

SETTLEMENT FICTIONS: GLOBAL SOUTH LITERATURE AND THE
POSTCOLONIAL URBAN IMAGINARY

by

CAROLYN PATRICIA MALCOM

A dissertation submitted to the
Graduate School – New Brunswick
Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey

In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Graduate Program in English

Written under the direction of

Richard Dienst

And approved by

New Brunswick, New Jersey

May 2012

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“Settlement Fictions: Global South Literature and the Postcolonial Urban Imaginary”

By CAROLYN PATRICIA MALCOM

Dissertation Director:

Richard Dienst

This dissertation traces the emergence of overlooked articulations of the megacity in contemporary postcolonial novels. Representations of non-Western cities and informal settlements or “slums” in global popular culture and Anglophone urban commentary enact a series of elisions -- making poor women and their economic and social activities invisible, allowing the volatile space of the street to stand in for all noteworthy space, and ignoring the progressive energies of slum-based social movements by equating them with religious extremism and other radicalisms. Postcolonial novelists, this dissertation argues, challenge these elisions by crafting what I term settlement fictions: narratives that foreground the unforeseen intra-community relationships, hidden spaces of work and laboring solidarities, and flexible approaches to spatial politics engendered by impoverished megacity life. Analyzing urban images of the Global South in film, journalism, visual culture, and literature, I suggest that

contemporary African, Indian, and Caribbean writers, including Chris Abani, Zakes Mda, Rohinton Mistry, and Patrick Chamoiseau, loosen the bonds that have heretofore tightly associated the imagined megacity with the fate of postcolonial nations embedded in a global system of exploitative capitalism. While recognizing the importance of both neoliberalism and colonialism in shaping modern urbanization, the writers I discuss push critics to see non-Western megacities equally as incubators of original urban social practices. My work draws upon theories of everyday practice, transnational governance, the gendering of postmodern labor, and micro-politics to clarify the local, regional, and global significance of these practices.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my committee for their input on this project. John McClure introduced me to many of the novels I discuss here and provided spirited responses to my readings of them. Richard Dienst gave useful feedback on the overall shape of the project and was unfazed by its many transformations. Michelle Stephens was a supportive voice pushing me to see important critiques I had been making without realizing it. Both she and David Eng offered incisive, late-stage readings of the project that helped me articulate its major interventions.

The support of my friends and family was invaluable at every stage of research and writing. Caitlin Ryan, Liz Reich, and Anantha Sudhakar spent countless hours talking with me about the dissertation, offering brilliant advice and loyal friendship. The Tenchs, Thompsons, and Alvarados sent cheerful support all throughout the process. I am so lucky to have Liz Alvarado as a sister and Pam Malcom as a mother, both of whom I thank for believing in me and for their love.

Finally, this work is dedicated to IV Tench. There are no words to thank him for all the little things and really big things he has done to help me get here. Plus, he is the one who made me watch *City of God* -- and so is clearly the real mastermind behind this project.

Table of Contents

Title Page	i
Abstract	ii-iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	v
List of Illustrations	vi
Introduction: The Megacity in Global Discourse and Global South Literature From Spectacles of Power to Everyday Practice	1-34
Chapter One: Narrating Development in the ‘Violent’ Megacity: The Relational Bildungsroman in Chris Abani’s <i>Graceland</i> and Zakes Mda’s <i>Ways of Dying</i>	35-86
Chapter Two: Precarious Spaces, Interwoven Lives: Everyday Labor in Rohinton Mistry’s <i>A Fine Balance</i>	87-113
Chapter Three: The Right to (Change) the City: Shantytown Resistance from Patrick Chamoiseau’s <i>Texaco</i> to the Abahlali baseMjondolo Shack-Dweller’s Movement	114-152
Conclusion: The Megacity and the Global South	153-158

List of Illustrations

The View From Above, <i>District 9</i>	23
Chauffeur and a Mercedes, Malabar Hill	88
Recurring Iconography, <i>The Harder They Come</i> and <i>City of God</i>	117

Introduction

The Megacity in Global Discourse and Global South Literature: From Spectacles of Power to Everyday Practice

In 2002, Miramax released *City of God* (*Cidade de Deus*), Brazilian director Fernando Mereilles's film adaptation of Paulo Lins' 1997 semi-autobiographical novel about growing up in the slums of Rio de Janeiro. The movie tells what one of the film's English-language trailers called "a story the world needs to know": a chronicle of escalating poverty, state neglect, and gang violence in a remote urban setting fifteen miles from the gorgeous beaches of downtown Rio. Its subject matter was hardly unprecedented when it was released, recollecting American films made in the early 1990s about black youth living and dying in the ghettos of south-central LA, such as *Boyz n the Hood* (1991), *South Central* (1992), and *Menace II Society* (1993). However, the setting and scope of Mereilles's film offered viewers something definitively new. *City of God* takes the viewer through the development of a Third World slum, from a modest, government-built housing project to a teeming, lawless netherworld, over several decades, from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. Beyond its familiar story of underprivileged youth fruitlessly navigating circumstances of entrenched poverty, then, *City of God* foregrounds the crisis inducing forms of urbanization that defined and shaped countless cities in the developing world over the last third of the twentieth century.

Since the 1970s, urban growth in the developing world has been an unplanned, largely uncontrollable affair, in which recent arrivals to cities, driven by poverty, war,

and economic policies prompting upheaval in the global countryside, find places to live by turning to illegal and informal housing settlements – by becoming “squatters” on the outskirts of faltering urban centers. Today, around 1 billion people, a third of the global urban population, lives in what the United Nations defines as a slum: a low-income urban neighborhood made up of substandard, often self-constructed dwellings, characterized by high population density, lack of basic services such as safe drinking water, toilets, and electricity, extreme environmental hazards, and insecurity of tenure.¹ The vast majority of slum-dwellers worldwide – some 94 percent – live in the developing world. An estimated 60 percent live in Asia, 20 percent live in Africa and 14 percent live in Latin America. Only 6 percent live in Europe and the rest of the developed world.² In extreme cases, such as the Amazon and parts of sub-Saharan Africa, more than 80 percent of new urban residents will live in slums indefinitely, with no hope of moving up or gaining better housing, making the urbanization of these regions synonymous with the massive reproduction of slums.³

City of God was the first film to historicize the development of the late twentieth/early-twenty-first-century Third World slum, and it does so through a specific combination of narrative and mise-en-scene. Visually speaking, the film employs techniques well known from early examples of cinematic neo-realism: scenes were shot on-location in Rio’s favelas, using handheld cameras and featuring untrained actors drawn directly from the Cidade de Deus and other local neighborhoods. The real-life setting of the film quickly reveals itself as more than a visually compelling backdrop to

¹ UN-Habitat, *The Challenge of Slums*, xxv.

² Ibid.

³ Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 17-18.

the narrative action -- the title slum becomes a character, both in the movie and in the segment of Brazilian history it recounts. Much of the film details the growing up of three teenage gangsters -- Shaggy, Benny, and Lil' Ze -- and an aspiring photographer, Rocket, in the Cidade de Deus. Interspersed with the scenes that tell of their development, however, are shots establishing the slum's own progressive maturation -- its growth into its contemporary degraded state. Quick and piercing, these shots add visual data to the housing project's original rows of pastel-colored, asbestos block housing, revealing the accumulation of more buildings, more stories on houses, more people, debris, traffic, and animals. Brightly lit and often staged in the early morning, these evocations of slum-growth appear on the heels of the dimly lit, nighttime scenes of gang violence and partying through which the characters' overlapping stories are told. They create the sensation of repeatedly "waking up" to a larger, more menacing environment, forcing the viewer to confront the spatial-historical trajectory in which the slum has concomitantly expanded and deteriorated over time.

The passage of time in *City of God* is thus synchronically linked to the growth of an urban slum (shown visually) and to the collapse of social values (plotted narratively). In 2004, social commentator and urban historian Mike Davis published an article in the *New Left Review* entitled "Planet of Slums" in which he makes a similar argument in prose as that which *City of God* makes visually: that the growth of urban space in the global South at the end of the 20th century has been concurrent not with its development, but with its breaking down. Davis is clear about the ways in which this trajectory confounds the modern ideal of urbanization as progress, more specifically the idea that city growth and formation should proceed alongside and act as evidence of technological

achievement. In *Planet of Slums*, his follow-up to the 2004 article of the same name, he foregrounds the profound irony of the fact that stalled and regressive Third World cities will soon become the global urban norm:

Rather than being made of out of glass and steel as envisioned by earlier generations of urbanists, the cities of the future are instead largely constructed out of crude brick, straw, recycled plastic, cement blocks and scrap wood. Instead of cities of light soaring towards heaven, much of the twenty-first-century urban world squats in squalor, surrounded by pollution, excrement, and decay.⁴

Postmodern urbanisms, whether spreading at the breakneck, unplanned pace of Chinese cities such as Shanghai and Shenzhen, or resulting in the swampy, polluted West African “conurbations” that stretch, for example, along the Gulf of Guinea from Accra, Ghana, to Lagos, Nigeria, make up a “vast urban world,” Davis comments, “little imagined by Mao, or for that matter, Le Corbusier.”⁵ This thwarting of the progressivist dreams of urban modernity by the unruly movement of people and failure of governments to perform their high modern function of planning has not resulted in the cohesive “cities of neighborhoods” postmodern urbanists such as Jane Jacobs dreamed of in the American context in the 1960s and ‘70s. Rather, postmodern urbanism in the developing world has entailed the weakening of the social fabric, abetted by the turning over of whole communities to illegal and dangerous enterprises such as the global drug and arms trades and the disappearance of state commitments to improving poor neighborhoods and assisting their residents. Powerfully, Davis argues that the kind of urban postmodernity the developing world has experienced in recent decades might make its subjects long for

⁴ Ibid, 19.

⁵ Ibid, 12.

the primordial and the primitive: “The one billion city-dwellers who inhabit postmodern slums might well look back with envy at the ruins of the sturdy mud homes of Catal Huyuk in Anatolia, erected at the very dawn of city life nine thousand years age.”⁶

“Settlement Fictions: Global South Literature and the Postcolonial Urban Imaginary” examines the recent crises of underdevelopment and overurbanization in the global South through the lens of the contemporary postcolonial novel. When I began this study in 2008, it was already clear that Meriès’s slum-historicizing film and Davis’s warning of a coming “planet of slums” were not isolated examples of textual production. They signaled the emergence of a larger and growing conversation about “crises” in Third World urbanization, in both creative and critical sources, the terrain of which they, as some of its of earliest contributors, were shaping to no small degree. The international tenor and self-inscribed urgency of this conversation seemed rather new, yet the major discursive projects underwriting it -- the representation and analysis of non-Western, developing world urbanisms -- clearly were not. In particular, researchers studying and novelists living in and writing about African, Asian, Latin American, and Caribbean cities had been attempting to understand and describe the developing world’s distinct urban cultures and problems for years, in fact, since the breakneck urbanization of the South began. My dissertation examines the recent literary output of this longstanding interest, focusing on representations of informal urban housing settlements and their residents in postcolonial world literature from the early 1990s to the present. It shows how novels by Chris Abani, Zakes Mda, Rohinton Mistry, and Patrick Chamoiseau offer alternative imaginaries of developing world cities, recasting through their narratives some

⁶ Ibid, 19.

of the thematics, problems, questions, and conclusions that have come to dominate many present inquiries into global slum development.

This dissertation suggests that novelists contribute original perspectives on developing world cities, the political and social challenges they face, and the opportunities they give rise to. Novels that attempt to render developing world urbanization, slum-formation, and slum life move us, to put it most broadly, beyond the passive/rebellious binary that guides much contemporary discourse and culture training our attention on the inhabitants of the global slum. The reason they are able to do so, I suspect, is because, like many social researchers, fiction writers engage directly and extensively with the specific histories of developing world cities, are willing to explore and represent novel social situations and political arrangements, and ground their explorations of urban space in sustained attempts to imagine or represent the perspectives of megacity subjects -- the individuals who actually live in slums and shantytowns today. The result is an evolving and multifaceted picture of the developing world's cities -- one that pays close attention to the long history and considerable burden of the South's forced underdevelopment in both colonial and postcolonial contexts, but without minimizing the importance and urgency of the question of what is to be done.

In some cases, the novels I examine were written five to ten years before the most hotly debated images of developing world cities began to be filmed, rendered in prose, and circulated. Yet, it is not my intent to argue that recent "popular" images derived from the earlier work of novelists, or to construct a definitive genealogy of the figure of the Third World slum. The areas of overlap and examples of mutual influence between, for example, literature, anthropology, film, and social commentary on contemporary

developing world urbanisms are numerous and evolving -- too much so to point to a consistent, unidirectional chain of influence, whether between national literatures, from “local” to “global” levels of inquiry, or among various genres of writing, image-making, and representation. Unexpected textual connections and lines of influence have appeared and continue to emerge. Mereilles’ film, for example, was adapted from an acclaimed Brazilian novel published in the late 1990s. Its author, Paulo Lins, lived in the Cidade de Deus as a child, but was inspired to write the novel only after assisting sociologist Alba Zaluar with her fieldwork for a multi-year study on Rio’s favelas and the rise of drug trafficking therein. Patrick Chamoiseau’s novel *Texaco* was informed by his attempts to collect oral histories from the Afro-Caribbean residents of an actual slum in Martinique, which had successfully resisted destruction by the state. Aravind Adiga’s novel *The White Tiger*, about a struggling lower-caste servant in contemporary Delhi, was the by-product of a series of globally distributed articles Adiga was researching and writing for Western magazines on the effects of economic liberalization in Indian cities during the mid-2000s. Danny Boyle’s popular film *Slumdog Millionaire* takes its basic plot from Vikas Swarup’s comic novel *Q&A*, but founds many of its new scenes on the descriptions of police interrogation and religious violence in the slums of Mumbai Boyle and screenwriter Simon Beaufoy read in journalist Suketu Mehta’s memoir/political commentary *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. This complex and generically intermingled cultural terrain makes it impossible to draw stark differentiating lines between the images we find in literature and other forms of cultural production, such as fiction and documentary films or works of journalism, or between “creative” texts and

analytical forms of knowledge production, such as anthropological and sociological accounts.

Despite recognizing the importance of these imaginative cross-fertilizations, throughout this project I have been interested in asking what insights literary texts offer regarding contemporary issues of urbanization, urban crisis, and slum conditions that other vehicles of representation may not. I treat depictions of developing world cities and impoverished urban neighborhoods in contemporary postcolonial fiction as an evolving archive of settings, narratives, plots, and perspectives, shaped by experiences and accounts of actual cities. I ask, in particular, how postcolonial novels work to defamiliarize increasingly familiar urban settings such as the slum and re-imagine attendant notions of urban crisis and response.⁷ Do portraits of slum communities by novelists with first-hand knowledge of developing world cities confirm the same senses of urban degeneration, social deterioration, and scarce possibilities for political action and change we find in internationally acclaimed films such as *City of God* and globally oriented commentaries such as *Planet of Slums*? How do postcolonial novels corroborate or challenge the startling observations and foreboding worlds increasingly at the heart of influential representations of the contemporary slum?⁸

⁷ Patricia Yaeger suggests that literary narratives crucially add to the theoretical “maps” of cities that have already been drawn. For Yaeger, fiction’s advantage is that it allows us to view urban space from multiple angles and perspectives due to the “plaited” devices by which literary narrative operates: “the intertwining of codes; the habit of overdetermination; the multiple mapping that accompanies condensation and displacement; the layering that comes with the use of compound plots, points of view, tonality, atmosphere and meter; and the dense array of figurative speech” (“Dreaming of Infrastructure,” 21).

⁸ Ashley Dawson raises without answering (understandably, since they cover a vast terrain) key questions similar to those motivating my study: “To what extent do (novelistic) accounts reproduce dominant discourse (about megacities)? Under what

My provisional answers to these questions are laid out in this dissertation, and my method for investigating them are laid out in this introduction. What I have found, at the most general level, is as follows. Contemporary postcolonial novels do feature narratives recounting the dire urban effects of economic underdevelopment, positing social breakdown and violence in slums, focusing on immensely difficult working conditions faced by the urban poor, and calling attention to the disorganized nature of protest by residents of shantytowns, which suggests that these issues are as concerning to postcolonial novelists as they are to contemporary urban theorists and practitioners. Largely missing, however, from novelizations of developing world urban spaces are the traces of fear of and fascination with Third World urban difference and extremity we find in slum narratives with the most global currency. Rather, the interest in the non-Western megacity's excesses and differences gives way to an examination of perspectives, spaces, and practices that bespeak pathways out of urban crisis. The content of these pathways -- where they are located, who they involve, what they imply -- repeatedly suggests the importance of everyday practice and the presence and possibility of hidden resistance in the slums of the South. It is their intense interest in the everyday as a category of resistance and solidarity, I contend, that most clearly differentiates novels of non-Western urban migration and settlement from so much popular film, political commentary on the Left and Right, and architectural culture centered on the new mega-slum.

conditions do representations of urban life that contest the terms of hegemonic discourse emerge? Can apparent mimicry of mega-city discourse not also serve as a critique, an assertion of common values and humanity in an increasingly Manichean global dispensation?" ("Surplus City," 19).

Approaching the Megacity: Codings of Crisis

Megacities in the Global South appear to exhibit limit-case scenarios of economic and social crisis. In many of the narratives constructed by contemporary observers of the “overurbanization” of non-Western cities, impoverished individuals living on their spatial and social peripheries in slums and other illegally built neighborhoods are unable to provide for themselves and their families, and state officials and the wealthy look upon them and their living conditions with disgust or brutal indifference. The name “Mike Davis” -- a radical Marxist, American scholar famous for his polemics against late capitalist development -- and his concept of an impending “planet of slums” have become keywords for these sorts of observations among many scholars in the U.S. academy. Yet is clear that Davis’s work represents only one strand of a vast commentary that has emerged on megacities in recent years. A more detailed sketch of this context is necessary if we are to understand the distinct entry-points novels provide into urban spaces that have been studied in a range of disciplines, including planning, economics, political science, sociology, anthropology, and architecture.

The megacity may be defined in various ways, but classically refers to a city of more than 10 million people. In recent years, the term has been used most often to refer specifically to cities in the Southern hemisphere, where it suggests, in addition to a large and densely populated city, one whose growth has not been centrally planned and is inhabited by a great number of very poor people, the majority of whom are significantly “under-housed.” The rising interest in these cities, particularly those located in Sub-Saharan Africa, South and Southeast Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, can be linked to two developments, one having to do with shifts in theoretical paradigms for

apprehending and producing urban knowledge, the other with global patterns in the settlement of people. The first development is the rise of the global cities paradigm, which has dominated urban studies for the past quarter of a century. The second is the growth of non-Western cities (in both population and size) over roughly the same period, which, in terms of scale and speed, was greater than anything before seen in human history.

Initial research identified with the global cities school of thought focused exclusively on cities whose wealth skyrocketed as their importance in managing the global economic production increased: New York, London, and Tokyo, the multiple “centers” of the international financial economy.⁹ The method of the global cities approach has been to attend to the way in which contemporary life paths and social structures are shaped by the growing interconnection and imbrication global circuits of capital, thereby revealing how shifts in the operations of the international economy since the 1970s have affected urban life and form.¹⁰ Thus, despite the fact that global cities scholarship did not until recently begin to consider cities in the South, the materialist perspective on urbanization and social change underlying its approach raised the question, almost from the beginning, of whether similar “advances” in the functioning of global

⁹ Saskia Sassen’s *The Global City* (1991) remains the definitive source for understanding these transformations. Sassen points to the growing importance of global capital flows for urban economies and increasing polarization in urban job markets as service, technology, and communications industries have crowded out older industrial firms, creating more jobs at the “high” and “low” end of the wage spectrum.

¹⁰ As Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall note, it was more the application of this approach to shifting urban economic functions than the approach itself that was new: a similar understanding of the intersection between space, social form, and capital underlies Fredric Jameson’s understanding of postmodernism, David Harvey’s account of flexible accumulation and time-space compression, and Manuel Castell’s study of how “information technology structures a space of flows of information, technology and finance” (*Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, 32).

capitalism had changed the shape and logic of urban form elsewhere in the world. Saskia Sassen, for example, who is credited with inventing the paradigm, suggested in 2000 that, “a focus on the city in studying globalization will tend to bring to the fore growing inequalities between highly provisioned and profoundly disadvantaged sectors and spaces” of urban economies.¹¹ The drive to chart these new inequalities and disjunctures, these growing gaps between “highly provisioned” and “profoundly disadvantaged” spaces, both within a single city and across multiple cities transformed by the globalization of their economic functions, has been the most influential force drawing attention to the situation of the impoverished megacity among those who study globalization and neoliberalism.¹²

Growing in population but without a strong enough economic engine to support more than a minority of their inhabitants, megacities have come to the fore in globalization and global cities scholarship as the darker side of urban change since 1970. New interest in the material dynamics of urbanization and new accounts of global urban form are not, on their own, however, enough to account for the way megacities have erupted into the public consciousness, especially in the West, where before 2000 they were not given much consideration. In the late nineties it was discovered, and much

¹¹ “The Global City: Introducing a Concept and its History,” 114.

¹² See, for example, the collections on megacities edited by Drieskins, Mermier and Wimmen (2007) and Koonings and Kruijt (2009). Mbembe and Nuttall provide a useful overview of this scholarship in the introduction to their compilation of articles on Johannesburg (2008). One of the more provocative developments of the international material analytic of global cities scholarship has been offered by Leftist urban scholars, who link the growth of global cities supported by “finance economies” to the reconsolidation of capital from the South through debt-financing agreements. Thus, according to Matthew Gandy, we should read the “extremity of urban deterioration over the past quarter century” in a megacity such as Lagos, Nigeria as “linked, in inverse proportion, to the capital accumulated in Chicago, London or Los Angeles” (“Learning from Lagos,” 42).

publicized by international policy-making and lending agencies such as the United Nations and World Bank, that the earth was approaching a major statistical milestone: over fifty percent of the world's population would soon live in cities.¹³ Meanwhile, recent urban population growth had been concentrated in the developing world, where nearly all future urbanization was expected to take place as well. These discoveries sparked dozens of explorations of the conditions of cities in the developing world, the riotous new "frontiers" of postmodern urbanism. Some accounts have been motivated by a simple exploratory urge, such as the *National Geographic* photography series "Megacities" (2001). Others have pointed to the need to rethink Western models of urbanism in light of the way these cities have formed and now function, as in Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City's architecture/urban studies book *Mutations* (2000). Some investigations are motivated by a desire to publicize the plight of the megacity poor and inspire political action and charity on their behalf, as in Robert Neuwirth's *Shadow Cities: A Billion Squatters, A New Urban World* (2004) and Mark Kramer's *Dispossessed: Life in Our World's Urban Slums* (2006). Others, however, approach megacities as new sources of elite urban lifestyles. *Dwell* Magazine's 2010 issue "Megacities," for example, explores Mumbai as a tourist destination and showcases "Homes That Stand Out in a Crowd" in Jakarta, San Paulo, and Seoul. These multi-city forays into megacity conditions, visuality, and cultures have been accompanied by concentrated explorations of single cities by writers with a similarly diverse range of specializations, from journalists, such as Suketu Mehta (*Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*), to activists/scholars attempting to shape Third World urban policy, such as

¹³ The UN's Population Division has issued these projections since 1988, based on annual estimates of the rural and urban populations of all of the world's countries.

Janice Perlman (*Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*), to academics in the humanities (particularly scholars of culture) interested in broadening discussions of urban modernity to non-Western sites, such as Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (*Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*).

My dissertation cuts across this discursive terrain in a specific way: by highlighting a mode of megacity representation that looks unyieldingly at the most unnerving examples and disturbing implications of urban growth in the Global South, growth that often is said, in this emerging “genre” of figuration, to spell disastrous consequences for the world at large and for the poorest residents of megacities in particular. This strain of megacity discourse has variously been termed eschatological, apocalyptic, noir, and, perhaps most often, dystopian.¹⁴ Its mode is usually futural and its way of predicting the future is to read it in (or through) the recent mass-production of slums in the non-Western world, whether by focusing on their untold misery and dysfunction, the larger economic and ecological crises they portend, or the way they seem to upend all previously held notions of the city, leaving observers without the bearings for understanding or reacting to what may soon occur within them. Texts that represent the informal settlement in this mode are often accused of promoting affects including passivity, disconnection, pessimism, horror, or detachment in the reader/viewer, *not* the active interest (and, in some cases, desire for constructive action) their existence would suggest their authors wanted to instill.

There have been several attempts to analyze this dark form megacity representation by cultural critics, which specify how and to what ends its images function,

¹⁴ Such terms abound in reviews of *Planet of Slum*, regularly taken as exemplary of this mode (see Brawley, Agnotti, and Boal).

in the view of most of the responders quite problematically. Gyan Prakash has suggested, in the broadest reading of the approach, the need to situate it within a larger tradition of urban dystopianism that is part of the legacy of global modernism. Eschatological or dark representations of the mega-city or mega-slum are, in his view, not new, but rather the most recent iteration of the modernist penchant for taking the dazzling potential of the modern metropolis as an ideal, while seeing in many actual urban spaces and experiences a betrayal of its utopian promise. Today's images of the megacity, Prakash therefore argues, should not be dismissed or embraced at face value, but analyzed as a form of urban criticism with "strengths and weaknesses": a mode of critique, that is, that intentionally "ratchets up a critical reading of specific historical conditions to suggest crisis and catastrophe," often by "transporting us to a ... future that indicts the present,"¹⁵ and thus betraying a utopian desire animating its outwardly dystopic outlook. Ravi Sundaram, however, warns that this "ratcheting" up of catastrophic intimations plays into the hysteria surrounding urban slums in the South generally. Its conception of urban space as pathological space provides a ready rationale for the quick clearance of slum neighborhoods the local urban elite already want and have a great deal of power to effect.

Taking an even more geographically (and historically) sweeping view of the mode's likely ideological underpinnings and effects, Vyjayanthi Rao insists that it is unsurprising that while "the nineteenth-century European metropolis exemplified the specific nature of metropolitan modernity, the Indian megacity of the early twentieth-first century stands in for the corruption of its ideals and possibilities."¹⁶ The same, of course, could be said for the African or Latin American megacity: the notion that each spatializes

¹⁵ Prakash, *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, 1-2.

¹⁶ Rao, "Embracing Urbanism: The City As Archive," 282.

the “terminal” condition (or collapse) of modernity uncomfortably recalls a basic maneuver that sustained much colonial discourse and orientalist thinking: the understanding of non-Western phenomena as constituting so many failed copies of equivalent phenomena in the West. The emergence of the non-Western city as the ultimate, mythic, dark “other” to the Western city in contemporary accounts of postcolonial cityscapes by Western commentators has disturbed not a few postcolonial critics. Jennifer Robinson makes the most specific critique of how this othering gaze functions rhetorically: the West’s newest urban dystopias are located not (as in classic dystopias) “in some far off future,” but in “an immediate and present geographic elsewhere”: the developing world city, especially in Africa.¹⁷ This transposition of the North’s potentially dystopic future onto the South’s actual present puts serious imaginative and political limitations on urban theory and practice, according to Robinson, because critics who turn to Southern megacities with a predetermined idea of the entrenched, unsolvable problems they will find there exclude from their investigations the *multiple* histories and coexisting realities these spaces actually embody.

My work attends to preoccupations and absences in the same texts upon which these aforementioned critiques rest: Mike Davis’s commentaries on slums (particularly as spaces of neo-imperialist warfare), Rem Koolhaas’s work on Lagos, Nigeria, Robert Kaplan’s discussion of crime-ridden African cities in “The Coming Anarchy,” and many of the popular films that have been filmed in real-life slums in recent years, which include, in addition to *City of God*, similarly disturbing/enthralling works such as *Elite Squad* and *City of Men* (also filmed in Rio de Janeiro), *Secuestro Express* (Caracas),

¹⁷ Robinson, “Living in Dystopia: Past, Present and Future in Contemporary African Cities,” 219.

