City, identity and dystopia: Writing Lagos in contemporary Nigerian novels

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This article aims to explore the poetics and politics of urban spaces and identities in an African metropolis by studying how novels such as Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* (2000) map the geography of the city and portray its people and the myriad of ways they negotiate selves and identities in the spaces they inhabit. The article demonstrates how the novels of the city configure urban identities as woven not only through the rich cultural textualities that people live in but also through emerging subjectivities of crisis that configure responses to contemporary realities experienced as dystopian. Within these dystopian spaces, shaping identities becomes fundamentally political: the article traces how, across the range of the novels studied, disillusionment with received imaginings of postcolonial nationhood and identity engenders a mood of inertia and complacency, but also contains a potential for shaping re-configurations of identity and spaces of critical response to the urban crisis.

**Keywords:** Nigeria; city; dystopia; space; identity; postcolony

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**Introduction**

“Writing” the city of Lagos, its sounds, smells, landscapes and people struggling to carve out spaces of meaningful and humane existence in times and spaces largely experienced as dystopian, is at the heart of a range of new and exciting contemporary Nigerian novels: Chris Abani’s *Graceland* (2004), Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* (2005), Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* (2002), and Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* (2000). This article sets out to explore the poetics and politics of urban spaces and identities in an African metropolis, by studying how the novels map the geography of the city and portray its people and the myriad of ways through which they negotiate selves and identities in the spaces they inhabit. In writing the city, the novels evoke a metropolitan Lagos that astounds the senses, a vibrant city of many cultures and languages, but also a dystopian space of deprivation, despair and dislocation. It is a city that represents the crisis of the postcolony, which has become the background for everyday practice. The figures inhabiting the multifarious urban spaces of metropolitan Lagos “negotiate” the city; they have developed the arts of “making do” reminiscent of the popular practices characterizing everyday life as discussed by De Certeau.
The novels open up multiple relationships between urban landscapes and identities. On the one hand, urban spaces are ingrained in the bodies and identities of the people inhabiting them. On the other, it is also the very people inhabiting urban spaces, who – through their activities and itineraries – give shape and meaning to urban spaces. This article seeks to demonstrate how, within “habitats of meaning”, people seek to figure a meaningful existence. I will also argue that the contemporary Nigerian novels discussed in this article – part of Nigeria’s “third generation writing” (Adesanmi and Dunton np) – are indeed texts “born into the scopic regime of the postcolonial and the postmodern” (Adesanmi and Dunton np): it is in the city (in this case, Lagos) that the Mbembean vulgarity of power in the postcolony is most clearly visible, and among its effects is a loss of belief in grand narratives and unitary identities. Responses to this loss of belief range from silence to the formation of new forms of urban social activism.

The poetics and politics of space

Contemporary Nigerian novelists write the city of Lagos through a poetics of space, in which the city creates a somatic experience that baffles the senses. Describing an urban slum, Chris Abani writes:

> The pale watery sun rose over the ghetto of Maroko. The place was already abuzz with life. [ … ] The plank walkways, which crisscrossed three-quarters of the slum, rang out like xylophones as a variety of shoes hurrying over them struck diverse notes. (24)

It is through its sights, sounds, and smells that the city of Lagos invades the senses of its actual and fictional inhabitants, its writers and its readers. Lagos is written as the site of a multiple and sprawling heterotopia. Urban squalor, decay and dilapidation are represented in the ghetto of Maroko in Abani’s *Graceland* and “Poverty Street” in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*. But landscapes of poverty intersect with more affluent neighborhoods and middle-class spaces, such as the Sunrise Estate (inhabited by well-paid young couples) in Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come*, and the white bungalows surrounded by the smells and colors of a “profusion of red hibiscus, pink crocuses, mauve bachelor’s buttons and sunflowers” in Abani’s novel (38).

Through their everyday practice, urban inhabitants invest their city with meaning. This involves a spatial rhetoric of “walking the city” – to borrow from Michel de Certeau’s lucid analysis of the spatial practices of everyday life (91–110). The people of Lagos appropriate urban spaces through countless itinerant moves. In the words of Sefi Atta:

> Most days it felt like a billion people walking down the labyrinth of petty and main streets: beggar men, secretaries, government contractors (thieves, some would say), Area Boys, street children. [ … ] There was a constant din of cars, popping exhaust pipes, and engines, commuters scrambling for canary-yellow buses and private transport vans we called kabukabu and danfo. (98)

In Atta’s and the other novels under discussion, the city is constantly re-mapped by the trajectories of those who walk its roads and use its buildings and public spaces. Elvis, the hero of Abani’s *Graceland*, takes note of the changing “faces” of the city:

> Elvis mused at how personal it seemed, specifically adapting itself to meet each circumstance. On his way to the club, the streets he had traveled sanged straight and proud, like a rope burn or a cane’s welt. Now every alley with its crumbling walls, wrought-iron gates, puddles of putrefying water and piss and garlands of dead rats was just as unique. (Abani 121)
Within novelistic cityscapes, urban identities emerge in figures of both suffering and affluence. Atta’s Sunrise Estate “on the outskirts of Ikoyi” is a space where “men chatted mostly about cars and money; the women about food prices, pediatric medications, work politics, and Disney toys” (Atta 198), and where consumerism is the natural expression of the inhabitants’ privileged position. But economic depression, the lack of infrastructure, and the oppressive political atmosphere invade the domestic and public life of all urban dwellers and require readjustments of urban “regimes of subjectivity”. In Abani’s *Graceland*, the story of Joshua Bandele-Thomas, the eccentric “who modeled himself entirely on the classic Jeeves-and-Wooster English gentleman” is a good example of such an adjustment: “eking out a sedentary and pedestrian existence” as an accounts clerk for the Upanishad Tagore Company (264), he had lived for his dream of studying in England to become a surveyor, only to see his dreams and existence shattered in a single night when thieves robbed him of his savings:

Then one day someone saw him down at the marina on Lagos Island. He was wearing his three-piece suit, but he had substituted his bowler for a hard hat. He also had a surveyor’s level mounted on a tripod. He was causing a minor traffic jam as he went about carefully surveying the area, trailing an extra-long tape behind him. (265)

Joshua lives in a space where individual agency no longer produces expected results, and where dreams and utopias can no longer be realized. In the seemingly eccentric act of setting up a tripod to survey the urban geography, Joshua becomes an emblem for urban dwellers’ inability to map their own places onto a dystopian space.

The city of Lagos is not only inscribed with the shattered dreams of its inhabitants in spaces of destitution but also figures as a site where the postcolony stages its regime of domination and violence, which is frequently inscribed by features of the obscene and the grotesque (Mbembe 102–41). In *Graceland*, fiction meets history in the narrativization of “Operation Sweep the Nation” that erased Maroko from the map of the city in 1990. The novel narrates the bulldozing of the ghetto through the individual fates of several characters. Elvis’s father and friends organize a protest. In a city space that is no longer their own, the people of Maroko employ a variety of tactics – barricades, fire, and the clandestine cutting of a bulldozer’s rubber pipes – to delay the destruction of their homes (Abani 264). Their protest can be no more than a moment of empowerment: it leaves behind a vast field of destruction and a trail of dead bodies – among them Elvis’s father, whose dying body is united with the material fabric of the city as he dies an absurd, heroic and almost mythical death:

Grabbing a cutlass Comfort had dropped earlier, Sunday sprang with a roar at the ’dozer. The policeman let off a shout and a shot, and Sunday fell in a slump before the ’dozer, its metal threads cracking his chest like a timber box as it went straight into the wall of his home. (287)

In a space where people are denied the right to exist, “everyday” experiences such as this one can no longer be understood. “Elvis read the city, seeing signs not normally visible” (306); the meanings encrypted in the signs are no longer clear. In the words of Mbembe and Roitman: “people themselves [ … ] no longer understand what is happening to them” (156).

It is also in the city that the postcolony manifests itself as a space of endless repetition (Mbembe). This not only characterizes the staging of power but it fundamentally describes the everyday perspective of ordinary people. In Helon Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, “[o]ne General goes, another one comes, but the people remain stuck in the same vicious groove.
Nothing ever changes for them except the particular details of their wretchedness” (113). Okey Ndibe’s novel poeticizes this experience in the metaphor of rain and the recurrent cycle of seasons, which he likens to the unending chain of changing governments (195). At a deeper metaphorical level, however, rain becomes the foreboding of evil: “‘Rain has two faces,’ concluded my grandmother. ‘It can give life, but its arrows can also cause death.’ Arrows of rain: my grandmother’s phrase for rain’s malefic face” (196).

The poetics and politics of identity

How does individual identity evolve within this geography of urban dystopia? Abani’s Graceland narrates the story of the main character’s adolescence that spans Afikpo, a town in eastern Nigeria, and metropolitan Lagos. After the death of his mother, Elvis and his father move to Lagos, where they are injected into the dystopian spaces of Maroko. This would appear to be a setting for an emerging identity based on a “subjectivity of crisis” (see Mbembe and Roitman). However, the portrayal of Elvis’s world points beyond crisis and its concomitant subjectivities towards the deeply cultural nature of human existence. Culture constitutes a central part of the fabric out of which Elvis and other figures in Graceland weave their lives. Books, for example, occupy a central space in Elvis’s identity. He reads the Koran, Rilke’s Letters to a Young Poet and locally circulating popular fiction with titles such as Mabel the Sweet Honey That Poured Away (113); he even has an “on-the-road book, usually one that held an inspirational message for him” (Abani 7).

