences of its inhabitants. Specifically, her article is concerned with the representation of the city of Lagos, Nigeria in the *Lagos Noir* (2018) short story collection in order to understand the lived realities of those living in the city, as well as the general perception of the city. She begins by explicating the 'symbiotic' relationship between cities and stories based on the idea that "characters must exist within a space and the city must be woven around a story" and thus both aspects – the city and literature – influence each other in a cycle of production and reproduction (1). Dairo also notes that this symbiosis with cities in particular presents itself in many different ways within the literature – one of these is that the city or context that is being written about will usually influence the narrative style of and language usage within the text, as well as result in the development of new and specific genres to accommodate this new subject of the city. Finally, the social relationships that can be found within these cities are more complex than in other spaces.

This chapter will read Lagos through the 'noir,' genre tracing its origin in the cinematic field through to its mediated revisioning and application in the literary field, in order to understand it as a genre that the African city could be situated and engaged within, as well as the possibilities for this genre to encapsulate the experience of the African urban and enable its possible reading as Afropessimist. The contents of this chapter will be laid out in three sections. The first section will work extensively on defining the noir genre, noting that it is translated into the Akashic Noir Series, paying special attention to the *Lagos Noir* collection and what is established by its introductory chapter written by Chris Abani. The second section will conduct an analysis of Chris Abani's contribution to the collection and probe how his short story, *Killer Ape* enacts the noir imaginary of Lagos that he put forward in the introductory chapter. The third and final section of this chapter will put the novel, *GraceLand* (2004) in conversation with noir themes and genre conventions that are reflected within the text, and thus complicate our understanding of it.

The idea of noir originated within the context of film and was used to denote a specific style of cinematic production that was fixated upon and set in the urban, or more specifically "tales

of urban crime” (174). In his chapter, “Film Noir and the City” as part of the *Encyclopedia of Film Noir*, Brian McDonnell begins by emphasizing the focus of the noir genre on the urban and the city and makes reference to Nicholas Christopher who further defines the connection between the noir genre and the city by stating, “However one tries to define or explain noir, the common denominator must always be the city. The two are inseparable” (39) (Mayer and McDonnell 51). Another characteristic of the noir genre that McDonnell notes is that of alienation or more specifically, “the treatment of the noir city...as an existential site of alienation,” meaning that the protagonists in these stories are mostly depicted as lonely and isolated, as well as occupying and manoeuvring obscure parts of the city (49). In this consideration, McDonnell references Michael Walker’s work where the city as seen in noir is characterized as “dangerous, bleak and isolating” (Walker 30) and occupied by protagonists who often fulfil the role of narrators of noir films, mediate the experience of the city by providing their own interpretation of what is observed by the viewers (49). For Andrew Spicer, the complexity of film noir runs much deeper than originally perceived within the genre. He notes that the conflict of the noir city lies in its ability to synthesize the numerous dichotomies it inhabits – such as ambivalence, violence and corruption, but also sophistication and a space of opportunity (67) (Mayer and McDonnell 52). These dichotomies are also present in the protagonists (occupants) of the city, who Spicer notes occupy precarious spaces within the city but are also simultaneously drawn to the promise of splendour that the city offers (67) (Mayer and McDonnell 52). The main aspect that stands out in this consideration of the noir genre is its fixation on the city and in depicting an urban imaginary that highlights alienation and isolation as key experiences of the space. The noir genre is focused on the precarity of inhabitants of the city as they engage – and are engaged in and by – their urban surrounds.

Christopher Breu and Elizabeth Hatmaker's *Noir Affect*, published in 2020 hosts a collection of essays engaging the noir genre and explores the concept of ‘affect’ in relation to it. The collection engages the ways in which noir literary productions evoke strong responses from its viewers and analyse how the noir genre’s ability to affect its audience has evolved and developed. Breu and Hatmaker set out to broaden the restrictive boundaries of the genre and the limited way it is often perceived. Some of the themes that emerge are those of trauma, the ways in which noir as a genre relates to others like science fiction and the impact this has on literary productions. The idea of emotion as a key aspect within the noir genre that is used as an underlying factor to almost reconcile the intensity of the noir narrative with the use of aesthetics and visual elements to heighten the impact on the audience,. This links to the genre's

roots in film and cinema and how it is often utilised as a form of commentary or as a platform through which to analyse and critique society (Breu and Hatmaker 2020). While the collection sets out on an exploratory basis, it highlights the inherent complexity of noir as a genre, as well as its versatility as a lens through which we can read, view or understand the life around us.

Noir themes allow for the disillusionment of Afropessimistic imaginaries of the urban that are commonly associated with it, as well as the presumption of negativity that is embedded in, experiences situated within the space. In a very practical sense, the genre enables us to ‘digest the more indigestible parts of the urban’ and the narratives that originate from these spaces which work to “make the strange knowable” (Quayson and Watson 5). This process is so clearly enacted throughout the stories in the *Akashic Noir* series, and it is through an engagement with this series that we can see noir in the context of the Global South, as well as the various ways that African writers of noir illustrate the noir genre in their imaginaries in and of the African urban. And in response to that, the inhabitants of the ‘inner cities’ expiate this lack, particularly in the economic sense but also as it feeds into the overall sense of the city. Works on extending the notion of infrastructure to include people’s activities within the city that are based on the conjunctions of their engagement with ‘objects, spaces, persons and practices’ (408). Spaces within cities as predetermined and restrictive but also available and ascribable – this provides freedom and some sort of direction to the people within cities to function as infrastructure (409) by navigating the complex geography of the inner city (421).

Simone also discusses city spaces as language and explains how different spaces ascribed to and performed by certain groups. But much like language, there are points of intersections and interfacing across these social spaces as a result of various interdependencies that in turn buttress the infrastructure of the city (the reference here is that this is specifically accomplished through “innovative economic transactions in the inner city” (419) or “transnational economies” (423)). Simone also claims that the use of people as infrastructure in African cities is a kind of mediated experience of the city that is essential to but lacking in non-African cities (410).

Noir Genre and the *Akashic Noir* Series

Dairo acknowledges that Lagos is a well-known city and has been portrayed in a variety of media forms, such as music, movies and even global news (3). But she notes that the Noir

series launched in 2004 by Akashic Books does something different in that its essence is “urban melancholic writings” that aim mainly to depict “fatal and unsettling” narratives that are a common theme in African cities, such as crime, corruption, violence and poverty (Shringarpure 2020) (Dairo 3). The *Lagos Noir* series especially frames the city as a sensory and subjective experience open to interpretation, and this is seen in the introduction titled “Lagos Never Sleeps” written by Chris Abani, the editor of the text, when he says, “I am listening to Lagos with my eyes closed” / “the city of many names, that wears as many faces as there are people” (Abani 2018) (Dairo 3). This subjective and sensory experience of Lagos described by Abani seems connected to his earlier depiction of the city in *GraceLand* (2004) where our presumably pessimistic perception of the city, as described in harrowing detail by Abani, seemed to be in conflict with the main character, Elvis, whose subjective experience bordered on the optimistic (Abani 2004). While discussing the collection in an interview in 2019 with Michael Sears for his online literary blog, *The Big Thrill*, Chris Abani stated the following:

The theme of noir, possibly the most interesting and flexible form of literature in recent times, invented late 19th century but perfected post-World War II, already allows for the range you find in the stories. All I had to do as an editor is reach out to a pool of brilliant and talented Nigerian writers—well known and early on in their careers—and ask them to trust me with their work. I am humbled that they did. Nigeria has always been on the cutting edge of world literature, and this continues to be the case. (Abani in Michael Sears, *The Big Thrill* 2019)

The Akashic Noir series with over 100 publications to date since the 2004 publication of *Brooklyn Noir*, has worked to not just broaden the perception of the noir genre, but to also synchronize the genre with “the nuances of place” by “making major international cities the settings for dark stories” (Villalba 1). Carolina Villalba, in her analysis of *Haitian Noir*, comments on the way that the noir genre has the “potential to both enhance and trouble literary representations [of Haiti]...” and this could be expanded to include the idea of the city as it is the focus of the series (1). In a conversation with Villalba, MJ Fievre notes the difficulty in truly defining the noir genre but comments in some or other words on certain aspects that are present in the genre, such as its initial fixation on crime, the positioning of the reader as an ‘outsider,’ the controversial colonial history of some spaces, otherness, alienation, an air of discomfort in the narrative, spirituality or magical realism, undesirability, agency, identity

formation, placemaking, politics and corruption (Villalba 4-9). In a similar conversation, Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel also comments on the aspects that she believes are essential to the noir genre, such as mystery, the genre's enabling of new stories due to its contemporary nature, violence, and ambiguity (what she interestingly refers to as "grey") (Villalba 13-17). What stands out to and interests me most in the stories that make up this collection is their commitment to reimagining the city space and the ways that the authors work to create intricate imaginaries of these spaces in ways that reshape how they are considered.

The *Lagos Noir* series, as a starting point to help us consider how Abani engages Lagos as a space could accomplish what Ato Quayson and Jini Kim Watson call for in their chapter titled, "World Literature, Cities and Urban Imaginaries" as part of *The Cambridge Companion to Cities in World Literature* (2023) when they note the need for an expansion of what we consider world literature. They explain that cities intensely shape the general understanding of the conditions of the global itself because these spaces allow for 'culture translations' from the "local to the global" (Quayson and Watson 4). The argument here is that the dominant notions to be found within world literature could be challenged by concepts embedded within urban settings. So, through the narratives discussing cities within the noir genre, we could reshape and reconstruct literature and how we understand our world through it. And with a collection like *Lagos Noir*, we could understand not just the position and perception of other African cities like Lagos, but also that of Nigeria since the imaginary of Lagos that is created in these narratives, could also reflect the overall imaginary and perception of Nigeria (Dairo 7).

Abani characterizes noir as "a genre that speaks best of the hop and despair of the twenty-first centuries" (Goyal 228). And in headlining the *Lagos Noir* anthology as its editor, Abani uses the introductory chapter as a way to succinctly premise his perception of Lagos and his formation of the collection as he gives readers an idea of what to expect from the collection by titling the introductory chapter "Lagos Never Sleeps" and already, we are introduced to the city as this living thing, a subject with its own chronology and functions, something to be studied and understood (6). Abani further describes the Lagos that will be imagined through this anthology as "the city of many names that wears as many faces as there are people," and this reference to the multifaceted and deceptive nature of the city immediately gives us an indication of the standard noir themes that will be highlighted and engaged throughout the different narratives that make up this collection (Abani 7). More specifically, Abani directly declares Lagos' connection to the genre of noir when he states that, "Lagos has, like many

coastal cities, a very checkered and noir past” (7). The reference Abani makes here is more than likely to the history of the Atlantic Slave Trade which utilised Africa’s coastal countries and cities as points of connection to the routes across the ocean that the Western empires instituted during their colonisation of the continent. Throughout the introductory chapter, Abani continues the work of explaining the relationship between noir and the city, stating that the concept originates in a post-war period where the main obsession is death (8). In his demonstration of the noir Lagos to be experienced through this anthology, Abani recounts his experience of the city during the Biafran War and the way this period worked to embed the darkness of the city.

In Abani’s introduction, he does the work of situating this particular collection within the already established global perception of the noir genre, assuring that the collection can be read as an addition to this body of work, and not as a set deviation from it, but he also takes this further by including what we can understand as a southern perspective on the genre. Abani also excellently fulfils the delicate task of laying out some of the important and intricate spaces of Lagos in a way that simultaneously highlights it as the economic capital of Nigeria that it is, but also provides extensive accounts of the Afropessimistic imaginaries that make up Lagos.

In Ikoyi Bay, boats dot the sea, sails like lazy gulls catching the breeze. Across the bay, the billionaires’ village that was once Maroko sits in a slight mist. I think it is the ghost of that lost place haunting the rich to distraction, so that even their twelve-foot walls, barbed razor wire or broken glass crowning them, or the searchlights, or the armed guards, cannot make their peace with the moans of a woman crying for a child crushed by the wheels of bulldozers. Or maybe it is just the wind sighing through palm fronds. (Abani 9)

In the above excerpt, Abani positions both Ikoyi⁵ and Maroko⁶, two suburbs with wildly contrasting dispositions, next to each other in a way that one would have to look past the splendour of Ikoyi to the grisly sight of Maroko and this duality of imaginaries is so inherently Afropessimist. One statement from this excerpt stands out in particular in highlighting the dichotomy that is the African urban experience – “the moans of a woman crying for a child crushed by the wheels of bulldozer” – depicts the Afropessimist condition of living in the African city where even in the processes of development and modernisation (represented by

⁵ An island that houses one of the most affluent neighbourhoods in Lagos, Nigeria

⁶ An impoverished neighbourhood or ‘slum’ in Lagos, Nigeria

the bulldozer as a tool of construction), noir narratives of loss and death are still present. Throughout Abani's introduction, he regularly and delicately dances between these two juxtaposed depictions of the city – he simultaneously illustrates the dynamic and globalised aspect of the city (as seen in the eclectic formations and collections of affluent neighbourhoods) and the precarious aspects of the city (as seen in the deprived and violent history of the city as it seeps into its present). In the neighbourhood of Ikoyi, we see a sort of imitation that exists as a result of colonialism – white European settlers transformed spaces in the African urban to match the aesthetic of spaces that they are familiar with, and this resulted in acres of land and resources being put towards this redevelopment project because it was in service of whiteness. In Maroko, we see what happens when imitation fails and becomes mimicry and the resources needed for the redevelopment of these spaces are not provided, particularly because of a lack of association with whiteness. Spaces like Maroko with its fractured itinerary are what often occurs when certain groups are unaccounted for in the African urban space and default to makeshift accommodations with limited resources; Simone notes that this is a product of the postcolonial moment where the current nation states fail to provide necessary infrastructure (409). Positioning these two contrasting spaces together, in their juxtaposed existences and interactions within the urban setting is the basis of the noir essence located in the city.