Slumdog Millionaire (Mumbai), *Tsotsi*, and *District 9* (Johannesburg). However, my method for approaching these texts and the perspectival continuities I see among them is somewhat different. In part, this is because I have looked for an analytical model that unearths, as much as possible, a common preoccupation shared by these texts, despite their manifestly different textual forms and conventions, and the distinct backgrounds and political and intellectual affiliations of their makers. Despite my sympathies with the previous approaches, I find that they do not bridge these gaps. Prakash's designation of the utopian/dystopian dialectic in contemporary examples of "noir urbanism," for example, usefully establishes the modernist credentials of writers such as Mike Davis, Jeremy Seabrook (*In the Cities of the South*) and Jan Bremen (*The Labouring Poor in India*) -- Anglophone Marxists whose urban images, however "dark," still suggest an attachment to progress and ideals of urban development. Yet, there is no similar (even negatively imprinted) idealism in a Robert Kaplan (a Malthusian "realist") or a Rem Koolhaas (an urban "vitalist"), both of whom are more interested in charting the magnificent breakdown of urban systems than in making a case for their re-establishment. Similarly, it is easy to find evidence of orientalist horror regarding dark, unruly, uncivilized megacities in Kaplan's travel writing on Africa and in many popular slum films. However, it is difficult, to my mind, to paint contemporary Left writing on slums with the same broad brush. Throughout Davis's, Seabrook's, and Bremen's works on Third World slums, for one thing, are as many (if not more) direct critiques of Western neo-imperialism and developmentalist ideology as there are images that arguably pathologize Southern spaces.¹⁸

¹⁸ Davis makes such critiques in regard to the paternalistic attitude of NGOs toward local

My approach is rather to emphasize how such texts exemplify the undiminished difficulty of representing the poor and disenfranchised as social and historical actors in all but their most “public” guises. These texts are, I argue, united in their fixation on the most public forms of slum-life -- exhibited in slum streets, traffic jams, informal marketplaces, etc. They are similarly concerned with the most visible, powerful actors and forces apparently determining life in these spaces -- gangs, the police, charismatic religious and political figures, the wealthy and other elites -- as well as the most clear-cut *forms* of resistance to megacity dispossession and disorder. They share a symmetric disinclination to consider the settlement as a space of more ordinary conjunctures, everyday practices, and unseen, often purposefully hidden, forms of resistance.

In contrast, the novels my work considers make what I see as an ongoing, profound engagement with the valences of the unspectacular and the ordinary in non-Western cities -- with the potential of “everyday” practices, collectivities, and engagements. These novels broaden our gaze so that we are able to take in, in addition to codings of crisis, intimations of open rebellion, and signs of social breakdown, the city as a site of social practice and everyday maneuvering within oppressive systems.

The most obvious theoretical reference point for such a project is the work of Michel de Certeau, making it important to explain why I part ways from those who would employ his work to discuss the representation of “practice” in megacity imaginaries. As Sarah Nuttall points out, recent applications of de Certeau’s understanding of everyday practice as “tactical” maneuvering and the creative recombination of a dominant culture’s

peoples. He is also critical of the criminalization and racialization of slum youth in the Western media, which -- not incidentally -- provides a rationale for the Pentagon’s various “wars” on the global excluded classes.

given signs and languages to the postcolonial city often end up “overstat(ing) the city as a space of flow ... transivity and transitioning ... (and) wandering/wondering.”¹⁹ They understate, in turn, the extent to which such cities are experienced by their poor and racialized inhabitants as striated by “divisions contrived by law, surveillance, and threat,” divisions that are actually “hostile to errant and nomadic meaning, to improvised selves and versions of social hope.”²⁰ De Certeau’s theories of practice do not “travel well” in this context, in part, I would suggest, because he derives his conception of the everyday maneuvering of the powerless from opportunities and constraints put into place by the cultural economies of late capitalist society.²¹ Here, subjects (tellingly identified as “consumers”) seem relatively free to move about, play, re-use, and appropriate. While they may inhabit spaces and cultural fields designed to control (regularize and profit from) their movements and practices, the system in which they are inscribed -- or at least, the aspects of the system de Certeau privileges in his readings of cooking, walking, reading, etc. -- is such that transgression and subversion are *not* (particularly for the “ordinary man” to whom de Certeau dedicates his study) subject to excessive scrutiny or punishment.

A study of the megacity “everyday,” then, requires a more complex understanding of the fields of power in which behavior takes place and resistance unfolds among those for whom “making do” within hegemonic cultural systems occurs simultaneously with their navigation of sharply unequal material conditions and social and legal divisions.

¹⁹ Nuttall, “Literary City,” 199. Her point of reference is the post-apartheid city, specifically Johannesburg.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ See the introduction to *The Practice of Everyday Life*, especially the section titled “Consumer Production” (xii-xvii).

James Scott provides insight into such forcefields of power in his analysis of the “everyday practices of resistance” of members of the Malaysian peasantry, *Weapons of the Weak*. James equates “everyday practice” with the “prosaic but constant struggles between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labor, food, taxes, rent, and interest from them.”²² He thus brings an understanding of class-relations to “making do” and sees its practitioners as necessarily subject to specific material and symbolic constraints.

James further insists that everyday practice -- as a realm of both opportunity and constraint -- is crucial to understanding the political resistance of the non-Western poor. Those who ignore it in favor of more spectacular, overt forms of resistance, he argues, ignore the “simple fact” that “most subordinate classes throughout most of history have rarely been afforded the luxury of open, organized, political activity”; “such activity,” he clarifies, “was (often) dangerous, if not suicidal.”²³ To equate political resistance among the poor with acts of undisguised rebellion or public struggles with the state is to misunderstand the nature of class and social struggle for the poor and racialized, which entails a complex mix of “on-stage” and “off-stage” behaviors and confrontations, the latter of which are unlikely to ever be recorded.

The discursive conceptions of the informal settlement I am concerned with analyzing here pay scant attention to the “offstage” components of the lives of slum-poor. To the extent that they depict individuals and collectives who inhabit settlements at all, these texts swerve repeatedly towards actors who can be easily understood as historical agents of some kind. This becomes particularly clear in *Planet of Slums* if we consider the images that cap either end of the argument. Davis begins his book by noting the

²² Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, xvi.

²³ Ibid, xv.

statistical projection that frames much slum commentary -- the impending transformation of the earth into a “more urban” than “more rural” planet:

Sometime in the next year or two, a woman will give birth in the Lagos slum of Ajegunle, a young man will flee his village in west Java for the bright lights of Jakarta, or a farmer will move his impoverished family into one of Lima’s innumerable pueblos juvenes. The exact event is unimportant and it will pass entirely unnoticed. Nonetheless it will constitute a watershed in human history, comparable to the Neolithic or Industrial Revolutions. For the first time the urban population will outnumber the rural. Indeed, given the imprecision of Third World censuses, this epochal transition has probably already happened.²⁴

We are given three stories, derived from statistics and used to summon an “epochal transition,” but that are narrated, however briefly, in the register of the “everyday” -- as moments of birth, leaving home, and resettlement, which change the trajectories of the lives in which they occur. Immediately, however, Davis declares this glimpse into the urban poor’s everyday “unimportant” and asserts that the details of “the event” (note how three distinct trajectories have been collapsed into one “event”) have little if anything to do with the watershed “it” portends.

Indeed, we might say that such an event is only “meaningful” to the extent that those looking in on it from the outside (“the people with history”) read meaning in it. This is not the case, however, for the drama *Planet of Slums* concludes with, where the actors evoked are able to shape urban life irrevocably.

²⁴ Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 1.

Night after night, hornetlike helicopter gunships stalk enigmatic enemies in the narrow streets of the slum districts, pouring hellfire into shanties or fleeing cars. Every morning the slums reply with suicide bombers and eloquent explosions. If the empire can deploy Orwellian technologies of repression, its outcasts have the gods of chaos on their side.²⁵

The possibility of resistance to megacity dispossession, if it *can* be found in the “planet of slums,” can only be found here, in the realm where “Orwellian technologies of repression” meet overt campaigns of rebellion by its targets. This is not exactly the “left-wing academic romance” with wars of national liberation Scott insists underwrote the obsession with revolution and insurrection in peasant historiography, but what Davis evokes here is perhaps its twenty-first century analogue: a clear-cut conflict between historical agents (now a global “empire” of states and the recently urbanized equivalent of the peasantry) with global consequences.

For Scott, the fact that Leftist scholars allowed the historical archive to dictate their conception of peasant resistance meant they were often unwitting collaborators with the state in producing an image of the peasantry as either totally passive or totally menacing. Writers such as Davis similarly have elements of their images of the megacity poor echoed in the overtly menacing depictions by conservative commentators, as in Kaplan’s *The Coming Anarchy*, and the only slightly more neutral representational space of popular film. In the latter case, the battles between slum rebels and the state either occupy the narrative foreground (as in *City of God*, *Elite Squad*, *City of Men*, *Banlieu 13*, and *District 9*) or are kept alive as specters of crime and police repression in the background,

²⁵ Ibid, 206.

naturalizing the slum as a space of near-constant confrontation and struggle over resources (*Secuestro Express*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Tsotsi*). These films share a visual tic that is also telling: the slumscape is shown at the beginning of each film in a series of arial shots that confront the viewer with its size, density, and visual difference from the modern city (fig. 1). The effect is to establish the massiveness of the slum as a phenomenon in itself, and to imply what the narrative will confirm: that it cannot be reformed, or even acted upon, by any but the most powerful forces of order or disorder.



Figure 1. The view from above. *District 9* (2009)

Rem Koolhaas's work on Lagos, finally, may be the exception that proves the rule. Koolhaas attends to Lagos's "homeostatic urbanism," or the way it "self-regulates" and continues to function in the absence of planning, economic investment, and infrastructural development. This would suggest that he is interested in making a study of the megacity as a space of practices -- and, indeed, he highlights recycling and selling as two kinds of activity that make the city "work" despite its "dysfunctions." Interestingly,

however, he insists on reading these practices from a helicopter's-eye-view: as a massive assemblage of markets and traffic jams. Only from this purview, he insists, can one perceive "the large-scale efficacy of systems and agents considered marginal, liminal, informal, or illegal" in Lagos.²⁶ Koolhaas's use of the word "agent" for the inhabitant of the megacity is telling. As in the previous texts, when people come into the picture, they do so as vehicles of forces much larger than themselves -- here, as components of elaborate systems that evince a kind of swarm intelligence. *What* people do, once again, is attended only to in its most public, visible guises.

Rediscovering the Ordinary in Settlement Fictions

In the previous section, I laid out the discursive terrain to which my study responds. I would now like to argue that the preoccupation with the most visible archives of megacity life and forms of resistance in global commentary, film, and architectural criticism constitutes an opening for my project -- an analysis of the divergent imaginaries and preoccupations of Global South literature. Global South novelists, I suggest, direct their readers' attention away from spectacles of power, underdevelopment, and crisis, and toward the question of social practice in slum communities. They foreground the arena wherein everyday life is lived, shaped, and negotiated by residents themselves, and its terms thus far more quietly contested and redrawn.

I read this redirection as similar to what Njabulo Ndebele termed, writing at the height of and in reference to depictions of apartheid by South African writers, a "rediscovery of the ordinary." Ndebele's seminal essay, which famously suggests the

²⁶ Koolhaas, et al. *Mutations*, 652.

importance of moving beyond overtly political themes associated with “the struggle” in South African fiction, is often taken as a paen to narrative complexity, subtlety of thought, and attention to detail in fiction-writing. I read him, as well, as exploring the importance of reformulations in *subject matter* in writing that addresses the situation of the economically, socially, and racially oppressed.

Ndebele highlighted a mode of “spectacular representation” very much like that which I have noted in contemporary megacity texts: one in which the obsession with the most “public” iterations of the apartheid system and its “brutality” left woefully unaddressed the “interior lives” of subjects who navigated it.²⁷ In his call for a “rediscovery of the ordinary” and his attention to writing that seemed to exemplify it, he shows us that these subjects’ “off-stage” interactions and “hidden transcripts” (to recall Scott’s formulations) were becoming a subject for literature. We see this especially in the examples he gives of writing that surpasses spectacular representation. After discussing a short story about Boer woman and a Coloured woman engaged in a public confrontation, (where motives are beside the point, he laments, because cross-racial interaction is portrayed as function of “the system”), he identifies three stories that feature everyday exchanges and ordinary ways of symbolizing and acting in the world -- which “rediscover the ordinary,” in other words. In the first, two brothers discuss their different interpretations of how racism functions in society and debate the usefulness of confronting whites directly. The second considers the wandering thoughts of a mine-worker reflecting on his job and daily routines. In the third, a woman consults a traditional healer for advice regarding marriage. Each story is a window into an “off-

²⁷ “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” 149-150.

stage” world -- the sort ignored and even effaced by representations that seek to create more “revolutionary” affects.

The novels in this study move repeatedly into the same kinds of off-stage worlds -- of private conversations and exchanges, self-approximations, small differences of power, and cultural tensions and complexities. These are explorations more interested in unforeseen, intra- community relationships than they are in battles between slum-dwellers and state. They are more attentive to hidden spaces of work and secret laboring solidarities than to the volatile, public space of the street and its practices. And they highlight the necessarily flexible, everyday nature of struggle and resistance among the poor not as a problem, but as a potentially powerful force in shaping megacity life.

Sometimes, overt acts of rebellion against the state (protests, armed struggles, etc.) by the urban poor *do* move into the foreground of these texts, but usually only briefly. Further, the outcome is often quite unsuccessful. It is tempting to read this commonality among the texts as bespeaking a general pessimism, among their authors, about the prospect for “resistance” in the settlement. If I do not do so, it is because, within the economy of the narratives, these failures generally have few consequences for everyday practice. The survival activities among the women at the “edges” of the megacity landscape in *Graceland*, the bonds that develop between Toloki and Noria in *Ways of Dying*, the affiliations that develop among the roommate/workers of a Bombay tenement in *A Fine Balance* -- all of these are shown to proceed quite apart from protests and demonstrations that are unceremoniously crushed by the state.

In a reverse move, *Texaco* narrates what is officially a rather heroic tale about a shantytown that survives an attempt by the state to demolish it, but the effect of its

narrative is to keep resolutely in the foreground petty struggles, moments of boredom and anxiety, intra-community differences, and debates over the proper recollections of events. To my mind, this is Chamoiseau's attempt to transmit resistance not as a series of heroic events or even cunningly strategic victories, but as an everyday, uneven affair.

The issue of the question of how foreground and background interact in each novel -- whether, in the case of the first three, everyday practice seems to contain the "seeds" for future resistance, and in *Texaco*, whether success against the state's machination is a function of everyday practice or contingent on myriad other factors the shantytown dwellers (Chamoiseau is not shy to imply) cannot see or control -- is one I have only just begun to consider. Obviously, it will be a crucial question for this project going forward. My provisional answer is that it would seem that the very difficulty I have answering it means that the novelists themselves are uncertain about the prospects for these solidarities among the "weak" to affect cities on a grander scale. Regardless, this uncertainty should not prevent us from taking up the appearances of these bonds and forms of resistance in these novels -- rather, I consider their appearance testimony to the "emergent" status of the everyday in investigations of megacity life: a speculative interest and refusal to discount everyday, small-scale struggle rather than a clear-cut endorsement of its power.

Reading Practices

To analyze the moments that most interested me in the novels, I found it useful to employ sociological studies and ethnographies of megacity life and urban poverty (such as by AbdouMaliq Simone and Ela Bhatt). In a sense then, I have attempted something of

what Gayatri Spivak advocates for in *Death of a Discipline*: the cross-fertilization of the methods of literary studies and area studies.²⁸ Even though I guessed this would be difficult, I was surprised by how difficult it was. In particular, it was hard to know how to interpret confluences between the sociological studies and the figures that were appearing, disappearing, and reappearing in the novels. It was only when I, late in the game, began to realize that there was a logic to this disappearance and reappearance -- that it had something to do with an intermittent, intense interest in the ordinary and the everyday, especially as I found them described in Ndebele's and Scott's work on these subjects -- that I was in a position to be able to interpret these confluences. As a result, there are certain places in the chapters where the sociological texts "take over" the readings and the clarity of the argument may falter. This is perhaps one of the dangers of the cross-fertilization of literary studies and area studies, but I think it was a risk worth taking.

One of the initial critical texts I encountered on the possibility for reading literature attuned to new urban crises was by Patricia Yaeger. She provides a general statement on what might constitute a "metropoetics" for describing the "flow" of literature as it passes through cities: critics might attend to the figuration of contests over space, the "dream" of infrastructure, infrastructure's creative re-appropriation, and the formation of subaltern counterpublics.²⁹ I soon learned, in doing background research on the novels I wanted to write about, that much of the criticism focused on literary megacities understood them as anything but places of creative "re-appropriations" or

²⁸ See especially her first chapter, "Crossing Borders." As Brent Edwards has argued, these remarks by Spivak represent one of the few attempts to articulate a new methodological vision for postcolonial studies that would "include the literary without sacrificing an attention to the social sciences and, in particular, to the complexities of a critique of capitalist globalization" ("The Genres of Postcolonialism," 3).

²⁹ See her introduction to the 2007 special edition of the *PMLA* on cities.

formations of new publics. Instead, they read these “new” narratives of the city as overwhelmingly bearing the scars of the past oppression of the people by the (post)colonial state.³⁰ While I understand their reasons for embracing this reading practice (itself a critique of history), I have tried to avoid this approach, in favor of attending to the way novelized literary landscapes appear as incubators of social practices.

Chapter Summaries

The push to account for intensifying violence in non-Western megacities has favored a highly contracted “masculine” subject – the economically disadvantaged perpetrator of violence who poses a threat to his community’s stability and urban society more generally. In chapter one, “Narrating Development in the ‘Violent’ Megacity: The Relational Bildungsroman in Chris Abani’s *GraceLand* and ZakesMda’s *Ways of Dying*,” I begin by arguing that this focus leads us to overlook the experiences of other men and women in impoverished neighborhoods or read them entirely in terms of victimization. The African novels I go onto examine illuminate what such discussions occlude: the realm of the settlement social in which women, in particular, construct communities of support to counter urban volatility. To analyze the narrative shape of practice in these communities, I develop the concept of the “relational bildungsroman”: a novel of

³⁰ This approach has produced readings of *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying* as attesting to the failure of the projects of decolonization and national development in Nigeria and South Africa respectively. See Ashley Dawson’s “Surplus City” and Grant Farred’s “Mourning the Post-Apartheid State Already?” Dawson concurs with the terms of the critique he sees Abani making, while Farred feels Mda’s “defeatism” is premature and argues that the novel does not do enough to take the still-young ANC government to task. Another recent example is Sabry Hafez’s “The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Transformation and Narrative Form.” Rita Barnard’s work is an important exception to this trend (see Chapter 1), as is Sarah Nuttall’s.

development that makes room for more than one protagonist and stages the unfolding of a bond between them. Demonstrating the need for interdependence (rather than independence) in settlements fraught with violence and entrenched poverty, and insisting on the importance of women in narratives that explore this need, Abani's and Mda's novels not only reconstruct the gender conventions of many texts that map the intersection between urban marginality and violence, they reformulate the bildungsroman to reflect the experience of the poor in African urban space.

Late-twentieth-century attempts to develop the Indian economy by inscribing its workers within global circuits of capital accumulation have produced a vulnerable domestic urban workforce, consigned to informal jobs and excluded from decent housing. One result has been the confluence of what Arjun Appadurai terms "spectral housing" and "urban cleansing": struggles over insufficient living space leading to explosive, ethnically inflected violence in cities such as Mumbai. Chapter two, "Precarious Spaces, Interwoven Lives: Ordinary Labor in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*," explores what narratives of this transition leave out: the lifeworld of poor workers as *workers* and their everyday experiences confronting the local effects of global capitalism. I read Rohinton Mistry's Bombay novel *A Fine Balance* as staging a shift in perspective from the exterior space of the street to the interior space of the home to capture the off-stage experiences of workers laboring in the informal sector. The interactions that occur among the novel's four protagonists in domestic space reveal the text's interest in the opportunities for labor-based solidarity that occur outside the public view. I consider what it means that these exchanges never develop into a platform for direct acts of resistance and instead suggest a template for thinking the ethical within capitalism's lifeworld.

Chapter three, “The Right to (Change) the City: Shantytown Resistance from Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco* to the Abahlali baseMjondolo Shack-dwellers’ Movement” turns its attention to the more direct forms of resistance engendered by informal settlement life. I begin with Patrick Chamoiseau’s *Texaco*, a Caribbean text that has been much read by critics looking for insight into megacity urbanism, but rarely with close attention to the multiple, shifting forms of resistance it explores. I argue that the model of settlement-based resistance it most clearly endorses involves a kind of everyday, translational ethos, and that the narrative undercuts our desire to focus on moments of heroic rebellion among the poor by foregrounding the lengthy, disorganized nature of their struggles. The chapter concludes by comparing *Texaco*’s notions of shantytown resistance to those articulated by two shack-dwellers’ movements: SDI or Shack Dwellers International, a “federating” or networking model based in India, and Abahlali baseMjondolo, a militant, ground-level movement based in Durban, South Africa.

Works Cited

- Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.
- Agnotti, Tom. "Apocalyptic Anti-Urbanism: Mike Davis and His Planet of Slums." *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 30.4 (2005): 961-967.
- Boal, Iain. "Twenty-first Century Noir." *Mute* 2.3 (2006): 10-15.
- Bremen, Jan. *The Labouring Poor in India: Patterns of Exploitation, Subordination, and Exclusion*. New Delhi: India, Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Brawley, Lisa. "The Desire Called Dystopia." *Criticism* 50 (2008): 153-159.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Texaco*. New York: Vintage International, 1998.
- City of God*. Dir. Fernando Mereilles. 2002. Film.
- Davis, Mike. "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat." *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004): 5-34.
- . *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Dawson, Ashley. "Surplus City: Self Fashioning, Structural Adjustment, and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *GraceLand*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.1 (2009): 16-34.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Trans. Steven Randall. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984.

- District 9*. Dir. Neill Blomkamp. 2009. Film.
- Drieskens, Barbara, Franck Mermier, and Heiko Wimmen. *Cities of the South: Citizenship and Exclusion in the 21st Century*. London: Saqi, 2007.
- Edwards, Brent. "Introduction: The Genres of Postcolonialism. *Social Text* 22.1 (2004): 1-15.
- Gandy, Matthew. "Learning From Lagos." *New Left Review* 33 (May-June 2005): 37-53.
- Hafez, Sabry. "The New Egyptian Novel: Urban Transformation and Narrative Form." *New Left Review* 64 (July-August 2010): 47-62.
- Kaplan, Robert. "The Coming Anarchy." *The Atlantic*. February 1994.
- Koolhaas, Rem, et al. *Mutations*. Barcelona: Arc en Reve Centre d'Architecture, 2000.
- Koolhaas, Rem. "Fragments of a Lecture on Lagos," *Under Siege: Four African Cities – Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos. Documenta 11*. Eds. Okwui Enwezor et al. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2002.
- Koonings, Kees and Kruijt, Dirk. *Mega-cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2009.
- Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995.
- Metha, Suketu. *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found*. New York: Vintage Books, 2004.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.
- Ndebele, Njabulo S. "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa." *Journal of South African Studies* 12.2 (1986): 143-157.
- Nuttall, Sarah and Achille Mbembe. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Perlman, Janice. *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Prakash, Gyan., ed. *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Rao, Vyjayanthi. "Embracing Urbanism: The City as Archive." *New Literary History* 40.2 (2009): 371-383

- Robinson, Jennifer. "Living in Dystopia: Past, Present, and Future in Contemporary African Cities." *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. Ed. Gyan Prakash. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Sassen, Saskia. "The Global City: Introducing a Concept and its History." *Mutations*. Barcelona: Arc en Reve Centre d'Architecture, 2000.
- Seabrook, Jeremy. *In the Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- Secuestro Express*. Dir. Jonathan Jacubowicz. 2005. Film.
- Scott, James C. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.
- Slumdog Millionaire*. Dir. Danny Boyle. 2008. Film.
- Spivak, Gayatri. *Death of a Discipline*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2003.
- Sundaram, Ravi. "Imaging Urban Breakdown: Delhi in the 1990s." *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*. Ed. Gyan Prakash. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Tsotsi*. Dir. Gavin Hood. 2005. Film.
- Yaeger, Patricia. "Dreaming of Infrastructure." Introduction, Special Issue on Cities. *PMLA* 122. 1 (2007): 9-26.

Chapter One

Narrating Development in the ‘Violent’ Megacity:

The Relational Bildungsroman in Chris Abani’s *Graceland*

and Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*

In the second chapter of *The Wretched of the Earth*, titled “Spontaneity: Its Strengths and Weaknesses,” Franz Fanon turns Karl Marx’s classic reading of the conservative, antirevolutionary tendencies of the *lumpenproletariat* on its head. In Marx’s view, this unemployed and informally employed segment of working classes, “the rascal, swindler, beggar ... the starving, wretched, and criminal workingman,” would generally side with the interests of capital-owners against the revolutionary aims of the organized working classes. For Fanon, the *lumpenproletariat* had served and would continue to serve, in the anti-colonial context, as an essential arm of revolutionary struggle. Organized by militant urban nationalists and inspired by battles begun in the countryside, “the pimps, the hooligans, the unemployed and the petty criminals,” Fanon writes, “throw themselves into the struggle for liberation like stout working men. These classless idlers will by militant action discover that path that leads to nationhood.”¹

Marx might well have appreciated Fanon’s revision. As Michael Denning reminds us, Marx’s remarks on the *lumpenproletariat*’s reactionary leanings were more often derived from historically specific examples than from universal deduction. He drew, for

¹ *The Wretched of the Earth*, 130.

example, on his analysis of Napoleon's recruitment of the *lumpenproletariat* in *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and the alliance between poor whites and North American slaveholders in the southern United States.² Fanon appropriates Marx's term to draw attention to a significantly different – and distinctly constituted – social formation: “that fraction of the peasant population which is blocked on the outer fringes of the urban centers” in colonial towns, “that fraction which has not yet succeeded in finding a bone to gnaw in the colonial system.”³ While the members of Marx's *lumpenproletariat* were defined primarily by the degraded nature of their work, Fanon highlights a group defined also by their location on the literal and symbolic edges of colonial cities – by their identity, that is, as recently migrated peasants to urban space and their collective exclusion from the metropolitan centers of colonial wealth and power on racial grounds. It is precisely the lived experience of biologically determined spatial exclusion that opens the eyes of Fanon's rag proletariat to the need for revolutionary struggle. Unlike the trade unions and the nationalist parties, this “mass of humanity” living in shantytowns on the outskirts of colonial cities knows intuitively, according to Fanon, that there can be no nonviolent path to independent nationhood. Rather, “they take for granted the impossibility of their entering the city save by hand grenades and revolvers.” Springing into action against the colonial occupier, “these workless, less-than-men redeem themselves in their own eyes and the eyes of history.”⁴

Recently migrated, informally occupied masses in and around cities of the global South today face a whole new realm of urban “fortifications.” Much like the colonial

² See Denning's “Wageless Life,” especially 10-13.

³ Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 129.

⁴ Ibid, 130.

urban poor of which Fanon wrote, they are physically and legally blocked from entering and integrating into the spaces where wealth is circulated, concentrated, and enjoyed. Yet, the poorest and officially least powerful residents of postcolonial entrepôts lack a Fanon for their times, which is to say, a theorist interested in specifying how the historical and political originality of their situation could become a pathway towards political, social, and economic liberation. With few exceptions, assessments of the contemporary *lumpenproletariat* -- particularly those living in the global South -- have focused on its acts of “violence” and “rebellion” to trace the lineages of a self-defeating phenomenon -- a “reaction” to hopeless poverty rather than a struggle knowingly entered into in order to fight it. Such discussions figure communities in crisis and violence as an everyday affair, leading to social dissolution and mass victimization. Compared to these images and narratives, the very stuff of what I discussed in the introduction as a “spectacular” rendering of megacity poverty, Fanon’s notion of urban rebellion -- of urban violence *as* rebellion, inscribed in a broader struggle for collective sovereignty -- seems foreign indeed.

I begin this chapter with Fanon not because I wish to valorize violence as a solution to contemporary urban exclusion.⁵ Rather, my aim is to emphasize and echo the guiding assertion behind his remarks on “shantytown masses”: that we may only know

⁵ Anyone wishing to pursue this line of argument, however, should begin with the work of George Ciccariello-Maher, who reads *Wretched* and *Black Skin, White Masks* as providing, together, a concept of “decolonial violence” that encompasses both symbolic and literal acts of aggressive self-assertion. “For racialized subjects,” Ciccariello-Maher writes, “the very act of appearing, of making oneself known, is a violent act both for its ontological implications and for its inevitable recognition ... it constitutes a challenge to the prevailing structures of symbolic ontological violence -- the walls of exclusion which divide being from non-being” (“Jumpstarting the Decolonial Engine: Symbolic Violence from Fanon to Chavez”). Symbolic violence is then used to analyze the recent political mobilization of the Afro-indigenous poor in Venezuela.

and say what they are capable of if we understand them in all their historical and political specificity. Recent narratives in which the residents of slum communities are painted as categorically “disempowered” by urban violence suggest the need for another round of clarifying adjustments to our ways of imagining the urban excluded. This chapter will begin to enact these revisions through a reading of two novels set in African megacities and concerned with the rise of violence therein: Chris Abani’s *Graceland*, set in Lagos, Nigeria in the 1980s, and Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*, set in an unnamed, major city in South Africa during the “transition” -- the period just prior to the election of the post-Apartheid, African National Congress government in 1994. In particular, I will show how these novels depart from common representations of slum violence, its causes and its victims, which span policy research, journalism, and even popular film. When these latter texts have a human subject, it tends to be a (highly contracted) masculine one: the economically disadvantaged perpetrator of violence, who poses a threat to his immediate community’s stability and urban “civil society” more generally. Charting his motivations and movements in megacities, such narratives tend to overlook other men’s and women’s experiences in the same urban neighborhoods or read them entirely in terms of victimization. Thus, the recent discourse on slum violence has become largely self-fulfilling: it has trouble making room for, recognizing, and discussing collectivities and behaviors that don’t fit within the patterns it emphasizes, and that could be supported in efforts to create different realities.

