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Cross Roads of the Living and the Dead: Necropolitics and Market Logic in Chris Abani's Graceland

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“CROSS ROADS OF THE LIVING AND THE DEAD”: NECROPOLITICS AND
MARKET LOGIC IN CHRIS ABANI’S *GRACELAND*

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that Chris Abani's 2004 novel *Graceland* presents the austerity programs imposed on Nigeria in the 1980s as a form of financialized necropolitics. Through its representation of the entanglement between transnational capital interests and repressive state security forces, *Graceland* offers new ways of theorizing neoliberal governance and its relationship to the construction of what Achille Mbembe calls "death worlds." In the novel, the state's instrumentation and destruction of human bodies (for the accumulation of wealth) becomes an apt metaphor for structural adjustment. But the novel goes further by demonstrating how this logic of accumulation utilizes biopolitical and even aesthetic arguments to justify its destruction. What results is a city in which those deemed outside of the biopolitical protections of the state (the poor, unlaboring population) are made increasingly invisible. This necropolitics is registered in the novel by a pervasive madness which Elvis must come to recognize not as personal or national defect but rather as symptomatic of the madness of the necropolitical state. Finally, this thesis looks to performance as a means of resistance to this necropolitical state through an assertion of visibility and self-formation.

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CHAPTER 1

CLIENT STATES AND NECROPOWER: THE UNHEALTHY NEOLIBERAL SUBJECT

In the culminating lecture of his series *Society Must Be Defended*, Michel Foucault lays out his theory of biopower. Foucault draws a distinction between disciplinary power and a new regulatory power developing in and alongside the growth of industrial capital in the 19th century. While disciplinary power works to rule “multiplicities of men” by breaking them into individuals who can be surveilled, conditioned, and punished, these later technologies of regulation act not on individual bodies but rather on populations, “directed not at man-as-body but at man-as-species” (243). But humans-en-masse form a dynamic, fluid, and unruly body. Therefore, it is only through the application of statistical analysis (a field of knowledge coextensive with the rise of biopower) that controls can be established and a homeostasis can be reached. Biopolitics thus asserts itself through the calculation and management of birth and death rates, as well as the study and mitigation of not only epidemic disease but also of endemic illness. Biopower can therefore be thought of as a security apparatus “installed around the random element inherent in a population of living beings,” which works to ameliorate risk and optimize the health and productivity of the population (246).

The rise of biopower brought about a corresponding shift in the relationship between sovereignty and death. Under classical theories of sovereignty, the Sovereign claims all authority over life and death. But this relationship can only express itself

unevenly, as “the right to take life or let live” (240). With the development of biopower, a new set of rights emerge: “the right to make live and let die” (241). This is the “right” to choose who is included within the sphere of biopolitical protection and who is excluded from it—left out of the risk-ameliorating and life-optimizing apparatus of the state. Key to Foucault’s argument is that the rise of these new biopolitical rights does not cancel out or replace the old sovereign right to kill, but rather instead “penetrate[s] it, [and] permeate[s] it” (240).

The key question for Foucault, then, becomes the following: if the imperative of biopower is the optimization of life, how does the state retain its sovereign right to kill and to “expose its own citizens to risk of death” (254)? It is here that Foucault proposes the idea of state racism, the establishment of a “biological-type caesura within a population that appears to be a biological domain” (225). It’s important to note that Foucault’s definition of state racism includes but exceeds the more common definition of racism to include any sub-population which the state deems outside of biopolitical protection, any sub-group whose very existence is said to compromise the health of the “normal” population. Foucault parrots the logic as such: “The more inferior species die out, the more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate” (225). In this way, through state racism the right to kill is not an aberration from the biopolitical, but a key and necessary feature of its function.

In “Necropolitics,” Achille Mbembe builds upon Foucault’s idea of state racism, but relocates the argument to spaces of colonial occupation and the apartheid state.

Mbembe adds to Foucault's analysis two key concepts: "the relation to enmity," that is, appeals to threats from a (fictionalized) enemy, and "the state of exception," in which rule of law is suspended in response to this perceived threat. Mbembe is primarily concerned with those types of necropolitical systems which can only operate in states of emergency. For Mbembe, the colony is the ultimate space of exception and "represents the site where sovereignty consists fundamentally in the exercise of a power outside the law (*ab legibus solutus*) and where 'peace' is more likely to take on the face of a 'war without end'" (23). Mbembe develops his essay by drawing this necropolitical thread between early modern colonial occupation and its late-modern counterpart, and finally to contemporary warfare in which state actors are increasingly replaced by war-machines. But what is produced, even as these technologies change, is the necropolitical space, the production of "death worlds" in which the inhabitants are reduced to the status of "living dead" (40).

In this essay I depart from Mbembe's analysis by locating the category of necropower not only in the power of the state to wage war, but also in the application of neoliberal technologies of the market toward "the generalized instrumentation of human existence and the material destruction of human bodies" (13). However, to view state necropower and the necropower of the market as separate phenomenon is to perpetuate the myth that markets are both naturally formed and independent from states. The reality is quite the opposite: markets and state-violence are mutually constitutive.

Take, for example the "Moralizing Tax" in French-controlled Madagascar. David Graeber describes how this tax, intentionally levied immediately after harvest, forced farmers to sell their crop to pay the colonial power. The crops were then sold back by the

merchant classes at a higher price, creating a cycle of debt with the purpose of conscripting natives into a labor market. Key to this enterprise was France's long term goal of providing the locals a limited amount of extra money to foster a consumer market as a means of maintaining Malagasy dependency on France. This consumer market would in turn secure the workers' labor without the need of military intervention (51). In this instance, the original exposure to violence is replaced by a market-based control which secures both French domination and a relatively passive Malagasy population.

If the rhetoric surrounding the tax emphasized its ability to educate the natives on the value of work, the primary pedagogical tool it had in mind is what Karl Polanyi refers to as "the scourge of hunger" (173). Polanyi argues that the implied threat of starvation ultimately takes the place of more direct forms of state violence in the creation of a labor class. He locates this original violence in the "legal compulsion and parish serfdom as in England, the rigors of an absolutist labor police as on the Continent, [and the] indentured labor as in the early Americas," positing this labor-by-force as the "prerequisite of the willing worker" (173). In the space of the colonies, such an exposure to starvation first necessitated the dissolution of traditional institutions and the securities which they provide. It is through the dissolution and atomization of the colonized social body that the individual becomes exposed to death, and it is this exposure to death which in turn produces the conditions necessary to construct the laboring population. Polanyi associates this phenomenon with the Ricardian vision of the labor market, which he describes as a "flow of human lives the supply of which was regulated by the amount of food put at their disposal" (172). Thus, from its roots, the labor market was inherently rooted in

necropolitics; the biological necessity of eating--the negation of which means death--becomes a tool for instrumentalizing the population into labor.

Of course, in the biopolitical state, aimed toward the optimization of life, exposure to the violence of the market must be mitigated, and safeguards must be put in place. After all, the notion of a self-regulating market requires that all aspects of production be for sale, and that “neither price, nor supply, nor demand ... be fixed or regulated” (Polanyi 72). Because land and labor are essential elements of industry, under a self-regulating market they must be treated as commodities. But these are fictitious commodities, to borrow the phrase from Polanyi. Labor (which is human life) and land cannot sustainably be treated as commodities to be administered by a “self-regulating” market; the result would be wholesale destruction.

Thus, the biopolitical state must ultimately step in to install a secondary apparatus of security around the artificial milieu produced through the regulatory power of the market. This is the domain of labor laws, minimum wages, and environmental regulations. In this way, regulation is layered; markets seek to regulate bodies into labor while the security apparatus of state power seeks to regulate the milieu produced by such regulation in a cost-benefit analysis which is always balancing the demands of production with the maintenance of the life and well-being of the labor force. It is the very dissolution of this state security apparatus, the unleashing of the market’s necropolitical function, which marks the neoliberal turn, in which free market fundamentalism and an attack on the “welfare state” come together to form a new biopolitical landscape.