One of the ways that this collection also introduces Southern urbanisms to the Western imaginary of noir is notable in the way these stories take noir genre conventions and revise them to suit the African literary palate. McDonnell in his chapter, "Film Noir and The City" notes that "selected titles from the classical period of film noir clearly emphasizes this city focus, either by the use of the word city in the title, by naming actual cities in the title, by employing the term or the notion of the street, or sometimes even by a metaphorical reference to the brutal savagery inherent in urban life" (47). These indications are the ways that Western productions in the noir genre make their association to the genre apparent. However, none of the stories in the *Lagos Noir* collection include the word 'city' or even allude to any aspect of it in their title, but rather they all seem to apply an abstract approach to naming their stories – "What They Did That Night," "Heaven's Gate," "Showlogo," "Just Ignore and Try to Endure," "The Swimming Pool," "What Are You Going To Do?" "For Baby, For Three," "Eden," "Joy," "Choir Boy," "The Walking Stick," "Uncle Sam," "Killer Ape." What these titles appear to have in common is that they all seem to reference the idea of the 'unknown' and the 'strange' that noir is renowned for but frame it in a way that ties into the subaltern experiences the narrative is focused on. An example of this can be seen in Nnedi Okarafor's short story titled

Showlogo, where we are presented with the story of a man who becomes a refugee in the hostland in order to escape unjust prosecution in his homeland – after antagonizing a pair of police officers, Showlogo must smuggle himself out of the country through the cargo hold on an aeroplane on the airport loading dock where he works. And similarly, Chris Abani’s story title, “Killer Ape,” does not reference any part of the city or its features. However, the title does include an indication of violence and crime as is common within the noir genre, in its use of the word “Killer” (Abani 153). The inclusion of the word ‘ape’ could be perceived as a way that Abani incorporates a unique subaltern experience because these animals (primates in general) have long been used in association with Africans, whether it was due to the dark appearance of the animals that was considered similar to the pigmentation of Black skin, or in the association of Africa’s indigenous practices and language to the behaviours of these animals, as well as possibly a way to mediate the unknown and strange that is often perceived as the Black experience. In an interview with Michael Sears, Abani actually recounts a memory where he and his siblings were equated to an ape that was kept as a pet by a White family; and this became the inspiration he used for his short story which we will analyse later in this chapter. [see below]

My mother was English and lived in Nigeria with my father for much of her adult life. She came to Nigeria in 1956. At that time there were still many expatriate English people working at different levels within the colonial system. My mother was reticent to befriend them, feeling that they had views of “natives” that she didn’t share and one day she visited a couple who had a pet monkey that my older siblings wanted to play with. Seeing my mother’s trepidation, the woman waved her fears away with the comment—”Oh let the children play together.” In that moment she realized the woman had conflated my siblings with the monkey. They never went back. Homosexual relationships were also part of the reality of the colonial experience. I wove the two together with a little of my own strangeness and the story was born. (Abani in Michael Sears, *The Big Thrill* 2019)

Another way that we can see southern urbanisms included as part of the noir experience of African cities is in the way theories from the Global South are enacted in and informed by these spaces. AbdouMaliq Simone’s theory of ‘people as infrastructure’ in the African urban is one that I see as particularly active in the narratives of the *Lagos Noir* collection, especially in the

contributions made by Abani in the introduction and his short story. Simone's theory asserts that because African cities are so fragmented, the built forms cannot and do not often constitute the traditional or normative sense of a city (they are made up of makeshift urban infrastructures that lack essential services and are riddled with inefficiencies - "half-built environments" that are "underdeveloped, overused, fragmented" (425)), and in response to that, the inhabitants of the 'inner cities' in African urban settings expiate this lack through their activities and participation, particularly in the economic sense but also as it feeds into the overall sense of the city. Simone's theory is based on extending the notion of infrastructure to include people's activities within the city that are based on the conjunctions of their engagement with 'objects, spaces, persons and practices' (408). Abani's introduction reaffirms Simone's theory that citizens of African cities make up the infrastructure of these spaces by re-purposing them and in turn become vital to its function. As seen in the excerpt below, he makes mention of the inner city sounds that contribute directly to this imaginary of Lagos as a bustling city – from the presumed melodies emanating from the church to the haggling from informal food stalls that cater to a variety of customers daily, and the sounds of the taxi conductors whose voices are the basis of their business as they call out the ever-fluid and irregular route directory of the buses they manage.

Christ Church Cathedral rises from the slump of land between the freeway and the sea and Balogun Market, like Monet's study of Rouen Cathedral. In the shadow, in the motor park that hugs its façade, is the best "mama-put" food in Lagos. Its legend travels all the way across the country. The seasoned Lagosian gastronomes can be heard chanting their orders, haggling with the madam—*Make sure you put plenty kpomo, or No miss dat shaki. No, no, no, dat other one.* There can be no sweeter music, no better choir. In the distance, bus conductors call like Vikings from the prows of their ships, testing the fog of exhaust fumes—*Obalande straight! Yaba no enter!* (Abani 10)

The food stall owner or "madam" can be seen as part of the informal infrastructure of the inner city because she is necessary to the functioning of this space as her customers rely on her for sustenance. Similarly, the taxi conductor stands in place of an easily accessible and established directory of routes and directions for the public transport system. In addition, there is an assumed form of economic collusion that occurs in these inner cities between its citizens (the food stall owner, taxi conductor and their customers) that is not directly referenced in this

excerpt. We can assume that there are forms of monetary exchange that occur between these individuals as they utilise the services available that link to the ideas discussed by Simone.

Based on the above, we can see how Abani uses the introductory chapter of the *Lagos Noir* collection to do more than simply introduce the short stories that will be provided in the anthology and to actively provide an imaginary of Lagos that is essential to our understanding of it as intrinsically noir, and by extension in conversation with Afropessimist imaginaries.

Semidocumentary Literary Noir and Abani's "Killer Ape" and Graceland

When discussing the genre of film noir, McDonnell notes a newer subcategory to be found within the noir genre, which is the 'semidocumentary film noir' that focuses on depicting crime and political corruption in the context of the city with protagonists who are based in law enforcement (48). This definition is particularly interesting in terms of this study because *Killer Ape* could be regarded as part of this sub-genre of film noir, despite the difference in mediums. The short story demonstrates the relationship between politics and crime in colonial Nigeria with the framing of a black man investigating a crime involving white people in a space that is not easily accessible to him as a black person; in addition to that, both Abani's protagonist and those found in semidocumentary film noirs are based in law enforcement and this further solidifies it as part of this sub-genre. Given that Abani's story belongs to this sub-genre noir, we interrogate how he also draws on an Afropessimist imaginary.

Abani's short story titled *Killer Ape* is about a detective named Okoro, who investigates a strange case in a wealthy neighbourhood in colonial Lagos, Nigeria. The story unfolds to reveal that the murder victim, a wealthy married man, was killed by his wife after she discovered that he was having an affair with their houseboy, and in turn forces the houseboy to assist her in framing an adopted chimpanzee for the murder to escape conviction. Abani provided an interesting insight in an interview with Michael Sears, where the author explains that *Killer Ape* was inspired by his own experience living in colonial Nigeria with his English mother and Nigerian father. The story is based on a memory of Abani, his mother and siblings visiting the home of a British expatriate with an adopted pet monkey, where to convince Abani's mother to allow his siblings to play with the monkey, the homeowner said to "let the children play together." This led Abani's mother to understand that the homeowner had just equated her children to the monkey, and they never returned to the home (Sears 2019). It is not explicitly

stated but the presumption here is that since Abani and his siblings are interracial, but black-identifying, it was easy for the homeowner to equate her perception of them to that of a primate. This suggests why Sears defines this short story as a “mirror to the attitudes of the day” and as an exposition of the corruption that is often found in this context (Sears 2019).

It was a quiet Lagos Sunday and the rich residential area of Ikoyi was lush with green palms, manicured lawns, and shocks of red hibiscus, purple bougainvillea, and yellow sunflowers. It was 1958 and the eve of independence. The air of freedom, of hope, was palpable. Already this once all-white neighborhood was a salt-and-pepper mix. The elite Nigerians, prepping for their takeover of power, had already moved in. Actually, it probably wasn't accurate to say that it was once an all-white locale because even in the late nineteenth century there were rich locals living here, and Detective Sergeant Okoro was particular about accuracy.” (Abani 156)

If we consider this scene that Abani creates in his short story, – an extensive look at the neighbourhood of Ikoyi – we can see how it very clearly aligns with the imaginary of Lagos that he foregrounds in his introductory chapter, as it perfectly captures the modernism that exists in African cities, as well as the effects of colonialism in the mapping of urban spaces in the Global South where African inner cities and its surrounds were constructed as sites inaccessible to Africans but were rather reserved for whiteness; the only instances where black bodies were allowed in these spaces were to be functional and provide service or labour. An example of this can be seen in Abani's main character, Okoro, who as a black man – and a queer black man – is considered an odd addition to the white-majority, very wealthy suburban neighbourhood of Ikoyi in 1958. Upon his arrival at the location of the crime, he comes into contact with another individual just like himself – another queer black man – but he fulfils a different and more acceptable role in this context, which is that of a ‘houseboy.’

Emmanuel looked Okoro over. Both men seemed to recognize something about the other... // Okoro smiled at Emmanuel's discomfort. He knew there was more. It was not uncommon for white bosses to take up affairs with staff—usually female though. Maybe it was nothing. There was enough going on here and he couldn't afford to be distracted. Sherlock Holmes wouldn't approve. It was the easiest way to miss the small details that can break a case wide open. (Abani 158)

The recognition described in the excerpt above could also be viewed as a recognition of the situation in play that both men – both queer and black – were so similar in the sociopolitical aspects of their identity but so different in the way they both encounter and navigate the African city because of the roles they hold in society. But recognition persists between both men because they are both caught in similar states of precarity as they delicately navigate the spaces they inhabit as queer black men. In addition to this, Okoro as a character can be thought of as a practitioner of the city due to his interaction with and observance of it, and this in turn enables him to read Emmanuel's character and understand his positionality in the city.

In his introduction, Abani also refers to a sort of imitation at work in the city of Lagos that takes the legacies and influences of colonialism and subsumes them into the fabric of the city in a way that reflects its noir essence. In the excerpt below, a similar imitation occurs, not at the city level but at a more individual and personal level, where Okoro uses Western practices and procedures in his investigations and even finds inspiration for his identity as a detective in the figure of Sherlock Holmes.⁷ Throughout the story, we see him make several references to the fictional detective all through his investigation. The intertextuality seen in the inclusion of Sherlock Holmes (a character created by Scottish writer Arthur Conan Doyle) in the short story is very pertinent to our read of the text as embedded in the noir subgenre since the story pulls from and references other noir texts; additionally, the inclusion of this character that is also a detective underscores the crime elements that are synonymous with the noir genre and that is highlighted in Abani's short story.

The extent of Okoro's imitation is so notable that it transcends his professional life and acts as a factor in his personal life, guiding his decisions and presentation of himself within society, often to the detriment of his relationships with his colleagues, who regard him with derision as a result. Much like the situation of Maroko in the introductory chapter, the limits of imitation are also evident in the excerpt from the short story below.

Even the white British Scotland Yard-trained detectives who worked alongside the Nigerians knew little of the forensic methods that fascinated Okoro. The fact that he drew most of his "technical" knowledge from the fictional Sherlock Holmes did little to help his credibility. Though he was a detective sergeant, Okoro had very little power, and he found himself overruled even by junior

⁷ A renowned fictional detective

white colleagues with whom the beat commanders always sided. He knew his promotion was more about the British trying to prepare an officer corps to hand over power to than about any real change or an actual belief in the Nigerian officer's abilities." (Abani 156).

