

LAGOS: A PILGRIMAGE IN NOTATIONS

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IT BEGINS LIKE THIS.

In London, in a Turkish restaurant, peering into the thick sludge in the bottom of my coffee cup, nine years since I have been home, I say: I miss Lagos. The next day, my friend Safak Pavey sends me a poem she translated by Turkish poet Orhan Veli Kanik. It is titled, I Am Listening To Istanbul. Here is the first stanza:

I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed
First a breeze is blowing
And leaves swaying
Slowly on the trees;
Far, far away the bells of the
Water carriers ringing,
I am listening to Istanbul with my eyes closed.

Years later, in another restaurant in downtown Los Angeles, over dinner in Little Tokyo, Gaby Jauregui tells me how much the Lagos I write about in my novel *GraceLand* makes her yearn for her Mexico City. In that moment I realise how much cities are not just geographical locations but psychic spaces of existential melancholy and desire. That we are always listening to the city inside us: Lagos-London-Istanbul-Los Angeles- Mexico City. There is only one city in the world and I guess Italo Calvino is right: it is an invisible city.

And yet these invisible cities of the melancholic soul are geographical places of real joy, of concrete despair and of inventiveness that people who live away from the urban will never fully understand. This is Lagos.



My first memory of Lagos is one I cannot trust. I was four, maybe five years old and my family, my mother and my four siblings, had just returned from London where we had fled in 1968, as the war in Nigeria raged for its second year.

Ikeja airport in 1970 had few amenities to offer us, particularly since my mother had been a vocal pro-Biafra activist in England during, one of the many war wives who spoke up against the British government's support of the Nigerian side. We were held for questioning in a hot tin-roofed hangar for hours. This is only what I remember.

An okra and palm oil stew that nearly burned my lips off is my second memory of Lagos. It was 1980 and my mother, my sister and I were on our way to London. My first time since we had left after the Biafran war in 1970. Ten years. We were on our way to Lagos by car because the flight we were supposed to take from Enugu to Lagos had been cancelled – and then rebooked at twice the price to other passengers. So my brother had accompanied us by road and after an eight-hour trip in a nauseously hot taxi, we had stopped in Shagamu, fifty miles outside Lagos, for a roadside café lunch. Even then, Lagos had sprawled out to Shagamu.

My third memory of Lagos is about my Uncle William. I didn't know I had an Uncle William until he died when I was fifteen. Two men appeared on our doorstep claiming to come from my Uncle William's congregation. It turned out that having failed and left school in Germany and not returned to the village for my grandmother's funeral, William was exiled not just from the family, but also from the memory of the family. And yet he haunted it, from his small Santeria-based church in the worst ghetto of the city, Maroko.

It was in search of this uncle, this memory, this loss that I couldn't even shape my tongue around that I went to Lagos for the first time as an adult: hitchhiking alternately by train and lorry; a stupid but exhilarating journey. It was in Maroko that I found the Lagos inside me.



When we arrived in Lagos, by the tollgate out near Mile 12, the sign by the roadside simply said: This is Lagos.

Not welcome to, or enjoy your stay. I remember even then thinking it sounded like a warning. I may be lying, of course.



Somewhere in another Lagos slum, a child is peeping through a crack in the wooden wall of a shack built on stilts in a swamp. In the distance, a line of skyscrapers rise like the uneven heart of prayer.



There are more canals in this city than in Venice. Except here they are often unintentional. Gutters that have become waterways and lagoons fenced in by stilt homes or full of logs for a timber industry most of us don't know exists. All of it skated by canoes as slick as any dragonfly.



The two street children begging on the freeway take a break. Sitting in the middle meridian, they look like an old couple making do with a poor lunch as they wind down to death.



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



In the shadow of highrises, behind the international money of Broad Street, the real Lagos spreads out like a mat of rusting rooftops.



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



Like in any world city, there are so few original inhabitants that they wear their Eko badges like honour.



If Lagos is a body, and the oil pipelines crisscrossing it are veins, then the inhabitants are vampires. This vampirism is new. It started slowly. Someone somewhere bored a hole into the pipelines to steal some oil – a drum here and there. Then it began to grow and the people like hungry mosquitoes began to drill more and more holes, taking greater and greater risks.

The city bled thick sweet crude into containers that were sold and resold and then the city rebelled and the veins, tapped too much, too quickly, too dangerously began to explode. Like a victim reclaiming its body from a deadly virus, the city began to kill its parasites, its succubae.

This is not a fairy tale. Thousands of Lagosians die annually.

This city must go on.



Badagry unfolds lazily into the sea, a stretch of land so beautiful that when the local king traded it in a bad treaty with the English, his regret named it: bad agree. Badagry. This is true. Lagos is a land of myth. It never existed before the naming.