However, here the myth of market-state opposition obscures the element of collusion. Indeed, as the case of the “Moralizing Tax” illustrates, state power is just as

responsible for the construction and maintenance of markets as it is for the protection of the laboring population. Through the interplay between the necropower of the market and the biopower of the state, a laboring population is developed and kept. The optimization of life turns out to mean the optimization of extractable labor. Foucault explicitly ties the management of endemics to the maintenance economic production. Such endemics, he argues, “sapped the population's strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive” (246). Likewise, David Harvey has asserted that within a capitalist system illness becomes defined as the “inability to go to work [and the] inability to perform adequately within the circulation of variable capital (to produce surplus value) or to abide by its disciplinary rules” (106). Conversely, the inability to produce becomes not only what defines illness but an illness in itself.

The conception of the economically healthy subject takes on an added dimension in the neoliberal world order that began taking hold at the end of the 20th century with the Thatcher and Reagan revolutions. Under the neoliberal paradigm of self-management, in which debt and credit have become ubiquitous, it is not only the inability to produce but the inability to properly manage one's finances that constitutes a pathology. Max Haiven equates this cultural shift to a financialization of culture in which debt takes on new meanings: “Whereas debt before this time was seen as a moral and social ill and the mark of bad character, by the 1970s, with the rise of new forms of student debt, mortgages, credit cards, and car loans, debt became a normal and expected part of mature economic subjectivity” (116). For Haiven, in this financialized paradigm, the normative economic subject is one who can creatively manage risk through utilizing “his or her

social location, skills, and creative energies into opportunities for success and fulfillment” (117). Conversely, an inability to manage debt and facilitate repayment becomes an individual malady, an abnormality the fault of which, in an increasingly individualizing paradigm, lies not in a systemic injustice but in a personal defect.

It is in this light that the harsh austerity of Structural Adjustment Programs enforced upon the developing world by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund becomes more intelligible as a willful assertion of necropower. Within technologies of neoliberal governance, the inability to manage debt becomes the new condition of the acceptability of putting to death. Debt, as an endemic inseparable from the subject which bears it, is regulated by the material destruction of those debtors who cannot creatively manage risk. In this way, state racism is enacted through the application of these policies to the otherness of the post-colonial space. The racial logic which underlies this exclusion from biopolitical protection, unpalatable to the modern liberal imagination, is masked in discourses on the morality of debt repayment.

Such a phenomenon of debt-collection and austerity can be understood as a financialization of the biopolitical technologies of power. When the aleatory elements of a population are regulated so that the objective is not the preservation and maintenance of life but rather the protection of a return on investment, and when the elements of risk to be secured against are not only those concerning human existence, but also the risks which are inherent to financial speculation, and when the latter supersedes the former, the technologies of biopower are converted into a financialized necropower in which a population is sapped of its vitality in order to prioritize debt repayment.

In what follows I trace this dynamic interplay of necropolitics, neoliberalism, and debt in Chris Abani's 2004 novel, *Graceland*. Taking as its subject the corrupt post-colonial regimes at the height of Nigeria's debt crisis, and concerned directly with the place of Nigeria in global economies of debt and death, *Graceland* offers a profound diagnosis of these financialized necropolitical structures and of lived experience within them, even as it suggests avenues of creatively engaging—perhaps even resisting—the madness of this necropolitical violence. To demonstrate this, my argument has three parts. First, I look to the novel's representation of collusion between the military state and transnational capital interests. Through the figure of the death-dealing Colonel, the entwinement of state repression and markets figures a relationship in which the production of Nigeria debt is closely allied with the production of Nigerian death, that in fact the repressive state apparatus is an extension of the neoliberal governance of transnational capital. Second, I turn to the biopolitical, aesthetic, and market logics which underwrite the novel's representation of the necropolitical project, while considering the ways in which exposure to death creates its own unwieldy illogic, a madness and violence which permeate the text. Here, I look to the reproduction of the necropolitical order of the state within the family structure and traditional masculinity, as figured by Joseph, Elvis's uncle and rapist. Finally, I turn to performance as one way in which the novel imagines resisting necropolitical negation and invisibility. *Graceland* registers the rich complexity of these relationships through Elvis's narrative: one of initiation into necropolitical logic while struggling to understand his own position in the economy of death within which he becomes increasingly entangled.

CHAPTER 2

THE NECROPOLITICS OF *GRACELAND*

In Chris Abani's *Graceland*, the streets of Lagos become a space where violence always threatens to burst forth and where precarity is infused into the very marrow of daily life. This is—in the first instance—a sort of generalized violence which is primarily characterized by the spontaneity of its eruption. This disorganized violence takes the form of a mob vigilantism and represents an organic and exceedingly brutal means of discouraging theft through public execution. This vigilantism is most vibrantly figured through the “necklace of fire,” a gasoline-soaked rubber tire hung on the neck of the thief and set aflame. The necklace of fire makes the punishment of theft a spectacular public event, a display of violence which acts not only as retribution but as demonstration of consequence. In this way, these public executions act as an unsanctioned and irregular imposition of order upon the disorderly streets of Lagos, even as the police look on with “bored expressions” (227).

This violence takes on an air of almost mechanistic inevitability. When we finally see the necklace of fire put to use, it is at the hands of a crowd seemingly unmovable by pity or logic. Jeremiah, a carpenter accused of theft, begs for mercy to no effect. He tries to plead his case: “I no be thief. I came to collect my money from dat man who owes me!” (224). But the mob is unmoved. The distinction between lender and thief is elided, and his guilt is considered self-evident. Soon the violence escalates, taking on a life of its own. Jeremiah begins “spinning around in a circle like a broken sprocket, pleading with

each face, repeating his name over and over. Instead of loosening the edge of tension by humanizing him, the mantra of his name, with every circle he spun, seemed to wind the threat of violence tighter, drawing the crowd closer in” (225). The mechanical image of a sprocket winding and tightening emphasizes a sense of unavoidability in the violence. It is a kind of agentless violence which once set in motion will run its course.

What, then, is the function of this violence? The answer may be found in the chants of the crowd as Jeremiah is soaked in petrol. The shouts of “Baptize him! Baptize him!” seem to point to the violence as an act of purification, a washing away of sin. Indeed, the biblical tones of this scene make Jeremiah into a grotesque Christ-like sacrificial lamb. Much of this is overt enough. The carpenter, denied by his friend (the debtor, tellingly named Peter) is stoned, humiliated, and violently killed. But as Jeremiah runs flaming into the lumber yard, Elvis’s statement that “the fire will spread,” counters the idea of regenerative violence. As the police and the crowd scatter and leave the lumber yard to burn, the scene suggests not an imposition of order but a spread of violence and disorder. The mob and the “justice” which it performs only serve to compound violence upon violence. This image speaks to the unruliness of this vigilantism and the difficulty of containing the violent energies of the impoverished mob.

This unruly and spontaneous violence of the mob is, however, only a secondary violence overshadowed by the more organized repressive violence of the Nigerian military government. This corrupt post-colonial regime is embodied by the Colonel, a homicidal officer of the military. We shall see that it, too, is linked to the problem of debt and theft. Yet the Colonel’s violence is distinguished from that of the mob by its systemic reach and its institutionally sanctioned right to kill. Through Redemption, Elvis learns

that the Colonel heads “the state security forces and that all other security agencies were under him, including the police” (121). The Colonel, as an agent of the military state, is granted an absolute power over who lives and who dies in Nigeria. The novel illustrates this in a moment which proves formative for Elvis’s impression of Lagos. After accidentally bumping into the Colonel in the nightclub where Elvis works as an escort, he is surrounded by soldiers and nearly executed, spared only by Redemption’s intervention. After this harrowing encounter, Elvis is taken outside and debriefed by Redemption and a soldier. They explain to Elvis that the Colonel and the military operate outside the rule of law, that “dere is no right or wrong with soldier. Just what we want” (121). In this way, the Colonel and the state security apparatus which he operates can be understood as embodying Mbembe’s definition of the necropolitical, possessing the “power and . . . capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (11). The Nigerian military at once comprises the law and exists fully outside of it.