In the case of the neighbourhood, its imitation of the Western aesthetic is interrupted by the lack of resources available to actualise it, but in the case of Okoro, his imitation is interrupted by his racial and sociopolitical positionality and this is evident in the line that states "*Okoro had very little power, and he found himself overruled even by junior white colleagues with whom the beat commanders always sided*" (Abani 156). Thus despite his higher rank and superior abilities as a detective, he is limited in the extent to which he can perform that excellence because of his skin colour.

The police officers that make up Okoro's colleagues are noted to bypass procedure in order to finalise the cases that are assigned to them, and later on in the story, Okoro himself is pressured to falsify the report of his case in favour of a much simpler and direct outcome that would not require further investigation. This idea that the police officers act as the singular authority (both knowledge and enforcement) of the law without any established systems to abide by, links to AbdouMaliq Simone's idea of people as infrastructure, where he explains that the fractured infrastructures of the Global South's inner cities are a result of state neglect and inherited failed state systems. In turn, this lack is substantiated by the individuals that make up these urban spaces, which means that individuals like Okoro stand in place of these established systems and work to maintain the functioning of these spaces, often at the cost of integrity.

The short story, *Killer Ape* in *Lagos Noir* takes the ideas presented by Abani in his introduction to the anthology and applies them to the narrative. The short story's imaginary of the African city and its surroundings of populous, gritty, downtown areas and sparse exclusive suburbs, mirror the imaginary of Lagos presented by Abani that offers a simultaneously dichotomous and synergized perception of the African city as a result of colonialism. In the introduction, where Abani provides specific accounts of violence that underline the noir aspects of Lagos, in the short story he only suggests the effects of this violence (and colonialism) through the interactions of the characters – in the way that Okoro's white colleagues dismiss him and the contempt of Mrs. Parker for Okoro and Emmanuel. The hierarchies illustrated in the text and the tensions that it produces – both a result of Nigeria's colonial history and urban planning – create a unique Afropessimist imaginary of Lagos that we see enacted in the text.

One of the aspects highlighted by Dairo from the *Lagos Noir* collection is the general positioning of Lagos as representative of Nigeria as a whole and as a direct reflection of the country as a whole (Adenle 2018) (Dairo 7). She also notes the diversity to be found within Lagos, particularly in the wealth divide with there being such an accentuated difference between rich and poor, but then she also notes that often Lagos is depicted and perceived as a “land of opportunity” that provides an opportunity to succeed for any individual regardless of their background, skills or abilities (8). This idea of Lagos as accessible and full of potential is also incorporated into the narrative of *GraceLand* as the main character, Elvis leaves his home in rural Nigeria to seek a better life in urban Lagos (Abani 2004). I would like to argue that what Abani accomplishes in his short story, he also accomplishes in his novel – pulling a noir text away from a simplistic Afropessimist framing and into a more ambiguous framing or perhaps rather implying that Afropessimism in itself is redefined through the noir genre and engagements with the African city, and as more modulated than previously understood.

When considering noir protagonists as narrators who mediate the viewer or reader’s experience of the city through their interpretations, it becomes clear that Abani does something quite intricate and fascinating in *GraceLand*. While Abani utilises Elvis in a narrational manner, using his perspective as a direction for our navigation through the city, and while Elvis does offer some kind of mediation of the city that is consumed by the reader, this does not necessarily make the city more “digestible.”

Elvis had read a newspaper editorial that stated, rather proudly, that Nigeria had a higher percentage of millionaires—in dollars, not local currency—than nearly any other country in the world, and most of them lived and conducted their business in Lagos. The editorial failed to mention that their wealth had been made over the years with the help of crooked politicians, criminal soldiers, bent contractors, and greedy oil-company executives or that Nigeria also had a higher percentage of poor people than nearly any other country in the world. (Abani 10)

Negotiating the ghetto plank walkways with care, he made his way home. One wrong step could cause him to lose his footing and fall headlong into the green swampy water that the ghetto was mostly built on. Raised on stilts like some giant millipede, the walkways’ many legs were sunk below the surface. (Abani 16)

These two drastic and opposing views of the city that are depicted in Elvis' living in the city versus the city that he read about are so critical to Abani's noir imaginary of Lagos that he creates. We can assume the international currency that was mentioned in the first excerpt is being exported out of the country and not being reinvested into its infrastructure, thus creating the "ghettos" that Elvis manoeuvres on his way home. To Abani, the noir that exists in Lagos is not just embedded in the failed infrastructure of the city but is also tied into the ways the city is perceived and lived and the ambivalence within this. Throughout the narrative, Abani uses Elvis to highlight the truly noir, dark and gritty aspects of Lagos but he also has Elvis comment on these gritty noir aspects of the city, highlighting the intricate relationship (a mutual one of gains and losses) that those who dwell in the city have with the space in a way that invokes what Matthew Omelsky calls an 'ambivalence,' where the city is neither intrinsically good nor bad. And this in turn is connected to Simone's idea that the people who make up the infrastructure in these spaces are not just representative of the lack to be found in these itineraries, but also depict a fundamental quality that reflects the dynamic nature of these inner cities – as predetermined and restrictive but also available and ascribable in a way that provides freedom and some sort of direction to the people within cities to function as infrastructure (409).

The buses wove through the dense traffic so fast they threw the passengers about, and caused those hanging on to sway dangerously. An old man on the bus had told him that the spirits of the road danced around the buses trying to pluck plump offerings, retribution for the sacrilege of the road, which apparently, when it was built, had severed them from their roots, leaving them trapped in an urban chaos that was frightening and confusing. (Abani 12)

The above excerpt that illustrates the failing state-provided material infrastructure of the city as seen through the eyes of Elvis, which prompts the need for makeshift urban infrastructures, is the basis of Simone's theory of 'people as infrastructure.' The characters that Elvis encounters throughout the narrative all connect and interact in a tortuous manner that gives shape and structure to Lagos and allows Elvis to navigate the city despite its embedded lack of physical established infrastructure.

Chapter Conclusion

Through Abani's curation of the *Lagos Noir* collection, we see very practically how residents of African urban spaces function within them as infrastructure, according to Simone's theory of 'people as infrastructure,' and the ways that the city space is repurposed and reworked by those who live in it to sustain not just their lives but also the city itself. From examining Abani's own story in the collection, we get a sense of the ways that he works to create a detailed and informed depiction of the city that takes into consideration the colonial history of Lagos and how that plays into the geographies of the space and the social structures that are perpetuated within it. Finally, in our perusal of the ways that noir themes of wealth disparity and inequality are enacted in Abani's novel and perceived through his main character, Elvis, we see the duality embedded in the space that posits these factors, not just as lack but also as an opportunity for innovation.

The above chapter makes clear that there is a strong relationship between Afropessimism and the Noir genre that works to situate the African urban within a restrictive framing that fails to take into account the inherently dynamic and vacillating nature of the space. However, Abani's own work offers some insight into the complicated systems of sustenance of the African urban that highlights the ambivalence that is suggested in the above exploration.

CHAPTER 2: Diasporic Writing: Reading the Homeland through the City in *GraceLand*

Simon Gikandi notes that writers who engage the topics of postcolonialism and globalization share two commonalities with one another. The first is that they are all “concerned with explaining forms of social and cultural organization whose ambition is to transcend the boundaries of the nation-state” and the second is that they all “seek to provide new vistas for understanding cultural flows that can no longer be explained by a homogenous Eurocentric narrative of development and social change” (628). This can be said of Chris Abani, a Nigerian-born author whose diasporic experience from an early age led to an extensive body of work engaging a key Global South locality (the homeland – or more specifically, the African urban or city space). Abani’s trajectory of writing is such that he does most of his expansive writing after leaving Nigeria, essentially writing from memory and engaging this idea of the hostland versus the homeland, and this shift is ultimately what makes him a diasporic writer.

GraceLand portrays the intricacies of Nigerian space by including the indigenous or pidgin language at key points of the text, despite it being an English publication, as well as punctuating representations of the space with certain traditional practices such as indigenous recipes and folklore. In this chapter, I will attempt a probe into the aspects of Abani’s life such as his exile and situation within the diaspora and how these elements feed into his perception of the city and influence his construction of it. In doing so, I will pay special attention to the way that the text is structured and the application of certain narrative devices within it which in turn impact our understanding of the city that is perpetuated in the novel. I will begin by briefly reviewing Abani’s life and history, particularly his perception of Lagos before exile to those post-exile, and consider how his diasporic experience influenced his perception; the first section will focus on the ways that Abani blurs the line between the traditional and the modern in the text to mimic the way these two interact as part of the itinerary of Lagos; the second section will look at the various forms of cultural diversity that are notable in the text that represent the cultural hotpot that an African city like Lagos is; the third section will consider the linguistic diversity employed in the text by Abani that underscores the authenticity of the narrative and represents various social inflections throughout the text. Furthermore, throughout this chapter, I will be utilizing theories from AbdouMaliq Simone and Edgar Pieterse that speak to the restructuring

of what we perceive as urban because of the complexities of inherent storylines that are present within these spaces, and to understand how the discourses they propose about the African urban are enacted through the imaginary of Lagos that we find in the novel. There is also a strong reference in the novel to a world outside of Nigeria through the character of Elvis, but I will unpack this in a later chapter.

In an interview discussing *Haiti Noir* that was published in 2013, titled *Why Noir, Why Now? Conversations on Haiti Noir with M.J. Fievre and Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel* (2014), Carolina Villalba talks with two authors from the collection, M.J. Fievre and Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel to better understand their experience of writing for the noir genre and the implications of this writing on the perception of their homelands in the current period. But what I find most important to note from this interview is the discussion about the impact of diasporic experiences on the works of these authors and the way that Western influences are woven into their writings about their homelands. Below Theodore-Pharel explains how a diasporic experience shaped her perception of literature by including an analysis of the role that class plays in this diasporic experience. In her explanation, she discusses how the difference in her and M.J. Fievre's socio-economic standing impacted the way each of them experienced the diaspora and even their access to literature:

The responsibility of representing the homeland from a diasporic space is complicated. For those of us in the lower classes, I think: if I had grown up in Haiti, would I have had the opportunities that I have had in the U.S.? Probably not. So I can be better and do the best writing from here, whereas [it might be different for] somebody else who may have had a better financial upbringing, like M.J. Fievre. We come from a very different upbringing. [For instance,] I didn't have a book to read for pleasure until I came to America... And in fact, I didn't really discover words or my love for words until I came to America....The weird part is that [in Haiti] we would spend hours telling stories, but of course that's not the same. (Marie Ketsia Theodore-Pharel – Villalba 11)

It is almost as if in leaving the space and returning to it, diasporic writers are afforded a new lens through which to reconsider the spaces they write about and this triggers a kind of introspection on the author's perspective that may not otherwise be prominent. Abani's diasporic imaginary of Lagos, and Nigeria in general, could also be thought of as having similar effects on his work as an author and is quite prevalent in the way he crafts a city in *GraceLand*

(2004) that is full of diasporic influences and that can be read through decolonial principles and practices.

When discussing his experience of diaspora and proximity to the larger conversation of Nigerian and African contemporary literature, Abani explains how he is positioned in relation to other African scholars and considers the role his forced political exile plays in how he writes about his homeland:

I'm in a generation that's lucky. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, and others have built that foundation for us. We no longer have to represent Nigeria. There's a clear picture of it, a very positive picture. It allows us new writers to have this aesthetic freedom, privilege, the aesthetic moment, the moment of making art over any kind of political insurgency. (Singer)

Abani notes that he is part of a “generation that's lucky” because he is preceded by thinkers and authors like Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka who laid out the cultural framework necessary for writers in his generation to have freedom with their forms as they write – what he calls an “aesthetic freedom” that surpasses the need to write a specific way due to politics (Singer). This ties into Boehmer's idea that writers in the Global South should not be restricted by Northern ideologies but should freely create their own within the Global South.

Literary interviews are particularly useful in this project when discussing Chris Abani's contribution because it is in these one-on-one semi-intimate spaces that he has... stated this quite clearly in an interview with Yogita Goyal, “I've also said that African writers are the curators of the continent's humanity and I would like to see more of that humanity curated” (Goyal 231).

When considering *GraceLand*, Abani's relation to the narrative is apparent, since the main character Elvis shares many similarities with the author, such as their mutual hometown of Afikpo in the Ebonyi State in Nigeria, and both having to relocate at a young age due to political reasons – Abani due to exile and to escape political execution and Elvis to seek a better life not impacted by the effect of the war in Nigeria at the time. This close relation to be found in the way Abani laces his own history in the imaginary of Lagos he creates through his novel is what I want to highlight, as well as the ways that his positionality as a third-generation author – influenced by those who predate him and as an example for those who will follow – is so evident in his conceptualisation of Lagos city, and as a result, Nigeria.