Graceland and *Ways of Dying* do confirm part of what the non-literary discourse suggests: that informal settlement life can be a daily struggle marked by uncertainty and brutality. Yet, these novels also (in the case of *Graceland*) pique our interest regarding

and (in the case of *Ways of Dying*) draw our attention directly to the everyday communities of support and sustenance that impoverished women, in particular, have constructed in response to urban volatility. In doing so, they reconstruct the gender conventions of so many texts that map the intersection of urban marginality and violence in megacities. Unlike common discussions of slum violence, which are unconsciously but forcefully shaped by gendered assumptions about victimization (featuring male victimizers and female victims), these novels maintain an explicit focus on how men and women's lives intersect and diverge in impoverished urban spaces.

To account for how African novelists engage both kinds of intersection -- between marginality and violence, and between men and women's lives -- this chapter develops the concept of the "relational bildungsroman." With this concept, I mean to foreground and draw out the ways in which one of central narrative conventions for representing the history of urbanization and the rise of urban modernity in Western narrative -- the "coming of age" novel or novel of development, set against the backdrop of rural-to-urban migration -- has evolved to depict contemporary African urbanization and settlement life. These reformulations have occurred, I suggest, particularly *vis a vis* growing authorial interest in representing the deeply impoverished, demographic majority in urban Africa. For this group, urban migration has rarely been an individual affair, nor has it enacted a complete break from village-based relationships. Rather, it has involved the unwieldy maintenance of rural ties, and, especially in recent years, the synchronous or staggered urban migration and resettlement of entire extended families.⁶ The word

⁶ AbdouMalique Simone links the increase in multiple members of families (women and children, siblings, etc.) migrating to cities to the imposition of structural adjustment on African nations, which ruined local agriculture, made subsistence farming difficult, and

“relational” in my coinage of the relational bildungsroman thus means to evoke the largely unexamined importance of *the familial* in novels about African urbanization as well as the significance of *relationality* itself -- everyday connection and affiliation -- in African novels that foreground the vast difficulties of urban life. My overarching argument is that in the process of foregrounding relationality, the African settlement novels make room for more than one protagonist. They insist that a seemingly central character’s experiences cannot be understood apart from the experiences of one or more apparently secondary characters.⁷ Overlapping urban journeys and shifting relationships among migrants, in other words, are these novels’ primary interests and concerns.

In the case of *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying*, the relations at stake are between characters who are not only “related” to one another through family and village ties, but are of different genders. By charting the separate but overlapping trajectories of cousins Elvis and Efua Oke in *Graceland* and childhood friends Toloki and Noria in *Ways of Dying*, Abani and Mda examine the differences between men and women’s everyday experiences in African cities and imagine potential and actual intersections between variously gendered communities in urban space. In my reading of their treatment of these relations, I emphasize how *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying* challenge the predominant

made the need to find employment more urgent and widespread. See *For the City Yet to Come*, 119.

⁷ Though I do not consider it here, Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* may constitute another example of what I am calling the “relational bildungsroman.” It seems to foreground the stunted development of Refense, a young man who moves from his village to Johannesburg to attend university. He commits suicide from the stress of living in the inner-city neighborhood of Hillbrow, but the story does not end with Refentse’s death. Rather his death is both an ending and a beginning -- an opening for the narrator to consider the life of his childhood friend Refilwe, who also lives in Hillbrow and whose story clarifies the lessons of Refentse’s.

ways of imagining impoverished subjects underlying common narratives of megacity violence.

Before turning to the novels' imaginaries, I will first discuss, in order to question, the implicit scope of widely agreed upon conceptions of the megacity as a violent space. I question these conceptions not to insist that informal settlements in the developing world are not dangerous places, nor to minimize the violence their often residents face, both from state-authorized actors anxious to demonstrate their institutional power and from non- or para-state actors that often operate in these neighborhoods with impunity. Rather, I want to suggest that prevailing ways of narrating these realities tend to oversimplify the roots of violence in megacities and the nature of power in a globalized world. I take issue, in particular, with the increasingly common explanation for how violence becomes endemic in non-Western cities, wherein "collapsing" postcolonial states lead to the "rise" of local, competitor sources of sovereignty, located mainly within impoverished communities. I offer an alternative reading of this situation, more attuned to the horizontal and specifically transnational functioning of governmentality in the global South. I also highlight and question the tendency of many depictions of megacity violence to imagine informal settlements as "doomed places" -- places from which new forms of solidarity against exclusion and violence cannot possibly emerge.

The "Violent" Megacity

Discourses of contemporary Third World slums tend to be regionally inflected. In the case of what are termed "epidemics" of slum and megacity violence, there are regional variations in the kinds of stories commonly told. Familiar depictions of

spectacular violence in megacities and border regions in Latin American and impoverished Caribbean cities such as Kingston, Jamaica tend to immediately link up with the drug trade, describing a low-intensity war of trafficking disputes and territorial intimidation ongoing among local drug gangs and conflicts between the gangs and the increasingly “militarized” (but also unprecedentedly corrupt) police.⁸ In texts addressing the violence in South Asian cities, portraits of similarly criminalized urban gangs and underworlds stress their religious character. The fallout from conflict between warring gangs, manipulated by Indian religious/nationalist movements such as the Shiv Sena and encouraged by the police, are shown to pit even normally law-abiding Hindu and Muslim slum residents against one another, precipitating violence such as the Ayodhya riots in Mumbai in 1992.⁹ Life in African cities, finally, is said to be at the mercy of what we might call “sheer crime” -- individual acts of murder, theft, and rape with no larger motive than the perpetrator’s need, desperation, or rage -- as well as corresponding incidents of vigilante justice perpetuated by communities and temporary collectives of

⁸ References to this kind of violence in the global media are too numerous to count these days, especially in response to the scores of murders on the northern border regions of Mexico in 2009 and 2010, as well as during the U.S.’s extradition and arrest of Christopher “Dudus” Coke from Kingston’s slums over the same period. Rio’s drug wars became famous in the North over the 2000s, garnering increased media coverage and inspiring Brazilian documentaries and fiction films with large English-speaking audiences, including *News from a Private War*, *City of God*, *City of Men*, and *Elite Squad*.

⁹ Suketu Mehta’s *Maximum City: Bombay Lost and Found* is a characteristic example. Tellingly, one of the images Danny Boyle and Simon Beaufoy adapted from that book for their film *Slumdog Millionaire* details the 1992 Ayodhya riots, which Mehta writes of in several chapters. In Boyle’s film, main character Jamal becomes an orphan when his predominantly Muslim slum is invaded by torch-wielding Hindu men and his mother is killed in the violence.

strangers pushed to the brink of terror and helplessness by the growth of unpunished crime.¹⁰

The regional specificities of the aforementioned images notwithstanding, each type indicates a pervasive concern with a crisis that seems to threaten all cities of the South to varying degrees. In their recent volume *Mega-Cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt give a name to this crisis by pointing to the growing incidence and significance of what they term “governance voids” in megacities. These are situations where “the effective violence monopoly of the state has crumbled,” where the state lacks the ability or the will “to guarantee protective capabilities or ... security” to all of its citizens, and where “alternative armed actors and violence brokers have carved out spaces of social and political control.”¹¹ The crisis, in other words, is one in which weak postcolonial states are increasingly unable to define the appropriate/legal channels for economic activity and maintain a monopoly on the violence exercised in their territories.

Whether they emphasize drug gangs, communal and religious violence, rioting, crime, or vigilanteism, discussions of the non-Western megacity’s new culture of violence all attest to the ways in which impoverished settlements in the South now function largely according to their own rules. Within urban slums and shantytowns, there

¹⁰ Robert Kaplan’s “The Coming Anarchy” is the most famous piece linking West Africa -- particularly its cities -- to the specter of out-of-control crime. On the issue of vigilanteism, Kaplan and other journalists make much out of the practice of “necklacing,” wherein an angry crowd places a tire around an accused criminal’s neck, douses it with gasoline, and sets it alight.

¹¹ Koonings and Kruijt, 26. Elsewhere in the same introduction, the authors suggest that these “voids” produce “grey zones” in cities, where the lines between informal and formal economies, extralegal and legal behavior, exclusion and inclusion, and uncivil and civil society are irrevocably blurred.

is said to be little respect or use for official sources of law and order, such as the police, the government, and the legal system, and the latter are said to have basically abandoned the residents of informal neighborhoods. This shift is offered as an essential explanation for why the residents of these neighborhoods are, more than any other urban group, deeply disadvantaged by growing violence. The rise of “alternative armed actors” occurs in slums and shantytowns because they are where “government voids” are most palpably felt and commonly located. This rise places residents in a constant state of “crossfire” between the police (who intermittently reappear to try and reestablish control) and other “competitor” sources of law.

To make matters worse, the “wars” among newly empowered criminal groups, between criminals and vigilantes, and between both and the avatars of a weakened state, many scholars suggest, undermine the conditions for “civil society” and avenues for engaging in grassroots political activity in the developing world. The conflicts immerse cities in a state of “siege”; meanwhile, gangs or parastatals take over or destroy existing instruments of neighborhood policy-making and the poor’s forums for democratic appeal to the government.¹² Increasing violence in the urban South not only stems from conditions of economic want, insecurity, and marginality in cities, it undermines the mechanisms by which the urban poor have historically challenged and contested these conditions.

¹² On these points, Koonings and Kruijt summarize their volume’s contributions from urban development scholars such as Jo Beal and Janice Perlman: “Those without access to the means of violence -- which is to say, the overwhelming majority of the urban poor -- suffer a process of disempowerment through the erosion of grassroots civil organizations and urban political institutions” (25).

Without state consideration or police protection, or effective forums for political protest or democratic contestation, feelings of desperation and hopelessness grow. Impoverished youth increasingly turn to criminal activity and illegal economic pursuits. Finally, vigilante groups may emerge and, as they have in Rio de Janeiro and other Latin American cities over the past ten years, institute repressive measures of community control and exploitation that match or exceed those employed by criminal gangs.¹³ Given the direness and complexity of this situation -- and how difficult or impossible it seems to resolve or improve things -- it is little wonder that studies of the intersection of urban marginality and violence often unfold in a fatalistic spirit.

Janice Perlman's work offers an illuminating example of this fatalism, especially in her recent writing, which departs quite clearly in tone and argument from her earlier work on urban poverty. The first scholar to coin the term "megacities" as a description for large cities of the global South, and among the first to insist that these cities required new categories of analysis, Perlman argued in her first book, *The Myth of Marginality: Urban Poverty and Politics in Rio de Janeiro* (1976), against the idea of the shantytown poor as existing on the "margins" of urban society. The then-popular conception that the recent urban migrants had no interest in or hope of becoming incorporated into the urban mainstream was a myth, she found. Citing extensive fieldwork with *favela* families among whom she lived for several years, she argued that these individuals were a major part of the urban economy as well as urban culture, and were wrongly perceived

¹³ Militias charge residents exorbitantly for their protection, and are hardly less violent than the gangs, the major difference being that they will kill and confiscate the property of anyone they suspect works for the cartels. See Robert Gay's contribution to *Mega-Cities*, "From Popular Movements to Drug Gangs to Militias: An Anatomy of Violence in Rio de Janeiro."

(primarily by those living outside the neighborhoods) as “marginal.” In her 2010 follow-up, *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*, written forty years later and based on interviews with many of the same families whose lives formed the basis for *Myth*, Perlman suggests that “marginality” has now gone “from myth to reality.”¹⁴ She links the realization of marginality in Brazil’s *favelas* or *morros* (hills) almost entirely to the surge of drug-trade-related violence. Rio’s *favelados* now perceive themselves as “marginal,” are treated as such, and are far less able to link up to economic opportunities, she contends, because they live in a no man’s land of violence. She concludes: “Whatever freedom Rio’s poor had is brutally curtailed as they find themselves trapped between the police, the dealers, and the vigilantes.”¹⁵

Significantly, while such pronouncements on life in informal settlements in the South mean to attest to the *weakness* or lack of *effectiveness* of postcolonial states in protecting and regulating the lives of impoverished citizens, what they tend to suggest, in fact, is the *absence* of the state in settlements entirely. Perlman’s description of how *favelados* are trapped between “the police, the dealers, and the vigilantes” is a good example of the ways in which this absence -- the governance “void” -- is often imagined. Though she clearly indicates one of the groups battling for control of Rio’s urban badlands which is officially affiliated with the state -- the police -- she, and nearly all urban experts commenting on megacity violence, no matter the region, maintains that police in Third World cities are as motivated by the desire to profit from illegal economic activity, fear, and desperation as are criminals and vigilantes. Any goal or hope of reestablishing “the rule of law” in settlements and similar legal “gray zones,” in other

¹⁴ See *Favela*, 147-164.

¹⁵ *Mega-Cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, 53.

words, has long been abandoned by the state's official actors and replaced by the imperative to pursue power and profit, sometimes secretly, often in blatant disregard for the laws they are supposed to uphold. Informal settlements are thus essentially *stateless* environs: free-for-alls of roving governmentality-by-force, wherein two or three types of similarly motivated and nearly identically behaving "violence brokers" compete to secure power amidst general chaos and confusion. In course of fighting each other, these anti-state and not-legitimately-state actors never establish full control over the territories in question -- never completely filling the void left behind by the "true" state -- but their activities do have the effect of disempowering, silencing, and victimizing the non-violent men, women, and children who live there.

The various components of this narrative, though unquestionably powerful in describing aspects of settlement life, seem to me to oversimplify the power dynamics within and the historical production of megacities. It is best to understand them, I contend, not as a simple reflection of reality, but as a product of and testament to what James Ferguson has described as the "vertical topographies of power" through which the political realities of contemporary postcolonial societies are generally understood. Taking political discourse about Africa as his point of departure, Ferguson indicates two paradigms that have dominated descriptions of central political processes in postcolonial Africa in recent decades. The first approach he terms "nation-building," the second, the "states-and-society" approach.¹⁶ Both conceive a tripartite division between the state, social institutions, and the people, and understand these spheres as arrayed in a vertical topography, wherein the state constitutes the highest level, social institutions constitute

¹⁶ Ferguson, *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*, 90.

an intermediary zone, and the people are down below, at the lowest level, living “everyday life” in their families and communities. Both paradigms are indebted to Hegel’s opposition between the universal state and patriarchal family, wherein which a realm of activities, operating “below” the state and “above” the family -- what Hegel termed “civil society” -- mediates between them. Only one, however, namely, the “nation-building” approach, follows Hegel in seeing it as the state’s responsibility to be a progressive, ethical influence on the spheres of life below it.

The nation-building approach arose in the decades when many African (and other Third World) nations were newly independent and their major imperative was to establish national structures of authority in the presence of primordial or “premodern” commitments leftover from colonial and precolonial days -- modes of political affiliation and social organization based on tribe, kinship, ethnicity, etc. The success of nation-building was measured by the degree to which states could construct new bases of authority resting on nation-state citizenship, which required integrating various ethnic or tribal factions in their territories and making “the people” into “citizens” capable of participating in “modern” social institutions (the primary focus of early development initiatives). Failure was seen in the persistence or resurgence of residual, “premodern,” non-national influences on politics and group affiliation. In the states-and-societies approach, which emerged to rival the nation-building paradigm in the 1980s, the essential division between the state and intermediary social institutions interacting with the people remains, but the valuation of their roles is reversed: the state is now seen as the backward, stagnant force restricting and limiting development -- both economic and social, national and individual -- and the intermediary sphere of society -- no longer dismissed as

backward, ethnic, rural or tribal -- is seen as the dynamic sphere of progress. The state's major imperative is now to reform itself in ways that give voluntary associations and "grassroots" organizations -- which now go by the name "civil society" proper -- room to breathe, that is, to bring about democracy and development on their own.

As Ferguson points out, this new valuation of civil society in the context of postcolonial development occurred in conjunction with its reformulation as a common sense "good" in the First and Second Worlds as well. Civil society's new career, which took it far from Hegel's specific understanding and even further from Marx's critique of it as an illusory realm of freedom under capitalism,¹⁷ began in communist Eastern Europe shortly before the fall of the Soviet Union. Civil society was understood to denote not what Hegel understood as a system of social interactions developing alongside and in conjunction with capitalism, but any social coalition -- whether "private business, church, or political party" -- that "demanded some space, autonomy and freedom from the totalitarian state."¹⁸ In the West, neoconservative movements appropriated much the same idea as simply "society" and used it to legitimate projects to roll back state protections in the name of the furthering the higher freedoms of individuals. For some on the Left, civil society became coterminous with grassroots democracy: a realm in which local actors could organize to press the state to respond to their demands. This gave it much of its appeal in the postcolonial context, where "it seemed to provide leverage both

¹⁷ Ferguson describes Marx's critique of Hegel's notion of civil society as one that "reveal(ed) the imaginary freedom's of capitalism's democratic political realm as an illusion, to be contrasted to" what Marx saw as "the real *unfreedom* of 'civil society'" under capitalism, "the domain of alienation, economic domination and the slavery of the workplace" (*Global Shadows*, 91).

¹⁸ Ibid, 91.

for battling dictatorships and for grounding a post-socialist mass democratic politics.”¹⁹

Political scientists and anthropologists also gravitated toward the concept as a way of talking about postcolonial cultures, since it freed them from the nation-building’s narrow and prescriptive definition of “the local” as the statically traditional. This lack of clarity about what civil society entailed and how and for whom it functioned made it immensely productive in an ideological sense.²⁰

Ferguson’s overarching argument is that the vertical topographies of power underlying both the nation-building and states-and-societies paradigms obscure more than they reveal about the workings of power in Africa, where it is impossible to understand the elements of political and social life regularly termed “state” and “society” without considering how they have long been shaped (under colonialism and throughout the postcolonial period marked) by forms of governmentality operating transnationally. I agree with this assessment and will have more to say about it in the context of African megacities in the next section, but for now let us stay with the vertical topographies thus mapped. I would like to suggest that, even at a moment when the value of the states-and-societies approach to postcolonial development is being questioned from many directions, both of these vertical models still exert significant influence on contemporary conceptions of megacity violence.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Jean and John L. Comaroff argue, similarly, that, “the more of a global obsession (civil society) has become, the less clear it is what the term might actually mean -- as a concrete object(ive), as an abstract concept, or as a political practice” (“Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming,” 330). For the Comaroffs, this vacuity is what allows civil society to act as an “ultimate magic bullet.” It conjures up, without having to specify, the possibility of achieving the “fundamental” thing neoliberalism seems to forever delay or simply denigrate: “a meaningful social existence” (334).

Descriptions of the violent megacity, I contend, construct the most up-to-date version of these vertical topographies of power, albeit one in which several of the components have gone missing. If the states-and-societies approach assumed that scaling back the state would unleash the energies of civil society and the market, bringing about citizen-centered development, the push to uncover the roots of megacity violence has been part of a larger effort to come to terms with what this approach has actually wrought. What postcolonial peoples have experienced over the past 20 or 30 years of privatizing reforms and structural adjustments, according to most commentators on megacity violence, is far *too much* freedom from the state. Weakened states allowed black markets to emerge where they were supposed to encourage healthy ones, destroyed civil society where they were supposed to free it. Many conceptions of the violent megacity thus envision a series of unfortunate revisions the original power structure. To picture them, first imagine the nation-building and states-and-societies paradigms overlaid (as they often are in common sense understandings of postcolonial societies): at the top, we have the modernizing state alongside the corrupt/bureaucratic state, in the middle, forms of the social that involve “premodern” ways of affiliating alongside those that qualify as “civil society,” and at the bottom, families and communities living “everyday life.” Then, cross out both iterations of the “state,” along with civil society, which is negated by the rise of violence encouraged by the state’s practical absence. All that remains are backward ways of affiliating (what we might call “uncivil society”) from the nation’s “pre-state” days, and the lowest level of the family and/or the community, its “inhabitants” left to fight for survival.

These absences and remainders, in my view, go a long way toward explaining the fact that of many megacity commentaries posit “irreversible” and to some extent inscrutable cycles of violence in slums. The drug gangs, dealers, international crime and trading syndicates, para-state militias, and vigilantes with bases of operation in slums are clearly not identical to the warring tribes and ethnic and religious factions seen as the primary threat to state stability under the nation-building paradigm. Yet the fact that, imaginatively speaking, they occupy the same intermediary level between the family and (now-absent) state means they can be easily viewed in terms of a resurgence of these older, “simpler,” more despotic and brutal forms of sovereignty, operating through violence that unfolds “independently” of state structures and formal economies. In reality, they are complex, transnationally linked organizations that often undertake many of their operations with the implicit approval of state authorities (not just the police), as well as Western states and multinational companies. These absences and remainders also shape our view of the men, women and children in settlements who are not part of black-market economies. Because we have few ways to talk about the empowerment and affiliation of these individuals beyond their participation in grassroots organizations and civil society, the fact that these are now said to have been destroyed leaves us few ways to imagine non-violent slum residents other than as passive, powerless victims.

The Need for Other Settlement Narratives

If we briefly consider one of the most popular films to have engaged these topographies in recent years, it will become clearer how assumptions about who and what is left behind in “stateless” megacities tend to translate into specific narratives, and why

other narratives exploring the realities of urban settlements are needed. Fernando Mereilles' *City of God*, as I emphasized in the introduction, was the first film of the twenty-first century to foreground the development of the global megacity. It was also the first film to memorialize the "violent" megacity, and, in doing so, it asserted as the latter's most potent symbol the *favela*-turned-conflict-zone, a slum neighborhood increasingly overrun by warring teenage drug dealers and trigger-happy, adolescent "soldiers." Here, then, is a specific and especially disconcerting incarnation of the "alternative armed actors" competing with the authentic state in megaslums: what Jean and John L. Comaroff have termed "youthenized poverty" or simply "youth." Youth, the Comaroffs caution, are not "teenagers," a word reserved for middle-class suburbanites; they are "adolescents with attitude," young men -- unemployed, disaffected, usually black, living disproportionately in cities of the South -- who "take the waiting out of wanting" by dealing and trafficking drugs and other illegal commodities to make good on the freedoms neoliberalism advertises but denies them.²¹ Rita Barnard has suggested that the representation of this figure in global South cinema taps into "transnational concerns about the ability of society to reproduce itself, especially given the retreat of the state from so many of its former educational and disciplinary functions."²² For Barnard, this pervasive anxiety explains why, in Gavin Hood's Johannesburg slum-film *Tsotsi*, the gang-banger protagonist must be "made safe" at the film's conclusion -- arrested by the police and shown to pose no further harm to the middle-class family he initially threatened -- even though, as the psychodrama of the narrative would have it, he finally

²¹ "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming," 308. Literary critic Roberto Schwarz coined the phrase "monetary subjects without cash" to describe this category of urban youth, notably, in a review of the novel *City of God*.

²² "Tsotsis: On Law, the Outlaw and the Postcolonial State," 563.

understands the wrongness of his crime. Both the law and the normative nuclear family still must be allowed to assert their power over this “erstwhile leader of youths.”²³

But, in *City of God*, there is no attempt to enact a “making safe” of the erstwhile youths or their gangs, nor even to underscore (as *Tsotsi* clearly does) the threat they pose to the wealthier classes. Rather, almost every reel of the film takes place in the Cidade de Deus, and concerns how the drug gangs are taking over and destroying all manner of normal life there. In this sense, it is the essential text for charting the immense simplification of the social and the everyday that can occur in depictions of settlement violence.

The popular story of how drug gangs took over Rio de Janeiro in the 1970s and ‘80s is already quite cinematic: the Comando Vermelho, or “Red Command” is said to have begun in the Ilha Grande prison in the late 1960s, when the military regime housed bank robbers from the *favelas* and dissident Leftist political prisoners in the same wing of the jail, where they shared principles and tactics and conspired to begin dealing cocaine in the *favelas* when they were released from prison to fund their respective activities. This story (in which formal state structures and politics do play a rather central role) appears nowhere in *City of God*, though it purports to track the same historical development. Instead the film tells of how Rio’s slums became a war-zone by focusing on the life of a single drug dealer named Lil Ze, who grows up in the impoverished Cidade de Deus *favela* and quickly morphs from hoodlum to drug boss, killing scores of other dealers and residents along the way. No psychological or social explanations are ventured with regard to his trajectory -- Lil Ze is simply bloodthirsty and power-hungry,

²³ Ibid.

even as a child. His greatest joy, we learn, is to steal other drug bosses' "rackets." He seeks power for its own sake, requires only the slimmest of rationales to murder his rivals and even his partners, and considers any economic advantage he might gain from these activities of little concern.

Lil Ze's "despotic," irrational actions drive the narrative forward.²⁴ He creates an atmosphere of chaos, violence, and revenge so compelling to the other young men in the neighborhood that they cannot help but join and choose sides in the burgeoning intra-settlement war. Even the defenses of a peaceable bus driver named "Knock Out Ned" are overcome after Lil Ze rapes his girlfriend and kills several members of his family -- for no other reason than the fact that Ned is handsome. Ned turns vigilante, hoping to murder Lil Ze, but soon ends up part of the leadership of a rival gang. As the rape of Ned's girlfriend and his response demonstrate, anyone who is not part of the war risks becoming one of its victims, and anyone who does not want to be (or stay) a victim must become a perpetrator of violence. This either/or division not only works to explain the male youths' behavior. It requires that all depictions of women, all references to romantic love, familial love, and the domestic, be made so that what they represent can be immediately or eventually destroyed. During the siege on Ned's house, for example -- one of the few scenes shot in a *favelado's* shack rather than in the streets or the gangs' safe houses -- the camera focuses on how bullets from the dealers' guns violate the home and family. They shatter wedding photos, knock over jars of food, and pierce the vulnerable bodies of the inhabitants, after which the camera pans slowly and silently over the wreckage.

²⁴ Significantly, Fernando Mereilles and Katia Lund cast a black actor (Leandro Firmino) to play this role. In Paulo Lins' novel "Ze Pequeno" is white.

The violence in *City of God* seems to have no structural causes, is perpetrated for the simplest possible motives, and meets nothing capable of contradicting or counterbalancing its destructive power. To “thicken” the social where such texts have thinned it, we need settlement narratives that consider how structural causes interact with individual experiences to make violence seem justified, rational, or necessary to secure whatever path seems preferable given the circumstances at hand. We also, however, need narratives that consider more than the type of violence that seems (but only seems) to erupt spontaneously among residents: that which occurs when residents are targeted by state and inter-state authorities must also be considered. Finally, we require narratives that include individuals and collectivities working at cross-purposes with violence, which means pushing beyond prevailing view of women, children, families, the elderly, and the working poor as the mere victims of violence.

The structural causes of violence in the urban global South may be fully understood only if we consider that states have governed over the past 30 in conjunction with transnational projects to liberalize trade and labor regulations for the benefit of the upper classes worldwide.²⁵ James Ferguson suggests, in response to these developments, that a better image than that of the “weak” postcolonial state is one of the state that has “gotten out of the business of governing” and into other kinds of “business.”²⁶ States have become organizations whose role is to attract international capital and help it “hop”

²⁵ In Brazil, the increase in drugs moving into and through the country could not have occurred without the trade liberalization policies that meant huge increases in cargo entering and leaving its ports. These pro-globalization policies, which benefit the country’s industrialists and investment class, would have to be significantly curtailed and trade more carefully regulated to stop drug trafficking at the source -- something the government has refused to do.

²⁶ *Global Shadows*, 39.

across their territories in “point to point” fashion, allowing it to by-pass large parts of the territory in the process.²⁷ In Africa, there has thus been drawn a stark distinction between the profitable parts of the region (those that contain minerals and other raw materials) and those which are unprofitable and thus seen as unimportant. In the latter, NGOs and other iterations of what is often termed civil society (voluntary organizations and aid groups, generally headquartered in the West) have been left to do the actual business of governing the “unimportant regions” (and citizens). They administer basic services (health care, education) once thought the sole purview of the state. As such, Ferguson argues, it makes little sense to think of power operating only vertically in Africa (now if ever). Both “the state” and “civil society,” rather, should be considered *networked* to a range of constituencies across the globe and thus, as accountable to many other people than the impoverished citizens whose interests they (in some cases, only apparently) serve.

Such insights about the transnational modalities of power operating within and across cities of the South make it, in my view, even more urgent to discover the social and political dynamics of urban affiliation that are considered below (not qualifying as, or able to reach) “civil society” in the traditional sense. What is happening in those impoverished urban spaces in which people are accountable mainly to *themselves* -- to those they have built lasting (or temporary) relationships with in the pursuit of common (or disparate) goals? In other words, I am suggesting that we pay as much attention to the horizontal connections occurring at the bottom of the “state/society/people” topography in megacities as is regularly paid to the “higher” levels. Though such networks generally

²⁷ Ibid, 34-38.

cover much less geographic space than those in which state and civil society actors are inscribed, their members are nonetheless always focused “on piecing together larger spaces of action -- larger in terms of both territory and social interdependencies across status, class, ethnicity, social position, generation and so on.”²⁸ This is precisely the terrain of everyday solidarities. It is this “piecing together” of spaces and interdependencies that I now want to foreground in my readings of *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying*.