Importantly, this right to kill is diffused into every soldier in what must be seen as a state of domestic occupation. Through the tentacular arms of the military and security forces, every Nigerian is exposed to the threat of death. This reflects what Michel Foucault, in a discussion of Nazi Germany, calls the “suicidal state.” Foucault understands the suicidal state as the state in which “the power to take life, the power of life and death, was granted not only to the State but to a whole series of individuals, to a considerable number of people (such as the SA, the SS, and so on)” (259). The result is a generalized right to kill, a right to kill which is embodied in every soldier—unrestrained by law and governed only by the whims of the individual soldier’s desire. In the suicidal

state, death itself takes on an omni-present quality. Wherever the agents of the state are, so is the possibility of death.

For a state to be truly “suicidal,” the power and right to kill must extend beyond state operatives. As Foucault notes “Ultimately, everyone in the Nazi State had the power of life and death over his or her neighbors, if only because of the practice of informing, which effectively meant doing away with the people next door, or having them done away with” (259). And indeed, the Colonel exercises his power through an expansive network of informants. The Colonel is said to “hear everything [and] see everything” (162). Within this surveillance state, there is an indistinguishability between who is and is not an agent of the Colonel. Within this suicidal state, paranoia reigns: as Redemption tells Elvis, “As far as I concern, you can be working for him” (163).

As the novel progresses, it is revealed that the Colonel’s authority to kill does indeed have its limits. As the King of Beggars leads a pro-democratic march against the military government, the Colonel trains him in the crosshairs of his sniper rifle. But the presence of the Western press causes him to hold his fire. He concedes “It would not do to have an assassination taped, especially by the BBC. It would affect foreign investments, and his bosses wouldn’t take kindly to that” (300). In this moment, the Colonel’s violence is shown to be governed ultimately by the imperatives of transnational capital. It is the need to protect the flow of capital into the Nigerian state that keeps the Colonel from exercising the state’s power to kill in full view of the eyes of the West. Through the shadowy figures of the Colonel’s bosses (never revealed but always off-stage), the novel reveals that the Nigerian military government’s power to kill is subordinate to the needs of capital, not an autonomous force but rather an instrument in

the service of securing investment. Moreover, this scene points to the military government's need to manage and maintain an image, a point which I will return to shortly.

Ashley Dawson has rightly noted that the King's march on the capital reflects the anti-austerity riots which tore through Nigeria in the wake of the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programs in the 1980s and 1990s (31). These policies, propagated by such international lending institutions as the IMF and the World Bank, ultimately reflect an ideology and praxis of what David Harvey calls a "market fundamentalism and neoliberal orthodoxy." Under structural adjustment, policies were forced upon the client states as a condition to receiving loans necessary for modernization and development. Harvey explains: "In return for debt rescheduling, indebted countries were required to implement institutional reforms, such as cuts in welfare expenditures, more flexible labor market laws, and privatization" (31). Moreover, under these debt repayment schemes, the citizens of the client state take on the full responsibility of repayment "no matter what the consequences for the livelihood and well-being of the local population" (31). In this way, Structural Adjustment Programs represent a three-fold gutting of state protections: first, through the gutting of state social safety-nets and labor laws, second through the privileging of the protection of financial investment over the lives of the citizens of the client state, and third through the exposure of the client state to the vicissitudes of the global market.

Under these austere and increasingly precarious conditions, the client state creates the means of its undoing, sparking waves of popular revolt—loosely figured in the novel by the King's march. Harvey argues that under these conditions, it becomes the job of the

“comprador state apparatus” to stifle these uprisings and insure the continued extraction of capital (164). We can thus understand the Colonel’s predicament as follows: To protect the “foreign investment” of the IMF, he must at once quash the burgeoning resistance movements while maintaining an illusion of nonviolence to the transnational system of capital that supports him.

There results a scenario in which the political elite of Nigeria collude in the nurturing of national debt in the name their own material enrichment. In a long speech, the King holds forth on the collusion between the corrupt Nigerian government and transnational lenders such as the World Bank and the IMF. The speech is preceded by an earnest question from Elvis: “But how is the World Bank responsible if we mismanage the funds they give us?” The King replies:

Funds? What funds? Let me tell you, dere are no bigger tiefs dans dose World Bank people. Let me tell you how de World Bank helps us. Say dey offer us a ten-million-dollar loan for creating potable and clean water supply in rural areas. If we accept, dis is how dey do us. First dey tell us dat we have to use de expertise of their consultants, so dey remove two million for salaries and expenses. Den dey tell us dat de consultants need equipment to work, like computer, jeeps or bulldozers, and for hotel and so on, so dey take another two million. Den dey say we cannot build new boreholes but must service existing one, so dey take another two million to buy parts. All dis money, six million of it, never leave de U.S. Den dey use two million for de project, but is not enough, so dey abandon it, and den army bosses take de remaining two million. Now we, you and I and all

dese poor people, owe de World Bank ten million dollars for nothing. Dey
are all tiefs and I despise dem—our people and de World Bank people!

(280)

What the King's speech reveals is an understanding that the production of international wealth is directly tied to the production of debt within Nigeria. Here, debts taken on by the state for modernization are instead used to line the pockets of both the wealthy financiers and the corrupt officials of the Nigerian army. Under the guise of development, a sort of money laundering scheme occurs. The scheme takes advantage of the needs for a "potable and clean water supply" turning it into a convenient means to generate capital through investment and interest. Importantly, the projects never see completion. Through the magical performance of speculative economy, funds set aside for improving the health of the population are transfigured into Nigerian debt and American wealth. The water remains tainted, the financiers and their military co-conspirators are well paid, and the burden of Nigerian debt grows increasingly heavy for everyone else.

In these instances, the novel attempts to map the ways in which the Nigerian military government and its occupation of Lagos are in fact an extension of a different type of occupation, in which the sovereignty of the Nigerian state is overtaken by the needs and imperatives of transnational capital through the mechanism of debt. Through the collusion of the Nigerian military with neoliberal interest, the production of debt and the production of death become intimately bound and mutually reinforcing.

2.1 BIOPOLITICS, BLACK MARKETS, AND REAL ESTATE

The Colonel's violence, as we have seen, services the needs of transnational capital, and is therefore restricted (and, likewise, unleashed) by the imperatives of the market and the demands of neoliberal accumulation. But the connection between the Colonel's right to kill and market logic goes deeper still. The Colonel uses his position as the head of the security forces to operate Nigeria's profitable black market, within which Elvis and Redemption become increasingly entangled. After being let go from his job working construction, and failing to make a living by dancing and impersonating his namesake, Elvis turns to Redemption who initiates him into Lagos's informal labor market. After moving on from packaging cocaine, Elvis and Redemption find themselves escorting kidnapped children, who they first assume with horror to be sold as sex slaves overseas. Soon however, Elvis, looking for something to drink, knocks over a cooler containing human heads, which tumble onto the ground, in the ghastly likeness of "errant fruit from a grocery bag" (237). In the car, after their escape from the gathering mob, Redemption explains that they were transporting "spare human parts" to be used in for organ transplant.