In this exploration of the novel, I will be mostly interested in the polysensory nature of the text and the way that it works to engage all the senses of the reader through its narration – "the polysensory delirium of a vibrant and heterogenous urban setting can just as easily enchant the individual with its delights as be a cause for alarm" (Tally 51). I argue that the form of *GraceLand* and the way Abani structured the novel (the use of (West) African traditional and local recipes to punctuate the chapters, the brief headlining of Igbo spiritual doctrines at the beginning of each chapter, the detailed inclusion of ethnic cultural practices as a core part of the depiction of Elvis' development throughout the narrative, and so much more) all make up part of this polysensory experience.

Tradition/Modernity: Redescribing the Dualities African Urban Space

One of the main aspects that stand out in Abani's representation of Lagos in the novel is his inclusion of both the rural and urban, not just as part of the narrative, but as part of the African urban itinerary he maps. The idea of redescription that is examined by Pieterse and Simone in their text, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (2017) can be applied to the novel or provide a lens through which we can read the text and the way that Abani works to blur the lines between modern and traditional which make up the African urbanity and suggest new ways to understand these spaces against the conventional methods of doing so – the idea of the traditional is thrown into flux when read through the context of the urban which is often associated with modernity. Redescription is presented as part of a group of ideas that are geared towards a more nuanced understanding of the impact of Global South spaces – Asia and Africa – on the overall largely urban-focused global landscape. This idea is outlined in the text as how "particular spaces, built environments or ways of living (can) be re-described, not as elements or evidence of particular principles, macro forces or structural arrangements, but as aspects of what is referred to as "n-dimension spaces, states of existence that might be" – by re-describing existent conditions as components of a process that might be taking place right now, but which is opaque, occluded or rendered inoperative" (Pieterse and Simone 10-11). Abani intricately weaves the essence of the rural into the urban through the culture that persists in the lives of the characters and the structure of the novel, most notably through the inclusion of traditional recipes, principles and practices in each chapter of the novel. These inclusions in the chapters are maintained through the narrative because they form part of the content from Elvis' mother's journal which he keeps with him out of sentiment and this then becomes an essential narrative

device that adds to the text and our understanding of it. If we consider how this narrative device functions, we see that it acts as a link to the past that informs the present narrative of the novel. The journal also acts as a representation of tradition (because it is filled with traditional recipes and practices) and the way it is 'carried around' and sustained within a contemporary or modern context like the African urban. This duality is present throughout the text, not just in the lives of city inhabitants who possibly migrated from the rural or live lives that interact across both spaces, but also in the mapping of Lagos that is presented in the text. One question that stands out is whether the pattern maintained is to include rural or traditional aspects in the more desolate spaces, while modernity underscores the more affluent spaces. However, because both of these spaces are intrinsic to the imaginary that Abani creates in his text, we can regard both aspects – tradition and modernity – as forming the foundation of his itinerary of Lagos.

Abani's novel follows an interesting structure in that he sections the narrative into two large parts, '*Book I*' and '*Book II*,' with the former containing twenty chapters and the latter just nine. In the first section of his novel, Abani crafts the story along two timelines in two separate locations, interchanging between the two for each chapter – the village of Afikpo from 1972 to 1981 which makes up the majority of Elvis' childhood and formative years, and the city of Lagos in 1983 after Elvis' micromigration. The second section follows a similar structure but is more irregular as it focuses more on the setting of Lagos in 1983, but also includes two chapters on Abeokuta⁸ and Ijebu⁹ in 1983. The main aspect of this narrative structure that I find interesting that could provide some insight into the imaginary that Abani crafts is the time period that he chooses to write on for each space – when writing about the past (from 1972 to 1981), his writing is set in the rural, but then when writing about the present (from the narrative's perspective), his narrative is set in the urban. And while this spatio-temporal configuration can be read as representing the rural as past and the urban as present, the narrative structure simply follows the progression of Elvis' life as he moves from the rural to the urban. However, what does stand out is the way Abani destabilizes this linearity by switching focus between the past and the present, the rural and the urban as the chapters progress, as this implies a connection between the past and the present, and ultimately between the rural and the urban. Furthermore, this structure allows the reader to have numerous vantage points through which to consider the narrative being presented in the novel.

⁸ A town in southwest Nigeria that is the capital of the state of Ogun; currently trades in agriculture

⁹ Ijebu Ode, a town in southwest Nigeria that forms part of the state of Ogun; currently trades in a variety of products, but most notably, the kola nut

Another way that Abani depicts the connection between the rural and the urban in his novel, is through the principles that form the foundation of both spaces and how they overlap. While crafting the rural space, Abani highlights the spirituality that is intrinsic in this space and makes up not just foundation of it, but also inform the daily practices, and this is evident in the rituals or traditional practices that inhabitants of the rural perform. One of these rituals is the coming-of-age ritual where Elvis is required to kill an eagle chick because it makes up his “first step into manhood” and enables them to begin his “manhood rites” years later, as his Uncle Joseph explains (Abani 21). Subsequently, Abani shows us that when these rural inhabitants move to the city, this spirituality does not entirely dissipate nor is it completely left behind. In his interview with Goyal, while discussing the task faced by African writers and scholars when exploring the subject of the continent in relation to transnationalism, Abani explains that "African nations are still in formation, but the regional and local remain and have always remained larger and more mythic than we give them credit for" (230) and that the task faced by these scholars and writers is ultimately to “move into more nuanced territory without fear” (230). I understand this to mean that Abani is calling for a complication of the way we typically imagine nations, particularly African nations, that instead of imagining these spaces through the narrow lenses of capital cities, this is expanded to include regions, localities and rural areas as this would allow the kind of “nuanced” engagement needed when conceptualising or writing about the continent. This call is similar to the ideas Simone and Pieterse put forward when they assert the growth and development of the African and Asian continents call for new ways of considering global expansion (Pieterse and Simone 2017).

Throughout the text, we see instances of spirituality in the representation of Lagos in *Graceland*, whether it is from the inhabitants who sustain them or is embedded in the performance of the urban space. One example of the former would be the character, Jagua Rigogo who lives in the same compound as Elvis and embodies a type of ambiguous spirituality:

Jagua used to regale Elvis with stories of his astral projections to different planes of existence or, within this one, to different countries. He even claimed he had met with aliens on Venus who planned and controlled the future of the earth. His stories were peppered with mentions of arcane masters of wisdom who showed him the hidden truths of the universe. Cosmic mechanics, he called

them. Then, just as swiftly, the stories would veer away from the cosmic and you would be back on earth, the story continuing seamlessly. (Abani 67)

In the excerpt above, Jagua's spirituality is depicted along such specific lines with the mention of curated terms like 'cosmic mechanics,' the reference to real experiences like astral projection, and the way these stories blend into reality, that as the readers, we are inclined to believe in this spirituality to some degree. Even Elvis is depicted as having some form of innate spirituality even though he no longer practices spirituality the way he did in the rural, and this is seen in the way he performs his impersonations – when beginning the meticulous preparations that form part of his impersonation routine, Abani writes that Elvis moves “methodically, with the air of ritual” (Abani 72).

ONE

This is the kola nut. This seed is a star. This star is life. This star is us.

The Igbo hold the kola nut to be sacred, offering it at every gathering and to every visitor, as a blessing, as refreshment or to seal a covenant. The prayer that precedes the breaking and sharing of the nut is: He who brings kola, brings life.
(Abani 6)

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TWO

We worship in different ways. With wine, the flow of worldly sweetness; with alligator pepper seeds, the hot and painful trials; with nzu, the sign of peace; with water, the blessing of the holy spirit; with blood, the essence of all life; with food, to fill the hunger of gods; with prayers, to allay the wrath of demons. But greatest of all this, is the offering of kola in communion, the soul calling unto life.

The Eucharistic qualities of the kola-nut ritual are clear. There are close parallels to Catholicism, as there seems to be some kind of transubstantiation involved in the kola nut ceremony, similar to the communion wafer in the Catholic ritual of mass. There is the invocation of a supreme deity, the reference

to the kola nut as representative of life and by association, the implication that the consumption of one was equal to that of the other. (Abani 19)

In the above excerpts, we see how Abani highlights spirituality as a key feature in his novel, by using Elvis' mother's journal as a vessel to carry it through the narrative. The first excerpt from Chapter 1 speaks closely to the kola nut and the importance of this seed in Igbo traditional culture. In the second excerpt, Abani draws parallels between Igbo traditional culture and Catholicism, likening kola nut rituals to the Eucharist. Additionally, he discusses the way the kola nut and other traditional elements represent all the different parts of life, like nzu as representative of peace and alligator pepper seeds as representative of pain and suffering (Abani 19). By doing so, Abani presents spirituality as a constant and essential factor that underscores all life, and this is further explored throughout the text.

Spirituality is also prevalent in the structure of the text as Abani includes various brief indications of spirituality that form part of the different traditional makeups of Nigeria and pulls these inclusions throughout the text, particularly the 'kola nut' and its various implications. As we can see in the above excerpts that are taken from the start of the first two chapters in the novel, in some chapters, Abani includes brief discussions of 'kola nuts'¹⁰ or more commonly, 'kola,' which is a kind of nut or fruit found in West Africa that is utilized in traditional and social practices and rituals, to celebrate special occasions in day-to-day life (Britannica 2023), thus the kola is a means for Abani to begin each exploration in his chapters with some discussion of spirituality in the novel. In his inclusion of these brief sections, Abani highlights the spirituality that is associated with this food item and that makes up part of the foundation of various cultures located within Nigeria, including those who now inhabit the city. Earlier on, we saw how certain rituals are formative in the development of individuals (like Elvis' coming-of-age ritual) and in the instances where individuals migrate, these traditional practices are still inherent in them because they form part of their identity. Thus, in some way, we can read this as one of the ways that Abani shows how the traditional becomes rooted in the modern.

The dual experiences of tradition and modernity are also evident, not just in the formative experience of individuals that make up the African urban, but also in the ways that they navigate and enjoy the space. An example of this was noted by Elvis as he wanders through the city,

¹⁰ Sometimes spelled 'cola nut'

where he saw workers of various ages disagree over radio stations and music – either modern artists like “Wham!¹¹, Sade¹², Duran Duran¹³ and Peter Tosh¹⁴” or more traditional stations with “indigenous music” (Abani 29). These kinds of disagreements or differences in views mean that there must always be some kind of mediation between the traditional and modern, similar to what Abani calls “a careful game of give-and-take” (29).

Earlier, I discussed how Abani himself has noted that he writes against any forms of categorisation and works to represent his multifaceted nature in his text in a way that confuses the theme of literary productions in Africa that are solely focused on representing the nation (Goyal 6). Additionally, the concepts of redescription, secretion and resonance proposed by Pieterse and Simone offer new perspectives to be applied in the consideration of how spaces like Lagos are depicted in the novel. Reading the novel makes it apparent that Abani is structuring his text along those lines and formulating his itinerary in a way that promotes redescription – a redescription of the singular way we perceive inhabitants of the city functioning within it, a redescription of the Afropessimist lens often associated with African urban, and perhaps a redescription of the ways that the African urban is written and the genre within which it is located.

Cultural Diversity and the Lagosian Urban Everyday

When considering the way that Abani engages culture and cultural diversity in the text, it is necessary to look at the various aspects that influence the formation of culture, much like the history of a space. So in Abani’s construction of a Lagosian culture in the novel, he must consider the history of Lagos and Nigeria as a whole, which like many African cities, includes war. Abani notes the civil war as a key aspect in the construction of cosmopolitanism to be found in the novel. He explains that the war created loss, which needed to be recuperated and this led to the importing of “films, TV shows, and books, and even teachers” (229). So it is easy to see how Abani could also utilize the war in his novel as a pivot for Elvis’ experiences from the small village of Afikpo to the major city of Lagos. In the novel, the war created a loss for Elvis that could only be recuperated through a kind of micromigration from the rural to the

¹¹ An English popular music duo formed in 1981

¹² Sade Adu, a Nigerian-born British singer who forms part of a band named after her that was formed in 1982

¹³ A British rock band formed in 1978

¹⁴ Winston Hubert McIntosh, a Jamaican reggae musician who was famous in the 1970s and 1980s

urban. Additionally, Abani grew up in Nigeria just after the conclusion of the civil war and recounts the “profound loss and PTSD” that continues to reverberate in Nigeria in its current period and its political state because these traumas of the past are not “given its due attention” (232). Abani concludes this thought by stating that his work is inspired by this idea of excavating the past in order to restore the present and relinquish the past’s hold on it (232). This consideration of war and the politics it’s based on is very present in *GraceLand* as it becomes the main catalyst for Elvis leaving his hometown and moving to Lagos, which then sets the scene for the formulation of Abani’s imaginary. What is more, in his exploration of this Lagosian culture, Abani includes a key feature, which is the interplay of the hostland and the homeland within the space. Used here, these terms are intended as geographic markers or indicators – the former refers to the Western world or Global North and the latter refers more generally to spaces within the Global South.