Pursuing the Invisible in *Graceland*

Perhaps because it confounds so many of our received ideas about urbanization, the African city has occasioned an empirical and theoretical renaissance in urban studies in recent years. Several prominent scholars have taken African urbanism as their subject, and all have written in subtle or explicit opposition to the notion that the African city is significant only as “an emblem of irresolvable crisis.”²⁹ Many are concerned with mapping its urban geography from unexpected angles -- highlighting the importance of informality in its material and social production, or the interplay between visibility and invisibility in its spatial forms and urban culture. Filip de Boeck and Rem Koolhaas, for example, have generated new theoretical tools for analyzing the form of African cities that have been dismissed as “formless.” de Boeck emphasizes the need to understand cities such as Kinshasa as existing beyond the realm of material infrastructure and built form, to engage them as compilations of heterogeneous fragments: patterns of speech, images and signs, invisible processes, and various “remnants” (both mental and material)

²⁸ Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*, 10.

²⁹ Mbembe and Nuttall, *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, 5.

of truncated urban processes.³⁰ Koolhaas, writing on Lagos, asserts the notion of the “informal,” primarily in regard to economic activity and labor, as the predominant engine at work in shaping African cities.³¹ Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall take a more expansive approach in a recent compilation of pieces on Johannesburg from historians, social theorists, artists, novelists, literary critics and journalists as well as architects and urban planners, all oriented toward the question of what defines or reveals its city-ness. The idea is to move beyond traditional studies of the city that overemphasize it as a “space of division” and state-sanctioned geographies of segregation and exclusion.³² Emphasizing its past and present imbrications with multiple elsewheres, they assert the city’s hybrid history and show how its evolving forms enable particularly African practices of self-styling.

Despite the richness of these and other studies, my readings of *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying* are informed primarily by the contemporaneous and similarly motivated, but differently oriented work of AbdouMalique Simone. With regard to the complexity of social practices in urban Africa, especially among the impoverished, the recently arrived, and others for whom everyday life has become “an emergency,” no one has done more to deepen our understanding than Simone. Even in an essay entitled “People as Infrastructure,” he demonstrates less concern with the question of how human practices reshape cities at the level of built or material form (the realm in which “infrastructure” is generally studied) than with exploring how these practices demonstrate residents’

³⁰ See *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*.

³¹ See “Lagos: How it Works.” Though not yet published, Koolhaas’s forthcoming work has been summarized and cited as an unpublished draft in the personal collection of Achille Mbembe in *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, 7-8.

³² *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*, 12-13.

attempts to “stabilize” the city and fulfill their immediate and long-term needs (the realm of everyday practice). For Simone, everyday practice is often governed by what he terms, in his influential book *For the City Yet to Come*, a “micropolitics of alignment, interdependency, and exuberance.”³³ Pursued in order to diversify and solidify individual economic opportunities, this “micropolitics” is not limited by this goal: it regularly has broader, community-wide effects. It does not, however, correspond to the activities of “civil society organizations and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), microcredit associations or people’s associations”; it involves more diverse and unpredictable assemblages of urban actors acting in “more diffuse,” but “no less concrete ways.”³⁴

Simone’s insights crucially elaborate the sphere of the social I have suggested is oversimplified in many depictions of megacity violence: that “baseline” level of everyday practice so easily crowded out by specters of alternative state actors and black-market pursuits. Particularly important to my reading of *Graceland* is Simone’s notion of *invisibility* -- his claim that residents of African cities are constantly manipulating the visibility of their practices and relationships in ways that make it possible for them to accomplish things they otherwise could not, thus making what are, in his view, the most significant urban practices in African cities also the most opaque and difficult to see. This idea grounds my assertion -- which might otherwise seem nonsensical -- that Abani’s novel can be read as having a second protagonist -- Efua Oke, Elvis Oke’s cousin -- who does not actually appear in the urban present of the narrative, or rather, appears there only via rumors and speculations about her whereabouts and sightings that cannot be verified. Before coming to this argument, however, it is necessary to say more about what I mean

³³ Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*, 12.

³⁴ Ibid.

by “relational bildungsroman.” What does this concept entail and why is useful for furthering our understanding of narratives concerning African urbanization and shantytown life?

To conceive of a bildungsroman with multiple protagonists, whose synchronous and/or overlapping stories provides the narrative with its major drama or problem, of course, is to strike at the very heart of conceptions of the genre. While the linkages between the concept and novels said to exemplify it can be hazy or approximate, the term bildungsroman is still mostly used by critics to indicate, as Franco Moretti specifies, the resolution of the conflict between “individuality and socialization, autonomy and normalization” -- between the desire for “freedom” and the desire for “happiness” -- in a *single* individual, who develops to the point of being able to “freely” embrace what society already demands of him or her.³⁵ Yet, to get to the space where “individuality” and “autonomy” can be expressed and demands for “socialization” and “normalization” simultaneously encountered, the bildungsroman requires an initial experience of mobility -- a breaking free from the space of “tradition” and its demand of merely recreating parental trajectories -- which has almost exclusively been mapped onto a journey by a youthful protagonist towards some more urban, cosmopolitan, or industrialized space. It is here that some novels of development set in African cities, particularly those featuring working-class or poor black protagonists, have already had difficulty reconciling the historical experiences to which they are attuned and the genre’s normal functioning. Many have refused to reconcile the two, and have insisted, instead, on the constraints and unfreedoms (legal, social, and economic) that emerge in the city and prevent the

³⁵ Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*, 16.

protagonist from achieving the vaunted compromise between the “self” and the “social.”³⁶

Both *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying* can, to varying degrees, be seen as heirs of this tradition. Yet, by reading them according to the notion of the “relational bildungsroman,” I mean to challenge us, in our role as readers and critics of global literature, to take up issues beyond the one that which is central to any reading of a bildungsroman: how and to what end the protagonist “develops” or matures as he moves to and then through urban space. To focus on more than one protagonist is to displace the genre’s concern with the compromise between individual freedom and socialization and to allow other, less prescriptive and more collective notions of development to emerge. It is to focus, specifically, on the development of horizontal connections between recently arrived migrants who traverse and embody (and can potentially link) different kinds of spaces and approaches to urban life. Sometimes, such as in the case of *Graceland*, these connections fail to develop, and this failure is highlighted. But whether or not such connections are sustained, “relational bildungsromane” involving urban settlement life, I argue, usefully direct our attention to the sphere of everyday practice and sociality -- the realm of city life where these affiliations are possible.

If we read Abani’s *Graceland* as Elvis Oke’s “coming-of-age” story alone, its clearest revision of the classic bildung narrative appears much simpler and more straightforward than what I am suggesting: a rejection of the developmental plot’s certainty in the possibility for “normal” development. The novel focuses on 16-year-old

³⁶ See Barnard’s discussion of the “Jim comes to Joburg” genre in 20th-century South African literature and Athol Fugard’s anti-apartheid novel *Tsotsi* in “Tsotsis: On Law, the Outlaw and the Postcolonial State.”

Elvis Oke, who has recently moved to a shantytown in Lagos where he lives with his father. Significant chunks of the narrative are devoted to his struggle to understand where and with whom he belongs in the city. Animating this conflict is whether it is better to fall in with one of two mentors he has recently met. The first is the King of Beggars, a homeless man who lives on the streets and runs a troupe of theater performers that encourages anti-government sentiment among the poor; to join him/them would be a vocation that appeals to Elvis's creative side (he intermittently works as a dancer and Elvis impersonator) and burgeoning political self. The second is Redemption, an "area boy," or Lagos's iteration of "youthenized poverty," who holds out the promise of a lucrative, but risky life of crime, and the chance to disregard societal expectations regarding morality and respectability entirely (pure freedom, in other words -- but no support or fellowship). Yet, near the end of the novel, the question of which of these worlds offers Elvis the most satisfying compromise between happiness and freedom becomes inconsequential. State violence -- all perpetrated by a ruthless Army Colonel in charge of security in Lagos -- causes the death of the King and forces Redemption to flee the city. It also means Elvis's imprisonment and torture, and results in the destruction of Maroko, the diverse and established settlement where Elvis lives. Once freed from prison, he is forced to settle in a more makeshift shantytown beneath a fly-over, where beggar children and drifters congregate. At the novel's conclusion, he leaves the country for America, posing as Redemption after his friend gives him his own illegally procured visa and passport as a means of escape.

By enacting this sort of disruption in the unfolding and resolution of the *bildungsroman*'s central individual conflict, Abani's novel represents, Ashley Dawson

has argued, “an unequivocal failure of (the narrative of) self-formation and socialization.”³⁷ The failure of Elvis’s developmental trajectory, according to Dawson, reflects the broader failures inhering in Lagos: Elvis inhabits and traverses a world “in which hopes for economic development and political reform are systematically obliterated.”³⁸ It is precisely such a one-to-one identification, however, between the protagonist of the postcolonial novel and the fate of the postcolonial nation (here, transposed onto and seen as equivalent to that of the city) that postcolonial scholars have long worked to challenge and complicate.³⁹ If we instead read, as I do, *Graceland* as highlighting the failed development of a *relationship* between Elvis and Efua in Lagos, and Elvis’s related disinclination to pursue and seek out the mostly “invisible” communities of support women are constructing all around him, failure is still a significant theme in the narrative, but it is not one that means to “represent” or “symbolize” Nigerian history. Nor does it attest to the impossibility of improvements in the lives of its urban poor. Rather, it is a failure of perspective and engagement, suggesting, via the narrative, something similar to what Simone implies through his work and what I have argued for in regard to the spectacular narrowness of so many depictions of megacities as violent, doomed places: that more attention should be paid to what is going on in these “invisible” communities.

³⁷ Ashley Dawson, “Surplus City: Structural Adjustment, Self-Fashioning and Insurrection in Chris Abani’s *Graceland*,” 19-20.

³⁸ Ibid, 20.

³⁹ I am thinking, of course, of the many critical responses (chief among them Aijaz Ahmad’s) to Fredric Jameson’s essay, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism,” which proposed reading all “Third World” novels as national allegories.

For Simone, limiting the visibility of their movements and alliances is a strategy settlement residents may perform either defensively or creatively or both. In the first case, he explains that the rise of violence in African cities -- leading to what he terms the idea of the city “as a locus of potentially irreparable harm” -- means that those navigating urban space must be cautious about the degree to which their activities are common knowledge: “(they) can never be sure whether their immediate positions or actions inadvertently place them in some ‘line of fire’” or “implicat(e) (them) in the narratives and behaviors of others.”⁴⁰ Yet residents might also disguise their activities because they want to step outside the kinship-based solidarities that pertain in settlements and involve strictly delineated social roles. Even further, invisibility may inhere in the exaggerated *visibility* of certain unexpected or underestimated groupings, as “actors from different religious, ethnic, regional, or political affiliations collaborate on the basis that no one expects such collaborations to take place or work,” and as a result, scrutiny is low and “resources can be put together or deployed with great speed and effectiveness.”⁴¹

In *Graceland* the reader becomes acquainted with the invisible not through explicit testimony to its effectiveness as a strategy for affiliation. The novel, it turns out, revolves around the perspectives of characters who take little care to disguise their activities or relationships -- Elvis and his father Sunday, primarily. Thus, invisibility is conveyed indirectly, in moments when the narrator hints that these characters are not seeing things that are happening all around them, some of which they vaguely sense are important, but are reluctant to pursue. Often, this blindness involves Elvis’s female friends and Sunday’s live-in girlfriend Comfort, all of whom appear in the narrative only

⁴⁰ *For the City Yet to Come*, 11.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 10.

to disappear, entering from and moving “off-stage” so rapidly that it causes the reader to “counterfocalize,” to wonder where they are going and to what end.⁴² In one scene, for example, Sunday peppers Comfort with questions about why she is not at work that day, while silently realizing that it is strange for him to ask, since “he had never taken a real interest in what she did to earn a living.”⁴³ In another scene, Elvis and Redemption speculate that Comfort’s difficult position as a “divorced woman in dis society” motivates her to stay with Elvis’s father though he brings nothing, monetarily speaking, to the relationship. Yet, when Elvis later uncharacteristically wonder about what Comfort “really wants” from life, his train of thought is interrupted by the memory of Redemption’s disdain: “‘Who cares? I’ve told you, dat’s all shit,’ Redemption had said. ‘Dat’s bullshit,’ he had repeated for emphasis.”⁴⁴

As Simone demonstrates, the urban poor in African cities often consider their economic pursuits a sphere sufficiently separate from their settlement activities to allow them to try out new identities and forge connections to other parts of the city, free from the scrutiny of neighbors and family members. For women, the increased profit and leverage these connections may provide allow them, in kind of relay effect, to have more power and input in male-dominated, neighborhood-based organizations. Conversely, but with similar effects of expanding their power, settlement women sometimes participate in political organizations tied to NGOs as cover activities, which permit them to widen their

⁴² My understanding of the productive function of the imperative to counter-focalize in *Graceland* is influenced by Gayatri Spivak’s discussion of the same possibility in J.M. Coetzee’s novel *Disgrace*; see “Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching.”

⁴³ Abani, *Graceland*, 249.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 50.

entrepreneurial pursuits with the same freedom from scrutiny.⁴⁵ This sort of cloaking of productive activities and connections by settlement women is regularly hinted at in *Graceland*. One example comes in an exchange between Elvis and Comfort that foregrounds her movements throughout the city:

“Elvis,” Comfort began as soon as he walked in. “Help me carry dis box of cloth to my shop.”

She had a shop somewhere across town. He had never been there and had no idea why she would suddenly ask him to do this. It wasn’t the chore itself; it was the fact that she had seemed so determined to keep that part of her life totally separate from home.

“I’m sorry,” he said, “I’m in a hurry.”⁴⁶

Abani indicates that Comfort’s shop allows her a space of autonomy and flexibility, notably, through its invisibility. She is “determined” to keep her work “separate” from her home life, and according to Elvis’s perceptions of her, has been successful in doing so. However, we do not get to find out what opportunities and communities her work links her to, because Elvis, despite recognizing her request for help with the cloth as an opening -- a departure from their normal relationship and her usual disinclination to share this part of her life -- refuses to engage her.

The men who are in charge of organizing the residents of Maroko amidst conflicts of political import enact a similar refusal on a larger scale: they shut down all attempts of the settlement women to contribute the relationships they have built and expertise they have gained in their “off-stage” pursuits to settlement politics. For example, when Sunday attempts to mobilize the shantytown against impending government-sponsored demolition, he interrupts and “corrects” Madam Caro, the

⁴⁵ See, in particular, his discussion of women traders in Dakar in *For the City Yet to Come*, 57-62.

⁴⁶ Abani, *Graceland*, 116.

proprietor of the local shebeen, when she volunteers the assistance of the women of the settlement in the plan taking shape during the meeting.

“Marching where?” Jagua asked.

“Like in front of deir office. Dat is de first step,” the King replied.

“I go bring de women. We go march to local council office and tell dem our vex,” Madam Caro said, jumping in.

“We will march on de council offices on Monday. Dat give us two days to get things set. I will lead, de men can carry placards and de women can support with singing and refreshments,” Sunday said.

Madam Caro glared at him.⁴⁷

Madam Caro’s interjection points to the possibility of realizing the kind dynamic feedback analysts such as Simone envision between platforms for political activity in urban settlements and connections already being made through the pursuit of common economic needs. The women, who are here, as in many informal settlements, the economic lifeblood of their community, are portrayed for a brief second as able to mobilize the relationships they have forged to “get by” for another purpose. Yet Sunday’s desire to preserve the same power relations in the march as in much of settlement life makes such synergy impossible. And, indeed, while Madam Caro “glares” at him, neither she nor the women she informally represents go onto challenge this more limited role. Both in the (failed) demonstration against Maroko’s demolition, and the (also failed) demonstration where the King leads a group of the urban poor against the Colonel’s excesses, in which the protesters chant “Yes, democracy, no more army!”, the women accept their place in the background. We can only speculate as to how the demonstrations might have unfolded differently had their voices been included and their insights and networks drawn upon.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 256.

By continually drawing our attention to Efua Oke's rumored presence in Lagos, *Graceland* gestures toward one way in which this fairly stark division of men's and women's communities among the urban poor in Maroko, and in Lagos generally, might be transcended. That is, it opens the narrative to the possibility -- and subtly sets up the expectation -- that Efua and Elvis will find each other in the city and reestablish the bonds of support they developed as children in Afikpo some ten years earlier. To fulfill this expectation would be to consider affiliations that could develop among megacity residents outside of the gendered constraints the narrative repeatedly draws our attention to. This is a trajectory and a project that Mda's *Ways of Dying*, as we'll soon see, is keen to realize, but in the case of *Graceland*, the opportunity for the reestablishment and revision of this central relationship never emerges.

Because of the way in which *Graceland*'s narrative is structured -- the chapter headings alternate between "Lagos, 1983," (the present) and "Afikpo" over several years in the 1970s -- Abani's reader learns of the extent of the initial bond between Elvis and Efua at the same time as she is encountering Efua as an increasingly insistent "absent presence" in Elvis's life in Lagos. The most stunning revelation in the Afikpo sections is that Efua and Elvis were separately raped by Joseph (Efua's father, Elvis's uncle) as children, and that each was the other's only confidante about the abuse. At the same time (narratively speaking) as this story from the past is unfolding, the reader is also learning Efua may be somewhere in Lagos in the present -- either working as a prostitute, according to Elvis's father, living in a commune as a religious devotee, as Elvis fears, or searching for Elvis, as Elvis's grandmother believes.

Given the repeated indications of the likelihood that Efua could emerge in the narrative as more than a character in a flashback, it is all the more strange and disappointing that she never does. Instead, *Graceland* concludes with her and Elvis's relationship still confined to the past, while the character herself is relegated to the realm of memory and conjecture. Efua comes to represent, at the conclusion of the novel, Elvis's deepest regret about leaving Lagos behind for America: "He had never known her, at least no more than he wanted to," Elvis realizes, deeply ashamed, as he waits in the airport for his flight to board.⁴⁸ The failure of Elvis to pursue Efua, and her failure to emerge -- either to confirm one of the rumors that has been circulating about her, or, conversely, to disprove them all and indicate some unanticipated trajectory -- means that the narrative cannot finally explore what it repeatedly suggests the need to explore: the content of impoverished women's activities in Lagos and the way in which the affiliations they create hold out the possibility for different futures in the megacity than those it otherwise prefigures -- through the destruction of Maroko, through the crushing of popular revolt by the state, through Elvis's abrupt departure from Lagos. His devotion to the dual-pronged project of critiquing the military regime in 1980s-Lagos and exposing the patriarchal norms that shape Nigerian society -- at all levels, from the elite to those that pertain among the "urban excluded" -- seems to prevent Abani from pursuing the more original task of exploring these unanticipated urban solidarities. *Graceland* points to, but finally retreats from the sphere of the social in megacities where the most important activities, relationships, and actors may be the least visible.

⁴⁸ *Graceland*, 319.

“She is my homegirl”: Learning to Live in *Ways of Dying*

In the South African settlement communities depicted by Zakes Mda in *Ways of Dying*, violence -- whether perpetrated by state authorities against the poor, or erupting among the residents of townships and squatter camps themselves -- is a subject of major concern, one that is decried, analyzed, and debated from the novel's opening page. The first scene finds Toloki, a self-styled “professional mourner” in the city's townships and squatter camps, at a service for a young child killed in an outburst of anti-Apartheid militancy turned back violently on an impoverished black squatter camp. At this particular service, “the Nurse,” the orator responsible for explaining how the deceased met his or her death, is unable to be heard over the mourners arguing about whether this death was justified, what it means, and how directly it should be discussed in the public, particularly when attempts to discredit the anti-apartheid movement are still ongoing. Here, Toloki will discover that the mother of the dead child is his friend Noria, who moved to the unnamed city where the novel is set from their village just a few years before him, some twenty years ago.

It is the first of many funerals Toloki and Noria will attend over the course of the narrative, their sheer number attesting to the fact that, as he comments, “death lives with us everyday” in South African cities: residents’ “ways of living” have become indistinguishable from their “ways of dying.”⁴⁹ These funerals commemorate deaths caused by countless permutations of violence: intra-settlement and family quarrels, police violence against anti-Apartheid activists and squatters, ethnic clashes between migrant Zulu hostel-dwellers and urbanized Xhosa settlement-dwellers, and of course “sheer

⁴⁹ Mda, *Ways of Dying*, 98.

crime” -- murders occurring during robberies and rapes, all shadowy urban threats to which the poor are particularly vulnerable.

Mda’s commitment to charting the destructive power of this violence makes it all the more surprising that the plot of the novel is essentially optimistic. The novel begins as Noria is concluding one of the most painful episodes of her life, but as it proceeds we see Toloki help her pick up the pieces -- rebuilding her shack after it was burned by the Young Tigers to keep from speaking out about Vuthu’s death, for example, and decorating her new shack with images from magazines that may help her escape, at least temporarily, the drudgery of extreme poverty. The two become closer and finally decide to live together, with the rationale that doing so will allow them to “teach each other how to live.”⁵⁰ The novel ends on a note that is both comic and hopeful, as Toloki learns he has inherited hundreds of figurines sculpted by his father years earlier when Noria acted as Toloki’s father’s muse in their village. Toloki and Noria begin planning for the future: they will either sell the sculptures to benefit orphaned children in the settlement or build a museum to house them in the settlement, so the children can enjoy the “folksy” sculptures -- which they find hilarious -- whenever they want.

Ways of Dying is a novel of the “transition” -- the years just before and after the election of the African National Congress government in 1994, and thus the period of the waning and replacement of apartheid rule. As indicated by my initial summary of its enumeration of the violence settlement dwellers experienced over this period, it is a novel in which the apartheid past and post-apartheid present are, as Grant Farred puts it,

⁵⁰ Ibid, 115.

“entangled ... difficult to distinguish, complexly bound up in each other.”⁵¹ Not only do optimistic and ominous images overlap and intermingle, Mda seems uninterested in specifying whether the persistence of urban divisions created by apartheid into the present or the new emergence of new problems -- such as the ANC’s disconnection from and disregard for its supporters in the townships and squatter camps -- pose the greatest challenges for political and social life in the future. For Farred, an early and influential critic of Mda’s novel, this lack of clarity is problematic. It seems to condemn all of the problems in the squatters’ lives equally: the militancy of anti-apartheid radicalism and the phenomenon of “black on black” violence as much as material deprivation. A better project for a novelist whose sympathies lie so clearly with the urban poor would have been, Farred argues, to take the “postapartheid government to task for the appalling conditions of life in the settlements and the townships.”⁵²

In other words, the South African writer’s role in the postapartheid era should be similar to what many thought it was or should be under apartheid: to critique the injustices and inequalities of the larger society by revealing the way in which the state has created or failed to redress these problems. Subsequent critics of *Ways of Dying* have rejected this narrow definition of what makes for sufficiently politically engaged postapartheid South African writing, and have worked to delineate how the many nuances of its depictions of settlement life make it more useful than Farred suggests. Chief among them has been Rita Barnard, who suggests that the novel dramatizes the need for and begins to develop a new “prosaics” in South African literature: a new way of

⁵¹ “Mourning the Postapartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” 184.

⁵² Ibid, 201.

thinking and writing about “the everyday,” “the customary,” and the “ordinary” in the contemporary South African city.⁵³ In settlements and similar urban communities, the struggle to survive in the absence of formal employment, shelter, and state support puts unprecedented demands on the urban poor’s capacities for self-invention. Mda’s attempts to render these circumstances and the subjectivities to which they give rise, Barnard argues, put considerable strain on the novel form, resulting in a text that seems to defy all generic classifications. For the sake of argument, she settles on a “unique South African black *Kunstlerroman*” that charts Toloki’s development as an artist, “from professional mourner, to decorator, to draftsman, to teacher,” while featuring “flashbacks, diverse anecdotes, and editorializing commentary” that give the narrative the reflexive quality of oral narration and “fantastic” subplots involving village life that lead it into the terrain of magical realism.⁵⁴

Without claiming to settle the fertile field of debate over its generic affiliations and influences, I would like to suggest that *Ways of Dying* also illuminates the narrative experiment I have been calling the “relational bildungsroman.” To read the novel as such is to insist that Toloki’s childhood friend Noria is not a secondary character, whose appearance adds a layer of significance to what is ultimately Toloki’s story. It is to insist, rather, that *Ways of Dying* is *their* story, the story of their divergent and convergent lives. It is important to point out, in support of this reading, that nearly all of the aforementioned flashbacks, anecdotes and subplots feature Noria. They include the story

⁵³ Barnard, “On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*,” 279-282. Barnard directly recalls Ndebele’s essay “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” which I discuss in the introduction, as one of several works that precipitated interest in a new “prosaics” in South African literature.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 282.

of her birth, scenes from her childhood, her preteen tenure as the muse of Jwara, Toloki's father, her teenage marriage to a laborer in her village, her decision to move to the city after the failure of her marriage, the births and deaths of her two children, among other events. Though a good deal of the novel's present is focalized from Toloki's perspective, we nonetheless discover as many details of Noria's life and coming-of-age as his. Indeed, what the narrative primarily rehearses is neither one's "self-discovery," but the (re)development of their friendship, the reinvention of their relationship apart from the constraints of village life, in an urban setting where each comes to value the other's support and companionship for different, but complementary reasons.

Although one of the signal points in this reinvention is their decision to live together in Noria's shack, their (re)union is not a romantic one. Their relationship is, as they each explain, that of "homeboy" and "homegirl" -- labels that the narrators⁵⁵ employ automatically to describe city-dwellers whose primary affiliation derives from once residing in the same village, but which Noria and Toloki use to describe each other only towards the end of the novel, when each has overcome his and her respective skepticism about the wisdom of relying on village relations in the city. For Noria, inviting Toloki to live with her and telling him the story of her sons' deaths advances her recovery from these traumas, which were limiting her capacity for intimacy of any kind. For Toloki, deciding to live with Noria and participating in activities in her settlement lead him to reject the monastic lifestyle in which he previously shunned not only village ties but all forms of engagement with the city's inhabitants beyond their funerals.

⁵⁵ Mda creates a "communal" narrator in *Ways of Dying*: "all-seeing eye" of village gossip that follows migrants such as Toloki and Noria to the city.

Yet by telling Toloki and Noria's overlapping stories, Mda does more than track the way each character opens up to the world. He also foregrounds the sphere of urban life I have referred to thus far as the "invisible," where alliances and communities forged in the project of survival and support fall below what is considered "civil society," where activities and practices are often highly provisional and experimental, negligible from the purview of the state and, in some cases, difficult to specify through the descriptive constructs of the social sciences. These include activities Africanists Mbembe and Nuttall have defined as "self-styling": Toloki's reinvention of himself as a professional mourner complete with an elaborate costume, following his failed attempt to earn a living as a street vendor and live normally in a township. However, they also involve far less individualist social practices: the activities of Noria's settlement, for example, where women are shown to be influential in shaping collective life.

Tracking Toloki's progressive inscription into Noria's community allows *Ways of Dying* to confirm the ways in which women are constructing communities of support aimed at mitigating urban uncertainty at this "invisible" level of urban society -- unlike *Graceland*, which was only able to hint at this possibility. Here, the intertwined developmental plot -- in which women figure as centrally as men -- enables the reader, alongside Toloki, to discover what such communities do and how they function. We learn that they do not cohere around a single, well-defined purpose, like the "street committee" in Noria's settlement, whose task it is to provide a forum for discussing settlement issues and representing the residents at local meetings of the ANC -- activities, obviously, that closely approximate "civil society" with its notion of the "voluntary organization" and "grassroots democracy." The women Noria is closest to, who took her in when she

arrived in the settlement, by contrast, constitute a group whose purpose is open and undefined. At first, it is distinguishable only by the correspondence of its work to certain locations in the settlement: “I want to take you to *some places in the settlement* where we do work,” she tells Toloki repeatedly (emphasis mine).⁵⁶ Yet, as Toloki discovers, the work to which Noria refers can actually take place anywhere in the settlement and creates its own kind of social space. Noria is referring to communal work, meaning both work “done together” and done for the community or the settlement as a whole. What she and other women in the settlement do is mostly invisible and thankless: preparing the food for a meeting in which the street committee will host the ANC, for example, or, as Noria’s friend Madimbaza does with Noria’s help, running “the dumping ground” -- a home for settlement children whose parents have either died or could not pay their medical bills and so abandoned them.

As these examples begin to indicate, Mda’s depiction of this work does little to romanticize it or the conditions under which it takes place. This is important to note because, as depictions of non-Western slums (both fictional and non-fictional) have come to the forefront of global culture in recent years, so has the practice of voicing concern that images of shantytown residents supporting themselves will appear and be used against them -- used, that is, to justify the scaling back of state supports for things such as public housing, infrastructure, and poverty reduction further than they have already been. We must not, as Jeremy Seabrook put it, and Mike Davis has echoed, “pass from one distortion” to the next: from the notion “that slums are places of crime, disease, and

⁵⁶ *Ways of Dying*, 152.

despair” to the certainty “they can safely be left to look after themselves.”⁵⁷ Yet, I would suggest that, in recent years, this concern has become misplaced. As argued earlier in the chapter, in one of the most popular iterations of the Third World slum today, the state is already seen to have withdrawn with disastrously violent consequences. The settlement is a space crying out for some way of filling the “governance void.”