This trade, the trade in spare parts, represents a nexus between Nigerian necropolitics, American biopolitics, and global circulations of capital. Here, Ashley Dawson's insight into the Colonel's criminal empire is especially helpful: "The Colonel's criminal pursuits dramatize the extent to which the truly lucrative sectors of the informal economy work not as some alluring alternative to existing power relations, but rather are a conscious construct of those who hold the reins of society and, doing so, use their authority to remove all barriers to violence, exploitation and degradation in their lust for

material gain and power” (26). This absolute exposure to violence in the name of material gain (that is, the accumulation of capital) is central to Nigeria’s post-colonial regime and the military state.

Importantly, this lucrative necro-market is global in scale. Redemption, ever mysteriously knowledgeable of the dark goings-on in the city, explains to Elvis the contours of this market: “American hospitals do plenty organ transplant. But dey are not always finding de parts on time to save people life. So certain people in Saudi Arabia and such a place used to buy organ parts and sell to rich white people so dey can save their children or wife or demselves” (242). He goes on to explain the global circulation of this market:

Anyway, de rich whites buy de spare parts from de Arabs who buy from wherever dey can. Before dey used to buy only from Sudan and such a place, but de war and tings is make it hard, so dey expand de operation.

People like de Colonel use their position to get human parts as you see and den freeze it” (242).

In this trade in spare parts, Saudi Arabia serves as middle merchant, with Lagos (and its surplus of street children) supplying raw “material” while rich Americans serve as the consumer market. As this quote suggests, the Colonel’s necropower is the lynchpin of the process, as it is the Colonel’s position at the head of the security forces which grant him both the power to reduce the human body to its constituent parts and the free reign to sell these body parts without intervention.

It’s important to note that this necro-market operates in the dark underbelly of American biopolitics. The organs serve as a way of ultimately securing the health of, as

Redemption puts it, “rich white people.” This dynamic, in which the death of one is directly related to the life of the other, is precisely Foucault’s definition of state racism. Redemption states “This world operates differently for different people,” and this difference precisely marks the biological caesura which sections off which populations must die so that others may live more fully. But here, this relationship takes on a market and class logic. Indeed, if the rise of biopolitics brought about the conception of man as a biological mass, the trade in spare parts represents the logical endpoint of the convergence of biopolitics with neoliberal market logic: the transfiguration of biological life—and its raw materials—into commodity. In this commodified state of biopolitics, the material destruction of human bodies takes on the calculating logic of supply and demand, dissolving agency into the invisible hand of the market.

The harvesting of Nigerian organs can be read as homologous to the money-laundering schemes of the IMF which the King describes. In the case of the IMF, international wealth is developed through a sort of harvesting of interest on Nigerian debt—at the expense of the lives and livelihood of Nigeria’s poorest citizens. Through the trade in spare parts, the biopolitical and necropolitical underside of this logic emerges. Here, it is not that American wealth is predicated upon Nigerian debt, but rather that American health is predicated upon Nigerian death.

The same interweaving of necropolitics, biopolitics, and market logic which underpins the Colonel’s trade in spare parts can be seen at play in the demolition of the Maroko slums. The demolition opens on a scene of mass displacement. As the “dozers leveled everything in their path—houses, shanties, even the swamps” (285), Sunday watches as the residents are driven from their homes. He sees a “rush of people,

screaming and shouting,” a “sea of bodies” rendered refugee. But this traumatic and deadly expulsion from their homes is only the final push of a much grander expulsion. The citizens of the Maroko slums, already living on the fringes of biopolitical protection, are further excised from its diminishing sphere of security. With the bulldozing of their houses, the precarity experienced by the people of Maroko crosses into full and unmitigated exposure to death.

Beyond the material destruction of bodies, the demolition robs death of all dignity or ceremony. As a drunken Sunday urinates from his balcony, he nearly hits “a small group running past with an open coffin packed tight with belongings” (286). Here, the coffin is transformed from a ceremonial object to a mere container for what little material wealth the refugees can bring them with. This lack of ceremony is extended to Sunday himself. In the aftermath of the demolition, Elvis comes upon the scene to discover his father’s corpse beneath the rubble. In his poverty, he realizes he cannot give his father a proper funeral with “cows or dogs slaughtered to ease his passage into the next world” (305). But even a simple funeral is denied to him. As he tries to take his father’s corpse, a soldier tells him he must pay him for the body. Elvis, in the face of “blind unreasoning power,” must leave his father to the gathering scavengers. This total indignity in death amounts to the refusal of the rituals of mourning to those unable to pay.

The government’s official discourse surrounding the demolition—“Operation Clean de Nation”—reveals the biopolitical logic used to justify this exposure of the population of Maroko to death. The demolition of the slums, and the death of its residents, is framed in dual discourses of crime and hygiene. It’s referred to in the newspaper as both “an attack on de centers of poverty and crime,” and the removal of an

infectious wound from “de face of de nation’s capital.” Through these statements, Lagos is discursively rendered into a body, and the Maroko slums a disease. Here again, we see an enactment of the logic of state racism which allows the biopolitical state to exercise the sovereign right to kill. The death and destruction of the Maroko slums, of the criminals and the poor who are said to inhabit it, is figured as the very condition for improving the health of the city as a whole.

But this justification is ultimately shown to be a mask for more base concerns. Like the necropower of the Colonel and the state security forces, the massacring and mass dispersal of the residents of Maroko is shown to be primarily in the service of the accumulation of capital. The demolition—justified through the language of hygiene—serves as an extension of a market logic which seeks to organize space not for maximizing the health of the demos, but rather for maximizing profit. Long before the demolition, Sunday recognizes this. He states that “the architecture in Lagos never made any sense; maximizing rent seemed to be the main design consideration” (202). Of course, what Sunday notes but rather tellingly disavows is that the architecture of Lagos is not senseless at all but rather driven by a logic which places profit over the preservation of human life, or rather makes the first of these coextensive with the negation of the second. From here it’s a short distance to recognizing the demolition as an act of creative destruction: the levelling of the slums allows for the repurposing of the space into a “beachside millionaire’s paradise” (248).

2.2 THE AESTHETICS OF THE NECROPOLITICAL

Through these demonstrations of the Nigerian state’s necropower, there is a recurring thread: the urgent need to manage optics. *Graceland* reveals the politics of the

image to be a vital aspect of both the market logic and the biopolitical logic which underwrite the state's necropolitical project. In this way, it resembles Henry Giroux's argument that "Biopower in its current shape has produced a new form of biopolitics marked by a cleansed visual and social landscape in which the poor, the elderly, the infirm, and criminalized populations all share a common fate of disappearing from public view" (186). Indeed, the novel reveals Lagos as a carefully wrought performance which masks the stark reality of poverty beneath. At the novel's opening, this management of image is shown to be largely successful. Upon arriving in Lagos, Elvis is shocked after discovering the poverty and violence which permeate the city: "It was as if people conspired with the city to weave a web of silence around its unsavory parts. People who didn't live in Lagos only saw postcards of skyscrapers, sweepings flyovers, beaches and hotels" (7). Such an obsession with the image-repertoire of neoliberal triumph reflects the state of Nigeria's speculative economy—just as a taped assassination is bad for foreign investment, so too is the appearance of a failing economy.

But the invisibility of slum-life in Lagos is, the novel suggests, at least in part maintained by the slum-dwellers themselves, who return to their home villages with a false performance of wealth: "They breezed in, lived an expensive whirlwind life, and then left after a couple of weeks, to go back to their ghetto lives" (7). Indeed, in the absence of real financial security, the appearance of wealth takes on a hyperbolic significance, and the "web of silence" surrounding poverty becomes, at least in part, self-perpetuating. This relationship is taken to an extreme in the figure of the beggar Okon. When Elvis runs into Okon for the second time, the beggar is "dressed like Superfly," and Elvis is struck by the stark contrast from the last time they had met, when Okon

desperately “scrabbled in the dirt for rice.” Okon explains that he gained his money from selling his blood to the local hospitals. He tells Elvis “If you eat well, you can give four pints in four different hospitals, all in one day” (76). In this instance, we see a more moderate form of the colonization of life in the name of (state) power. In the absence of a strong formal labor sector, Okon is forced to sell his very life-force. Importantly, the act of “eating well,” as a life-sustaining action, serves only to facilitate further transactions (and indeed, transfusions). The result of this vampirical enterprise is the reproduction of a self-image, one resembling the Blaxploitation anti-hero Superfly. Okon’s affectation of affluence, his appearance of wealth, is a performance paid for in blood. This performance is inherently precarious, and might at any point dissipate to once again reveal Okon the beggar scrambling to scoop a fallen plate of rice out of the dirt.