I posit that through *GraceLand*, Abani aims to represent Nigerian culture as imagined, not only through the modern influences of the hostland, but also through traditional cultural practices forming the strong basis of what constitutes the lived experiences of the different ethnic groups that make up Nigeria and how a complicated interplay of the two create a uniquely Nigerian modernity. In his essay, “Of Ancestors and Progeny,” Abani states that “the time has come to begin to imagine and deal with more homegrown (albeit universal) concerns—gender, sexuality, familial tyranny, history, and even hybridism” (25) (Goyal 230). When prompted to say more about this in an interview with Goyal, Abani builds on this idea by explicating his belief that the majority of Nigerian culture that is perpetuated today, is not purely founded on Nigerian principles but is actually a “Victorian perversion of said culture” (Goyal 231). I take this to mean that the imaginaries of Nigerian culture that are often disseminated have undergone some level of editing or influence as a result of colonialism, to present it as more digestible and worthy to be included in the scope of world literature (which Quayson notes is also structured through a colonial lens) and are thus not truly representative of its features; this, in turn, highlights the importance of engaging and depicting this everyday lived culture and experiences from the perspective of those who own it.

Abani’s imaginary of Lagos perfectly encapsulates this diverse landscape and one such example is the excerpt of the marketplace below. At various spaces such as the marketplace, Abani presents a bustling market scene filled with different forms of informal trade of local

wares, like the garri¹⁵ and various vegetables. But he also peppers in key Western influences that form part of the Lagos experience, such as the variety of Coca-Cola¹⁶ products. This is another kind of blurring of dichotomy that is enacted through the text that could be regarded as an application of Abani's ideals that were central in his discussion with Goyal where he proposed a refocus on the local as a point through which to understand the national. In the creation of his imaginary of Lagos, Abani includes the almost obligatory market scene that is often included in narratives situated within the African continent as they are noted as having an essential role in these spaces and as a "powerful factor that influences development, the economy, social and political relations, and the structuring of space" (J. Igué, 2010) (Zoma and Dahani 25). W.N. Njambi and W.E. O'Brien note that this inclusion of the marketplace is a key aspect in Afropessimist depictions of spaces on the continent in film (92-95). But these market sites go beyond just representing a one-dimensional view of the African urban and are key locations that build on the poly-sensorial experience of the space.

He navigated the colors—yellow gari, red tomatoes and chilies, purple aubergines, brown and even orange bread, dun groundnuts, yellow-green guavas and red-yellow mangoes. Stalls with children calling in husky voices "Coca-Cola! Is a cold!" while hunkered over wooden boxes housing chunks of ice nestling bottles of Coca-Cola, Fanta, Sprite and plastic bags of cold water under wet blankets of jute sacking. (Abani 105)

It was essential that Abani includes an urban market scene in his depiction of a Lagosian urban culture because of the importance of these locations to city life. These locations are thought of as "places of opportunity" in which city residents could generate growth (African Development Bank, 2010) (Zoma and Dahani 25), as well as provide a means to develop economically and perform one's financial autonomy (Bénicourt, 2014) (Zoma and Dahani 25). This is depicted as the case, even for children who are not typically regarded as having much autonomy, and we see in the excerpt above that they are just as intrinsic to the marketplaces as any of the adult sellers – their "husky voices" (Abani 105) that are most likely sore from continued use gives us some indication to their experience and familiarity as sellers in the marketplace. So, in markets, we see how Simone's ideas of surveillance and observance can be enacted as different

¹⁵ A ground or powdered form of cassava root, a popular produce of West Africa; makes up a significant portion of the West African diet

¹⁶ The Coca-Cola Company, an American multinational corporation founded in 1882 that produces a wide variety of beverages

city dwellers flock to these spaces, not just for the services they provide, but for the opportunities for self-sustainment available to them in these spaces. Markets themselves are also defined as “precarious” (Zoma and Dahani 29), and the reason given for this definition is the way that these markets consume the space around them through haphazard constructions that are often a result of municipalities neither working to accommodate the development of these sites within the African urban, nor providing any means for maintenance (Zoma and Dahani 29). Thus, these markets can be thought of as a result of failed infrastructure and can be regarded as the actualisation of Simone’s theory that inner city residents become the infrastructure of the space – the market spaces are not possible through involvement from the government and are rather representations and enactments of the autonomy of the population.

In the excerpt below, we see another way that Abani crafts a uniquely Lagosian cultural imaginary that acknowledges the diversity of representations from both the homeland and the hostland, by including a reference to Onitsha Market Literature, a local African literary production genre with covers that “mirrored American pulp fiction” and texts from numerous West African authors that Abani himself regarded as making up African literary canon, directly alongside Western publications and institutions, like Penguin Books¹⁷. The inclusion of all of these types of literature (from the Global South and Global North) could be symbolic of the mediation between the local and regional that Abani puts forward in his interview with Goyal.

Pausing by a cart selling secondhand books, he rifled through, looking for something to buy. There was a set of dog-eared Penguin Classics. Elvis pulled a Dickens out, *A Tale of Two Cities*, his favorite, and read the first line: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.” Smiling, he closed the book. That was the perfect description of life in Lagos, he thought. There were also novels by West African authors: Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; Mongo Beti’s *The Poor Christ of Bomba*; Elechi Amadi’s *The Concubine*; Camara Laye’s *The Radiance of the King*; Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*; and thrillers like Kalu Okpi’s *The Road* and Valentine Alily’s *The Cobra*. He’d read them all and ran his fingers along their spines nostalgically. He settled for a torn copy of Dostoyevsky’s *Crime and Punishment* and a near-pristine copy of James

¹⁷ Penguin Books Limited, a British publishing house founded in 1935 known for the publication of ‘classic English literature’

Baldwin's *Another Country*. He paid the asked price without haggling. Books, he felt, were sacred and should therefore not be bartered over. (Abani 105)

Reflecting Pieterse and Simone's observation, the urban space as a paradox (page ref?) is clearly captured in *GraceLand* through the inclusion of global and rural entanglements in the narrative. The representation of Lagos in the text also functions as a space where all dichotomies (modern and dated, old and young, wealthy and poor) are forced together and thrown into a complicated interaction with one another – as a paradox, which I will unpack through Elvis' wandering in the next part of this chapter.

Writing Lagosian Linguistic Diversity

In his formation and structure of the text, Abani makes sure to include a scope of the languages of Nigeria, particularly indigenous languages as part of his unique itinerary of Lagos. In both spaces of the rural and the urban, we see pidgin English being maintained as the main language of communication between the characters throughout the text, and this accentuates the possibility of this being an intentional choice made by Abani, since the majority are of a certain socio-economic and socio-political standing, and has done so in order to highlight the precarity of urban citizens. Below, we see once more how Abani creates an imaginary of Lagos that tenderly dances along the lines of precarity, in his depiction of both the affluent neighbourhood of Ikoyi and the despondent slum of Maroko. The coexistence of these two spaces within the city of Lagos informs the culture of the city because it enforces a recognition between the inhabitants and triggers a mediation as the inhabitants learn to identify along these proximities. For Abani, this dual representation and cohabitation is inherently Lagosian, and so much so that it is noted by the characters of the novel who have in some way or another exhibited a strong sense of awareness in terms of their existence within this particular urban landscape:

To their left, through a skirt of trees, was the road, and across the lagoon from it, on the distant shore, were lights.

“Is that Ikoyi?” Elvis asked.

Redemption squinted.

“Oh yes,” he replied. “Dis is why I like Lagos.”

“Why?”

“Because though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we don’t go away.” (Abani 128)

Concurrently, Abani maintains the use of indigenous language throughout in various forms, like in the traditional recipes, brief fragments of cultural and social practices, and terms from indigenous Nigerian languages. An example of this is seen in the below excerpt of a recipe, where Abani also includes the traditional name of the recipe, ‘Ji Na Agwa’ and not just its English version, ‘Black Bean Potage.’

YAM PEPPER SOUP

(Igbo: Ji Minni Oku)

INGREDIENTS

Yam

Salt

Palm oil

Desiccated crayfish

Dry fish

Curry

Fresh bonnet peppers

Ahunji

PREPARATION

First, peel the yam and cut it into chunks. Next, put in a pot of water, add a pinch of salt and put it on to boil. When the yam is soft, take off heat and drain. Put another pot of water on to boil. Add about three dessert spoons of palm oil, the crayfish, the dry fish, and a pinch of the curry, salt and fresh peppers. Pull the fresh ahunji apart and drop the shredded leaves into the mixture. Leave to cook for about twenty minutes. Bring off the boil, dish the spicy sauce into a bowl containing the boiled yam, and serve. (Abani 25)

As seen in the above excerpt from the novel, although the recipes are traditional and feed into the inclusion of indigeneity as a basis for Lagos and Nigeria, we must also consider what is accomplished through the utilization of recipes in particular, especially written and recorded in this way. This stands out to me because much of traditional Nigerian culture, traditional

practices and beliefs appear to have not been recorded and are typically sustained through oral histories. And just in case we missed this potentiality, Abani directly draws our attention towards this idea in the novel where he distances the idea of following recipes from an inherently local experience:

He had brought his mother's journal with him and he turned the pages, reading with difficulty the curved, spidery handwriting. All these recipes, and yet nobody he knew cooked from recipes. That was something actors did on television and in the movies: white women with stiff clothes and crisp-looking aprons and perfect hair who never sweated as they ran around doing housework for the husbands they called "hon." (Abani 136)

If we consider the difference in language in the text, we are constantly pulled between the narrative voice of the novel and the journal as a narrative device within the text. The narrative voice Abani uses to craft his imaginary of Lagos is standardized English and the rest of the text (the dialogue of the characters and the journal excerpts) is peppered with traditional dialects and localized terminology. This peppering and mix of the languages create a dissonance in the text that in turn defamiliarizes the readers to standardized Western English. Abani also actively defamiliarizes this language in the excerpt above where Elvis very directly declares that the kind of regulated language used in his mother's curated recipes and the idea of recipes as formulated cooking instructions, were unfamiliar to him in his context in the city that includes a wide variety of languages and styles that are shared through various global media forms – like the radio playing "Wham!, Sade, Duran Duran and Peter Tosh" as well as "indigenous music" (Abani 29) mentioned earlier this chapter.

Another way that Abani engages language in the text is through the names of his characters, as he utilizes a naming convention that incorporates or signifies the individual's experience in the city and works to weave in the influence of the local and regional. In this case, we can also look at the character, the King of Beggars. The names ascribed to this character [seen below] are very interesting to consider in relation to the diasporic experience that is interwoven into the text. His first two names, 'Ceasar Augustus' are of Roman etymology and are popularly attributed to the historical figure, Gaius Julius Ceasar Augustus who was emperor of the Roman empire from 27 BC until 14 AD (Grant 2023). The reason he gives for this naming is the spiritual belief that by ascribing the name of someone notable to someone impoverished, his life could be positively influenced and impacted. But then we see how when that spirituality

did not play out in his life, he was then ascribed a different name more directly based on his life and circumstances, 'King of Beggars,' but one that still refers to some sort of dignity or privilege because he is referred to as a 'king.' Or perhaps this reference is just to underscore the extent of his impoverishment, but it does act as a kind of separation from the masses of impoverished individuals struggling to survive in the city. Additionally, Abani includes a type of ambiguity with this character that I think is related to the "magic" that comes from supposedly owning such a magnanimous name – at a later point in the novel where people are debating what to do about the threat of demolition of Maroko, we see the King of Beggars brought up as an influential individual who could possibly lead their revolt against the government and later is requested to offer his advice on the matter (Abani 237-238). So abiding by his explanation about his work countering categorisation, Abani neither confirms nor denies this particular instance of magical realism in the narrative.

"Mhm, well, I am known as de King of de Beggars," he replied. "But my parents name me Caesar Augustus Anyanwu. Big name for poor man is good magic."
(Abani 31)

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He had come to terms with the King's death; but he hadn't come to terms, and probably never would, with the way the King had been deified. He was spoken of with a deeply profound reverence, and the appendage "Blessings be upon his name," usually reserved for prophets in Islam, was being used whenever his name was invoked. A group of Rastafarians even claimed he was the Emperor Selassie, Christ Himself, the Lion of Judah, returned to lead them home. (Abani 287)

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He mused at how the King, with all his imperfections, had become the icon for freedom and spiritual truth. (Abani (298)

In his article, *People As Infrastructure*, Simone explains that city spaces can function as language where different spaces are ascribed to and performed by certain groups in the same way that a language would (423). In this case, we can consider the language in Maroko and Afikpo – pidgin English and indigenous Nigerian languages – as part of and representative of

the space; and we can presume (from certain scenes in the text where there is interaction with this space) that the language implemented in spaces like Ikoyi would reflect a different experience – presumably a more nuanced application of the English language or a more advanced and direct use of indigenous language. But much like language, there are points of intersection and interfacing across these social spaces as a result of various interdependencies that in turn buttress the infrastructure of the city, and this is in turn specifically accomplished through “innovative economic transactions in the inner city” (Simone 419) or “transnational economies” (Simone 423)). So, we can deduce that the application of certain forms of language could enact certain types of transactions within the city.