Mda’s depiction of violence in the South African informal settlement, it is crucial to note, flatly rejects the notion of governance voids. He goes to great lengths, in fact, to show that “para-state” violence occurs in the townships and settlements alongside the violence of the authorized state, not due to its absence, and in some cases, in conjunction with it -- the state has created the violence that supposedly competes with it. We see this, for example, in Toloki’s memory of the “vigilantes” that eventually took over his neighborhood when he first moved to the city: “when the bulldozers failed to get rid of the shantytowns,” he recalls, “the government devised new strategies. They recruited some of the unemployed residents and formed them into vigilante groups.” These “vigilantes,” according to Toloki, would claim that they had formed spontaneously, when, in fact, they were tasked by the government to make life in the shantytowns so difficult that poor inhabitants would simply disperse. State forces are also revealed to have instigated and financed the inter-settlement violence between the Zulus and Xhosas, which sets in motion the events that claim the life of Noria’s second son. The apartheid government’s reason for encouraging this violence is to demonstrate that black South Africans are “incapable” of self-rule, which would help them claim an international mandate for continued power. In both cases, Mda demonstrates how images of cities as

⁵⁷ Seabrook, *In the Cities of the South*, 197. See also Davis’s chapter in *Planet of Slums*, “The Illusion of Self-Help.”

consumed by violence (particularly of the para-state or “pre-state” variety) have long been at the center of debates about (post)colonial sovereignty, used and even created by internationally empowered authorities who stand to gain from them.

What Leftist critics of studies suggesting the ingenious creativity of squatters and their remarkable talents for self-organization take issue with, of course, are not the basic notions of squatters as creative or generous but the implication that these qualities relieve states of their responsibilities to them. It is thus worth noting that the meandering shape of *Ways of Dying*'s narrative prevents this implication from ever arising, instead undercutting the notion the efforts of the poor alone are sufficient to produce a better future. The narrative, that is, alternates between scenes showcasing the funerals Toloki attends, scenes of settlement life and labor in Noria's neighborhood, and Noria's unfolding recollection of how she came to the city and how her sons died. This alternation works to unearth gradually a complex mix of forces shaping the urban environment in the settlement. Besides state and para-state violence and the unacknowledged work the women do, these include criminal activity, the anomie generated by unemployment and despair (disengagement from family and community, alcoholism, etc.), and the interventions of formally empowered local groups such as settlement committees, especially the Young Tigers, a militant youth offshoot of the ANC with its base of operation in the settlements. As a result, while the women are by no means presented as powerless, their efforts to stabilize the settlement, to make it a place where useful things can get done and where children will not be destroyed by neglect and violence, are still shown to be up against strong forces working in other and sometimes directly opposite directions.

In this sense, imagining a “relational” version of the bildungsroman allows *Ways of Dying* to tell a different kind of developmental story -- one that works despite the novel’s clear delineation of the circumstances in South African cities that make it impossible for poor individuals to thrive, or even survive, on their own. That is, we are not presented with the typical coming-of age story in which “growth” comes through and is measured by an individual’s achievement of a healthy amount of independence. We are presented, rather, with a story in which the thing being developed is *dependency* itself. In the relational bildungsroman, interdependency is not something to be avoided or carefully modulated but something to be embraced, the flourishing of which becomes ideal endpoint of the narrative. It tracks the emergence of a singular instance of what Simone terms a “micropolitics of alignment, interdependency, and exuberance.”

Simone repeatedly emphasizes that this micropolitics should not be seen as equivalent to unbounded creative practices that emerge “spontaneously” in African cities, but as a series of approaches to “mooring” in space that resuscitate particular modalities of organization (kin-based, but also those drawn from religious practice) rooted in diverse African histories.⁵⁸ The relational bildungsroman draws our attention to this continuity between the rural past and the urban present, but not, unsurprisingly, in the register of “anthropological” description so much as in the service of dramatic potential. In Mda’s version of the migratory narrative, relations that initially were limited by or predisposed to take on certain characteristics due to the constraints of village life (much as the individual “personality” is in the European bildungsroman) in the city become loci of unforeseen possibility. Thus, unlike in the conventional bildungsroman, youth is not

⁵⁸ See, especially, the chapter entitled “Movement” in Simone’s *For the City Yet to Come*.

fetishized. Toloki and Noria are reunited when they are of middle age, when each has experienced the “toll” taken by the “hard life” that ensued after they left their village.⁵⁹ Yet, this belated beginning in no way diminishes the dramatic intensity associated with the question of what might emerge from their new alignment.

If, as Simone emphasizes, African migrants tend to envision their individual pursuits as necessarily having a “provisional” character in urban space, Noria and Toloki’s affiliation in *Ways of Dying* is similarly “provisional” and open to definition. They have progressed beyond the basic level of familiarity that exists between all “homeboys” and “homegirls,” but not, they insist, to the level of “mates.” They enact, in this sense, an “unfixing” of the form relationships between men and women in the settlement might take.

The women are excited when Noria arrives with Toloki.
 ‘Hey Noria, you have come with your mate.’
 ‘Yes, so that he should see the work we do.’
 ‘That is very good, Noria. Our men must see what we are doing, so that when we come home late they cannot complain.’
 ‘He is not my man. He is my homeboy.’⁶⁰

In other words, Toloki and Noria’s relationship departs from social status quo precisely because they -- Noria most vocally -- refuse to allow it to be governed or determined by the rules and expectations that usually accompany relationships between men and women in the settlement -- those of the romantic union. While the narrative does not exclude the possibility that their companionship may someday include sex, and love in a more “conventional” sense, it is crucial that their partnership begins by exceeding this “known” alignment. Where the women assume the only interest Toloki might take in Noria’s work

⁵⁹ *Ways of Dying*, 12.

⁶⁰ *Ibid*, 170.

is that of a neglected and ungrateful spouse, Noria insists that she has brought him to the settlement “so that he should see the work we do.” By this she means: appreciate its importance and even participate in it. Indeed, Toloki moves beyond watching to participating at several points in this episode. For example, he is asked to fetch the water for the women to cook with, and thus is forced to experience the settlement as the same kind of “chronotope” it is for the women of the settlement -- laboriously navigating a wheelbarrow to a “communal tap,” where “he stands patiently in a long queue of children and women who have also come to draw water.”⁶¹

As it stands, men and women’s communities in Noria’s settlement are quite insular, much as they were in *Graceland*’s Maroko. The women portrayed in *Ways of Dying* have more local power: being tasked with the everyday work of making the settlement run, as Toloki notes to himself, in no way impedes them from taking leadership roles on the street committee or from speaking out regularly on questions of institutional politics. However, this empowerment, as Toloki also mentions to Noria, mainly results in their doing *more* of the work. The men here take equally little, perhaps less, interest in women’s lives than those featured in Abani’s novel. They are too busy sitting around all day, as Toloki observes, “dispens(ing) wide-ranging philosophies on how things should be ... com(ing) up with wise theories on how to put the world right. Then at night they demand to be given food, as if food just walked into the house on its own.”⁶² In *Ways of Dying*, however, the penetrating, sympathetic perspective created as Toloki accompanies Noria on her daily tasks allows us to see how self-defeating are the men’s refusals to pay attention to and participate in the women’s work. And, Mda

⁶¹ Ibid, 171.

⁶² Ibid, 175.

presents us with an example of a recent addition to the settlement -- Toloki -- who is determined to let Noria “teach (him) how to live,” and to do the same for her. He thereby intimates that this strict division between women who take an active interest in the settlement’s functioning and future and men who do not may change.

Given the sheer unpredictability of life in African cities, “the very acts of mooring and taking apart social ties become the locus of intense contestation and concern.”⁶³ With growing awareness of how quickly people’s trajectories are wont to change in the city, recent arrivals worry that the affiliations they have entered into to increase their chances at finding a safe home and creating a network of support may unexpectedly backfire, or produce nothing. The relational bildungsroman is a narrative attempt to trace the evolving connections between urban protagonists who, as Noria puts it in *Ways of Dying*, are “from the same world,” but have entered an urban space that requires ever new strategies of “living.”⁶⁴ It thus responds to the widespread situation of needing to mobilize “old” connections and create “new” ones in the city by developing a narrative in which they are theoretically capable of being satisfied together. A certain notion of “development” is idealized here, but not that of the typical bildungsroman, in which the protagonist discovers that there is room for him in bourgeois society, and assumes his place as a productive member of the nation. This notion of development does not correspond to the conditions of life -- to what is possible or thinkable -- for the vast majority of residents of contemporary African cities, so it is not surprising that novelists are attempting to tell other kinds of stories. Development here is less prescriptive but still progressive. It

⁶³ Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*, 4.

⁶⁴ Mda, *Ways of Dying*, 115.

involves the thickening of a relationship between characters whose sharing of practices enhances their lives and signals new directions in the functioning of their communities.

Works Cited

- Abani, Chris. *Graceland*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2004.
- Barnard, Rita. "On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*." *Novel* 37.3 (2004): 277-302.
- . "Tsotsis: On Law, the Outlaw, and the Postcolonial State." *Contemporary Literature* 49.4 (2008): 541-572.
- Ciccariello-Maher, George. "Jumpstarting the Decolonial Engine: Symbolic Violence from Fanon to Chavez." *Theory and Event* 13.1 (2010).
- City of God*. Dir. Fernando Mereilles and Katia Lund. 2002. Film.
- Comaroff, Jean and John L. Comaroff. "Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming." *Public Culture* 12.2 (2000): 291-343.
- Davis, Mike. *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Dawson, Ashley. "Surplus City: Self Fashioning, Structural Adjustment, and Urban Insurrection in Chris Abani's *Graceland*." *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 11.1 (2009): 16-34.
- De Boeck, Filip and Marie-Françoise Plissard. *Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City*. Ghent, Belgium: Ludion, 2004.
- Denning, Michael. "Wageless Life." *New Left Review* 66 (November-December 2010): 79-97.
- Elite Squad*. Dir. Jose Padilha. 2007. Film.
- Fanon, Franz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Trans. Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
- Farred, Grant. "Mourning the Postapartheid State Already? The Poetics of Loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*." *Modern Fiction Studies* 46.1 (2000): 183-206.
- Ferguson, James. *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Gay, Robert. "From Popular Movements to Drug Gangs to Militias: An Anatomy of Violence in Rio de Janeiro." *Mega-cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and*

- Violence in the Global South*. Eds. Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt. London and New York: Zed Books, 2009.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text* 15 (Fall 1986): 65-88.
- Kaplan, Robert. "The Coming Anarchy." *The Atlantic*. February 1994.
- Koonings, Kees and Kruijt, Dirk. *Mega-cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2009.
- Mda, Zakes. *Ways of Dying*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995.
- Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture*. New York: Verso, 2000.
- Mpe, Phaswane. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Scottsville: University of Natal Press, 2001.
- News from a Private War*. Dir. Katia Lund and Joao Moreira Salles. 1999. Film.
- Nuttall, Sarah and Achille Mbembe. *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Perlman, Janice. *Favela: Four Decades of Living on the Edge in Rio de Janeiro*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.
- Schwarz, Roberto. "City of God." *New Left Review* 12 (November-December 2001): 102-112.
- Seabrook, Jeremy. *In the Cities of the South: Scenes from a Developing World*. New York: Verso, 1996.
- Simone, AbdouMalik. *For the City Yet to Come: Changing Life in Four African Cities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004.
- . "People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg." *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis*. Eds. Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Slumdog Millionaire*. Dir. Danny Boyle. 2008. Film.
- Spivak, Gayatri. "Ethics and Politics in Tagore, Coetzee, and Certain Scenes of Teaching." *Diacritics* 32 (Fall/Winter 2002): 17-31.
- Tsotsi*. Dir. Gavin Hood. 2005. Film.

Chapter Two

Precarious Spaces, Interwoven Lives:

Everyday Labor in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*

The frontispiece to Raghubir Singh's collection of photographs titled *Bombay: Gateway of India* is a picture of a man lavishly outfitted in a white chauffeur's uniform, sitting alone in the driver's seat of an expensive convertible, parked atop a hill [fig. 2]. The photograph is taken at night. The driver and car are in the center of the frame, shown in profile, looking offstage to the left of the frame, and behind them, a row of lights glows in the distance, designating "the city" and its promises. The caption, "A Chauffeur and a Mercedes, Malabar Hill," reveals the setting as the highest point in South Mumbai, a wealthy neighborhood home to some of the most expensive residences in the Indian capital, and the world. *Bombay: Gateway of India* was published by Aperture in 1994, a few years after the liberalization of the Indian economy. Does its framing image, then, mean to draw our attention to the glitter and extravagances of the "new" India? Is it a rumination, perhaps, on the private wealth then accruing in the capital as national import controls were lifted and foreign investment began to surge?



Figure 2. "Chauffeur and a Mercedes, Malabar Hill." From *Bombay: Gateway to India* (1994)

What prevents us from reading it as such is only the chauffeur himself. At first, he appears to be merely sitting in the car, but a closer look reveals that he is about to step out of it: the driver's side door is ajar, his hand is atop it, and a shoe-clad foot is emerging from beneath it. Capturing this small bit of motion, and suggesting more to come, Singh prevents the chauffeur from becoming a reified element in an image otherwise concerned with the trappings of wealth. He is not a "thing" like the costume-ish uniform he has been made to wear and the showy car he has been employed to drive; he is somehow more. Adding to the resonance of the image, it is possible to read this "moreness" in at least two ways. One way would involve interpreting the chauffeur's movement as projected towards a space and a demand related to his duties. We might conclude that the picture shows him responding to the call of his employer, springing out of the car to carry shopping bags back for his employer's wife, or to complete some other menial task located just beyond what the camera shows us. The image, in this sense, suggests the lack

of freedom of the chauffeur/servant. The “more” it is telling us about his humanity presumes the fact that the imperative to work is always upon him, that there are few moments when his movements are his alone. Given the clear disjuncture between the possibilities evoked by the cityscape and the foreclosure of freedom implied by the depiction of domestic service, we might think of this as the sanctioned irony of the photograph: the chauffeur is not a thing like the car, but he is treated like one -- he has been *made into* a resource to be exploited at will. In this suggestion, a sophisticated criticism of capitalist India emerges, one that doesn’t merely turn its nose up at its nouveau riche excesses, but calls into question the justness of its society, the opportunities for work and leisure it provides.

The other reading that may well occur to us, however, without contradicting the first one, *per se*, complicates its attitude of straightforward critique. Here, the image implies something further about its worker-subject than the fact of his exploitation, insisting even more deeply, I would argue, on his expansive humanness. In this interpretation, we must note that, because we cannot see where the chauffeur is going and to whom or what he is responding, we cannot dismiss the possibility that his movement might be aimed somewhere we do not expect. “What is his aim?” we might wonder, without, of course, being able to arrive at a definitive answer. The uncertainty permits us to imagine that the driver could be leaving the car and moving toward a task and a space that fall outside the incessant demands of his work. Toward the fulfillment of a need or desire that, were we to see it fulfilled, would confirm that he exceeds both the notion of a “dependable chauffeur” suggested by his appearance and the abstraction of an “exploited

laborer” inferred by elements of the image’s frame. From this perspective, the lights of the city begin to suggest authentic possibility rather than a deceptive gleam.

Singh’s collection of Bombay photographs features dozens of workers who occupy a similar place in the city as his chauffeur: maids, gardeners, street vendors, cart-pushers, rag pickers, and so, workers who toil in what economists have termed the “informal sector.”¹ Studies of informal sector work attest that it is precarious and poorly compensated, performed much of the time under unregulated, dangerous, and abusive conditions.² Yet, Singh’s photographs tend not to stress these facts outright or try to capture what we might therefore assume are the most significant difficulties these workers face. Instead, the images direct the viewer’s attention, as here, to details that may be read in several ways, layering interpretations of the situation under consideration. Singh’s photographs thus may be said to accomplish the task that Njabulo Ndebele, whose work I discussed in the introduction, terms the “rediscovery of the ordinary.” He approaches a subject that could easily occasion an “obliteration” of details, a “spectacular representation” of exploitation and degradation in which “no interpretation is necessary”

¹ Development anthropologist Keith Hart coined the term “informal sector” in a 1973 article describing the employment activities he observed while conducting fieldwork in slums of Accra, Ghana. See: Hart, Keith. “Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana.” Since then a whole literature has developed discussing the consequences of informalization on livelihood opportunities in the South. See, for example, Manuel Castells and Alejandro Portes, “World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics and Effects of the Informal Economy.” While early definitions such as Hart’s defined the sector as equivalent to the survival pursuits of the poor, it now includes any economic pursuit that occurs outside government regulation and taxation (“off-the-books”) without involving the production of commodities or services are themselves illegal (the “black economy”).

² Jan Bremen, who writes on informal sector labor conditions in rural and urban post-liberalization India, pioneered research in this area. See his *The Labouring Poor in India: Patterns of Exploitation, Subordination, and Exclusion* (2003) as well as *Down and Out: Labouring Under Global Capitalism* (2000), co-authored with Arvind Das and Ravi Agarwal.

because “seeing is meaning,”³ and introduces uncertainty – an interest in his subjects’ “off-stage” practices and the “hidden transcripts” they are participating in and contributing to.

The history of Bombay (or as it is now officially called, Mumbai) since the publication of Singh’s collection offers more than an enough material for a culture of spectacle. It has been, as Arjun Appadurai describes, a period that has seen the concomitant “dematerialization” of the city’s economy, through the completion of the turn from industrial manufacturing to finance and global business services, and the “hypermateralization” of its citizenry, through ethnic mobilizations and violence.⁴ As the growth of the tertiary sector resulted in proto-global city status for Mumbai, real estate prices and speculation soared and were followed by draconian slum clearances to free up land for luxury hotels and other elite amenities. The speculative link Appadurai posited in 2000 between conflicts over living space (“spectral housing”) and ethnicized tensions leading to bursts of violence (“urban cleansing”) speaks to conditions that have only increased in the decades since the Ayodhya riots in 1992 and 1993. Adding to the sense of lawlessness and everyday despair, an underground criminal network of gangsters largely runs the city, embedded in its political system, real estate economies, and film industry. Though once considered to be secular, the network “seems to have been split along religious lines and provincial loyalties ... even while it becomes increasingly transnational.”⁵ All signs point to Bombay/Mumbai’s “provincialization” and “de-cosmopolitanization” -- the paradoxical but not unpredictable outcome of the Hindu

³ Ndebele, “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” 147.

⁴ Appadurai, “Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai,” 630.

⁵ Rashmi Varma, “Provincializing the City: From Bombay to Mumbai,” 80.

majority party's successful campaign to connect the city's spaces to international circuits of capital investment.

This account of Bombay's spectacular decline allows us to see, far more so than the more abstract notion of the "violent" megacity I discussed in the previous chapter, the historical, economic, and political developments responsible for stripping this particular city of its civility and livability. It names the Hindu Right, the local elite, and transnational capital as forces that have created and benefited from "de-civilization," meaning that vague notions of "government voids" and anti-state actors that spring up in the state's absence are much less likely to take root. Yet, as in chapter one, I am here concerned to designate what this narrative -- necessarily incomplete, as all narratives that describe reality and history are -- leaves out. What it leaves out can be understood, at least initially, as a "who": the laborer in the informal sector, whose proliferation also accompanies and marks this period.

My argument is not that the working poor do not appear in these accounts at all, for they certainly do, in the guise of both the slum-dweller, targeted by state and capital as the city is cleared of the poor to make room for development, and as members of a lumpenproletariat or unemployed mass likely to become an anarchic, rebellious force within the city. What gets lost in these notions of the impoverished worker as the victim of "spectral housing" and/or the rebellious perpetrator of "urban cleansing" is precisely the sense of the informal sector worker as *worker*. This, it seems to me, is what is at stake in the anti-spectacular, everyday images of workers such as those conveyed by Singh's photographs. Although they do not (and perhaps cannot) evoke the structural changes that have (re)shaped life on a large scale for their subjects, they evoke the complex conditions

under which labor takes place and the many meanings it takes on for the laborers themselves.

Is it possible for a depiction of informal labor in the megacity to offer an unstinting critique of its conditions while simultaneously engaging in a consideration of its positive value, particularly for the worker? For Ndebele, creating complex depictions of work that reflected the challenges and opportunities of “the ordinary” under apartheid required the writer to separate “the necessary political vilification of exploitation” from “the human triumph associated with work, a triumph which constitutes a positive value for the future.”⁶ This chapter looks at a novel that successfully separates and balances (as even its title suggests) these two objectives of critique and recognition: Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*.

Published in 1995, but depicting a series of events occurring in the Indian capital from 1975 to 1977, Mistry’s novel examines a Bombay on the cusp of provincialization.⁷ The main events of the novel take place during the State of Emergency declared by then-prime minister Indira Gandhi to protect her claim to rule, and are followed by a brief epilogue in 1984 shortly after her assassination. *A Fine Balance* thus returns us to two early moments in India’s transition toward liberalism and capitalism, years before the debates over liberalization had begun, but nevertheless when the government was using force to discipline the unionized textile industry to boost owner profitability and the

⁶ “The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,” 54.

⁷ *A Fine Balance* is set in a “city by the sea” exactly resembling Bombay, though it is never referred to by name. Mistry’s other two novels are set explicitly in Bombay (Mistry’s home before he emigrated to Canada at age 23): *Such a Long Journey* (1991), which portrays the lives of a Bombay-based civil servant during the 1971 war between India and Bangladesh, and *Family Matters* (2006), which concerns the domestic dramas of a Parsi family in the 1990s during the city’s pronounced rightward political shift.

Emergency law allowed Gandhi's administration to bypass the elected legislature to pass economic de-regulations that would attract foreign investors. All of these reforms were meant to develop the Indian economy by inscribing its workers and its products within global circuits of capital accumulation. However, as history has shown and as *A Fine Balance* demonstrates, the price of doing so was a highly vulnerable urban workforce, increasingly consigned to jobs in the informal sector as textile mills were de-staffed and shut down, excluded from state support as welfare programs were made "efficient," and denied civic rights as slum neighborhoods were demolished during urban "beautification" campaigns.

What distinguishes Mistry's novel from other narratives of Bombay/Mumbai's decline is that it maintains a distinct focus on the informal sector worker as worker, and on work as an activity that, even when performed within a highly exploitative economic system, nonetheless can have enlivening and transformative effects on everyday life. The novel details how Dina Dalal, a middle-class Parsi widow, comes to run a cottage tailoring outfit from her home, hiring two recent migrants from a distant Northern village, "untouchable" caste Hindu tailors Ishvar and Omprakesh Darji, to work for her sewing clothing for export. At the same time, she takes in Maneck Kolah, a Parsi college student studying engineering in the city, as her "paying guest." The turning point of the narrative comes when Ishvar and Omprakesh's shanty is demolished by the police and Dina must allow her employees to live with her in to protect them from further harassment. Since their labor provides her with her source of livelihood and Maneck a place to live, the four must share her apartment out of necessity for several months, all while facing intermittent attempts by the landlord to evict them for running an "illegal business" from the

apartment. This situation of common need created by the combined pressures of spectral housing and precarious labor brings about bonds between the characters that help shelter them from the dangers and stresses of urban life. For a short while, Dina's apartment becomes a haven where they find refuge from the hostile city. During this period, their labor itself becomes common; they begin to share the tasks necessary to make the household a productive space: sewing, of course, but also cooking, cleaning, and the "affective" labor required to work through conflicts and outwit the landlord.

Mistry's novel thus moves beyond a critique of the conditions under which informal labor in the megacity occurs toward a consideration the possibilities it opens up. The reason it is able to do so, I suggest, is because unlike most narratives of Bombay's dehumanization, which tend to center on public space and visible resistance even when they concern "housing" in an abstract sense, *A Fine Balance* moves between activities occurring in the public space of the street and in domestic, interior space, where everyday practices and modes of resistance are so often overlooked.

If the megacity street is where the enormous pressures of "spectral housing" are most obvious (Appadurai cites, for example, the sleeping body of the indigent pavement dweller as the most "contained" version of spectral housing) and spectacular exhortations of ethnic violence generally take place, domestic, interior space has become, with the closure of factories and the rise of the informal sector, the space where *work* is often done and, Mistry insists, new megacity solidarities ventured. This chapter will read the conjunction of workspace, interior space, and everyday labor in *A Fine Balance* through the lens of reformulations of mainstream and Marxist accounts of the informal sector by Ela Bhatt in *We Are Poor But So Many*, an autobiographical account of her experiences

unionizing informal women workers in India. I argue that the reformulation of domestic space as one of global capitalism's primary workspaces opens up opportunities for new urban laboring collectives to take root. At the same time, I suggest that the traces of these collectives and solidarities may not appear in the normal archives of urban political practice, precisely because they take place among workers whose resistance to power generally must occur "off-stage." Mistry's novel raises this problem particularly in its epilogue, where the persistence of previously formed bonds between three of the characters are revealed to the reader but are shown to be otherwise "invisible" and unrecognizable in the city at large, leaving the question of their significance for the future unanswered.

Mistry's Bombay

Since its publication, *A Fine Balance* has been one of a few texts at the center of a scholarly debate about literary realism and the contested position it has occupied within postcolonial studies. The release of Mistry's most acclaimed novel to date seemed to many of its American and British reviewers to herald a new moment in Indian Anglophone fiction, a sign that Rushdian magical realism was on the way out and "the novel" -- meaning the realist novel as it took shape in nineteenth-century England, France, and Russia -- would once again be "reinvigorated" with new cultural material.⁸

⁸ Pico Ayer compared Mistry's work in *A Fine Balance* to that of the great Russian masters, while A.G. Mojtabai wrote that its "arrival" on the Western literary scene was proof that, "those who continue to harp on the inevitable decline of the novel ought to hold off for a while ... the unique task of the genre ... is truthfulness to human experience in all its variety, and thanks to the great migrations of population in our time, human variety is to be found in replenished abundance all around us" ("An Accidental Family").

Critics specializing in postcolonial studies, for their part, as Eli Park Sorensen notes, were less immediately enthused: many treated the “realist dimension” of *A Fine Balance* either “suspiciously or, paradoxically, as a critique of realism.”⁹ This debate over the political implications of the novel’s form has forestalled similar debate over its content. While most of the novel’s critics understand it as depicting India’s “chaotic transition to globalization”¹⁰ few have considered what is at stake in this project – why, in particular, Mistry is concerned to represent this period in India’s history.

Those who have considered *A Fine Balance*’s interest in its period noteworthy often focus on its depiction of how the Emergency transforms urban space and many who do find Mistry’s adherence to what I earlier termed the narrative of Bombay’s decline disconcerting. Ian Almond, for example, admits to being perplexed by the representation of the novel’s setting, which appears specifically designed to give the impression of a lack of agency on the part of the protagonists:

The Bombay displayed to us in *A Fine Balance* is an unpredictable, dazzlingly precarious place bereft of any centre; in sharp contrast to Rushdie’s multi-cultural pool of colours or Vikram Chandra’s high-society power-cliques, Mistry’s Bombay is a grim succession of ciay shops, street corners, and cramped rooms where anything can happen to anyone. Goondas can appear at a moment’s notice to smash up an apartment; bulldozers can materialize from nowhere to level a suburb, buses can rub out the more careless existences; trains can come hurtling into the protagonists in the middle of their toilet; policemen can arrive without warning to arrest and deport truckloads of unfortunates to a work camp fifty miles north of the city ... Bombay repeatedly bursts in on the protagonists’ comfort and

⁹ Sorensen, “Excess and Design in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*,” 344. The critic who has written most extensively on realism in Mistry’s work is Laura Moss (“Can Rohinton Mistry’s Realism Rescue the Novel?”); Moss also provides a useful overview of debates about literary realism in postcolonial studies and an argument in favor of its “resistant” potential (“The Plague of Normality: Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory”).

¹⁰ Sorensen, “Excess and Design in Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*,” 348.

stability throughout the book, thwarting and complicating, paralyzing and dismaying.¹¹

As this suggests, Mistry's sense of Bombay in the mid-to-late 1970s accords with Appadurai's description of it at that time: an increasingly "malignant city"; malignant, in Mistry's view, not only due to the lack of jobs, crowding, and wear and tear of rapid, uneven modernization, but also the new vigor with which the government tried to keep the poor out of public spaces to maintain the city's image. For Almond, the vulnerability of the protagonists as they move through the city gives the novel a sense of fatalism. I would suggest, however, that Mistry actually takes us beyond a view of the megacity that only emphasizes its disempowering qualities. This is because, as the above remarks also reveal, *A Fine Balance* is a novel in which equal care is taken to represent everyday urban life as it unfolds in interior/private spaces. As readers, we would not experience the trauma of Bombay "burst(ing) in on the protagonists' comfort and stability throughout the book" if this were not the case. It is because Mistry takes such effort to convey the mundane experiences of life in interior space and associates it much of the time with "comfort and stability" that we have a sense of the characters and the relationships constructed in this realm as sometimes vulnerable to disruption from the "outside."