What the case of Okon reveals is an internalization of the state’s emphasis on the performance of wealth. This need to appear wealthy is almost compulsive in the poorest citizens of Lagos, and indeed it is this compulsion to appear wealthy which serves as a mechanism for keeping the poor trapped in poverty. Underlying this is a desire by the poor to be seen, and a recognition that, like those disappeared dissidents, they are being made increasingly invisible, pushed to the margins of not only society, not only economy, but visibility itself. The fear of invisibility runs through the text, but perhaps finds its most startling expression in the image of the man who has his business inventory seized and burned by the Nigerian police. In a fit of despair, he tells the crowd “Every day I go walk up and down, ringing one small bell to make people see me” (74). But this invisibility soon erupts into primal spectacle as “the man screamed again and tore his clothes off, dancing around the fire naked, emitting piercing calls, bloodcurdling in their

intensity” before casting himself in the fire. And yet even this image, startling as it is, soon fades in Elvis’s consciousness, as the “practical pressures of living . . . usurped the image of the burning man” (74). Here, even in the sympathetic Elvis, the market induces a tunnel-vision or amnesia, an erasure of suffering as the laboring subject is forced to focus on his own material well-being.

The need to manage the image of Lagos also underpins the demolition of the Maroko slums. Coextensive with the official biopolitical account of the demolition is an aesthetic argument: the slums are not merely diseased, but an “eyesore” which disrupts the image of wealth that the city works tirelessly to present. In the rich neighborhoods of Lagos there are “beautiful brownstones set in well-landscaped yards, sprawling Spanish-style haciendas in brilliant white and ochre, [and] elegant Frank Lloyd Wright-styled buildings,” which contrast starkly with the filthy and ramshackle makeshift houses of the slums. It is the visibility of the slums which inspires in Redemption—arguably the most wealth-obsessed character in the novel—an abiding love for Lagos. Staring at the rich neighborhood of Ikoyi from across the lagoon, Redemption remarks that “though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we don’t go away” (137). With the demolition of the Maroko slums, however, this sentiment is shown to be naïve. That the slums are not merely destroyed but “leveled” suggests the creation of a blank slate, a rewriting of space which extends even to the miasmatic geography of the swampland. It is an act of erasure, an attempt to make poverty and crime invisible by eradicating its victims rather than addressing its root causes. As Sunday notes: “Instead of dem to address de unemployment and real cause of poverty and crime, dey want to cover it all under one pile of rubbish” (248).

This is a cosmetic biopolitics, one more concerned with the city's face than with its diseased innards. This need to maintain the image of Lagos is in keeping with the very nature of speculative economy. In an economy which needs foreign investment to thrive, the appearance of wealth becomes more important to economic "life" than is the reality of the health of the population, most of which exist far outside the city's centers of wealth and power.

It is important to note that this management of the image of Nigeria is bound up with the figure of the Colonel. As the head of the security forces, the Colonel exercises rigorous control over the narrative of the state. The Colonel, through his expansive spy network, sees and hears all. But more to the point, he strictly enforces what information is seen and heard. He is responsible for causing the "disappearances of famous dissident writers, journalists, lawyers, musicians and thousands of nameless, faceless Nigerians" (163). This suppression of information is, of course, in keeping with the military state, the power of which is always under threat by uncontrolled and resistant ideologies. Through the exercise of his necropower, the Colonel creates a generalized atmosphere of fear in which dissident speech is disciplined and eradicated. But while the Colonel's power is rooted in a type of spectacle, it is, paradoxically, a power which operates in the shadows, known primarily through rumor. Indeed, prior to his run-in with the Colonel, Elvis is totally unaware of the activities of these state security forces. This is central to the Colonel's power: he must maintain a phantom presence, at once always present and ever invisible, haunting those most vulnerable in Lagos while shielding himself from the external eyes of the foreign press.

But beyond this cruel maintenance of what is seen and heard in Lagos, the Colonel is more explicitly linked to an aesthetics of death—that is, to the production of images that instantiate rather than dissemble the logic of the necropolitical. The Colonel is rumored not only to oversee the tortures conducted by his security forces, but to photograph them as well. Indeed, through this practice the Colonel has developed a reputation as an artist “looking to find de beauty of death” through the medium of photography (164). The Colonel’s is an aesthetic project which seeks at once to capture what is essential in its subject, its “spirit,” the “ghost on the film,” and to elevate that subject through grizzly composition. As the artist, the Colonel seeks a kind of mastery over death, the ability to fix the instance of death within the frame and in doing so to render its essence knowable and to capture the beauty of its order.

The Colonel’s act of framing death parallel’s Elvis’s own aesthetic project. As he walks around the slums, Elvis attempts to aestheticize the streets: “he often wondered how he would frame moments like this if he were a director making a film. What shots would he line up? Which wouldn’t make the final edit, ending up on the cutting room-floor?” While the Colonel seeks to use the art of photography to capture the essence of death, Elvis imagines doing the same for the untidy streets of Lagos. But Elvis registers the fact that this filmographic imagination comes at a price, the loss of the “magic” of the movies is traded for the mastery of artifice. Likewise, as the Colonel seeks to find what is essential in death, the very artifice of his medium continually puts him at a distance to his goal. Redemption explains that the Colonel “is never satisfy, so he arrange de dead body many ways, sometime he cuts de leg or head off.” Importantly, this act of

arrangement inevitably fails. Redemption notes that the Colonel never finds this spirit or beauty of death: “How could he, when he don’t know what to look for?” (164).

This haunting moment works to link aesthetic creation to the material destruction of bodies. In this way, it resonates with other moments in the text which underline how the politics of the image are harnessed by necropolitical regimes. But beyond this, the Colonel’s failure as an artist highlights an inability to render death fully knowable. This represents, then, the limits of the Colonel’s power. As an object of knowledge, death remains ever elusive, its properties too grand to capture, always extending beyond the camera’s frame. Despite the Colonel’s power to administer death, his mastery over his subject is always fraught. The failure of the arrangement of bodies to capture death’s beauty is not just an indictment of the effort to redeem death aesthetically. It goes further to reveal a divide from mastery over the body, that is to say, the application of necropower, and a mastery over death itself. Like the fires sparked by the mob, here death is shown to be uncontainable. The application of an ordered system to death, the harnessing of death by the Colonel’s necropolitical regime, does not make death any less unruly. Instead, death exceeds logic, and transforms it in ways which cannot be mastered, contained, or made uniform.

2.3 NECROPOLITICS AND THE FAMILY

The violence of the Colonel and the Nigerian military finds its analog in *Graceland*’s depiction of interpersonal violence within the family structure. If the Colonel deals in death on the national scale, it is Joseph, Elvis’s uncle, who represents the murderous impulse within the family structure. This is true in the first instance of Joseph’s rape of both his daughter Efua and later Elvis himself. This latter violation

occurs when Joseph catches Elvis sexually experimenting in the Anglican chapel with the other young boys of Afikpo village. Joseph forces himself onto Elvis, and in the process renders Elvis a specimen of the undead. Abani indicates that he becomes “zombielike” as Joseph rapes him. Moreover, inspired by superstitious tales, Elvis is afraid that by having oral sex with Joseph, he will suck out his uncle’s soul. The fear that this sexual act would make him a “vampire,” frightens Elvis (198). As Joseph continues to rape Elvis, the image turns once again to fire: “Elvis felt the man hard against his buttocks, and then a burst of fire ripped him into two” (198). In this image, Joseph’s violation is linked to the Colonel’s later torture of Elvis during which Elvis “could feel his body—but as a single sheet of flaming pain” (293).