Chapter Conclusion

In the above chapter, I have worked to apply Pieterse and Simone’s idea of redescription to the various elements that are typically considered opposites of the urban – traditions, ritual practices, indigenous methods, rurality and more – and have shown how these elements do not detract from, but rather, add texture and layers to the city space and act as valid factors thereof. I have also noted that it is within these layers of the city, that we find paradoxes of these cultural specificities that make up the space and enact a ‘wordling’ of it. Even in the diverse linguistic elements of the novel that are explored in this chapter, do we also find the complexities of the African urban, specifically the city of Lagos, come to life. Thus, in my appraisal of the text in this chapter, I have arrived at a uniquely Lagosian Urbanity which manages to contain the extent of these dualities and paradoxes. And the essence of these elements lies in their ambiguity and ambivalence, as a result of their ability to be redescribed.

CHAPTER 3: The Lagosian Flaneur: Mapping Lagos/Graceland through Elvis

In this chapter, I will focus on the way that Abani utilises his main character, Elvis, as an essential tool in creating his imaginary of Lagos in the novel and the ways that Elvis' navigation of the city feeds into the understanding of this urban space. In the first section of this chapter, I will be considering impersonation as the career path of Elvis that is initially presented to us at the start of the novel and how that is carried through the rest of the text and in turn acts as a key factor in understanding the Lagosian urban. The second section will be focused on the representation of death as occupying equal space in the African urban as its other citizens and the way that death is regularly included as a part of Abani's mapping of the space. The third and final section will be a continuation of the previous chapter and explore Elvis' relationship with Redemption specifically and how 'Redemption' (both the character and the idea) are prevalent in Elvis's narrative and presents itself as a key trajectory throughout the text.

Abani states that he never aims to "take a definitive side" but rather produces work that complicates and questions:

As a writer, I am often opening up questions and exploring them with characters such that the work never shuts down, never ends and, in the end, never takes a definitive side. (Goyal 231)

This already sets up our understanding that Elvis will be a character that follows this aim of exploring and "opening up" questions, as well as avoiding direct definition and embodying ambiguity. This suggests that Elvis will be a character that evades an exact definition or perception as he resides within the city space but will rather be a polyphonic subject that embodies the multiplicity that is present in the space, in such a way that Lagos itself seems to emerge as a character.

Walter Benjamin also provides invaluable insight into my understanding of the flaneur. In *Selected Writings* (Eiland and Jennings 2003), the various texts engaged by him propose dynamic considerations of this figure that feed into my study. In his discussion "The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire," Benjamin states that "In the flaneur, the joy of watching prevails over all. It can concentrate on observation; the result is the amateur detective. Or it can

stagnate in the rubbernecker,” (41) and I find that these actions it produces – of observation and stagnation – and the types of people reflected in it – the detective and the rubbernecker – are prevalent in both texts by Abani that I engage in this study. Furthermore, the “leisurely quality” (19) that is ascribed to *flânerie* and the flaneur by Benjamin in the same chapter, also underlines the nuances of Abani’s texts where the act of observation and witnessing is never imposed but rather features seamlessly within the urban landscape. The flaneur was born as a way for Benjamin to navigate the labyrinth of his mind, and the flaneur becomes a ‘wandering observer’ that “confronts the chaos of the modern world as a labyrinth only he can penetrate” (Birkerst 164). Presented as a motif and as a response to a world that is “disjuncted, scattered, crystallized in detail,” the flaneur becomes both a collector and connoisseur of this detail (Birkerst 165). We see this enacted in the character of Elvis through whom the scatteredness of Lagos and its inhabitants are translated to the readers of the novel. Benjamin’s flaneur originated in the context of the Western world, notably Paris, but I translate the idea into the African city through the figure of the Lagosian flaneur. In some ways, Benjamin relates the idea of the flaneur to an acceptance of shock or irregularity as part of daily life and one’s interactions with the space they inhabit; and in doing so, he perfectly positions the idea to be translated in the context of the Global South where mediating pessimism becomes part of regular life, as seen in *Graceland*.

Michel De Certeau proposes another lens through which we can understand the surveyance of the city and the flaneur in his work where he redefines the term as a metaphor for the resistance of modernity, as well as navigating it as it exists in the city. De Certeau’s definition of the flaneur consists of various aspects of city life and the individual’s engagement with it, such as the act of wandering through urban spaces, countering the confined aspects of modernity, weaving the urban landscape into narratives that tell the stories of those residing in it, and the act of observation within the city space (De Certeau 1980) (Visser 2014). For De Certeau, the figure of the flaneur is an embodiment of a type of resistance within the urban context and its attempts to enforce some level of constraint on its inhabitants: this resistance is enacted through wandering and acts of exploration within the city (De Certeau 1980) (Visser 2014). De Certeau also presents the idea of the city walker as a method of experiencing modernized spaces like cities, while simultaneously ascribing meaning to them. In this regard, while walking the city, the pedestrian creates the city (Visser 2014), and as we read the novel, this becomes a very literal experience as our view of the city is only pieced together as Elvis moves through it.

Walking then becomes a connection to the everyday and this is especially the case for the Lagosian flaneur.

While the above explications are essential to the understanding of the flaneur and how I will be applying it to my study, it is important to note that the Lagosian flaneur utilises a different itinerary because of the situation within the Global South. For the Lagosian flaneur, these itineraries are not based in leisure, and in turn produce a very specific iteration of Lagos that I will be exploring in this chapter.

In the exploration of the ways that Abani uses Elvis' perception in his imaginary of Lagos, I will be utilising concepts from AbdouMaliq Simone and Robert Tally. Simone's proposed concept is that urban residents are constantly observing and surveilling as a means of survival within the city, whether this relates to earning an income or taking advantage of an opportunity, as a way to enact some sort of authority over their lives (Simone 2011, 360). The ideas that Tally puts forward in his work are about "spatializing actions" and seeing this as a means to map a cartography of a space rather than the static projections of space that are created through physical maps. Tally also proposes the idea of a topophrenic experience of space that is created through the perspective of a witness to the city (Tally 99). In this chapter, I will consider how Simone's ideas of surveillance and observation play out in the text and how the characters use these actions as a means to enact their autonomy and authority and sustain their livelihoods within the urban space. In terms of the Tally text, I will use this to show how Abani uses the character of Elvis to spatialize the city in *GraceLand* through his movement in it and how he creates the character as a pedestrian in order to create this topophrenic experience of the space (99). In addition to the ideas brought forward by Tally, I will also consider how this feeds into Quayson and Watson's belief that cities complicate traditional understandings of theory; and I will further explore these complications in the chapter.

The cultural diversity found in Abani's Lagos can be thought of through the lens of AbdouMaliq Simone's theory of 'People as Infrastructure' that I had unpacked in earlier chapters, in that the characters that Elvis encounters throughout the narrative all connect and interact in a tortuous manner that gives shape and structure to Lagos and allows Elvis to navigate the city despite its embedded lack of physical established infrastructure, like Madam Caro, the food stall or 'buka'¹⁸ vendor, a figure that Elvis encounters almost daily in his

¹⁸ Nigerian (originally Yoruba and Hausa) term for an informal roadside establishment that offers local cuisine

movements to and from his home in Maroko. Simone also puts forward the idea that traditional government-based politics do not have the scope that is necessary for suitable governing and regulation of the African city space, because it does not do the work of recognising the customary politics that arise as a result of urban intersection, and this is in large extent due to the government structures in the Global South being inherited directly and often without amendment from the Global North. An example of this would be the narrative around the demolition of Maroko by the local government because of the failure to acknowledge the significance of spaces like Maroko as part of the overall experience of Lagos – that it is because of dichotomic representations of Ikoyi and Maroko and their interplay that Lagos can exist as a dynamic representation of the African urban. Furthermore, Simone notes that the architecture located in these Global South urban settings functions dually as a reason for and as indications of these intersections. The impoverished and degraded structure of Maroko is the reason for its residents taking on the responsibility of performing infrastructure, and in viewing these structures, we can also see the ways that residents intersect and perform the city.

One such character who presents as an embodiment of culture and an influence to cultural phenomenon, is the King of Beggars whom Elvis meets fairly early on in the text. The King (as he is often referred in the text), although positioned at the lowest socioeconomic and sociopolitical point, functions as such an intrinsic part of the culture and infrastructure of Maroko because he seems to operate as a mutual connection between characters of the novel and he has a past which is depicted as connected to the history of the space. His influence on the culture of Lagos and Maroko is cemented close to the end of the novel where he leads the resistance against the government and authorities who plan to demolish Maroko and succeeds in killing the Colonel who leads the demolition (Abani 280).

In a similar sense, Goyal presents an interesting description of Elvis as a character who is positioned within a space of ambiguity and ambivalence throughout the text and as representative of these same principles as they exist in the context of the African urban itinerary which is just as ambiguous.

Goyal: Elvis, for example, reads neither like a victim nor as a triumphalist icon of globalization. His dreams are equally made up of Hollywood Westerns, his mother's recipes, and botched initiation ceremonies. (Goyal 229)

Abani: Elvis is not a victim certainly; I agree with that. But I would argue that he is triumphant not as an icon of globalization (the very icon of Elvis that is deconstructed in the narrative is about the failure of any kind of iconography to represent a truly human moment), but he is triumphant as a deeply human person who happens to be African living in this intersection of culture and place. (Goyal 230)

As seen above, Abani builds on this idea and describes Elvis further as “deeply human” and thus encompassing a variety of factors that we see in play throughout the text. Elvis’ ‘deep humanness’ is apparent in his need to impersonate, his constant experience of death, the relationships he maintains, and his quest for redemption, which I will investigate in greater detail later in this chapter.

Imitation, Impersonation and Performativity in *Graceland*

This section will explore the way that Abani weaves impersonation into the itinerary of Lagos that he presents in the text and how this invokes a kind of ambiguity, as well as his choice to introduce the readers to the character of Elvis as an impersonator in all aspects of his existence – his name, his career, his dreams and how all of these aspects become actualised through impersonation. Abani’s 2007 novel, *Virgin of Flames* can in many ways be linked to his earlier work in 2004 that is the focus of my study, as both the main characters in the previously mentioned novel and *GraceLand* use the act of mimicry or impersonation as a means of expression and to support their livelihoods, but the impersonation enacted by both of Abani’s characters is also depicted as a representation of the uncertainty and fragility of their identities.

The discourse of mimicry is presented as a phenomenon and discussed by Homi Bhabha in his work, *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse* (1984) where he roots this practice as arising in the postcolonial moment where colonial subjects perceive themselves as inferior and as a result mimic or imitate that which is presented as superior, the West (their principles, practices, languages and so on). This is all framed as part of the programming of Western powers through colonialism – Manakkal Sadasivam Nagarajan notes that “...this colonialist ideology created colonial subjects who behaved in the way the colonizer had programmed. They willingly accepted the superiority of the British, and their own inferiority. It produced a ‘cultural cringe’ so to speak” (187) (Gupta 2).

Mimicry when performed, suppresses the cultural identity of the performer and leaves them in a state of ambivalence, which Bhabha notes mimicry is constructed around; and this in turn suppresses the cultural identity of those performing mimicry (86) (Gupta 3). The result of this practice then leads to what Nagarajan calls an “unhomeliness” where the mimicry performer feels disconnected from their own home and becomes a “psychological refugee” (187) (Gupta 5). In his discussion of this phenomenon, Gupta notes that Bhabha does not directly suggest a way to use mimicry as a decolonial strategy but hints at the possibility of using mimicry in a subversive manner to rebut the superimposing narratives and influence of the West (Gupta 6). I am interested in examining the ways Abani writes to subvert the phenomenon of mimicry in his text as a commentary on the extensive influence of Western ideologies on the Global South through an exploration of its cityscapes.

“The discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*” (Bhabha 126). Thus, in Abani constructing his main character based on this idea, he is rooting his text in a particular ambiguity that further complicates our understanding of the city he formulates in his novel. Mimicry as a practice is prevalent in Abani’s novel in many ways and especially through the life of his main character, Elvis Oke who is introduced to us as an embodiment of mimicry – as a performance artist who finds inspiration in a key Western figure for whom he is also named – Elvis Presley¹⁹.