Mistry puts special emphasis on the domestic as a constitutive category of urban life, one which may be under attack in the form of hired thugs, bulldozers, greedy property owners, and the police, but which also induces for cross-caste and cross-gender solidarities to develop, solidarities which shelter the characters from the violence of the city repeatedly. These solidarities do not develop merely on account of need (as a kind of charity), but because the protagonists have developed a greater understanding of each

¹¹ Almond, "Re-Orientalizing the Indian Novel," 215.

other's lives by living *and* working together. Everyday labor, ultimately, is the bridge upon which the novel's domestic solidarities are built.

From Street to Home: Everyday Labor

In his deprivileging of the street and privileging of the home as a space for exploring the transformations of globalization, Mistry adds layers of detail and depth to the conceptualizations of informal sector employment Marxist critics of megacity urbanism tend to provide. Writers such as Mike Davis and Jane Bremen consider home-based work as one of the many new, deeply exploitative modalities of work in the megacity, yet it never arises as a potentially advantageous transformation -- or even a transformation with political consequences at all. We may note its absence, for example, in Davis's discussion of whether rural migrants-turned-informal workers in the slums of the South are likely to become a "class for themselves as well as in themselves." Arguing that what stands between these workers and organized class struggle is the lack of cultures of collective labor and opportunities for wide-scale resistance accompanying Fordist production, Davis insists that the "informal proletariat's" "social stage," if it has one, "must be the slum street or marketplace, not the factory or the international assembly line."¹² What drops out of the equation, as Davis charts this transition from the "factory or the international assembly line" to the "slum-street or marketplace" to denote the places where today's impoverished urban workers might find their "social stage," is precisely the home.

¹² "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat," 28-29.

Davis is by no means alone in neglecting home-based work as one of the sites from struggles against capitalism might be launched. Indeed, his comments suggest a general aporia in considerations of the informal sector by Marxist critics: a failure to see the “informalized” home as a space that is particularly productive (and thus could potentially become particularly disruptive) for global capitalism. Ongoing work on informalization that takes gender into account indicates the reductiveness of this perspective. According to Saskia Sassen, for example, the global informalization of the production and distribution of goods and services has made homes into newly important spaces within urban economies. Not only do home-based workers “absorb the costs of informalizing” economic activities, “labor-market functions” have largely shifted “to the household and the community.”¹³

In Mistry’s novel, the home is the primary locus for the narrativization of these shifts and becomes the space through which the social organization of labor takes on political import as the characters renegotiate their relationships to each other through work that is initially divided according to class, caste, and gender. Given the novel’s intricate representations of these moments of renegotiation, as well as its engagement with economic discourses of development and proto-globalization generally,¹⁴ I would like to read Mistry’s depiction of the family-like ties that develop among Dina, Ishvar,

¹³ “The Many Scales of the Global,” 88. For a broader treatment of these issues, see Sassen’s *Cities in a World Economy*, especially chapters 6 and 7. Lourdes Beneria and Marta Roldan’s *Crossroads of Class and Gender: Homework, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City* offers an in-depth examination of how globalization has reorganized the informal economy by increasing the prevalence of homework done within subcontracting networks.

¹⁴ Tyler Tokaryk goes beyond the usual associations between *A Fine Balance*’s narrative and the subject of “Indian globalization” to suggest that Mistry specifically dramatizes the “effects of an aggressive program of economic development as envisioned by the World Bank in the mid-1970s” (“Keyes, Storytelling, and Realism,” 8).

Omprakesh and Maneck as more than the paeon to the “human spirit” reviewers of the novel have largely taken it as, defining the latter as our ability to survive difficult circumstances and come together across differences that divide and confound the human community. We should also read them, I argue, as figuring metonymically the text’s underlying interest in the social and political possibilities brought about by the shifting conditions of labor in the megacity and particularly the “household-ization” of labor Sassen describes.

It is important to note from the outset that, despite the narrative’s close attention to the everyday existence of what we might term the “informal proletariat within globalization,” the characters, although they come together, do not do so in an active attempt to combat their status as such. No one joins a union or raises the prospect of creating one, and there are not any attempts to cause malfunctions in the networks of production through which local and distant owners of capital profit from their labor. Their daily survival activities -- making enough money to eat, paying rent, searching for one’s belongings when one’s slum has been destroyed, finding a new place to sleep, etc. - - are difficult enough, the novel implies. The absence of a narrative of proletarian subjectivization and rebellion, however, should alert us to the presence of what Sonali Perera has described as a “more counterintuitive model” for thinking labor and its possibilities. Working-class literature that disregards “short-term political agitations, codings of crisis, and revolutionary romanticism,” Perera insists, may present the reader with “new figures and concepts for thinking unorganized resistance, everyday experience, and the shape of the ethical within globalization.”¹⁵ Like the “women’s texts of non-

¹⁵ Perera, “Rethinking Working-Class Literature,” 9.

revolutionary socialism” Perera introduces into the canon of working-class writing as a way of disrupting its certitudes, *A Fine Balance* offers us “other measurements and templates for thinking socialist ethics.”¹⁶

Key to these “measurements and templates” is the novel’s insistence that the lines economists draw among various sectors of the urban economy -- the neat divisions that often imply not only a completely *different* but a completely *separate* urban existence -- run through the home, where they become, to echo Mike Davis, “more of a continuum than an abrupt divide.” Davis offers this intriguing statement on informality only to disclaim it immediately. He writes, in a chapter of *Planet of Slums* focused on informalization, that:

Part of the informal proletariat, to be sure, is a stealth workforce for the formal economy, and numerous studies have exposed how the subcontracting networks of Wal-Mart and other mega-companies extend deep into the misery of the colonias and the chawls. Likewise, there is probably more of a continuum than an abrupt divide between the increasingly casualized world of formal employment and the depths of the informal sector. Yet at the end of the day, the majority of slum-dwelling laboring poor are truly and radically homeless in the contemporary international economy.¹⁷

Beyond Davis’s final point, to which I will return, I would like to highlight the spatial metaphors that occur in each sentence of the passage. In the first sentence, Davis employs the image of a network to suggest links between the First World and the Third World – an intricate system (intermittently “exposed” by studies) of outsourcing, subcontracting, and denial. In the second sentence, he posits the aforementioned notion of a continuum between the “world” of casualized formal employment and the “world” of the informal sector. In the third sentence, he makes one of the spectacular generalizations for which he

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Planet of Slums*, 178.

is famous, stating that the majority of the slum-poor are “truly and radically homeless” in the global economy.

Davis never explains what he means by a continuum between casualized and informalized workers – the idea disappears as the argument concludes and he moves on. However, we can speculate from the tenor of his remarks that he is perhaps referring to the ways in which “casualization” exposes affected workers to many of the same conditions as “informalization”: the precariousness of work, the disappearance of the stable working day. He may also be invoking the fact that, in the South especially, a worker may live “between” the formal sector and informal sector, shifting from one to the other depending on where the best opportunities are. Generally, however, Davis argues, such movement only goes in one direction: “a down staircase by which redundant formal sector workers and sacked public employees descend into the black economy.”¹⁸

Ela Bhatt, in her recent account of the history of SEWA, the Self-Employed Women’s Association in India, expands upon this notion of a continuum between the formal sector and the informal sector in a rather different sense. She does so by introducing the home as an actual place, rather than as a metaphor for job security. During the first major restructuring of the textile industry in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat in the early 1970s, Bhatt was sent by her then-employer, the Textile Labor Association, to study the effects of mill closures on the families affected. “When I visited the homes of the laid-off workers,” she recalls, it became clear that:

While the men were busy agitating to reopen the mills, at the end of the day, it was the women who were earning money and feeding the family. They sold fruits and vegetables in the streets; stitched in their homes at piece-rate for middle-men; worked as laborers in wholesale commodity markets, loading and unloading

¹⁸ Ibid, 178-179.

merchandise; or collected recyclable refuse from city streets ... These were informal, home-based jobs operated outside of any labor laws or regulations. They were jobs without definitions. I learned for the first time what it meant to be self-employed. None of the labor laws applied to them; my legal training was of no use in their case. Ironically, I first glimpsed the vastness of the informal sector while working for the formal sector. One was protected, the other unprotected – although both contributed to the national economy.¹⁹

For Davis, the continuum between “the increasingly casualized world of formal employment and the depths of the informal sector” appears primarily when the formal sector worker descends into the “abyss” of the black economy. Bhatt reveals a less expected way the two sectors can “meet”: in the household, where workers from both sectors struggle together to survive. This continuum is not visible at a mill strike, or even in the street where informal workers abound. It is only apparent in those “off-stage” spaces where global capitalism’s least visible mechanisms of labor exploitation occur.

For a women’s labor activist such as Bhatt, the growing perception of continuities at the level of everyday struggles is what allows self-employed workers to come together in collective pursuit of common goals. Told repeatedly by traditional union leaders and the Indian bureaucracy that women working in informal sector trades -- “chindi workers, embroiderers, cart pullers, rag pickers, midwives,” etc. -- could not form a union because they lacked an employer, Bhatt and the fledgling members of SEWA persisted in their attempts to “remov(e) (these) conceptual blocks.”²⁰ In the process, Bhatt “came to a simple realization -- a union is about coming together. Women did not need to come together *against anyone*, they just needed to come together *for themselves*. By forming a

¹⁹ Bhatt, *We Are Poor But So Many*, 8-9.

²⁰ Ibid, 17.

union -- a bond -- they affirmed their status as workers, and as a result of coming together, they had a voice.”²¹

In Mistry’s novel, there is a similar lack of an identifiable “employer” who might constitute a common enemy its informal sector workers -- Dina and the tailors -- could come together against. While Dina is technically the tailors’ employer, she neither sets their piece rates nor determines the rigid schedules within which they must meet their quotas. She is the “supervisor,” as she repeatedly reminds herself, to quash her impulse to abandon her authority and join in the sewing. Even the petty tyrant Mrs. Gupta, Dina’s boss at the export company, seems a toothless opponent for this kind of struggle. Indeed the “enemy,” as scholars of postmodern capitalism such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have warned, and the proper terrain on which to fight it, seem somehow impossible to identify in this case.²² Though he skewers the Indian government and Bombay’s upper-classes repeatedly, the larger picture of economic and social conditions Mistry sketches indicates that the source of the workers’ misery is diffused over multiple, transnational networks of money, power, and biopower. Would they not likely fail even if they tried to identify an effective target for their resistance? And what, if they were to perceive the deterritorialized networks of power and capital in which they are inscribed, would their “resistance” consist of? Yet this absence of a common enemy or target does not prevent the tailors and Dina from coming together, just as Bhatt has it, “*for themselves.*” They *do*,

²¹ Ibid, 9.

²² Hardt and Negri’s theorization of the concept of Empire describes the form of sovereignty underwriting postmodern capitalism as a fluid apparatus of rule that “establishes no territorial center of power and does not rely on fixed boundaries or barriers” (*Empire*, xxii). It protects the status quo and all its disjunctures by deterritorializing the world in the service of capital, all the while claiming its mandate through an appeal to common global prosperity and peace.

it turns out, form a union, if we understand the word in the particular sense Bhatt gives it: “a bond” that “affirm(s) their status as workers.”

The crucial distinction, however, between the lessons Bhatt draws from her experience and those we can draw from Mistry’s novel, lies in what Mistry’s informalized workers gain in this coming together. It is not so much a “voice,” as in Bhatt’s formulation, in part, perhaps, because their struggle never enters the public domain. Rather, it lies in the daily support they give to and receive from each other, both material and affective. It is a kind of nascent solidarity built on a mutual recognition of each character’s position within social relations of exploitation: the characters thus begin to read the work they do *outside* the de-socialized networks of market exchange in which capitalist ideology insists this work is done.

Interwoven Lives

The unfolding of this recognition, though it takes place throughout the novel, is especially noticeable in two crucial moments. In the first, the tailors have returned from being detained in a work camp where they were sent for nearly a month after the police destroyed their slum. Dina and Maneck, in the meantime, have struggled to complete the quota of dresses the household was assigned before the tailors’ abrupt disappearance; not to do so would mean no rent money, so Dina and Maneck must abandon their predetermined roles. When the tailors just as abruptly reappear in the flat, after the professions of relief and joy during the reunion have died down, Ishvar “timidly” ask to borrow a few rupees from their employer so he and Omprakesh can buy something to eat that evening. Dina’s response, especially compared to the ways in which she has

previously anxiously guarded her resources *vis a vis* the tailors (often covering her desperation with feigned suspicion) is striking:

“There is much more than five rupees coming to you from the last order,” she said.

“Hahnji? Really?” They were overjoyed, having presumed that leaving the work incomplete meant forfeiting their right to any payment, and said as much.

“It may be the practice with some employers. I believe in honest pay for honest work.” She added, jokingly, “Maybe you can share it with Maneck, he deserves something.”

“No, I only helped with a few buttons. Dina Aunty did it all.”²³

The shift in Dina’s perception of the tailors is both captured and understated by her aphorism “honest pay for honest work.” She suggests, here, that the money coming to tailors is fully deserved for the work they have put in, and yet, as the novel makes clear, in the logic of the cottage industry (“piece work”), they have hardly done any work at all. I would like to read this shift as more than evidence of Dina’s feeling sorry for the tailors for what they have gone through at the work camp. I read this as her tacit realization that the “work” they do encompasses being exposed to such dangers, such violence. Dina seems to realize, in other words, that providing the labor on which her tiny business runs requires the tailors to work much harder than she is able to perceive in her flat – it *includes* the strategizing and surviving they must do in the streets, and it includes the violence they are exposed to as untouchables.

The tailors come to a similar realization about Dina, one that mirrors her connection between street and home, but approaches it, appropriately, from the opposite angle. Ishvar and Omprakesh are distressed that, when Dina allows them to live on the veranda of her flat so that they will be less exposed to the city’s dangers, she refuses to accept rent money for the arrangement. Dina’s motives for this refusal, which she keeps

²³ *A Fine Balance*, 377.

to herself, are far from magnanimous: she does not want the landlord to have any more legal reasons to evict her, and is also concerned that, under the provisions of Bombay's Rent Act, to accept rent from the tailors would give them a claim on the property as well. These latter worries dissolve, however, when the tailors decide that the best way to repay Dina has nothing to do with money. One morning, while Dina is getting ready, Ishvar "takes matters into his own hands":

He fetched the broom and the dustpan from the kitchen and swept the verandah, the front room, Maneck's room, and the sewing room. As he finished in each room, Om got busy with the bucket and cloth, mopping the floors. They were still at it when Dina emerged from the bathroom. "What is going on here?" "Forgive me, but I have decided," said Ishvar firmly. "We are going to share in the daily cleaning from now on."²⁴

If Dina's key realization is that the tailors' work exceeds the bound of the household, Ishvar and Omprakesh's equivalent discovery (left understated and unspoken, here as before) is that Dina's work in the flat goes well beyond supervising them. It includes what Michael Denning terms "the women's work of cooking, cleaning, and caring," the completely unwaged work that is required to "reproduce" labor in a capitalist system, to create, in other words, the conditions where production can take place and a wage can be earned.²⁵ This labor, more or less invisible in the novel thus far, becomes visible in this scene. The care with which the narrator recounts how Ishvar and Om move through the flat, cleaning "the kitchen," "the verandah," "the front room," "Maneck's room," and "the sewing room," attests to the scope of the unacknowledged work Dina has been doing.

As the tailors' attempt to de-gender the work that is necessary to make the household run, Dina's caste prejudices, already faltering, finally dissolve. They dissolve,

²⁴ Ibid, 382.

²⁵ Denning, "Wageless Life," 81.

we can conclude, under the affective weight of the tailors' acknowledgment of her life, her labor. "Deeply moved" by their gesture of cleaning, she gives Om his morning cup of tea out of the glass from which she usually drinks, taking one of the differently colored cups she has heretofore "reserved" for the tailors, hoping to keep some small degree of distance between their bodies and hers, for herself.²⁶ As Om accepts the glass, he turns away, "hoping she did not see the film of water glaze his eyes."²⁷

Moving between the space of the street and the domestic, interior space of the household allows Mistry to novelize the megacity landscape in such a way that these "private" exchanges are not totally "lost" to the archive of urban life, even if they are unrecognizable to most understandings of what constitutes resistant praxis in the megacity. Is his drive to capture these moments an assertion of their political importance, an intimation, perhaps, that they could serve as the ground upon which future acts of collective resistance could be ventured?

At the very least, the conclusion of *A Fine Balance* suggests that the misapprehension -- specifically the undervaluing -- of everyday experience produces missed opportunities. To summarize briefly: the epilogue takes us to 1984, eight years after Dina, Maneck, and the tailors have all been together in the same room. Dina has been kicked out of her apartment and moved back in with her brother. The tailors, who had hoped to be self-sufficient by now, are far from it: disfigured in an episode of unthinkable state paternalism (the "sterilization" campaigns which were also taking place at this point in the country's history), they are now beggars living in the streets of Bombay. Maneck, who has been living abroad in the Gulf, working as a supervisor for a

²⁶ Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, 382.

²⁷ Ibid.

company that installs and maintains air-conditioners in the desert region, returns to Bombay for a brief visit and is horrified by the events that have transpired in his absence. He is not at all consoled by the small bit of “light” the narrative provides us: that Dina, Ishvar and Omprakesh still see each other every day, meeting secretly in her brother’s house while the other occupants are gone, so that Dina can feed them. His final act is to commit suicide by jumping in front of a high-speed train at a station near Dina’s new home.

Even in his construction of this tragic ending, however, Mistry insists on distinguishing between “the street” and “the home” as different categories of urban experience. Maneck learns of the horrifying denouement to the tailors’ story from Dina in her brother’s house, a few minutes before the tailors are supposed to arrive. Dina asks Maneck repeatedly to stay, to see the tailors, to re-establish contact with them. But he is terrified of what he will feel -- horror, guilt, repulsion -- and so refuses, making up an excuse about having an appointment in the city. As he leaves, he has one final encounter with the tailors, in the street outside Dina’s new home. Neither party is able to cast aside their new “public” roles in capitalist urban space (beggars and businessman, respectively). The tailors pretend not to recognize Maneck and ask him for money, and Maneck cannot identify himself, so his “words of love and sorrow and hope remained muted like stones.”²⁸

As readers, however, we are not left with either this sad exchange, or the disturbing moment in which Maneck succumbs to his sorrow shortly thereafter. Rather, the final scene of the novel offers a brief glimpse into Dina and the tailors’ continued

²⁸ *A Fine Balance*, 598.

exchanges of material and affective support -- exchanges that take place, as they always have in the space of the home and realm of everyday practice. The tailors-turned-beggars finally arrive in Dina's brother's house, where she feeds them and gives them a needle and thread to re-stitch the quilt she has gifted them so they may stay warm in the evenings. None of them knows what has happened to Maneck; the brief scene of their meeting is mundane or comic rather than tragic.

Many of Mistry's critics have worried about the implications of this scene. Does it suggest, asks Ian Almond, that, "a certain 'Oriental' flexibility (would) have saved (Maneck) from suicidal despair? In the end, are Ishvar and Omprakesh Yeatsian role models for how *pukkah* Orientals should cope with their suffering?"²⁹ I would suggest that any reading that interprets these juxtaposed scenes as offering a judgment on the characters and how they cope with their suffering is misguided. I am tempted to read the conclusion of Mistry's novel, instead, as a lesson in how to approach the megacity's everyday spaces of suffering, work, and companionship, a reminder that there are kinds of solidarity that too easily recede from view and memory. It is a lesson in what the street hides from us and what the home reveals.

²⁹ "On Re-Orientalizing the Indian Novel," 215.

Works Cited

- Almond, Ian. "On Re-orientalizing the Indian Novel: A Case Study of Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." *Orbis Litterarum* 59.3 (2004): 204-217.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Spectral Housing and Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai." *Public Culture* 12.3 (2000): 627-651.
- Beneria, Lourdes and Martha Roldan. *The Crossroads of Class and Gender: Industrial Homework, Subcontracting, and Household Dynamics in Mexico City*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987.
- Bhatt, Ela R. *We are Poor But So Many: The Story of Self-Employed Women in India*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Bremen, Jan. *The Labouring Poor in India: Patterns of Exploitation, Subordination, and Exclusion*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.
- Castells, Manuel and Alejandro Portes, "World Underneath: The Origins, Dynamics and Effects of the Informal Economy." *Informal Economy: Studies in Advanced and Less Developed Countries*. Eds. Alejandro Portes, et al. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989.
- Davis, Mike. "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat." *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004): 5-34.
- Denning, Michael. "Wageless Life." *New Left Review* 66 (November-December 2010): 79-97.
- Hart, Keith. "Informal Income Opportunities and Urban Employment in Ghana." *Journal of Modern African Studies* 11.3 (1973): 61-89.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage International, 1995.
- Moss, Laura. "Can Rohinton Mistry's Realism Rescue the Novel?" *Postcolonizing the Commonwealth: Studies in Literature and Culture*. Ed. Roland Smith. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfred Laurier Press, 2000.
- . "The Plague of Normality: Reconfiguring Realism in Postcolonial Theory." *Jouvert* 5.1 (Fall 2000).

- Ndebele, Njabulo S. "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa." *Journal of South African Studies* 12.2 (1986): 143-157.
- Perera, Sonali. "Rethinking Working-Class Literature: Feminism, Globalization, and Socialist Ethics." *Differences: A Journal of Feminist Studies* 19.1 (2008): 1-31.
- Sassen, Saskia. "The Many Scales of the Global: Implications for Theory and for Politics." *The Postcolonial and the Global*. Eds. Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Singh, Raghubir. *Bombay: Gateway to India*. New York, Aperture: 1994.
- Sorensen, Eli Park. "Excess and Design in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." *Novel* 48 (Spring-Summer 2008): 342-362.
- Varma, Rashmi. "Provincializing the City: From Bombay to Mumbai." *Social Text* 22.4 (2004): 64-89.

Chapter Three

The Right to (Change) the City: Shantytown Resistance from Patrick Chamoiseau's

Texaco to the Abahlali baseMjondolo Shack-Dweller's Movement

“And when in the end it all began to shift, or rather, collapse, when the unstoppable evolution had emptied the enclosure of people to reassemble them on the margins of cities, what remained, what still remains, is the dark side of this impossible memory, which has a louder voice and one that carries farther than any chronicle or census.”

Edouard Glissant

In the 2000 book *Mutations*, architect-urbanists Rem Koolhaas, Stefano Boeri, Sanford Kwinter, Nadia Tazi, and Hans Ulrich Obrist present their investigations of the “mutating” condition of the city under globalization as a response to a series of demographic discoveries and predictions. Printed individually, in large type so that they fill up an entire page, these blocks of text summon the trends in urbanization that have been the major context for most investigations of slum-life over the past ten years. They read as follows:

At the outset of the twentieth century, 10% of the population lived in cities.

In 2000, around 50% of the world population lives in cities.

In 2025, the number of city-dwellers could reach 5 billion individuals (two thirds of them in poor countries).

In 1950, only New York and London had over 8 million inhabitants. Today there are 22 megalopolises.

Of the 33 megalopolises predicted in 2015, 27 will be located in the least developed countries, including 19 in Asia.

Tokyo will be the only rich city to figure in the list of the 10 largest cities.¹

Beginning from the sheer speed and scope of urbanization in the twentieth century, the authors of *Mutations* quickly reveal their specific point of concern: the “un-First-World-ing” of the cities of the future.

My introductory chapter began with the claim that Fernando Mereilles’s 2002 film *City of God*, set and filmed in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro (current population: 6.3 million), was the first film to engage this situation: to call attention to the fact that the phenomenon of rapid urbanization had migrated to the southern continents. By plotting of the passage of time against the expansion of the contemporary Latin American slum, *City of God* looks warily towards a future in which a majority of all megalopolises will be “poor” and in the “least developed” countries, as Koolhaas et al marvel. Yet, from a different viewpoint, *City of God* brings more to our attention than the conjunction of urban growth and slum-expansion. It is a film often attentive to certain experiences of slum-life in the postcolonial city as well: to the spread of drugs and violence in jobless, peripheral communities, to the mixed cultures that sprout from poor urban streets, alleys, yards, and shacks. Seen from this angle, it is nowhere near the first film of its kind, of course, and has many predecessors. Among the earliest is Perry Henzell’s *The Harder They Come*.

Released in 1973 and set and filmed in Kingston, Jamaica, Henzell’s film stars reggae legend Jimmy Cliff as Ivanhoe Martin, a country boy who comes to town to inform his mother of his grandmother’s death, then decides not to return to the family’s troubled farm. The plot concerns his inability to find work in the city, disdain for the

¹ Koolhaas, et al, *Mutations*, 2-7.

evangelical Christian revival in the slums, disillusion as he fails to secure a lucrative career as a popular singer, and transformation into a defiant ganja-dealer. His trajectory suggests the general experience of urban Jamaicans at that time, who appear in the film often as, for example, men waiting alongside him when he is turned away for construction work, and women and children scavenging atop mountains of trash in the background as he wanders the city streets.

Concerned with these local signs of material poverty, *The Harder They Come* depicts the Jamaican drug-ridden ghetto in such a way as to also map the transnational system of exploitation in which its deprivation is inscribed. There are many references, for example, to the Caribbean and North American elite who benefit from the drug trade, particularly through the under-compensated work of Kingston's dealers. The film looks askance, too, at the machismo and bravado of the culture of the gangs and the corruption of the police, indicating how both secure the charismatic Martin's meaningless death. In this sense, Henzell's film prefigures Brazilian slum films such as *City of God* and *Elite Squad* with almost eerie precision. Indeed, Mereilles's film, though visually and stylistically innovative in its own moment, even reiterates much of *The Harder They Come*'s iconography, such as the famous scene/image in which Martin/Cliff poses Clint-Eastwood-style as a gunslinger to have his picture taken for the newspapers while on the run from the cops and his rivals [fig. 3]. The opening and closing scenes of Mereilles's film, too, in which warring drug lords chase each other through the favela accompanied by the neighborhood's young male children, recall one of the last scenes in *The Harder They Come*.



Figure 3. Recurring iconography: *The Harder They Come* (Jamaica, 1971) and *Cidade de Deus* (Brazil, 2002).

Unlike South America (with which it is often conjoined in broad geopolitical inquiries), the Caribbean has rarely, if ever, been a primary site of investigation in scholarship on the megacity. The reasons for this are perhaps obvious. Though Caribbean cities are characterized by structural and experiential features of megacities including inequality, exclusion, segregation, violence, and economic insecurity, they do not suffer from an intense disjuncture between population size and markers of healthy urbanism such as livelihood opportunities, service provision, and urban planning -- a disjuncture that nearly always underwrites discussions of the megacity as a site of urban “pathology.”² Their small populations, low density, and relatively high indicators of wealth, stability, and “human development” compared to cities in Latin America, Africa, and Asia, all make it hard to speak about Caribbean cities with the same urgency that has accompanied calls to investigate the conditions of life in these larger global cities of the South. Though many of its residents are struggling, it is more difficult to detect with the Caribbean city spectacular signs of the “cutting edge” of a destructive globalism, defined by chaotic urban growth and unprecedented forms of “spatial apartheid.”

² See Kees Koonings and Dirk Kruijt’s discussion in *Mega-cities: the Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*, 9-11.

Yet in Caribbean culture since the 1970s -- film, literature, poetry, and music -- we find regular investigations of urban neighborhoods that not only mirror but *anticipate* the abandoned, volatile, and energetic spaces that today coalesce into the image-concept of a “planet of slums.” In Jamaica, Haiti, Trinidad, Martinique, or the Dominican Republic, the disintegration of earlier systems of slavery and colonial rule, “left its marks,” to quote Edouard Glissant, most indelibly in new forms of urban enclosure, which for Glissant constitutes a “second Plantation matrix,” an island traversing “maze of sheet metal and concrete where our common future takes its chances.”³

The aesthetic representation of this shantytown “maze” has produced films such as Henzell’s, which anticipates by twenty years the global explosion of what Carolyn Nordstrom calls the “il/legal economy,” the complex trade in illicit commodities (most spectacularly drugs and weapons) that has allowed slum-residents to insert themselves into “post-industrial” global city networks.⁴ In Earl Lovelace’s 1971 novel, *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, a portrait of a shantytown in Port of Spain, Trinidad, the same impulse grounds an investigation of a broader historical development that, according to critics such as Grant Farred, justifies the pessimism of the late postcolonial moment: the silencing of the subaltern underclass by the postcolonial state apparatus and cultural disenfranchisements that mute their ability to speak in oppositional voices.⁵ (Lovelace’s

³ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 72-73.

⁴ Nordstrom, *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money, and Power in the Contemporary World*, xviii.