Together with others, Elvis participates in the global flows of culture infused into the Nigerian context: popular culture, ballroom dance, western films, Indian cinema and the global teenage culture of the 1970s. He attends the performance of the Ajasco dancers, “the magic show by the world-famous Professor Pele” who performs “Arabian, Indian and American Magic” (66) and Mr Aggrey’s dance classes for kids (84–87). He also watches silent westerns and Indian films at the local motor park. In the novel, audiences selectively appropriate and creatively re-employ the films they watch: figures are extracted from one film, interpreted as embodiments of character types and re-employed to interpret other films (147). Elvis’s adolescent friends prefer Actor, the villain, to John Wayne, the hero, central figures in many of the popular western films at the time: “Elvis loved Actor too, and thought he had the best role: part villain, part hero” (147). This ambivalent figure seems to tally with figures marked by a subjectivity of crisis, figures that employ “techniques of avoidance, circumvention, and envelopment that, in the end, neutralize and invert the legislation” (Mbembe and Roitman 173). Elvis employs mimicry and simulation in experimenting with different identities: he dreams of becoming a dancer, but barely eked out a living by impersonating Elvis Presley on the beaches of Lagos. Not only his name, given to him by his mother who loved listening to the popular tunes of Elvis Presley on the gramophone (105), but also the title of the novel – Graceland (Elvis Presley’s estate in Memphis, Tennessee) – point to the unattainable in the young boy’s aspirations and dreams. Traversing urban spaces from the slums of Maroko to the beaches frequented by the rich and expatriate workers with their families, Elvis undergoes a transformation of the self – with the help of face powder, lipstick and eye shadow – from a subjectivity of poverty to one of escapist mimicry. But mimicry and simulation cannot take Elvis beyond expressing his aspirations: “Without understanding why, he began to cry through the cracked face powder” (78).

It is at this point that two characters with names infused by further layers of symbolism and irony enter Elvis’s life: the King of Beggars and Redemption. Redemption walks the dangerous road of employing clandestine, half-legal tactics in order to carve out a habitable space of survival, while Caesar Augustus Anyanwu, known as the King of Beggars, calls
for local social activism through theatre performances and public speeches. On Timunb
Square, known as “Freedom Square”, he recites poetic texts in which he models a national
utopia by appealing to and recuperating the traditional past of the Igbo people. Disagreeing
with the King’s view, Elvis voices the perspective of a younger generation that has lost all
utopian beliefs: “The King’s rather preachy sermon sounded a lot like the ideas of Obafemi
Awolowo, an independence advocate from the early days of the nation” (155). The King’s
perspective contrasts with that of Redemption, the one who “knew everyone, heard every-
thing and could procure everything, for a price” (25). A willing suspension of moral
concerns is involved when Redemption enters a new business, escorting a transport of
unknown nature to Togo: “‘Dey are paying five thousand naira each for us to follow deliver
something. I don’t need to know what it is, neider do you” (138). Elvis hesitates to join the
scheme, but after a final confrontation with his own life of misery, he makes a choice: “As
he walked, he realized, the only way out of this life was Redemption” (189).

How viable are these projected alternatives? Ultimately, the novel disrupts belief in both
of them. Redemption and Elvis discover that they are participating in a gruesome business,
while the King of Beggars’ motives turn out to be ambivalent: a “political” demonstration
he leads culminates in an act of deadly, personal revenge. Positioned between unfeasible
alternatives, Elvis experiences his identity as plural, fragmented and ambivalent, which
parallels his loss of belief in utopian narratives of change. Finally, he chooses exile. This
loss of belief can be traced across the entire range of the novels studied, and it is often trans-
posed into subjectivities characterized by inertia, complacency and silence. Elvis’s silent
presence at the suicide of an Okirika-trader (a second-hand clothes trader), when witnessing
how the man’s entire business is set ablaze by a government “task force” (73–74), is para-
digmatic of the silence of the many, muted in the face of tyranny. This is perhaps why, in
the literary imaginings of space and identity in the city, the figure of the silenced writer and
his/her quest for identity is a recurrent and significant one.