The second key instance of Joseph’s violence is the facilitation of the murder of Godfrey by his cousin, Innocent. This murder is particularly significant in that it takes place in the context of monetary exchange: Joseph and Sunday pay off Innocent, an ex-child-soldier in the Biafran war, to kill his cousin. Years later, when Elvis confronts Sunday about his role in the killing, Sunday justifies his actions with an appeal to credit and masculine honor, and in doing so reveals that the two concepts have become deeply interwoven. He tells Elvis “In dis place, it used to be dat all you had was your name—before dis new madness with money started. De measure of a man was his name. It will be again” (187). For Sunday, the murder of Godfrey was a “mercy killing” of a thief before the police or mob got to him first. It was an act of preservation of honor. But Sunday reveals an understanding that this masculine honor system has been usurped by one based on money: credit is no longer based on one’s name, but rather one’s ability to pay. And indeed, the two become indistinguishable from one another.

Sunday's emphasis on his name is more easily understood when considered in the light of the credit economy of the slums. This informal micro-economy is structured around vast webs of informal credit relations. Within the local market, one's name is one's credit, and in the absence of liquid money, this credit is essential to survival. This is figured in the novel primarily through Madame Cairo, the proprietor of the local bar:

She was very ready to extend credit to all her customers, who were mostly poor and unemployed anyway. But even her generosity had its limits, though she understood that they had come to drown their sorrows in her watered-down alcohol. They needed her and she needed them; they drank, she sold. If she was owed, she owed the palm wine supplier, who owed someone else; everyone owed someone these days, it was the vogue. (52)

As Madame Cairo shows, the life of the slum economy is built on rickety foundations, a chain of credit which, like the Ricardian chain of labor, constitutes an economic body. While this body is ultimately precarious, it constitutes and binds the community together. But underwriting this community is the threat of expulsion from this social body of credit. Madame Cairo must occasionally threaten this expulsion, must "crack the whip from time to time" to maintain this tenuous web of relations. And indeed, it is through this precarity that we can both understand Godfrey's murder and even the necklace of fire: the thief, breaking the social compact which underwrites the social and economic life of Maroko, is expelled from its body and is already as good as dead. As Sunday implies, it was only a matter of time before Godfrey was caught and publicly executed. He was already a dead man walking.

2.4 MADNESS AND SIGHT IN THE NECROPOLITICAL STATE

As I hope to have shown, *Graceland* works to unravel how biopolitics, aesthetics and market fundamentalism combine to inform the necropolitics of the military government of Lagos. Moreover, this national repressive apparatus is made analogous with a type of violent and repressive masculinity, one which is also bound up with the concerns of the market and the spectacular and speculative issue of credit. But the making of death, as the Colonel's failed aesthetic project suggests, produces effects which go far beyond the mastery of either the state or the patriarch. The constant exposure to death produces its own distinct logics and subjectivities which resist order and control. These everyday resistances to necro-logic are, for Elvis, indistinguishable from madness, though such madness turns out to be the condition of understanding the "madness" of the necropolitical state. Resistance, then, is first a matter of confronting necropower in and as madness and, through this confrontation, gaining a clearer understanding of the city and its inhabitants. It is only through this understanding that Elvis gains a communal-knowledge, a means of seeing Nigeria as a body worthy of redemption.

Graceland is thus intensely concerned with a style of vision or way of seeing that exposes and disrupts the precarious line between madness and sense. An example of this concern can be found in one of the many entries on the medicinal uses of plants interspersed throughout the text: "The right words spoken over the juice before it is dropped into the eyes will open one's psychic sight. This is to be used with care, for if one sees things others do not and speaks carelessly, or without the office of the dibia, he or she may be considered insane" (127). Psychic sight—to see what is hidden to others—

is closely bound up here with madness. And this connection is, in turn, developed more fully in the “body” of the novel.

Early in the narrative, Elvis is overcome by the senselessness of the pedestrians who cross the freeway without using the overhead bridges. As the bus that he is riding on strikes a pedestrian, a baffled Elvis points out the simple logic that “if you cross the road without using the overhead bridges, you increase the chances of being hit by a car.” Unable to fathom such an unnecessary gamble, he cannot help but see the road, “littered with dead bodies at regular intervals,” as a sign of personal and national defect, irrefutable evidence that, as Elvis states, “We are crazy, you know” (56-7).

But the man next to Elvis on the bus sees things differently. With a certain numbness to the sight, he explains to Elvis that “life in Lagos is a gamble, crossing or no crossing” (57). Here, Elvis is confronted with a fact of life in Lagos which he had before only been marginally aware: the ubiquitous presence of precarity. Indeed, it is in light of this precarity that the man’s philosophy surrounding death is more readily understandable. He tells Elvis “We all have to die sometimes, you know. If it is your time, it is your time. You can be in your bed and die. If it is not your time, you can’t die even if you cross de busiest road. After all, you can fall from de bridge into de road and die. Now isn’t dat double foolishness” (57). This view of death is one that, paradoxically, negates risk by invoking life itself as a generalized state of risk. The “double foolishness,” then, is the state of the man who takes no risks and dies anyway.

The spectacle of bodies on the road, spaced in “regular intervals,” can be understood not only as the result of this madness, but a reinforcement of it as well. Indeed, the madness of the Lagosians is a sane response to the madness of the

necropolitical. It is the regularity of precarity which, the novel seems to suggest, constructs a subject who gambles and who risks. Or, to put it slightly differently, it is the ubiquity of death, ever visible on the streets of Lagos, which constructs the precarious subject. This visibility of death, and the surreal logic which it inspires, is a direct product of the corrupt and necropolitical state, which levies fees for “dying by crossing [the] road illegally” (57). Elvis learns from his fellow passenger that the reason the bodies are not removed from the roadway is because the relatives of the deceased “can only take de body when dey pay de fine” (57). Importantly, this financial sanction serves as a form of terror against the impoverished of Lagos. The dead bodies on the road become a spectacle which links the inability to pay with the corpse. As in the demolition of the slums, the poverty of the family strips them of the right for dignity in death. Moreover, the fees compound the state of precarity, further constructing the very psychological condition which promotes the surreal “madness” of the street crossers.

The dead bodies on the road further reveal the necropolitical madness of Lagos, figured by a different money-making venture in which death is central. Elvis learns that the striking workers of the State Sanitation Department took to “using de government ambulances as hearses in deir private business” (57). The man on the bus tells Elvis the story of an American journalist in Lagos who became sick and called an ambulance. The ambulance driver tells the journalist he must book in advance, and that “dey only carry dead people for a fee as part of funeral processions. If de man was alive, dey suggest make de hotel rush him to de hospital by taxi” (57). What’s notable about this example is that the State Sanitation Department is ultimately intended as a functionary of state biopower. The conversion of the ambulances into a means of private business represents

a liberalizing of the relationship between the state and the market; the state's protective function is dissolved into private enterprise, the overriding logic of which is the maximization of profit. But curiously, it is neither the state nor foreign pressures which dissolves the Sanitation Department, but rather the workers themselves. Abani presents a situation in which, ironically, it is the very mechanism of organized labor that is repurposed for liberalizing the market, replacing state biopower with a necromarket which profits directly from the failure of biopower that the striking workers have facilitated.