⁵ For Farred, the spectacular failure of postcolonial governments to enact the fundamental social and economic transformations they promised during decolonization sets the stage for the development of acquisitive and transnational masculine identities across the South. He writes of the “yardie” subculture that stretches from Kingston, Jamaica to London, as disillusioned postcolonial migrants drift to the former center in search of

characters struggle to understand what sort of resistance, if any, is possible in an urban environment where postcoloniality brings more insidious forms of disenfranchisement than slavery and colonialism.) And it produces in Patrick Chamoiseau's famed novel *Texaco*, published in its original French in 1992 -- two years before Eric Hobsbawm's *The Age of Extremes* drew attention to the "death of the peasantry" and ten years before Anglophone commentators responded with global commentaries of the urbanization of the South -- an astonishingly direct confrontation with the Third-World-ing of questions of urban exclusion and citizenship. A character simply called the "urban planner," bureaucratically powerful but atypically introspective, puts into global perspective the story of *Texaco*'s squatter-citizen protagonist Marie-Sophie Laborieux, who has just educated him on the history of Martinique's urban settlements: "Listening to that great lady's last words, a shiver ran through me: in a few years, *more than half of humanity will face, under similar conditions, what she calls City.*"⁶

Like the planner, whose interspersed "notes" give *Texaco*'s narrative its intermittent visionary seriousness, Chamoiseau often frames Marie-Sophie's story in terms of its global relevance. A global perspective enters the novel both via the planner's "theoretical" reflections on the meaning of Marie-Sophie's story and her own musings, as the first-person narrator of the testimonial novel, on the urban communities with which she is aligned. At one point, she describes Fort-de-France's post-war urban squatters as "a proletariat, without factories, workshops, and work, and without bosses, in the muddle

economic opportunities in the global drug trade ("The Postcolonial Chickens Come Home to Roost," 287-288).

⁶ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 368.

of odd jobs, drowning in survival and leading an existence like a path through embers.”⁷ Such moments of widened perspective and redeployment of historical-materialist language have drawn many non-Caribbeanists to the novel: cultural critics interested in Global South urbanism have discussed it so often since its translation into English in 1997 that Michael Rubenstein has called *Texaco* a “defacto representative literary text for the ‘Planet of Slums.’”⁸ Davis himself quotes *Texaco* in *Planet of Slums* twice, making it that work’s most cited literary source. That the Caribbean is not a major *ethnographic* source for Davis, making only two brief appearances (in remarks on corruption in Jamaica and housing policy in Cuba) in his sea of studies, monographs, facts, and figures, has not seemed to limit *Texaco*’s perceived relevance to the global urban context he sketches, and vice versa. The link between novel and context here is best summed up by Ashley Dawson, who argues that, despite the specificities of its urban imaginary (especially the “diminutive size” of its setting), *Texaco* records a “paradigmatic experience for the many millions experiencing urbanization in the global South: displacement.”⁹

What can be learned from *Texaco*’s depiction of this “paradigmatic experience” of displacement? Though many critics have asked this question, they have done so while treating the novel as an exemplary illustration of subaltern resistance in the context of late-twentieth-century “Southern” underdevelopment.¹⁰ It has yet to be asked in the

⁷ Ibid, 314.

⁸ Rubenstein, “Light Reading: Public Utility, Urban Fiction, and Human Rights,” 34.

⁹ Dawson, “Squatters, Space, and Belonging in the Underdeveloped City,” 18.

¹⁰ Ashley Dawson provides an almost thematic overview of the aspects of the narrative that may be studied from the perspective of global South urbanism: its ethnographic aesthetics, its historicization of “the circumstances that breed squatter settlements” (25), its focus on marronage as urban conquest, etc. Patricia Yaeger narrows in on resistance,

process of deducing how Caribbean urbanization inflects universal narratives of slum-formation, offering particular historical and political vantage points from which to view slums and their social possibilities. In this chapter, I read Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* as a Caribbean urban text, which I argue requires drawing out the multiple practices of resistance to spatial dispossession it explores and its insistence on the everyday as the register of experience in which these practices become visible.

To write of and thus distinguish a Caribbean text in terms of multiplicity is nothing new. Mercantile capitalism and the transatlantic slave trade constructed a plantation "machine," which conjoined people, languages, cultures, traditions, religious practices, and so on, in a variety of spatial enclosures and social relationships, making it difficult to speak of the Caribbean archipelago, now and then, without reference to the differences it "contains," interweaves, and syncretizes.¹¹ It perhaps, then, indicative of the extent to which previous readings of *Texaco* as a "squatter" novel have approached it through a universalizing lens that none have engaged the *multiple* forms of subaltern resistance it depicts, neither across its sweeping, circular narrative, encompassing 150 years of Martinican history, nor within its "present," the 1980s, when a road called Penetrante West exposes its titular squatter community's "insalubrious" reality to the wealthy inhabitants of island.

but only to discuss the novel's portrayal of "rebuilding" as a newly "epic" act. Michael Rubenstein argues that the novel understands electricity as a human right, which for him underscores the political importance of "the public utility" to the neoliberal imaginary (43).

¹¹ For a discussion of the relationship between this history and Caribbean culture highlighting the latter's "polyrhythmic" nature, see *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* by Antonio Benitez-Rojo.

Marie-Sophie and her neighbors' fight to preserve the location of their shantytown they call "Texaco" (in a sly appropriation of the moniker and mystique of the multinational company officially occupying the land on which it is situated) most obviously revives a form of rebellion against slavery that looms large in the West Indian imaginary. Called "maronnage" in the French Caribbean and "marooning" in the Anglophone, the term refers to the practice of fugitive or freed slaves claiming space in the hills on the outskirts of colonial cities, subverting the will to control space (and black populations *in* space) that was a major feature of the plantation economy. As a "creoliste," Chamoiseau has tried to revive interest in the particulars of local culture before Martinique's departmentalization in 1946 -- before what he and other members of the "creolite" movement see as not only the foreclosure of Martinican independence, but as the island's "Westernization" and disconnection from its popular past.¹² Marronage has been a central part of his fictional oeuvre, as has popular, everyday struggle among the former slave population in Martinique generally. The conjunction between the two is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in *Texaco*, in which protagonist and narrator Marie-Sophie learns of the practice of marooning from her father Esternome, a former house-slave who sets up his own colony in the mornes (hills) outside St. Pierre following abolition. His stories inspire Marie-Sophie to create what she sees as a similar peri-urban

¹² Chamoiseau and fellow Martinican writers Jean Bernab  and Raphael Confiant developed the notion of Creolite in a paper for a conference on Aime C saire's legacy in 1989. Their intent was to move past the narrowness of C saire's Negritude, which they felt underemphasized the creolized nature of culture and identity in Martinique and overemphasized the significance of the black population's African roots. They have since been accused of trying to promote a fixed Creole essence. For a founding statement of the movement's intentions, see "Eloge de la Creolite," and for a review of the controversies their work has inspired, see Lucien Taylor's interview with Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernab .

community on the outskirts of Fort-de-France in the mid-twentieth-century – a squatter camp on a steep hill, perched just above the ocean and legally inhabited by the Texaco oil company’s tankers.

As crucial as this staking out of spaces of resistance in the city is to the narrative’s imaginary, my reading of *Texaco* insists that it explores the importance of other modes of resistant solidarity as well. In particular, I argue that the novel explores new forms of collaboration that require embracing the transformative possibilities for which the Caribbean is also increasingly known. Out of necessity and on the “disorganized” terrain of everyday struggle, I suggest, Marie-Sophie’s settlement develops a fundamental openness to competing discourses of the city.

By suggesting the need to “creolize” and multiply rather than control and limit the parameters of resistance, *Texaco* projects a philosophy of subaltern struggle as requiring strategic flexibility and constant translation among differing worldviews. Thus, what some Left social theorists have read as slum-based social movements’ inherent political weakness -- their ideological heterogeneity and disorganization -- Chamoiseau sees as one of their strengths. This chapter will test *Texaco*’s intuition by comparing the ethos of disorganized and translational opposition it articulates with those followed by two actual shack-dwellers’ movements: SDI or Shack Dwellers International, a “federating” or networking model based in India, with chapters and contacts across the world, and Abahlali baseMjondolo (“People Who Live in Shacks”) a popular, ground-level movement that emerged from a march in the Kennedy Road Settlement of Durban, South Africa in 2005.

At the end of *Mutations*, Koolhaas and his cohort from the Harvard Project on the City write that Lagos, Nigeria (current population unknown, but estimated to be between 7 and 10 million) may constitute a “developed, extreme, paradigmatic case-study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity.”¹³ They argue that planners and urbanists in the West can learn from Lagos, since its brand of “resilient, material-intensive, decentralized and congested” urbanism epitomizes the kind of future toward which we all, in our era of unchecked privatization, may be headed. Lagos’s present, in other words, has much to tell us about our own urban future – a future in which we may need to be prepared to give up control of the city as such.¹⁴ This chapter, in a rather different spirit, argues that the Caribbean past has much to tell us about the global megacity present. While Koolhaas et al put their faith in the “homeostatic,” self-regulatory systems that develop in the absence of planning and infrastructure, I wish to highlight the unexpectedly complex strategies of everyday resistance that developed in a region where cities have long been highly contested spaces, and where the drive to “conquer” them -- to moor in the places where citizenship has been denied, but sustenance and community beckons -- has long been a generative force for politics.

Circle into Spiral: Returning to Marronage

For Edouard Glissant, the slave culture of the black Atlantic world necessitated and produced a kind of “living in relation” that we must learn from in the present, that is, in a global modernity marked by its tendency to bring differences into intense, inextricable relation via the expansion and reproduction of capital, technology, and

¹³ *Mutations*, 653.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 718.

culture. His book *Poetics of Relation* articulates an ethic of globality in which “relation” - the attempt to move toward the Other -- functions only by recognizing the Other’s radical opacity.¹⁵ Thus, whereas utopian promises of globalization tend to imagine a “marketplace” of coherent, rooted individuals meeting to exchange certain components of their identities -- to discard, take on, or reaffirm certain qualities of “self” based on highly mediated encounters with difference -- Glissant imagines a form of cultural creolization that operates among subjects who have no solid ground to stand on. Relation’s ground is “alluvial.” Those who wish to embrace it must “drift” or “swim” in the unknown, the constantly shifting, expanding, and contracting, opening them up to an “experience of the abyss” which for Glissant has its vertiginous, de-localizing beginnings in the trauma of the middle passage.¹⁶

In the “Eloge de Creolite,” the manifesto in praise of “creoleness” Chamoiseau co-authored with Rafael Confiant and Jean Bernabe in 1989, one year before the publication of *Poetics of Relation* but claiming an intellectual debt to Glissant’s previous work, the authors begin from the same place as would Glissant: from an inquiry into the special relevance of the Caribbean and the black Atlantic for understanding contemporary social processes that go by the names empire and globalization, and an interest in what the trauma of the middle passage and erasure of subaltern history under slavery and colonialism reveal about the particulars of Caribbean experience. Yet, where Glissant moves outwards from these particulars, the Creolistes turn resolutely inwards. Their interest is in trying to repair the fundamental breach that Glissant will name the abyss and designate as the “best element of exchange” in late modernity. Theirs is an attempt to

¹⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 7, 8.

¹⁶ Ibid, 33.

repair through their fiction the continuity fractured by enslavement and its official historical disavowal in Martinique, revivifying “true memory” by burrowing deeply in the island’s lost and silenced histories -- its popular and mythical rather than official pasts.¹⁷ Where Glissant would have them embrace the alluvial to move towards the Other, the Creolistes’ desire is to become grounded and move toward the Self, to shore up the ground upon which (especially black) Martinicans may know themselves.

In a word, then, the *Eloge* proceeds in the opposite direction from Glissant’s thinking, something he was quick to note in response in *Poetics of Relation*, where he wrote that any attempt to “get at Being,” even a state of Being whose “contents” are forged through creolization, “would constitute a step backwards in comparison with how creolizations can function.”¹⁸ It is, thus, a testament both to Chamoiseau’s own understanding of what Glissant terms Relational ethics and the original, non-manifested quality of his aesthetics that while *Texaco* tunnels through Martinique’s popular and mythical histories and revives figures from them, including the maroon and the “conteur” or Creole storyteller, it does *not* attempt to get at the Being of such figures. Indeed, the point of their fictional treatment in *Texaco* is to destabilize their coherence, explode the simplicity attributed to them as myths. Chamoiseau, in this way, effects the pose of localism without monumentalizing the local, an achievement we might attribute to the fact that, for him, to write is necessarily, incessantly to confront the “groundlessness” of writing. As Marie-Sophie asks, in one of her many asides to Chamoiseau’s authorial alter-ego in the text, the “word scratcher” Oiseau du Cham:

¹⁷ See “Eloge de Creolite,” 896-898.

¹⁸ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 89.

Oiseau du Cham, is there such a thing as writing informed by the word, and by the silences, and which remains a living thing, moving in a circle, and wandering all the time, ceaselessly irrigating with life the things written before, and which reinvents the circle each time like a spiral which at any moment is in the future, ahead, each loop modifying the other, nonstop, without losing a unity difficult to put into words?¹⁹

Texaco meets this self-posed challenge -- to write according to the “wandering,” looping cadences of the “word,” attuned to the oral rhythms of everyday speech -- in no small sense. Its circular narrative, further, allows Marie-Sophie to “irrigat(e) with life” and the prospect of discovery the things she has already relayed, continually revisiting thematics she and other speakers in the text have already explored and thus transforming what might have been a closed circle into an open spiral.

Arguably the most important question the narrative wanders “around” and through as it tries to remain a “living thing” concerns acts of urban resistance. What is the best way to “maroon” in the city, to stake out a place of belonging and rootedness that opposes predominant modes of spatial ordering for those whom the city includes as “exceptions”: slaves, ex-slaves, the “proletariat without factories,” squatters? For Esternome, Marie-Sophie’s father, the answer is clear: to recreate the mythic practice of maronnage as closely as possible. He distinguishes his community of ex-slaves in the mornes of St. Pierre from the other collectives present by positioning it as an inheritor of the tradition of the black slaves who fled the plantations as maroons, setting up fugitive communities. His (re)attachment to space is also unapologetically nativist, as though what gives the ex-slaves the right to stake a claim on the land in this moment is the shared trauma of having survived slavery. Thus, when he defines his “Nouteka” (his creole word for the community and its ethos, which Marie-Sophie translates as “a

¹⁹ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 320.

magical we”) as a process of planting and “building the country,” he specifies: “not the mulattoes’ country, not the bekes’ country, not the coolies’, not the congoes” but “the country of the blacks of the land.” Thus, for Esternome, “to say Quarter is to say: blacks who came out of freedom and entered life through this side of the land.”²⁰ His Quarter is closed not only to the bekes and the indentured laborers who were brought to Martinique to work after the legal end of slavery, but to those he considers virtual slaves despite abolition: “But careful! Marie-Sophie: Here, I’m telling you about the *Quarters up there*, neighborhoods of the ridges, of the hills, of the clouds. The *Quarters down there*, by the canefields, meant the same thing as plantation. That’s where the bekes stuck their workers.”²¹ His disdain, finally, for those “down there” extends even to those in his own Quarter, as they increasingly go down to the new sugar factories they hope will provide better livelihoods than subsistence farming.

Its closed specificity soon makes Esternome’s “Nouteka of the Hills” impossible to maintain. In its failure, Chamoiseau suggests the undesirability of trying to resurrect or redeploy marronage as a heroic form of subaltern rebellion. To do so is to take refuge in an all-or-nothing logic of resistance, he indicates, that excludes those who remain (by choice or fate) partially inside the system it seeks to oppose. By contrast, Marie-Sophie’s own struggle will be to carve out a space inside the system that forces it to change from within.

Before turning to discuss how she engages in this struggle, it is important to note that such critiques of the romance of pure spatial resistance as we find in the first half of

²⁰ Ibid, 127, 128.

²¹ Ibid, 128.

Texaco extend beyond Martinican literature to other texts immersed in the urban Caribbean context, and are not, of course, limited to investigations of the post-abolition period. In Earl Lovelace's novel, *The Dragon Can't Dance*, for example, we see similar interest in the problems of oppositional purism staged in a narrative set in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad in the 1960s, shortly after the island won its independence from Britain. Lovelace's novel builds to a semi-tragic climax in which the "Bad Johns" of the Cavalry Hill shantytown -- the defiant, unemployed men who occupy the corners and play in its steelband during Carnival -- try to foment a violent rebellion against the new government in the streets of the city but are unable to do so. They are eventually arrested and sent to jail, but more disheartening in their minds is the way their effort is dismissed publicly, both by the government and among the poor, as nothing more than a "dragon dance," a threatening gesture with nothing behind it. Unable to get their intended target -- their neighbors -- to "rise up" and "make no peace with slavery, for you have survived," the men, especially their disillusioned leader Aldrick (who plays the neighborhood's dragon in the yearly Carnival parade), speculate that their inability to think and act "for themselves," rather than "for the authorities," produced the failure.²²

The more persuasive answer, however, when it comes, recognizes, as well, their long-held disdain for anyone on the Hill who does not share in their wordless appreciation for "Carnival, rebellion, (and) the possession of nothing."²³ Whether scorning the neighborhood men and women who take low-paying jobs in the city, dismissing the old women gossiping on their porches, or humiliating, finally, the young East Indian-Caribbean man, Pariag, who wants to join them in solidarity, the Bad Johns

²² Lovelace, *The Dragon Can't Dance*, 189.

²³ Ibid, 204.

have exempted *themselves* from everyday practices of survival and possibilities of resistance on Cavalry Hill, as it were, in advance. As one of the toughest rebels, Fisheye, finally realizes and explains: “Listen, you know why we play a mas? Why? Is because a man alone, that is all he could play. That is all a man alone could do.”²⁴

Solidarity Through Relation: Making Room For All at the Rendezvous With Conquest

Texaco’s Esternome and the Bad Johns of *The Dragon Can’t Dance* are “men alone” in their struggles against urban dispossession because their attempts to craft solidarity in the post-slavery, postcolonial city depend on exclusivist claims to space and heroic notions of rebellion. To distinguish between the philosophies underlying their projects and Glissant’s notion of relational ethics, which sheds considerable light on Chamoiseau’s representation of Marie-Sophie’s subsequent community of squatters in *Texaco*, we should begin where Glissant does in *Poetics of Relation* -- from Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of the root and the rhizome. Here is how Glissant glosses the difference between the two, as they are theorized in the philosophers’ *A Thousand*

Plateaus:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness, but challenges that of a totalitarian root.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid, 190. The “mas” Fisheye references is a vernacular rendering of “masque”: to “play” one is to dress up and perform as in a Carnival parade.

²⁵ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 11.

Those who translate Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the rhizome into spatial and geographic praxis often privilege their interest in the figure of the nomad, the wanderer who moves ceaselessly from point-to-point, and avoids putting down roots of any kind. Glissant speaks, instead, of the rhizome as an "enmeshed root system," an interlacing of roots and branches that "maintains ... idea of rootedness" without a "predatory rootstock taking over permanently." The rhizome "moves" even as it remains rooted because it ceaselessly elaborates new, lateral, non-hierarchical points of connection. And it is this fostering of connections through "rhizomatic thought" that, Glissant quickly reveals, is the principle behind his Poetics of Relation.

For Glissant, the project of Relation is akin to "errantry," a way of moving through the world and discovering one's unexpected connections with its diversity that, unlike the idea of (literal) nomadism, does not preclude remaining "rooted" in spatial or geographic terms. This is an important distinction considering that his is an application of Deleuze and Guattari's thought to the colonial and postcolonial specificities of the Caribbean. As Glissant acknowledges in his writing on the "abyss" of the middle passage, the history of enslavement and colonialism creates countless subjects stripped of the ability to determine of their relation to, and location within, Caribbean space. Any theoretical embrace of the imperative to wander and detach oneself from territory comes up against this history. For black slaves and their descendants, the imperative to mobility has long been a reality and the desire to make a home of what Glissant calls "the imposed land" of the Caribbean repeatedly thwarted by subsequent geographic expropriations. Thus, to conceive of Relation as a way of being "rooted but errant," as Glissant does, is to recognize the political value and practical importance of being rooted in the first place,

before specifying how such “rooting” may make room for and be enhanced by rhizomatic thought and praxis.

In *Texaco*, Chamoiseau’s multigenerational plot provides the narrative mechanism by which rooting via the imposition of a “totalitarian root” gives way to rootedness enacted and protected through rhizomatic flexibility. Marie-Sophie’s final meeting with Papa Totone, the mysterious “Mentoh” who takes over the role of mentor and confidant in her life after her father’s death, confirms for her the importance of struggling to moor in the city. “You’ve got to fight here,” Papa Totone tells her, “whoever maroons in the hills, maroons in City.”²⁶ To devote herself directly to “that very old struggle” to realize citizenship requires her to claim a space in the city -- to “possess a roof” and fight to keep it.²⁷ Marie-Sophie’s decision to found the Texaco shantytown thus constitutes an updated, more directly “urban” form of marronage. Her method of founding it, however, is to break from the heroic models she has been given, and to embrace the uncertainty of everyday struggle.

First off, unlike Esternome, she does not try to limit the make-up of the settlement she establishes. Rather, she amplifies its potential for chaotic growth and multiplicity. Where Esternome imagines his Quarter as a “Creole flower,” an image that metaphorizes his attempt to delimit, cultivate, and naturalize it as the home of an authentically “Creole” community, Marie-Sophie imagines Texaco’s hutches spreading wildly, blooming with “the stubbornness of tough wild grasses.”²⁸ After she constructed her first hut, she recalls,

²⁶ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 294, 292.

²⁷ Ibid, 297, 275.

²⁸ Ibid, 314.

Things went very fast. My hutch attracted other hutches. Word about the place blew about like the wind. Since every day brought with it a flood of would-be City people, it was soon known that there was room by Texaco. What's more, I went around saying it everywhere, along the warehouses where I did my odd jobs, hoping to get a few people around me so as to get a tighter hold.²⁹

The settlement is, in short, born of what Glissant would call Relation. It constitutes the spatial realization of Marie-Sophie's will to move toward, and, in this case, attract, the urban Other in a way that relates, connects, and conjuncts without limitation, which attempts to be, in Glissant's terms, "directly in contact with everything possible."³⁰ And, further, it suggests the inherent strength and hardiness of that which grows from this openness, this refusal to limit the scope of relation between Texaco and elsewhere.

While it would be impossible to delineate all of the differences among the squatters who arrive to live alongside Marie-Sophie in Texaco, suffice it to say that they are a "heteroglot" group -- racially, in terms of geographic origins and national affiliations, ideologically, and so on. Marie-Sophie's references to them foreground the paradox of their rootedness and diffraction, their disorganization and strength: "our maroon gang, still disorganized in the midst of battle."³¹ The smaller group she cobbles together from this complex mix to defend the settlement from those who would see it demolished (primarily the "oil beke" who owns the land the Texaco corporation rents on the island, flanked by the Seyaress or "CRS," a colonial arm of the French riot police regularly called in to destroy the shacks) are almost all women, many of whom, as Marie-Sophie describes them, are single and not "so mobile on the good Lord's earth" due to the

²⁹ Ibid, 300.

³⁰ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 32.

³¹ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 315.

many children they must “drag” behind them.³² Here, Chamoiseau draws our attention to another of the paradoxes of Relation. Complicating the common assumption that rootlessness, itinerancy, and mobility give rise to translational worldviews, the men of the settlement “practic(e) a supple detachment” from its difficulties. They have no need to encounter the diversities of the settlement, because they only entertain “a temporary contract” with it.³³ The women, because they do not have the option of drifting, become the primary practitioners of what Glissant would term errantry -- a “rooted errantry” that impels them to “plunge” into the “opacities” of the “part of the world to which (they have) access.”³⁴

To wage the battle to protect Texaco, they “begin to organize,” and here organizing requires actively contemplating difference among the squatters and activating the “multilingual” nature of Relation. When the squatter camp is threatened with a civil suit by the beke, for example, the efforts of the “lawyerly mulatto” the communists with the PPM (Progressive Party of Martinique, founded by Aime Cesaire) have sent to protect Texaco are, on their own, not enough: “Marie-Clemence, Sonore, Neolise Daidaine, and myself had to go around to each hutch and explain, reassure, gather the papers, rouse the men living by themselves *Otherwise it’s a jail guard who’s going to wake you up every morning.*”³⁵ Even within the common code of “survival,” what it means to survive may differ. For the women, it involves procuring things that make the shantytown more permanent, more livable, less vulnerable to police assault, such as concrete steps, paths, and electricity. For many of the men, it entails having the option to move between

³² Ibid, 344.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 20.

³⁵ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 344.

Texaco and other places, the freedom to move, settle, then move again – and it is by appealing to this logic of survival that the women compel them to cooperate with the lawyer who is working to protect them within the urban bureaucracy.

The languages by which Texaco's comrades-in-struggle speak the city and the settlement's needs and prospects range from the aesthetic to the bureaucratic, the survival-oriented to the messianic. At times, Chamoiseau seems to suggest that a range of *Weltanschauungen* is useful in the shantytown because there is a constant need to try new tactics of resistance in the battle for its survival, to test out different ideas of struggle as well as ways of having faith. For example, one of the arrivants, a Haitian exile called Ti-Cirique, is inspired to read great French literature (Lamartine, Hugo, Baudelaire) aloud in the shantytown to inspire the "defense committee" at their most dejected moments. (Thus, in a line often quoted by critics, he instructs them to read their own rebuilding of their continuously demolished shacks in heroic terms, as full of the "persistence of Sisyphus and the invincibility of the Phoenix"). This comic discrepancy between text and context becomes something more concretely generative, though, through everyday experiences of Relation, which is to say, as Ti-Cirique's participation in the struggle moves him away from his universalist canon to an appreciation of more "local" texts and Marie-Sophie begins to connect their local struggles to his poetic attempts to inspire new outlooks. One day, when the squatters are growing despondent over the lack of response from the E.D.F. (French Electric Company) to their petitions for electricity, Marie-Sophie is struck by a line Ti-Cirique reads from Aime Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (*Notebook of a Return to My Native Land*): "and room there is for all at the rendezvous with conquest and now we know that the sun revolves around our earth,

lighting the parcel that only our will has fixed and that any star shall plummet from sky to earth at our limitless command.”³⁶ She decides to use it to petition Cesaire directly.

Visiting (i.e. intruding on) the then-mayor of Fort-de-France in his home, flanked by the women of the shantytown, Marie-Sophie overcomes Cesaire’s reflexive hostilities by reciting the line, which, fittingly, is not only an assertion of agency by the oppressed, but a declaration that the “event” of subaltern resistance is inherently illimitable (“and room there is for *all* at the rendezvous with conquest”). Hearing (and seeing) his grand invocation made material and immediate, Cesaire “calms down” and Marie-Sophie is able to ask him “for running water ... electricity ... a way to come in and out of Texaco without having to beg to use the beke’s gate.”³⁷

Such canny recruitments of official power on behalf of local need and co-modifications of pragmatic and poetic worldviews are common throughout *Texaco*. Both accompany the squatters’ greatest triumph: winning the urban planner over to their cause, so that he becomes their passionate emissary to the town council, no longer a mere agent of the modernizing state. Yet, unlike in the aforementioned scene with Cesaire, we are prevented from detecting the moment that precipitates the planner’s shift in perspective. As Roy Caldwell has noted, the narrative “understates” the actual development of the planner’s conversion, leaving us to piece it together from the notes he has composed on his meeting with Marie-Sophie after the fact, which are inserted into the main text at random.³⁸ By obscuring the chain of causality in this way, Chamoiseau keeps the narrative emphasis on the everyday practices and exchanges that occur among the

³⁶ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 368.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Caldwell, “For a Theory of the Creole City,” 27.

squatters, rather than on those arising between Marie-Sophie and the planner (both “heroes” of the narrative in their own right). Even the moment in which Marie-Sophie recalls how the planner, the “Scourge,” became Texaco’s “Christ,” downplays his and her efforts in reshaping the shantytown’s trajectory in favor of highlighting these intra-community networks. Marie-Sophie, for example, cites “an agreement of strange little facts, sudden small joys, minute happiness, of changing fortunes, which made (his) coming the point of departure for a new era”:

The testimonies of all the things that had happened during his coming were being tied together. Sonore finally had work. Irene had faced a monstrous shark in the harbor which he succeeded in bringing up whole the next day and which he sold by five-kilo slices (this brought us enough to finish our house in concrete). Julot the Mangy had a dream in which his cruel mother reached out and caressed him (the only time in all his life). Neolise Daidaine sighted the Virgin Mary wrapped in madras under her lemon tree. Marie-Clemence heard celestial murmurs tell her tales from all over the Caribbean, in Creole, English, Spanish, and French, and a vigor with which to spread these stories came over her as well ... That’s why the Scourge seemed less threatening and why we began to call him Christ, without giving it much thought, and hoped he would come back with *the Good News* of which we knew nothing.³⁹

The way that Marie-Sophie juxtaposes these various interpretations of the meaning of planner’s arrival tempts us to see them as idiosyncratic and to assure ourselves that there exists, beyond the squatters’ multiple perspectives, a “true” interpretation of how the shantytown was saved. At the same time, by refusing to provide this interpretation, Chamoiseau challenges us to see these “testimonies” and the way in which they have been “tied together” in the process of defending the shantytown as constitutive of the political themselves. It is a kind of politics that cannot neatly be separated from everyday events and recollections, which overspill Marie Sophie’s narration of their triumph.