This is seen in greater detail in a scene at the beginning of the novel where Elvis performs at a beach hotel for white American and British tourists and expatriates where we are presented with an example of this impersonation. In this scene, there are so many intriguing aspects in play, such as the representation of the wealth disparity present in the postcolonial city where certain resources and spaces are reserved for specific groups. It is also interesting to note the dissonance created in Elvis’s greeting and his following performance – in his verbal introduction, he underlines the geographical location of the city but then in his performance, he underscores Western ideals in his recreation of Elvis Presley’s dance. The response from the foreigners to Elvis’ impersonation speaks to what Bhabha and Gupta note is the result of mimicry – where performers of this mimicry fall short of achieving it and produce a ‘cultural cringe’ that highlights their own perceived inferiority (Bhabha 187) (Gupta 2).

“Welcome to Lagos, Nigeria,” Elvis said.

¹⁹ An American singer and actor who is regarded as one of the most significant cultural figures of the 20th century

He put his bag down and took several steps away from it, the freshly watered sand crunching under his heels. He cleared his throat, counted off “One, two, three,” then began to sing “Hound Dog” off-key. At the same time, he launched into his dance routine.

It built up slowly, one leg sort of snapping at the knee, then the pelvic thrust, the arm dangling at his side becoming animated, forefinger and thumb snapping out the time. With a stumble, because the wet sand, until he adjusted to it, sucked at his feet, he launched into the rest of his routine. It was spellbinding watching him hover over the sand, movements as fluid as a wave, and it was some time before any of the foreigners moved or spoke. (Abani 14)

In a different scene in the novel (as seen below), we are also presented with another form of mimicry. While on the trip, one of the bus passengers, who we assume is some kind of pharmaceutical representative, loudly promotes an imitation of the paracetamol drug but all the while mispronouncing the different advanced medical terms that make up the drug’s composition: When thinking of Simone’s theory and the way it can be read into the cityscape, the bus from the scene below can also be regarded as a point of urban intersection because it acts as a point where city residents connect or encounter each other while manoeuvring the city space and can also be a location that allows for surveillance and observation which is necessary for life in the city (Simone 360).

“We get new product for sale today call Pracetmol. It cures all pains, aches and fever caused in de body. If you look at de package, you will see dat de expiry date is December eighty-three. Dis is a new drug from de white people’s labs and plenty research done go into it. It is manufacture in Yugoslavia. In dat country dey call it narcotics and it is costing plenty money. We in Star Advertising Agency with head office in Orile Lagos have been choose by de makers to promote dis drug in Nigeria. Today you can obtain your copy at cheap rate from me. Due to and because of advert purpose, dis packet containing twenty tablet is costing only one naira. If you check any chemist it is costing three naira dere. Buy your own now, for mama, papa and childrens too ...”
(Abani 12)

Impersonation is evident throughout the text, not just in the character of Elvis, but also in the construction of the African urban space as we see multiple references to Western culture and the way its influence is perpetuated throughout the space. The medicine presented above by the hawker is never confirmed in the text to be a trusted product and the only experience we have of it is in the bus scene, which only works to highlight the inferiority of the product in comparison to its Western counterpart. The use of Pidgin English and subsequent mispronunciations of certain words further supplements the depiction of inferiority and suppression of cultural identity that is a result of mimicry (Bhabha 86) (Gupta 3). The medicine promoter in the scene could also be enacting Simone's theory of intersections in the urban context as a means of sustainability (360) – in order to promote this drug, the promoter chose a key location for intersection where numerous city residents could be found, and this provided him with the prime opportunity to do so.

In a twist by the author, we are also confronted with the redeeming effects of impersonation and imitation as Abani utilizes this concept as a framing for Elvis' redemption at the end of the novel, where he very literally assumes his friend Redemption's identity and passport in order to gain access to a better life outside of Nigeria (in the United States) – but I will discuss this in more detail at a later point in the chapter. Additionally, in engaging the themes Abani presents in this chapter, I am forced to acknowledge the irony apparent in his choice to make his character imitate an individual who was also accused of imitation²⁰. In a similar regard, I am prompted to consider the irony in the African urban imitating Western structures, when those structures are in some way an impersonation of ideals based on unsustainable systems of exploitation and which in turn lead to a collapse of the infrastructures located in the Global South, as they are not sustainable within this context (Simone 425). As part of these ideas, Abani also highlights a sense of ambiguity that is present throughout the novel, and especially in Elvis and his impersonation, as it is not particularly presented as completely harmful nor totally beneficial.

Abani's mapping of Lagos in the novel is similar to that found in the *Lagos Noir* anthology because in both narratives, we see how the harsh dichotomies of wealth, class and access play out as part of the itinerary of the inner city. In the novel, this is evident in Elvis's wandering movements through the city, from the poverty-stricken slum of Maroko where he resides away from enjoyable amenities of the city to the wealthy ostentatious resorts where White tourists

²⁰ Elvis Presley was often accused of poaching his music and performances from lesser-known Black musicians

reside closer to the ocean and the city's more desirable locations. When thinking of Elvis and his movement within Lagos, I do not perceive him as a flaneur in the city because of the modes of power and access associated with this idea (Tally 2023) but rather as a wanderer who simply navigates the city based on his familiarity with the space, and whose movement through the space is not pre-determined or fixed but rather fluid and undetermined. As seen in the excerpt below, Abani directly references the imitation of Western spaces in the African urban as a means to provide for whiteness. This influence is so embedded in the itinerary of Lagos that Abani notes that Western currency was more prominent than the local currency.

Urban Itineraries: Lagosian Cartographies of Life and Death

Abani maps death into the city and how the experience of death is intrinsic in his mapping of the city. As often as this death is depicted, it is not raised above other narratives, rather interwoven as a key aspect of Lagosian life. Elvis is presented to us not just as the main perspective through which the narrative is shared, but also as our compass through the African urban itinerary. Elvis is a pedestrian who has a tophophrenic experience (that is curated by walking through and engaging with the space) of the city and as he walks through the city, 'spatializing' it (Tally 57). Through his movements across and within this space, we see how death is embedded so deeply as part of this process, as well as how death forms part of Elvis' mental cartography of the city. However, although Abani highlights death in numerous scenes and to varying degrees, he always makes sure to observe it in a way that depicts Elvis, not just as a witness to death, but as a vessel through which it is processed (he gives us Elvis's commentary and thoughts about the death he just witnesses and how he perceives these scenes occurring as part of life in the city), therefore making it more easily consumed by the readers and allowing for a more digestible reading of the African city. There are also certain instances in the text where Elvis acts as a conduit of death, rather than just a witness of it.

In so many scenes in the novel, there are instances where Elvis witnesses death briefly as he perceives the city but does not focus on it and moves on to witness something else, or Abani introduces something else into the narrative or the scene that then overtakes the depiction of death that was being presented. An example of this can be seen in the excerpt below:

The public tap was situated directly below a high-voltage power line. Picking up a thin piece of metal, the boy rapped out a tune on the metal beak of the tap,

dancing in the puddles, laughing. Suddenly the girl jerked up. Eyes wide, she reached out a trembling hand and pointed. Elvis saw it too. More than four thousand volts of electricity arced from the overhead cable in a beautiful steel-blue hue, like ice reflecting the sun, and hit the upturned bicycle spoke the boy held with the grace of a cat.

There was a brief flash like a bolt of lightning and then, scarcely disturbing the heavy air, its fragrance alluding to death, a choking smell filled the nostrils as only the smell of burning flesh can. Elvis watched the boy's body float away in the deluge, while another took his place and took the full bucket of water to whatever destination would pay for it. (Abani 292)

In the above excerpt, we are offered quite a harsh and vivid scene where a child is spontaneously killed by a rogue bolt of electricity while carrying out a mundane task like getting water from a public tap to sell to whoever will purchase it. While fulfilling this task, the child does what children often do and picks up a piece of scrap metal to play with, but this has an adverse effect as it acts as a conductor for a bolt of electricity that springs from presumably poorly-maintained electricity lines. As soon as this occurs, the only individuals who are shown to witness this tragedy or be affected by it at all are Elvis and a little girl because soon afterwards, the boy's corpse is carried away by the chaotic city itself in a "deluge," while another city inhabitant quickly "took his place" for the incomplete job. Witnessing here is used by Abani as a literary strategy that is enacted both by the readers of the novel and the characters in it – where the readers witness the death but also witness the characters' witnessing of said death. The role of Elvis as the wanderer here is highlighted as he spontaneously comes upon this scene while trying to recover from illness in Bridge City after the fall of Maroko. It is additionally important to note the disconnect in the tone in this scene where Abani seems to highlight the cruelty of the city by using language that almost seems too calm or reserved to depict this death – he even goes as far as to describe the bolt that killed the boy as "beautiful" (292).

This also shows us how the failed infrastructures that often make up the African urban itinerary contribute to the experiences of its inhabitants and enforce their participation in the structures and functioning of the urban (Simone, 2004 – 409). Because these children have no other recourse available to assist them in funding their survival in the city, they resort to carrying out menial tasks for payments; even this option is so inaccessible and rare that after one child dies,

another can simply take over, and actually must take over to sustain themselves and fulfil this fractured urban function. This scene truly highlights the precarity inherent in urban existence where not even life is guaranteed, and survival is not always assured nor dependent on the actions of the residents of these inner cities. The reason for this could be understood as linked to the failed infrastructure that makes up these urban landscapes, such as the damaged electrical line that killed the boy and the faulty water system that made it necessary for him to sell water in the first place. In Abani's framing of death as so intrinsic in his mapping of an African urban itinerary, he could be inadvertently situating the itinerary that he maps within an Afropessimist scope.

The cultural diversity found in Abani's Lagos can be thought of through the lens of AbdouMalik Simone's concept of 'people as infrastructure' that I had unpacked in earlier chapters. The characters that Elvis encounters throughout the narrative all connect and interact in a tortuous manner that gives shape and structure to the way that Elvis navigates the city. For example, Madam Caro, the food stall or 'buka²¹' vendor, a figure that Elvis encounters almost daily in his itinerary to and from his home in Maroko. Building on my earlier argument, Simone asks, "What are the appropriate forms of community organization and mobilization in a context where urban government is increasingly less capable of meeting the demands of all citizens" (362) and thus also puts forward the idea that traditional government-based politics do not have the scope that is necessary for suitable governing and regulation of the African city space, because it does not do the work of recognising the customary politics that arise as a result of urban intersection (the essential interaction of inner-city residents), due to urban governance structures in the Global South being inherited directly and often so without amendment, from the Global North (Simone 425). The way that Abani maps relationships in the text could also be read as a mapping of life throughout the text, in the way that these characters engage and interact with one another and, as a result, breathe energy into the city landscape. Through seeing the way these relationships play out in the novel, particularly those that Elvis maintains in the text, we can see the ambiguity present in those connections, as well as the intricacies of these relationships.

²¹ Nigerian (originally Yoruba and Hausa) term for an informal roadside establishment that offers local cuisine

Urban Intersections: Mokoro, Bridge City and The Quest for Redemption

The above idea of poor urban governance is very practically represented in the novel and personified in the corrupt figure of the Colonel, whom Abani frames as a type of faceless villain for the majority of the narrative. We are introduced to the Colonel when hearing The King's life story but only encounter him towards the end of the novel during the demolition of Maroko and therefore confirm his existence. It is important to note that the character of the Colonel represents more than just an embodiment of Western ideologies but also represents the corruption of the modern nation-state in relation to urban governance – which is visible in the role he plays in Maroko's demolition as the frontrunner leading the process and fighting against the residents who oppose it (Abani 278-280).

The narrative around the demolition of Maroko by the local government is a result of their failure to acknowledge the significance of spaces like Maroko as part of the overall experience of Lagos and intrinsic to the formation of the cityscape. In choosing to erase this site from the city, urban governance structures are also erasing a key point of intersection in the overall city of Lagos and displacing the residents who intersect within that space and perform its infrastructure. Ultimately, the establishment of Maroko was a result of urban neglect – the city did not provide for certain citizens which meant they had to create their own spaces of residency – and the demolition of the neighbourhood is a continuation of that neglect. This responds to the characteristics of 'conflicting rationalities' that Vanessa Watson engages in her article, *Conflicting rationalities: Implications for planning theory and ethics* (2003). Furthermore, Simone notes that the architecture that is located in these Global South urban settings functions dually as a reason for and as indications of these intersections (Simone, 2011 364-365). This simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic depiction of relationships within African urban spaces feeds into the ambiguity that Abani weaves into the itinerary. An example of this would be Elvis' relationship with his alcoholic father, Sunday. Even with the tumultuous nature of his relationship with his father, Elvis is shown to have a deep connection to him and is even deeply troubled when he discovers his father's corpse after the battle at Maroko (Abani 282), which also highlights the ways that urban spaces are produced and maintained through relationships and complex structures of feeling.