To come to an understanding of the people of Lagos, to make sense of this senselessness, Elvis must first confront and recognize the madness of the necropolitical. In order to see Lagos, he must first admit his implication in madness and death. This initiation is first figured in spatial terms, in the moment after Elvis's first near-death experience with the Colonel. Walking back to Redemption's apartment through the back alleys of the city, Elvis sees a new side of Lagos:

Their route showed the city to be as untidy as the remnants on a half-eaten plate of food. Elvis mused at how personal it seemed, specifically adapting itself to meet each circumstance. On his way to the club, the streets he had traveled singed straight and proud, like a rope burn or a cane's welt. Now every alley with its crumbling walls, wrought iron gates, puddles of putrefying water and piss and garlands of dead rats seemed just as unique.

(122)

In this moment, exposed to death, Elvis is permitted to see the "putrefying" innards of the city, contrasted with the "straight and proud" streets of its outward appearance. But

beyond this, Elvis recognizes that the orderliness of the city is itself the product of violence—the singing streets are like a “rope burn or a cane’s welt”: disciplined into order, beaten into submission.

This first exposure to death scrambles Elvis’s sense, as he at once feels and disavows his mortality: “And though he had felt the sharp edge of danger, the full enormity of how close he had come to being shot eluded him. It seemed too surreal” (122). But this initial exposure to the necropolitics of Lagos is eventually succeeded by a more complete confrontation with death, one which, for its intensity, cannot be disavowed. After soldiers break up the performance of the King’s troupe of musicians and dancers in Freedom Square, Elvis is captured and undergoes horrific torture. In a scene which recalls Elvis’s rape by his homophobic Uncle Joseph, his tormentor sexually assaults Elvis with a burning chemical agent: “Then, whistling softly under his breath, he began rubbing a cool white paste all over Elvis’s body. It felt good, soothing almost . . . Still smiling, he took Elvis’s penis in one hand and gently smoothed the paste over it, working it up and down. Elvis felt himself swell” (295). After Elvis ejaculates, his skin begins to burn, and his torturer proceeds to flay him for his homosexuality. This torture, like Elvis’s rape, links the necropolitical with a repressive masculinity and homophobia, and underscores the violence through which such masculinity is structured and maintained.

After he is released from his torture, Elvis, stumbling through the streets of the city, is himself taken for a “madman,” as he wanders into the road and is nearly hit by the oncoming traffic (297). As such, at the novel’s end he comes to embody the very madness which he rejects at the novel’s opening. His own personal exposure to death is

compounded as he comes upon the demolition of his home and the corpse of his father. His body beaten and permanently scarred, his home destroyed and his community dispersed, Elvis wanders the slums, “seeing signs not normally visible” (306). What Elvis sees is what he had previously disavowed: the pervasive madness of the necropolitical state, the severe economic violence and the exposed death-world of the Lagosian ghettos, swollen with the impoverished “as the influx from Maroko brought more life flooding into it” (306). As Elvis surveys “Bridge City,” he sees a man “deep in conversation with a hallucination.” But, Elvis is now able to grasp the relationship between exposure to death and madness: “It did not seem strange to Elvis that the spirit world became more visible and tangible the nearer one was to starvation” (307). Elvis recognizes the man’s hallucination as a way of piercing the veil: the spirit world which evades the Colonel’s photographs is revealed to the man by his experience with death.

But this recognition ultimately fails to produce meaning for Elvis: “There is a message in it all somewhere, he mused, a point to the chaos. But no matter how hard he tried, the meaning always seemed to be out there somewhere beyond reach, mocking him” (307). And here again we see the relationship between sight and madness, between the ability to see and the inability to make sense of what is seen. While Elvis can see and make peace with the madness of the citizens of Lagos as a rational response to the madness of the necropolitical state, he cannot see a point to the physical and psychological violence which permeate his life in Lagos. The madness of the necropolitical remains insensible, even as reactions to it become increasingly intelligible.

CHAPTER 3

RESISTANCE AND TRANSCULTURAL PERFORMANCE

The recognition of the madness of the necropolitical state allows Elvis to accept the madness of the people of Lagos as a symptomatic response to the terror of both the state and a market system within which they are made increasingly disposable. Likewise, the novel itself offers its readers ways of seeing the necropolitics of the corrupt post-colonial state by revealing the aesthetic and market logics which underpin its project. But the novel resists offering a clear solution for overcoming or resisting the necropolitical. The early success of the resistance to the demolition of the Maroko slums is followed by a more profound defeat, and the end result of the King's march is his martyrdom, a circumstance which Elvis finds deeply troubling. Moreover, it must be noted that the novel ends with Elvis, assuming Redemption's passport and identity, boarding a plane and leaving for America, a flight which Ashley Dawson views as an indictment against meaningful resistance in the neoliberal world order, a recognition that "social and economic transformation on both an individual and collective level . . . cannot be found within the fictional mega-city represented in the novel" (20).

Indeed, much of the critical response surrounding *Graceland* focuses on the novel's representation of resistance and agency within the stifling socio-economic conditions of Lagos. For Dawson, *Graceland* dramatizes the impossibility of self-formation in the brutally oppressive conditions of slum-life in the politically and economically corrupt megacity; but Dawson does note the avenues for self-fashioning

that the cosmopolitan world of Lagos grants Elvis, particularly through his performative vocation as a dancer and Elvis Presley impersonator. Matthew Omelsky has similarly argued that *Graceland* problematizes the possibilities of resistance by presenting an ambiguous image of youth rebellion, one which oscillates between the difficulty of agency within the city and the problematic agency of escape into “non-African spaces and their cultural capital” (87). While he notes that this engagement with non-African spaces allows the young men of the novel the means to transgress hegemonic cultural norms, it fails to produce a real change in social conditions. Taken together, these critiques seem to privilege a resistance which is rooted in a demonstrable shift in social and economic relations. While these critics concede that the use of non-African cultures offers some means for self-formation and agency, they ultimately locate this agency as a means of escape from, rather than a meaningful confrontation with, their position within the social and economic order.

However, in *Graceland*, transcultural expression offers much more than escapism; rather, it provides new possibilities for constructing identity. If we return to Giroux’s understanding of a neoliberal biopolitics which asserts the invisibility and disposability of entire groups of people along class and race lines, the act of performance becomes one way in which the novel theorizes potential resistance to the necropolitical. Chris Dunton has argued that the contemporary Lagosian novel, *Graceland* as example, is distinguished from its predecessors by its recognition of the potential of expressive acts to combat the chaotic breakdown of order and meaning of the megacity space (73). In *Graceland*, Dunton locates this expression primarily in Elvis’s role as a professional dancer and Elvis impersonator. Through performance, Dunton argues, Elvis negotiates a

stable sense of self and sexuality in the increasingly indecipherable streets of Lagos. This negotiation constitutes a way of performing resistance to the disordered madness of the necropolitical state. As I have previously noted, the performance of wealth by the poorest citizens of Lagos works to reinforce the necropolitical. But beyond this, the novel offers up alternative performances which hold the potential to undermine the state's aesthetic white-washing and make the necropolitics of the state visible. Sunday's mocking question, "how will staging plays defeat a military government?" thus becomes a line of inquiry which the novel itself asks more earnestly.

Indeed, as a dancer and Elvis impersonator, performance is at the very heart of Elvis's identity. But just as Elvis's performative identity is adapted from a commercialized image of white America, performance in the novel is not a category which transcends the global market, whose necropolitical underpinnings have been the subject of this analysis thus far; rather, performance in *Graceland* is deeply rooted in commodity circulation and inseparable from the market of Western images and identities which permeate the cosmopolitan culture of the city. His performance, therefore, is not only expressive but, as Chielozona Eze argues, *transcultural*. For Eze, transculturality is an ultimately positive and generative interaction with Otherness, through which "it is possible to weave new affinities that transcend those prescribed by blood or tradition" (109).