³⁹ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 380-381.

An Everyday Militancy?

Texaco's assertion of the political possibilities inherent in the heterogeneity of the squatter settlement sets the novel apart from considerations of shantytown movements on the academic Left a decade later. These have been more pessimistic, particularly on the issue of what Mike Davis terms the "bewildering variety" of responses to structural neglect the experience of living in a shantytown can produce, even among the residents of a single impoverished neighborhood.⁴⁰ In many Southern slums, Davis notes, NGOs coexist with gangs, radical social movements compete with widespread anomie and apathy, and the only founts of collective mobilization that have appealed to the urban poor on a large enough basis to be considered "mass" and/or "global" movements are non-secular: charismatic, healing (as opposed to radical/activist) churches. Taking a similar perspective, Slavoj Žižek declares the major political imperative for the Left in the twenty-first century to be the politicization of slum-dwellers: the grand task of helping them realize, as he matter-of-factly states, that "whoever lives in the banlieus of Bamako or Shanghai is not essentially different from someone who lives in the banlieu of Paris or the ghettos of Chicago."⁴¹ Only by transcending such differences of birth, identity, language, belief, etc., can those relegated to shantytowns and other marginalized neighborhoods become unified and purposeful. And what should their purpose be? For Žižek, it should be to build upon the "most interesting" aspect of their exclusion: its territorial character, which provides them an opportunity to create "liberated territories" where the logic of the larger, exploitative system is suspended.⁴²

⁴⁰ Davis, *Planet of Slums*, 202.

⁴¹ Žižek, *In Defense of Lost Causes*, 426.

⁴² Ibid.

For Chamoiseau, as I have been arguing, embracing the “bewildering variety” of perspectives, experiences, and affiliations of urban residents is a crucial part of everyday political praxis. And, as Esternome’s failed experiment makes clear, one of *Texaco*’s primary lessons is that the drive to compel place-based opposition movements to leave behind or transcend their particularities may, in fact, only cement their fragmentation and isolation. In Esternome’s *Nouteka*, we see Zizek’s hope that the disenfranchised will establish “liberated territories” outside the system of global capitalism and neoliberal state formations prefigured, and we find that the story does not end well: it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, Chamoiseau insists, to maintain a stance of complete opposition to those spaces, forces, and practices that are capitalist, Western, masculinist, and otherwise “hegemonic” but upon which one’s daily survival also often depends. Zizek optimistically imagines that such “liberated territories” could maintain themselves as social and territorial alternatives, though he implicitly concedes that to follow this premise to the end would require state action to protect and expand them as such. On this point, he cites Hugo Chavez’s rise-to-power in Venezuela, sustained by the support of barrio-dwellers in Caracas and elsewhere in the country, as an example of a “politicization” of slum-dwellers that should be replicated in other places.

Is it possible for shantytown-based social movements to favor militancy without endorsing a revolutionary ethos? While this question is best answered through close attention to the words and actions of actual social movements, David Harvey’s recent work elaborating and updating Henri Lefebvre’s notion of the “right to the city” allows us to clarify the criteria by which we might read their practices. Broadly, Harvey’s proposal is that adopting the slogan of the “right to the city” could serve as a unifying thematic and

demand in the myriad contemporary, globally “uncoupled” struggles against neoliberal dispossession. Many political mobilizations of shantytown-dwellers -- against forced eviction, for example, or to bring to slums services automatically accorded to the wealthier parts of urban municipalities -- obviously already claim this “right” in various ways. Yet Harvey’s conception of the “right to the city” contains within it a subtle distinction that can help us identify those movements of the urban poor that advance this demand in more militant ways:

The right to the city as both working slogan and political ideal ... focuses on the question of who commands the necessary connection between urbanization and surplus production and use. The democratization of that right, and the construction of a broad social movement to enforce its will is imperative if the dispossessed are to take back the control which they have for so long been denied, and if they are to institute new modes of urbanization.⁴³

Movements centered in slums that demand the democratization of what Harvey terms “the exercise of a collective power to reshape the processes of urbanization” enact militant demands,⁴⁴ even when they encourage translational approaches to conceptions of resistance that help it thrive as everyday practice.

While commentators such as Davis assume that a grounding in everyday emergencies and a kind of ideological “flexibility” (what he terms “promiscuity”) will lead slum collectives to engage in alliances that require them to compromise on (or prevent them from ever forming) significant political and economic demands, *Texaco* suggests just the opposite.⁴⁵ Harvey’s work adds to our understanding of how militancy might be defined outside narratives of revolution and other “heroic” modes of rebellion.

⁴³ Harvey, “The Right to the City,” 40.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴⁵ This is how I read Davis’s claim that slum-based movements may be too “episodic,” fragmented, and prone to “clientalism” to sponsor effective Left resistance. See “Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat,” 29.

Rather than simply seeing all shantytown/slum movements as prone to engage in “functionalist” political maneuvering, it is crucial, I suggest, to distinguish between those for which the struggle to democratize the collective power to shape urban processes acts as a guide for daily practice, and those for which it does not. This is precisely what I will attempt to do in the concluding section, as I turn to two real-life squatters’ movements.

Shack-Dwellers’ International and Abahlali baseMjondolo

Many of the adjectives I have used to describe the “relational” mode of urban resistance endorsed by *Texaco* -- flexible, inclusive, pragmatic, women-centric, etc. -- also appear in the self-ascribed philosophies of dozens of non-profit organizations currently attempting to empower the residents of slums and shack-towns in the South. It is therefore important to specify how ideals of flexibility and openness are distinctly articulated, in *Texaco* and some of the real-life movements of squatters its fictional imaginary opens onto.

Chamoiseau’s novel intervenes most directly into Caribbean and black Atlantic discourses of resistance, alighting on the growing importance of urban dispossession in the region as its guiding thread. It seeks a way of moving forward from a model of anticolonial resistance that requires enacting a complete break from hegemonic structures of power and corresponds to a narrative structure grounded in the experiences of the newly self-sovereign, black male subject/collective (a subject/collective whose instantiations we might trace from C.L.R. James’ black nationalist history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, all the way up to a “pessimistic” postcolonial novel such as Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance*). Chamoiseau’s critique, however, does not lead

him to dismiss militancy, or models of resistance that attach primary importance to bodily and spiritual freedom, tout court. *Texaco* seems to ask, instead, how to refigure them for a Martinican present in which racialized dispossession persists but masculinist, nationalist, revolutionary projects have been shut down. To this end, it figures a deracinated, popular urban settlement that enacts militant demands on political authorities while simultaneously configuring itself as radically open to diverse ways of living and protesting -- as building a new kind of urban community based in the solidarities of everyday struggle: "Each hutch, day after day, supported the other and so on. The same went for the lives which reached out to each over the ghost fences writhing on the ground."⁴⁶

Militancy emerges via the "right to the city" as the squatters' non-negotiable demand for both inclusion in the city and the transformation of the city to accommodate them. Though the "holes" of remote housing projects residents of *Texaco*'s neighboring shantytowns allow themselves to be "scattered into" provide many of the same services Marie-Sophie and her defense committee are fighting for, *Texaco*'s squatters know this "solution" would require them to give up the ability to participate in the process of remaking the city into the kind of space where they *can* live.

Texaco thus envisions (in an unmistakably Caribbean move) a hybrid formation of spatial resistance in which "openness" and militancy coincide in creative, rather than purely defensive movements. In offering a different path towards the postcolonial present, the genesis of this formation in *Texaco* opens up the present's political possibilities. It does so especially by disrupting the tendency of the social sciences to

⁴⁶ Chamoiseau, *Texaco*, 319.

measure the efficacy of grassroots or popular movements in the era of globalization by first defining them as *either* militant *or* cooperative. Here, for example, is how Arjun Appadurai describes the bright line that for him may be drawn across *all* such grassroots movements in the early twenty-first century:

The alliances and divisions in this new global political economy are not always easy to predict or understand. But among the many varieties of grassroots political movements, at least one broad distinction can be made. On the one hand are groups that have opted for armed, militarized solutions to their problems of inclusion, recognition and participation. On the other are those that have opted for a politics of partnership – partnership, that is, between traditionally opposed groups such as states, corporations, and workers.⁴⁷

Appadurai's "broad distinction" does not apply to (and thus seems to deny the existence of) the kinds of social movements novels such as *Texaco* stage in fictional terms: those that enact militancy-from-below and rhizomatic connections as a means to internal strength. In his reading of social opposition, rather, militancy is equivalent to *militarism*. There is no room in this assumption for grassroots movements for whom militancy is far less about "armed, militarized solutions" than a process of holding fast, in spite of considerable pressures and intimidations, to the demand for "inclusion, recognition, and participation" in urban life. Flexibility, further, is equivalent to the "politics of partnership," which we can easily recognize as the dominant ethos of the NGO: negotiation, compromise, and coalition-building among variously invested "stakeholders" operating at hierarchically differentiated levels of power and influence.

Shack Dwellers International, or SDI, is perhaps the best-known non-governmental organization to employ this "politics of partnership" on behalf of squatters on issues of housing rights. Formed in 1996 as a network of affiliations among shack-

⁴⁷ Appadurai, "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics," 22.

dwellers' groups in India, South Africa, and Thailand, it attempts to extend the "federating" model of activist collaboration (initiated by an Indian organization called the "the Alliance," begun by SDI president Arputham Jockpin) to shack-dwellers' associations worldwide. The goal of the "federating" model is to link pro-poor movements into more effective, agile, network formations, working vertically, on the one hand, to build linkages among national, urban, and grassroots activists in specific countries, while on the other hand promoting the sharing of information and political strategies between similarly situated groups internationally. SDI has received a great deal of praise for the ways in which it improves upon the "World Bank" model still practiced by many NGOs trying to link the urban poor in the Global South to international sources of assistance ("donors"). SDI, unlike these organizations, positions itself as pro-poor and anti-expert in outlook, "decenter(ing) the developmental model of an expert/client relationship where knowledge flows unidirectionally and asymmetrically."⁴⁸ Rejecting the tone of emergency that often characterizes studies of the lives of the poor and the logic of projectization by which the Western donor community has long dictated the terms of progress in the South, SDI advocates a "politics of patience" which insists that real change in the slums happens slowly, through a process of long-term asset building and trial-and-error organizing in which the poor pool, amass, and grow the resources for remaking their communities with themselves at the helm of these efforts.

Many have suggested that SDI's model provides slum-dwellers significant access to the international policy debates that determine their futures. Appadurai further insists on the potential benefits of its policy of encouraging the poor to exchange experiences

⁴⁸ Dilip Gaonkar, "Toward New Social Imaginaries," 14.

and debate tactics across national borders, which arguably makes room for something similar to what I have termed “solidarity-through-relation” between localities:

Visits by groups of slum or shack dwellers to one another’s settlements in other countries (allow them) to share in ongoing local projects, give and receive advice and reactions, share in work and life experiences, and exchange tactics and plans. The mode of exchange is based on a model of seeing and hearing rather than seeking to impose standard practices, key words being *exposure*, *exploration*, and *options*.⁴⁹

Yet such celebrations of SDI’s partnership model necessarily overlook the way in which their ethos of “compromise” necessitates that groups operating under their aegis accept major limitations on what they can individually accomplish and ask for. This, I would suggest, is the unspoken condition upon which SDI’s philosophy of “flexibility” rests: the poor, more so than the other “stakeholders” it mediates among, must be “flexible” about what they can expect to get out of struggle. Such limitations are obvious if one notices how many of the news-briefs and working papers on SDI’s website foreground the issue of “negotiated resettlement” and “people-managed resettlement.” These designate the allocation of a small amount of control to those who are being pushed off valuable land in their cities over the terms of their “resettlement” -- regarding when demolitions will occur, how to decide which residents will be allowed to stay and which must go, whether residents whose homes are to be demolished will be compensated and/or get new houses, and how far from the original site they will be located.⁵⁰ While such control may be

⁴⁹ Appadurai, “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics,” 41.

⁵⁰ See, for example, “Negotiating the Right to Stay: A Community-Led Process in Old Fadama (Accra)” and “Negotiating the Right to Stay in the City (Phnom Penh)” on SDInet.org. In both cases, “the right to stay” is accorded only to a fraction of the communities in question. Generally, those that receive it are required to “enumerate” themselves -- provide crucial information to the authorities about how many people are living in the settlement -- in exchange for some say in the terms of resettlement.

important, SDI's philosophy seems to be that "managing" resettlement can substitute for more militant demands -- such as the demand not to be "resettled" at all -- and that making the latter would prevent squatters from being taken seriously by their formally empowered partners.

This discussion reveals the importance of distinguishing between the openness to heterogeneity of beliefs and tactics championed by a squatter novel such as *Texaco* and the interest in multilateral "partnerships" demonstrated by organizations such as SDI. What this amounts to is a significant divergence in the *orientation* of flexibility. Where Chamoiseau's squatters are expert translators among the often opaque visions of the city they themselves hold, SDI's openness to negotiations over tactics and outlooks has as its fundamental object the "scaling-up" of institutional power, which opens it to cooptation from above.

Abahlali baseMjondolo, which developed out of a protest in the Kennedy Road settlement in Durban in 2005, distinguishes itself from institutionally recognized "network" formations such as SDI by installing a militant localism above all other objectives -- an unyielding attachment to what we may call, following Harvey, its members' "right to the city" as their most important "human right."⁵¹ As Richard Pithouse, a social theorist and activist who has participated in the movement and written extensively on its beginnings, argues, Abahlali baseMjondolo arose when its members realized that their efforts as "obedient and faithful citizens," participating in "every available public participation program," were failing to produce even a modicum of change:

⁵¹ Harvey, "The Right to the City," 23.

For years Kennedy Road has dutifully sent representatives to meetings with (the) government. They did everything that was asked of them and became the perfect civil society organization in search of “partnership” with other “stakeholders.” In return they got contempt. The ongoing collective reflection on the experience of the failure of the official model produced an ongoing and collective reflection on a developing commitment to open resistance. The “leadership” has had no choice but to accept this.⁵²

Behind the democratic-sounding discourse of the “politics of partnership” lies the reality, Pithouse insists, of undisguised contempt. He flatly rejects the idea that the negotiations organizations like SDI train shack-dwellers to participate in are actually conducted on anything like equal footing with other “stakeholders.” The failure of what he terms the “official model” reenergizes efforts to establish what Appadurai would call “deep democracy” -- the effort to reconstitute citizenship in cities where huge numbers have been disenfranchised by globalization -- but not, as Appadurai predicts, by extending the links of local organizations vertically or internationally. Rather, it is by starting over from scratch, from the bottom, democratizing the shack-dwellers’ movement internally. Thus, when Pithouse puts “leadership” in quotations in the last sentence in the excerpt, it is not to cast doubt on anyone’s abilities or legitimacy but to underscore that Abahlali baseMjondolo maintains no separation between its leaders (whose tasks are scrupulously rotated, in any case) and its rank-and-file. Both sustain “ongoing and collective reflection” on what the aims of the movement must be; both see to it that “the work of (the leaders) remains a function of the committee which remains a function of the community.”⁵³

⁵² Pithouse, “Struggle is a School: The Rise of a Shack-Dweller’s Movement in Durban, South Africa.”

⁵³ Ibid.

Abahlali baseMjondolo emerged as the culmination of what Pithouse calls a “developing commitment to open resistance” among a community of South African shack-dwellers who had for more than ten years been faithful to the idea that the post-Apartheid government simply needed time to make good on its promises to improve the lives of those in whose name the authority of the ANC was first legitimated. “Open resistance,” therefore, most obviously designates undisguised, unadulterated resistance to the present conjuncture. No more politics of partnership that limits the terms of success from the beginning; the first Abahlali protests demanded everything: “land, housing, toilets, an end to the threat of forced removals, and the (local ANC) councilor’s resignation.”⁵⁴ As in *Texaco*, the project of militant resistance grounds itself here in the struggles of the not-so-distant past, a move that is key to establishing the movement’s local, national, and international legitimacy. The members of Abahlali baseMjondolo remind each governmental and quasi-governmental official they meet with that the state’s policy of forced evictions is not only a betrayal of the promises made during the struggle against apartheid, “it (is) the same as apartheid – black people (are) being pushed out of the city.”⁵⁵

Less explicit but still crucial, the decision to embrace open resistance in Kennedy Road also entails a commitment to *open* resistance: a resistance that cannot be “owned” by any particular faction of the movement. Abahlali’s squatters insist that, “a politics that cannot be understood and owned by everyone is poison.”⁵⁶ Theirs is a politics of the “strong poor,” in which strength derives, as in *Texaco*’s solidarity-in-relation, from

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Abahlali activists quoted in Pithouse, “Struggle is a School.”

⁵⁶ Pithouse, “Thinking Resistance in the Shantytown,” 29.

remaining open to change and innovation “from below.” Such openness leads to unexpected affiliations between the movement and its various “outsides,” as collective struggle and reflection on its meaning “ties together” endless “testimonies” (to recall Marie-Sophie’s language in *Texaco*) on the experience of exclusion and the desire for freedom. Pithouse explains how, in Durban, this process of struggle and reflection has slowly but surely (an “everyday” temporality if there every was one) culminated in a non-racialized approach to resistance. This is despite the fact that the ANC constantly discredits the Abahlali as an ethnic as opposed to secular movement, and the fact that socioeconomic divisions in Durban are often popularly mapped onto racial differences between Indian and black South Africans.

In May 2005 your experience may have led you to believe that your suffering was directly linked to Indian racism. In September 2005 you may be paying your part of the 350 rand (about \$50) to send a taxi to the predominately Indian working-class suburb of Bayview to show solidarity with the struggle of the people there because you have come to understand their experience of suffering. And you may have elected radical (Indian) academic Fazel Khan, a man you have come to know, respect, and trust in the praxis of struggle, to be on the Kennedy Road negotiating team in a crucial face-off with the city. In May 2005 you might have believed that the World Bank would create jobs for your community at the dump. But while building solidarity for your march, you may have discovered that the same jobs have been promised to other nearby communities that you would never have met in the course of ordinary life lived with everyone in their place.⁵⁷

New insights into common experiences of suffering, new solidarities with those you are not supposed to know but find yourself meeting unexpectedly -- these, for the Abahlali, are the only “pay-offs” to be found in the “praxis of struggle,” the only real “wealth” of the urban poor. Fittingly, they bring transformations that are most keenly felt in the register of everyday experience: “ordinary life” has changed; it is no longer “life lived with everyone in their place.”

⁵⁷ Pithouse, “Struggle is a School.”

In a 2007 communiqué distinguishing themselves specifically from Shack Dwellers International (with which they are commonly, though somewhat inexplicably confused, by international journalists) the members of Abahlali baseMjondolo return to this idea of the “praxis of struggle” to explain why *their* collective resources could not be more different than the ten million dollars given to SDI by the Gates Foundation that same week. “The money is not ours,” the communiqué insists, “Our struggle is ours. Our struggle continues. Our struggle is for land and housing in democratic cities.”⁵⁸ The multiplicity of everyday practice -- in which militancy coexists with inclusiveness, material demands coexist with defiant critique of the existing system, and immediate needs are asserted alongside futural hopes -- pervades Abahlali’s assertion of that for which they fight.

⁵⁸ Abahlali baseMjondolo, “Neither the March Nor the Money Are Ours.”

Works Cited:

- Abahlali baseMjondolo. "Neither the March Nor the Money is Ours." *Abahlali baseMjondolo*. 22 November 2007. Web. 1 February 2012.
- Appadurai, Arjun. "Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics." *Public Culture* 14.1 (1996): 21-47.
- Benitez-Rojo. *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. Trans. James E. Maraniss. Durham: Duke University Press, 1992.
- Caldwell, Roy Chandler. "For a Theory of the Creole City: *Texaco* and the Postcolonial Postmodern." *Ici-La: Place and Displacement in Caribbean Writing in French*. ed. Mary Gallagher. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003. 25-39.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick. *Texaco*. New York: Vintage International, 1998.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick, Raphael Confiant, and Jean Bernabe. *Eloge de la Creolite*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989.
- Chamoiseau, Patrick, Raphael Confiant, Jean Bernabe, and Mohamed B. Taleb Khyer (trans). "In Praise of Creoleness." *Callaloo* 13.4 (1990): 886-909.
- City of God*. Dir. Fernando Mereilles. 2002. Film.
- Davis, Mike. "Planet of Slums: Urban Involution and the Informal Proletariat." *New Left Review* 26 (March-April 2004): 5-34.
- . *Planet of Slums*. New York: Verso, 2006.
- Dawson, Ashley. "Squatters, Space and Belonging in the Underdeveloped City." *Social Text* 22.4 (2004): 17-34.
- Elite Squad*. Dir. Jose Padilha. 2007. Film.
- Farred, Grant. "The Postcolonial Chickens Come Home to Roost: How Yardie Created a New Postcolonial Subaltern." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 100.1 (2001): 287-305.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007.
- Gaonkar, Dilip Parameshwar. "Towards New Imaginaries: An Introduction." *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002): 1-19.
- Harvey, David. "The Right to the City." *New Left Review* 58 (September-October 2008):

23-40.

Koolhaas, Rem, et al. *Mutations*. Actar, 2001.

Koonings, Kees and Kruijt, Dirk. *Mega-cities: The Politics of Urban Exclusion and Violence in the Global South*. London and New York: Zed Books, 2009.

Lovelace, Earl. *The Dragon Can't Dance*. New York: Persea Books, 1998.

Nordstrom, Carolyn. *Global Outlaws: Crime, Money, and Power in the Contemporary World*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007.

Pithouse, Richard. "Thinking Resistance in the Shantytown." *Mute* 2.3 (2006): 20-31.

--. "Struggle is a School: The Rise of a Shack-Dweller's Movement in Durban, South Africa." *Monthly Review*. 10 October 2005. Web. 1 Feb 2012.

Rubenstein, Michael D. "Light Reading: Public Utility, Urban Fiction, and Human Rights." *Social Text* 26.4 (2008): 31-50.

SDInet. Shack/Slum Dwellers International. Web. 1 February 2012.

Taylor, Lucien. "Creolite Bites: A Conversation with Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphael Confiant and Jean Bernable." *Transition* 74 (1997): 124-161.

The Harder They Come. Dir. Perry Henzell. Perf. Jimmy Cliff. 1972. Film.

Yaeger, Patricia. "Dreaming of Infrastructure." Introduction, Special Issue on Cities. *PMLA* 122. 1 (2007): 9-26.

Zizek, Slavoj. *In Defense of Lost Causes*. New York: Verso, 2008. 420-461.

Conclusion

The Megacity and the Global South

My final chapter concluded by thinking the ethos of shantytown resistance articulated in Patrick Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco* and comparing it with the political philosophies of two shack-dwellers' movements, finding unexpected affinities between Chamoiseau's Caribbean narrative and the experiences of a squatters' collective in South Africa. It thus began to demonstrate some of the possibilities for comparison across national and regional contexts that are opened up by the mode of reading megacity imaginaries I have developed in this dissertation. My interpretative method focuses not on economic crises, evidence of governmental failure, or spectacular acts of resistance as starting points for analysis and comparison. It explores, rather, the ways in which novels of urban settlement imaginatively reveal and discursively reconstruct violence, development, labor, and resistance among the megacity poor as everyday phenomena. In conclusion, I want to suggest that this mode of reading not only permits the linking together of regions that are rarely thought together in urban scholarship -- such as the Caribbean and Africa -- but that it advances what Caroline Levander and Walter D. Mignolo have termed the "world dis/ordering" potential of the "global south" as a space of praxis and imagination.

For some, the "Global South" is the label that arose to replace the "Third World" as a primary designator for the least developed countries after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989 and the obsolescence of the "three worlds" model. From this perspective,

however, very little changed despite the shift in terms. The new term designates the same geography and political and economic reality as the old: a global locus of underdevelopment, a collection of poor nations requiring the assistance of the nations in the Global North to become stable and prosperous. Yet, as Levander and Mignolo point out, “global south” has also, and perhaps more often, been claimed as a label “in the struggle and conflicts between imperial global domination and emancipatory and decolonial forces that do not acquiesce with global designs.”¹ In this context, the global south overlaps not with a group of similarly formed “less developed nations” but suggests South-to-South solidarities that dis/order imperial projects. Instead of designating a shared state of underdevelopment, “global south” names a “location where new visions of the future are emerging,” where “global political and decolonial society is at work,” where “decolonial emancipations are taking place and ... new horizons of life” are taking shape.”² My project suggests that megacities may be crucial spaces for the production of these new visions and emancipatory projects, but that we will only be equipped to recognize them as so if we learn to read megacity practice beyond the obsession with open rebellion, state politics, and civil society that has characterized much discussion of the “resistance” and agency of the global urban poor, without actually speaking to their circumstances.

If slums, impoverished, illegal neighborhoods, and urban communities of the poor are (or are to become) locations where “new visions of the future” and “new horizons of life” are emerging, this is in part because they are the places where the most intense

¹ Levander and Mignolo, “Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order,” 3.

² Ibid.

failures of the old developmental narratives have occurred.³ These neighborhoods and their inhabitants have been denied the normal certainties and blocked from the “usual” channels of modern urban life. Many non-western urban settlements are located in cities where economies shrink rather than grow with time, in which most people are unable to access jobs in the formal economy or a regular wage within the informal economy, where supposedly democratic governments show no willingness to listen to demands made by the poor through the official political channels. The everyday practices that arise as a result of such paucities in urban life are, in part, survival strategies. Yet they also suggest ways of inhabiting space and defining the political that could shape future modernities.

In my chapter on African urban novels, this re-shaping involves a different notion of development, which unfolds at the individual level privileged by the *bildungsroman* but the value of which could be extrapolated far beyond it. This is a model of development in which the implied telos is what AbdouMalik Simone terms “exuberant *interdependence*.”⁴ In the view of postcolonial statehood, the prized, projected endpoint of individual/national development is *independence*: an endpoint that not only has been shown to be actually unviable, but has served repeatedly as an alibi for neocolonial modes of exploitation. *Graceland* and *Ways of Dying* contribute to recent attempts to imagine what critics of developmentalist ideology such as Arturo Escobar term a “post-

³ My understanding of this failure is influenced by James Ferguson’s discussion of the fate of narratives of modernization in Africa. Ferguson describes the deep skepticism now cast, in much of the region, on the “old” narratives that promised economic progress to countries that followed a Western model of development. Yet the disillusionment he cites does not seem to me to preclude the invention of locally resonant counter-narratives of development that reject the “old” idealizations. See “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy After Development.”

⁴ See Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

development era.”⁵ They figure forth an understanding of development-as-relation that discards the impossible-to-realize and counterproductive aim of independence in favor of recognizing the connections and strengthening the interdependencies that makes specific places habitable.

My chapter on Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* offered insights into the transformation of work under post-Fordism that many Northern critics of globalization overlook in their focus on the spectacular miseries of the informal economy. Mistry’s novel draws our attention to the space of the home and its disjunction/connection with the space of the street to suggest that work performed by those at the “bottom” of the global economy gives rise to new solidarities and avenues of resistance. And yet it warns that these solidarities and avenues, because they tend to take place and open up in private spaces, may drop out of the historical record and urban archives. It suggests the need to ask how these solidarities might be “remembered” and whether and how they might shape more direct confrontations with power and refusals of dispossession despite their invisible beginnings.

The recent uprisings against neoliberal globalism and elite nationalisms in Egypt have inspired similar movements in cities in the North in the form of the “Occupy” protests. For many, this has suggested that cities of the South are becoming “advanced sites” in the production of global political affects, insights, and tactics. Yet a novel such as *Texaco* suggests that “spectacular” moments of revolt and open resistance like the demonstrations in Cairo may have their foundations in struggles and practices that unfold in a slow, piecemeal, everyday fashion. A similar interest in the realm of everyday

⁵ See his “Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development, and Social Movements.”

politics and the politics of ideological translation as that which *Texaco* evinces is necessary if we are to understand how direct confrontations with state and global power come about and how urban movements around the world might align themselves. It is certain, for example, that their participants, speaking to one another “across” the globe and its deep disjunctures, will have different ideas about what constitutes effective resistance. If the praxis of the megacity now “travels” and conjuncts unexpectedly, we have even more reason to treat the settlement as a space worthy of close attention, and to read those literary imaginaries that have long understood it as such.

Works Cited

- Escobar, Arturo. ““Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development, and Social Movements.” *Social Text* 31/32 (1992): 20-56.
- Ferguson, James. “Decomposing Modernity: History and Hierarchy After Development.” *Global Shadows: Africa in the Neoliberal World Order*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006.
- Levander, Caroline and Walter D. Mignolo. “Introduction: The Global South and World Dis/Order.” *The Global South* 5.1 (2011): 1-11.