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Main content

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Chinua Achebe once wrote that the great problem of the African is anxiety. In his witty essay, "Africa and Her Writers," Achebe is not concerned with the medium of the video film--the new "literature" of the city that I am preoccupied with in this essay--but rather with literary writers and their writings. Yet I think that both those who write with pen, and video producers who "write" with the temper and temperament of the postcolonial city in Africa, respond to the anxiety that is expressed in the cities in which they live and practice their art. In this sense, they share the project of creating through the annihilating and crippling futility of the pain Achebe (and Fanon before him) identifies as stemming from the postcolonial's urban experience. Achebe writes that the condition of the "anxious African ... is the source of all our problems," and that we are anxious because "Africa has such a fate in the world that the very adjective "African" can still call up hideous fears of rejection" (27). Such palpable feat, Achebe insists, makes " ... running away from [oneself] seems ... a very inadequate way to dealing with an anxiety," and asks "if writers should opt for such escapism, who will meet the challenges?" (27). Since one of the characteristics of the postcolonial is the desire to live in the cities, which are themselves described as "nervous" and "anxious," how would the postcolonial write the "nervous condition" of the city? I want to examine how the nervous write the nervousness of the city and how such anxiety manifests itself in a new kind of "city literature"--the video films of Lagos. First let us see how the idea of the "city" sits in the discourse of "anxiety of the postcolonial."

We live in the age of "cities." Sometimes, we defeat the city and reshape it to suit our whims and caprices. We invent the city and at other times, it reinvents us. What constitutes a city in the way Lagos--the Mecca of video films in Africa--defines itself in the last two centuries of its official existence? In his 1974 text, *Soft City*, Jonathan Raban points out that cities are socially constructed and, like nation states, they come and go. They are always in processes of change that are often influenced by factors associated with what another commentator describes as the flow of "ideas and ideologies, people and goods, images and messages, technology and techniques" (Arjun Appadurai 2000). Cities can be temporal. As works-in-progress, they are constantly fashioned out of the contingencies of this flow, and like those who live in them, are always being re-made. Raban argues that the city is like a theatre where "individuals could work out their own distinctive magic while performing a multiplicity of roles," (2) and while it offers individuals the freedom to act out preferences, that such actors are acted upon in significant ways. In the many theatres of the city, we come head-on with the various sites of hopes and...

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