In the case of Elvis's performance of Elvis Presley, the narrative underscores, on the one hand, a desire to escape Nigerian identity into a white, American identity. Elvis, applying his white-face, asks "What if he had been born white, or even just American?"

Would his life have been different?” But this musing is interrupted by a self-consciousness recognition that he is “suffering from colonial mentality” (78).

On the other hand, *Graceland* resists simply parroting anti-colonial discourse which would view the proliferation of American culture as an erosion of Nigerian national identity. Responding to a speech in which the King calls for the renouncement of the “vice and depravity” of American capitalism and a return to traditional culture, Elvis recognizes such discourse as an antiquated oversimplification which does not “account for the inherent complications he knew were native to this culture, or the American. As naïve as Elvis was, he knew there was no way of going back to the ‘good old days,’ and wondered why the King didn’t speak about how to cope with these new and confusing times” (155) What Elvis intuits in these “new and confusing times” is a globalized world in which identity is delocalized. Neither nationalism nor a return to “traditional identity” can undo the complex webs of cultural exchange which are the legacy of colonialism and the new global market of identity.

Indeed, it is through his exposure to this globalized culture—interactions which are primarily facilitated through film and literature—that Elvis resists asserting a binary between America (as all evil) and Nigeria (as all good). Elvis intuitively resists adopting what itself can be thought of as an inverted necropolitical logic which constructs the west as an absolute enemy whose destruction is prerequisite for the liberation of Nigeria. Instead, Elvis understands both Nigeria and America as possessing “complications.”

Indeed, we must consider the repressive masculinity of Sunday, Joseph, and Elvis’s torturer as one of these complications with which the novel is particularly concerned. Elvis’s performance allows him a means of stepping outside of this repressive

masculinity, and reconnecting with both his own (culturally-coded) “femininity” and the memories of the women of his childhood. This is most evident as Elvis applies his Elvis makeup, a scene which parallels the feminine beauty rituals he recalls from his early childhood.

The lumpy powder crumbled in cakes of beige, reminding him of the henna cakes Oye ground to make the dye she used to paint designs all over her body. Satisfied with the mix, he began to apply it to his face with soft, almost sensual strokes of the sponge. As he concentrated on getting an even tone, his earlier worries slipped away. Finishing, he ran his fingertips along his cheek. Smooth, like the silk of Aunt Felicia’s stockings. (77)

Here, the application of his makeup allows Elvis to express an identity which is “soft,” “sensual,” and “smooth,” and moreover connects him with his Aunt and his Grandmother. But the application of the makeup also represents a stepping out of himself—a performative donning of “selfhood” rather than an expression of self as inner essence. This is made evident in a scene from Elvis’s youth. Watching Aunt Felicia apply her makeup, Elvis becomes “amazed” at “how much he wanted to wear that mask.” In this scene, the application of makeup represents for Elvis the possibility of fluid identity: “He envied her this ability to prepare a face for the world. To change it any time she like. Be different people just by a gentle hint of shadow here, a dash of color there” (173). If traditional masculinity represents a fixing of identity in one’s name, honor, and credit, in the performance of femininity, Elvis seeks to achieve a fluid, adaptable, and expressive self.

Importantly, however, Elvis only applies full makeup in the privacy of his bedroom, for fear of violent attack:

Admiring himself from many angles, he thought it was a shame he couldn't wear makeup in public. That's not true, he mentally corrected himself. He could, like the transvestites that haunted the car parks of hotels favored by rich locals and visiting whites. But like them, he would be a target of some insult, or worse, physical beating, many of which were meted out by the police, who then took turns with their victims in the back of their vans (77).

Again here, we see the recurring theme of a violent masculinity enforced by state violence and, paradoxically, male on male rape. That the transvestites "haunt" the hotels of the rich and white emphasizes the ghostly half-life of those deviating from gendered norms, while at the same time pointing to an underground market of sexual tourism operating in the shadows of the repressive government.

The "transvestites" who haunt the margins find their visible counterpart in Esau, the oldest of the young boys who play the female roles in the King's all-male acting troupe. Elvis finds himself "fascinated by the conviction" that Esau brings to his female roles, contrasting his performance with the "caricature" of the other boys' performances which he describes as an "exaggerated femininity that was no more than a reassurance of their masculinity. Esau, on the other hand, brought a simple understanding, something of a shared commonality; nothing more" (278). Of course, not only is Esau not attacked, despite wearing "full drag," but his performance creates a space in which the homophobic

gender dynamic is temporarily suspended, as “he made more than a few heads turn longingly, including some of the musicians who knew he was a man.”

The space of performance thus offers a reprieve from the necropolitical masculinity of the novel. Moreover, it operates as a space in which “shared commonality” can be more generally explored. But, the spaces of these performances are, throughout the novel, constantly policed. From Elvis being chased off the beach by a security guard to the shutting down of the performance at Freedom Square, private and state security forces are continually imposing order upon the public spaces in which fluid identity and shared experience offer potential resistance to the necropolitical state. So, to answer Sunday’s question, in so far as the state has the power to police the public sphere, staging a play cannot defeat the military government. No. But what it can do, and where resistance does exist in the novel, is in creating new ways of seeing oneself—indeed, of “being” oneself—even as the state pursues a biopolitics of invisibility.

As George of the Joking Jaguars explains, it is through the act of expressive performance that you experience the “knife-edge beauty of seeing yourself as you are” (276). Far from a romantic notion, George associates this beauty with “the insanity of de muse” which he hopes Elvis is not cursed by (276). Here again, the material conditions of society present themselves as ultimately at odds with the creative impulse. As George states “in dis time and place, being a musician is not a bless. It is a curse” (276). Performance and the consequent self-knowledge is presented as inherently rooted in violence, but it is violence which provides clarity, self-sight, and finally the transcendence of an imposed invisibility.

To conclude this exploration of necropolitics in *Graceland*, I'd like to turn to the novel's close, as Elvis, boarding the plane for America, reads an old copy of James Baldwin's "Going to Meet the Man." If *Graceland* is a novel of learning how to see in oneself the "knife-edge beauty," then this passage marks the profound closing of this theme. It comes at a moment where, even as Elvis, now called Redemption, leaves Nigeria, his traumatic experience with the Colonel retains a ghostly presence occasioned by the ubiquitous presence of the necropolitical state: "Soldiers, armed for battle, crawled everywhere like an ant infestation, and Elvis watched them nervously, still haunted by the specter of the Colonel" (319).

Reading the scene in Baldwin's story describing the lynching of a black man, Elvis sees himself. At the passage where the "unnamed white man in the story cut off the lynched black man's genitalia," he closes the book to imagine "what kind of scar that would leave":

It would be a thing alive that reached up to the sky in supplication, descending to root itself in the lowest chakra, our basest nature. Until the dead man became the sky, the tree, the earth, and the full immeasurable sorrow of it all. He knew that scar, that pain, that shame, that degradation that no metaphor could contain, inscribing it on his body. And yet beyond that, he was that scar, carved by hate and smallness and fear onto the world's face. He and everyone like him, until the earth was aflame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire. (320)

The passage registers a parallel between Elvis' torture and rape and the necropolitical legacy of slavery and racism in America. As such, his pain is no longer localized but

enters him into a transnational community of the pained body—a delocalization which parallels his flight to America, and which reminds the reader that Elvis flies from one necropolitical state to another, from a neoliberal austerity imposed through structural adjustment, to one implemented by the Reagan administration. But, besides all of this, the figure of lynching is an apt one for Abani to end on. In it, biopolitics and spectacle combine in a performance which, like the dead bodies scattered through Lagos, serves as a psychological affront, a binding of the black body and the corpse in the cultural imagination. Like the wildfire violence of Lagos, the scar which Elvis imagines eludes containment by metaphor or representation, spilling out into the world and setting it “afame with scarred black men dying in trees of fire” (320).

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