One such character who presents as an embodiment of Lagosian urban identity, as well as influencing cultural phenomenon is the King of Beggars, whom Elvis meets fairly early on in the text. Despite his very low socioeconomic and sociopolitical position, he is represented as a

key witness to and of the city. Elvis is first approached by the King of Beggars, who has been watching him witness an attempted crime (Abani 31). In this scene, we see Elvis, our wanderer, through whose eyes we witness the city, being witnessed by another character. This is representative of the multiple gazes present in the city and the ways that surveillance and observation are utilised to formulate and maintain intersections in this context (Simone, 2011 - 360). The King— an ironic name given that he is a beggar — functions as such an intrinsic part of the infrastructure of Maroko because he seems to operate as a connection between characters of the novel, such as his connection to both Madame Caro and Elvis, despite neither individual being aware of their mutual connection (Abani 236). His influence on Lagosian city space and Maroko in particular, is cemented close to the end of the novel where he leads the resistance against the government and authorities who plan to demolish Maroko and eventually succeeds in killing the Colonel who leads the demolition (Abani 280).

At the end of the novel, after the battle against the demolition of Maroko occurs, all its citizens are displaced — most seemingly relocated to Bridge City — and have had an aspect of their identity purged along with their neighbourhood. After this harrowing experience, the ex-citizens of Maroko are depicted as either searching for redemption or having found it in different ways in Bridge City. Madame Caro is revealed to have found her redemption as she established a new and thriving business in Bridge City after leaving Maroko (Abani 287); the King is shown to have gained redemption despite not surviving the battle in Maroko because of the vital role he played during it: “He had come to terms with the King’s death; but he hadn’t come to terms, and probably never would, with the way the King had been deified. He was spoken of with a deeply profound reverence, and the appendage “Blessings be upon his name,” usually reserved for prophets in Islam, was being used whenever his name was invoked” (Abani 287); Elvis’ stepmother, Comfort, is mentioned by Madame Caro to have found some kind of partial redemption while trying to heal from Elvis’ father’s death by relocating and maintaining her business (Abani 288). This section will explore the ways that redemption is introduced as a theme in minor doses throughout the text despite the harsh realities that are presented, and how this also creates an ambiguity that we perceive while engaging the city, as well as the representation of Redemption as a character in the text and his connection to the main character, Elvis.

Abani maps relationships into his structuring of African urban spaces in his depiction of Elvis who relocates from Lagos to Bridge City, after the fight in Maroko to stop its demolition, where

the majority of its precarious residents were either killed or displaced – having survived the fighting – but is forced to relocate to Bridge City where he becomes a ‘caretaker’ or ‘scavenger’ who is paid by homeless beggar children to protect them from other scavengers who come to the city (Abani 287). During his duties as a scavenger, Elvis is watching over Blessing and some other beggar children as they sleep at night when Blessing approaches Elvis in an effort to seduce him:

She stood before him and he stared at her transfixed. Her lips parted slightly and her tongue darted out to lick her upper lip and he followed her every movement, his tongue licking in sync. (Abani 289)

However, despite her relationship with Elvis beginning in a sexual manner, it then develops into something more emotional as she later cares for him during a serious illness, taking on a more maternal role despite Elvis’ position as a ‘caretaker.’ Elvis muses about Blessing, stating: “She reminded him so much of Efua, and he wondered why all the women in his life had to take care of him—even those he should have been taking care of” (Abani 293). Blessing is so intrinsic to Elvis’ story that she became his final motivation to leave Nigeria and pursue life in the West. We see this in one of the last paragraphs of the novel where Elvis states, “I promised Blessing that I would never leave her” as a reason to stay and due to the affection he developed for her and Blessing urges him to go, saying “Go, den you send for me” (Abani 295). However, Abani maintains his complex depiction of the city as a space that is often synonymous with the idea of redemption but that works to keep it just out of the reach of its citizens, by depicting Elvis as restricted from reaching Redemption (both the idea and the character) until he seems to overcome his desperation, settle into despair and even almost lose his life from starvation and illness. And in the above excerpt, we see a dual redemption occur for both Blessing and Elvis who seem to become better versions of themselves through their interaction with one another.

Redemption in the city is presented as seemingly ever-present but not openly apparent to those who seek it, and this is a simultaneously pessimistic but ambivalent take on city life and experiences. It is also through the act of seeking redemption or of trying to redeem oneself that these urban citizens enact their autonomy within the urban space in as many ways as possible. If we read this through Simone’s concept/notion of urban intersections, these acts of redemption become points of intersection that sustain life in urban inner cities. He notes that these intersections enable them to enact some form of authority over events that occur, shape

their outcomes, and influence the quintessence of these spaces that could and would ultimately have an impact on their own lives within the space (Simone 360). As most of the surviving residents are now situated in Bridge City, they are positioned in a way that requires them to formulate new mutually beneficial relations as part of the process of creating new lives, since the previous intersections established in Maroko have been depleted. We see the mapping of these new intersections occur in familiar (like Madam Caro re-establishing her buka in a new location) and new (like Elvis choosing to become a 'caretaker' after trying for many years to be a performer) ways in Bridge City as the residents work to rebuild their lives and their identities. Even the idea of a 'caretaker' is the result of intersecting needs, because Bridge City is described as full of "the scavengers spawned by this place" (Abani 287), these caretakers were created as a response to the danger of the space in order to positively impact the lives of the young beggar children who live there and were "prime targets" for these scavengers (Abani 287).

At the end of the novel, Elvis is shown to have seemingly found some redemption after carrying out a sort of penance – in his becoming a 'caretaker' who takes care of abandoned street children (Abani 287). This change occurs at the lowest point in Elvis' life after he learns of his father's death, flees the remains of Maroko and comes to Bridge City in search of a new life and a second chance. In his choosing to become a 'caretaker,' Elvis seemingly gives up on some of his other goals to care for these children. So much so that even when he is faced with the choice of leaving Nigeria to go to America, he is hesitant to leave Blessing behind, saying "I promised Blessing that I would never leave her" (Abani 295). Ultimately, it is through the intersection of Elvis and Redemption's lives in the text that Elvis is able to enact some form of authority over his life in his move to America. Elvis initially meets Redemption in school and is impressed with his ingenuity and charm (Abani 6) and their connection and mutually beneficial relationship developed from there; it is even noted in the text that Redemption was the key factor in Elvis becoming an impersonator and introduced Elvis to the idea of fleeing Nigeria for the United States. In describing the strong bond between Elvis and Redemption, Abani states, "Elvis adored Redemption, deferring to him as if he were the elder brother he'd never had. For Redemption this offered the possibility of something he desired most, acceptance" (Abani 27).

The connection Elvis has to Redemption is so potent that in an earlier part of the novel, Elvis has a key sentence when he resolves to escape his life in search of better – "As he walked, he

realized, the only way out of this life was Redemption” (Abani 177). This realisation comes after Elvis confided in his father that he was sexually assaulted by his uncle and indirectly decides to disown his family after learning that his father and uncle had his cousin killed. Redemption here directly references the character because he has always been a resource for Elvis since their unconventional introduction, believing in his dream to become a dancer and introducing him to the idea of immigrating to the United States (Abani 26-27). But this sentence can also be read as referring to the idea of redemption, which means that in order for Elvis to become worthy once more of the life he desires for himself, he would need to atone for the actions of his family (sexual assault, murder) and of himself (not speaking out earlier against these crimes).

Elvis also strongly resists the idea of going to the United States in a way that suggests that he does not feel he is worthy of doing so, and would rather remain in Nigeria despite it possibly leading to his death, and Redemption notes that Elvis feels this way because he is afraid (295). However, finally, Elvis is able to find redemption because of Redemption. and his actions that allow Elvis to enact one final form of impersonation in the text and leave Nigeria in the hopes of a better life in the United States:

“Redemption,” the airline clerk called.

Elvis, still unfamiliar with his new name, did not respond.

“Redemption!” the clerk called louder.

Elvis stepped forward and spoke.

“Yes, this is Redemption.”

(Abani 298)

The uncertainty of the boundaries between these individuals is reflective of the modes of being that make up inner cities where individuals blend in some way to form complicated identities based on and within the city, and this could also be regarded as why Elvis can use Redemption's identity to redeem himself. The line “Yes, this is Redemption” (Abani 298) also connotes that it is through this act of performativity and escaping that Elvis is finally redeemed.

Chapter Conclusion

This chapter was focused on the main character, Elvis Oke, and after a lengthy exploration of the different ways Abani uses his life to illustrate the city, a few ideas are established. Firstly, is the role of mimicry in the life of the flaneur and in the construction of the African urban, and the ways in which this action underscores the symbolic gaze on the West. Secondly, it is how in mapping death into the itinerary, Abani automatically maps life instead as the former makes way for the latter. Thirdly, the ways in which intersections occur are both a means for and a result of redemption. The constant movement that is foregrounded in this chapter (from Maroko to Bridge City to the United States and Elvis' transition across different types of residencies in these spaces) is reflective of the fluid and ambiguous nature of the African city and its residents, in that the experience of it is not limited to one location or point in time. Elvis' unique position as a Lagosian flaneur is activated in all other spaces he finds himself, and this ambivalence is reflective of a specific Lagosian urbanity that he carries with him.

CONCLUSION

In the first part of my study, I was concerned with the relationship between Afropessimism and the Noir genre – particularly in the ways that noir literary and cinematic productions are framed or perceived through a pessimistic lens. What emerged from my analysis of this genre is the very specific ways that it crafts a city narrative. Chris Abani, as the editor of the *Lagos Noir* anthology, presented an interesting question of whether his novel, *GraceLand* falls within the noir genre and thus represents Lagos through an Afropessimistic lens. However, after careful examination of this idea, it is clear that what the novel presents is a very specific Lagosian noir that complicates traditional understanding of the genre and its pessimist framing. In this Lagosian noir, the focus is not just on the dark themes of the Noir genre – of the city defined by the violence inherent within it – but also reflects ambivalence towards an Afropessimist representation of Lagos.

After understanding how the novel is positioned in relation to the noir genre which focuses on the city as a literary character, it becomes necessary to consider Lagos as it is depicted by Abani as a diasporic writer. We see that the author uses more than just the narrative of the text to formulate his depiction of the city within the Nigerian sociocultural and economic context. In this regard, he includes dynamic representations of certain Nigerian cultures like the traditional recipes and remedies in the journal, and the ritual practices that occupy the majority of Elvis' memories about his childhood, as well as the application of Pidgin English at various points in the text. Abani takes these dichotomic elements and highlights their correlation to each other and their engagement within the city. This presents a very complex and specific Lagosian urbanity that is rooted in ambiguity and emanates a feeling of ambivalence of the writer towards his homeland. Abani intricately maps this Lagosian urbanity and constructs its dialectic in the way that seemingly opposing ideas are situated in a simultaneously harmonious and discordant manner within the Lagosian urban space – notably, life and death, as well as tradition and modernity as collaborators within the space. This depiction of the city as more than just one idea, but as a site where a multitude of ideas are at play, then fulfils Pieterse and Simone's belief of the city as a paradox in their text, *New Urban Worlds: Inhabiting Dissonant Times* (2017), which proposes paradoxes as inherent to the city space and promotes a reformation of urbanity.

The ambivalence towards Afropessimism in the text is taken further as we proceed from the examination of the Lagosian urbanity to the individuals that reside within it. Abani's characters in the novel are complex creatures involved in a constant tangling and untangling within the text, and not just with each other, but with the various elements that make up life in the city. From investigating the representation of these characters and their relationships through Simone's *People as Infrastructure* (2004), it becomes clear that their existence within the city is more than just residency but is part of what sustains the city through various means. The novel also depicts the trajectory of these city residents as not being a linear narrative of progressing as a result of their residence in the city. This was particularly clear in the life of the main character, Elvis, who presents as an ambiguous Lagosian flaneur that is both an advantaged and a disadvantaged literary figure in his wandering of the city, much like Omelsky's 'euphoric optimism' that makes up his definition of ambiguity and ambivalence in the novel, from his article *Chris Abani and the Politics of Ambivalence* (2011). Abani shows how the narrative of Elvis's life in the city is ultimately a precarious one – as is the case with many city dwellers in this novel – that involves some form of performativity with in the space and performance of the space. Just as the performance of redemption towards the end of the novel; as well as the ambiguity of this lived experience, is not only a result of the individual's actions but involves negotiating different elements that characterise Lagosian urbanity, such as the characteristics of Southern cities outlined by Parida and Agrawal – colonial spatial culture, focus on infrastructure, informality and uncertainty of urban processes, vulnerability of the urban experience, conflicting relationships, and a disparity between capital and labour (2022).

The above ideas produced from this study counter preconceived perceptions of the African urban as being closely linked to Afropessimism and rather suggest a decolonial approach that moves away from this developmentalist framing. Thus, it becomes clear that the understanding of the city of Lagos, and African urban spaces in general, is one that is only possible once we understand the inherent ambiguity of "cityness" in the Global South. Future studies in this field must recognize this ambiguity as an analytical intervention and contribute towards the wording of the African urban by situating any explorations of the setting within this decolonial framework.

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