There is nothing like Bar Beach on a Sunday afternoon. The sand is white, the diamond-shaped all-glass Bank building across the street reflects the water and makes you think it is a wave frozen in time. Children ride flea-infested horses, squealing with that childish delight that is a mix of fear and awe. Slow roasting lamb-suya blankets everything with desire. A cold Coca-Cola here tastes like everything the ads on TV promise – I shit you not.

In one corner, as though they stepped out of a Soyinka play, a gaggle of white-garbed members of the Order of the Cherubim and Seraphim Church dip themselves in the water, invoking the Virgin Mary and Yemeya in one breath.

Gleaming cars – BMWs, Lexus's – line the waterfront, spilling out young people giddy with money and power and privilege and sunshine.

All of this belies the executions that used to happen here in the '70s. Families gathered to cheer the firecracker-shots from the firing squads dispensing with convicted robbers.



The complex network of spaghetti-bridges that make up the Berger-built freeways limns Lagos like the cosmopolitan whore that it is. Driving at night across them, you end up on Third Mainland Bridge and the dazzle of lights on the water is more breathtaking than anything you can imagine.



Lagos never sleeps. Ever. It stays awake long after New York has faded in a long drawn-out yawn, matched only by the vigil of Cairo. With a population of over 15 000 000 people, it is one the largest cities in the world. On the Internet, the tourist board promises:

There is something for everyone in Lagos. If your interest is sport, we have it. Soccer (football), tennis, swimming, golf, sailing - all within easy access. If you enjoy volunteer work, it's here - International Literacy Group, the Motherless Babies Home, the Pacelli School for the Blind -- just to name a few opportunities. Perhaps you are a collector. You'll have plenty of chances to search for artifacts of West Africa. Masks, trader beads, artwork, woodcarving, drums, fabrics, walking sticks. You can find it all in Lagos. Own your very own beach hut on one of the local beaches. We have various clubs - both social and business - representing many nationalities. Have you ever wanted to go on a safari? Lagos is your gateway to East Africa. We offer culture in the MUSON (Musical Society of Nigeria) Centre, the German-sponsored Goethe Institute, and many other venues.



The way a man sits smoking on the hood of his burned-out Mercedes Benz it is clear he wants you to know that this is all temporary. He will be rich again. By his feet, a rat skulks for cover. In the street in front of him, dead rats thrown from houses litter the street like a fresh rash of dried leaves from fall.



In front of the National Theatre, shaped like an old Yoruba crown, the statue of Queen Amina of Zaria, on horseback, sword drawn, face pulled back in a snarl, reminds you that here women will not bow to men, I don't care what the propaganda says.



In Victoria Island, there are houses that even the richest people in the USA cannot imagine owning. In Ikoyi, the money is quieter: the thing here is not the house, it is the land and the fescue lawn and the trees and the quiet swish of water against a boat docked at the end of the garden.

The poor go out of their way to drive past them. Everyone can dream.



Underneath the government-sponsored billboard that says Keep Lagos Clean, a city of trash, like the work of a crazy artist, grows exponentially.



Even when under Abacha there were no stamps in the post office and almost no landlines, mobile phones and Blackberrys never stopped working, and online banking was never more than a click away. This is the thing here. With or without the government, life goes on and goes on well. Maybe in spite of the government.



Lagos is no place to be poor, my brother.



Even though the rich don't know it or see it from their helicopters and chauffeur-driven cars, for most of the poor, canoes and the waterways are perhaps the most popular means of travel. That and the rickety molue buses.



The sign over the entrance to the open-air market announces: Computer Mega City. This is no joke. There is everything here from a dot matrix printer and the house-sized Wang word processors of the '80s to the smallest newest Sony VIAO. In Lagos it is not about what is available, only about what you can afford.



The Hotel Intercontinental looks like something out of the Jetsons. It would be more at home in Las Vegas. Inside here, you could be in any city in the world.



In Idumota, the muezzin at the Central Mosque has to compete with the relentless car and bus horns, the call of people haggling, the scream of metal against metal and the hum of millions of people trying to get through a city too small for them.

And yet, hanging tremulously in the heat, there it is, that call to prayer. And all around, in the heart of the crowd, as though unseen snipers are picking them off, the faithful fall to the ground and begin praying. As though it is the most normal thing in the world, people, buses and cars thread around them.



Really? There is a large fountain in Tinubu Square?



The Lagos Marina looks like the New York skyline. Don't take my word for it. Check Google images.



Far away from where the heart of the city is now, you can still find the slave jetty and the slave market. Don't be fooled. A lot of Lagosians got rich selling slaves. It was a trade, remember?



Today, in Los Angeles, on National Public Radio, I heard a programme that was expounding on the world-class gourmet restaurants of Lagos.

Later, as dusk falls over the city, listening to Fela Kuti on my iPod and drinking a soothing *latte*, I am listening to Lagos with my eyes closed.



I am listening to Lagos with my eyes closed.