Okey Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* is a novel about writing, speaking out and silence. It tells
the story of Bukuru, a madman arrested as the prime suspect in the rape and murder of a
prostitute – a crime that he witnessed, committed by a group of soldiers. *Arrows of Rain* is
a novel of the city and the political abuse of power. Iyese, a prostitute with whom Bukuru
had a relationship, is brutally raped and murdered by Major Isa Palat Bello, years before
the same man ascends to the position of President of the Federal Republic of Madia. Iyese
had been drawn to Langa because she had heard that it “was a vast, strange human bazaar
where shame had no odour because people lived anonymously” (Ndibe 157). This absence
of shame characterizing the city becomes manifest as urban prostitution becomes symboli-
cally intertwined with ruthless abuses of power by politicians and other authorities. The
postcolonial regime of violence is inscribed on Iyese’s body very much in the sense
described by Mbembe, in which the pleasures of government/administrative figures are
transformed into the deaths of their subjects (126–27). For the onlooker, Bukuru, the
choice of silence becomes a form of exile from society. When Major Isa Palat Bello
ascends to the political forefront, Bukuru transcends the available repertoires of socially
acceptable identities by assuming the identity of a madman wandering the shores of B.
Beach. This is the silence he struggles with when he wonders: “[w]hat was my life but a
succession of silences, evasions, abdications” (222), and when he asks himself, “how much
of Madia’s misbegotten history could be traced to my silence about Iyese’s death” (212).
He overcomes his silence by raising his voice to tell his story from behind prison walls,
recalling the words of his grandmother: “My grandmother was right: stories never forgive
silence […] I know that power dreads memory. I know that memory outlasts power’s
viciousness” (248).
Through the figure of the writer as well as others such as Abani’s Elvis, a politics of identity is staged that makes it pertinent to choose between possible forms of empowerment and silence. For many fictional figures – including those in the novels by Helon Habila and Sefi Atta – refusing to be silenced means participating in new configurations of urban activism.

**Urban activism**

Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* is a political novel woven out of a range of narrative voices linked through the figure of Lomba – a poet, writer and journalist writing from prison in order to “rediscover” his “nullified individuality”, because “[p]rison chains not so much your hands and feet as it does your voice” (14). The novel addresses the viability of sustained political activism in the prison-like atmosphere of the city. At the onset of the novel, the narrator makes available Lomba’s secretly written prison notes. Lomba had been arrested and imprisoned without charge as a journalist attending the demonstration of a local group of activists who live in an impoverished area of Lagos.

One day, during his times as a university student, i.e. long before his eventual imprisonment, Lomba returns to his room on campus after a student protest to a sight of havoc, wreaked not only on his belongings but also on his words:

> I picked up a paper from the floor; it was a poem, my poem. I picked up another; it was a page from one of my short stories. [ … ] Most of them were torn; boots had marched upon them, covering the writing with thick, brown mud. I felt the imprint of the boots on my mind; I felt the rifling, tearing hands ripping through my very soul. (78)

Lomba is not a political activist: his identity as a writer and journalist is ambivalent. Central to the novel is Morgan Street, a symbolic space of urban dystopia where Lomba had spent two years “locked in this room, in this tenement house, trying to write a novel”, trying to find a voice (110), but finally abandoning his dream in order to take up a position as a journalist for *The Dial*. When Joshua, the English teacher on Morgan Street, seeks to hire Lomba to cover the planned protest of his community against the conditions of life on Morgan Street, he hesitates. It is his editor, James Fiki, who insists that refusing to be silenced is a historic necessity. During a visit to the slave museum in Badagry, he asserts:

> “It was in the ships that the mouth-locks were used, so that they couldn’t console each other and rally their spirits and thereby revolt. [ … ] You see, every oppressor knows that wherever one word is joined to another word to form a sentence, there’ll be revolt. That is our work, the media: to refuse to be silenced, to encourage legitimate criticism wherever we find it. Do you understand?” (198)

*Waiting for an Angel* maps Morgan Street, also known as Poverty Street, as a microcosm of destitution – but Kela, a young adolescent and one of the novel’s narrators, underscores the dignity and importance of each individual existence. The inhabitants of “Poverty Street” in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* are dreamers because “people become dreamers when they are not satisfied with their reality, and sometimes they don’t know what is real until they begin to dream” (Habila 121). One of the illustrious figures inhabiting Poverty Street is Brother, a popular tailor, dreamer and myth-maker who mesmerizes his friends – drivers, park touts and mechanics – with “his outlandish stories”, dreaming of the day when Allah would give him a million (Habila 129). He imagines, in ever more fantastic versions, a send-off party from poverty:
My send-off from life of poverty. [...] All of us go wear aso-ebi, fine lace, and Italian shoes. [...] Then finally I go stand before the TV people dem for final last handshake with Poverty. “Oga Poverty,” I go say, “we don finally reach end of road. We don dey together since I was born, but now time don come wey me and you must part. Bye bye. Good-night. Ka chi foo. Oda ro. Sai gobe.” (130)

But like the dreams of so many others we encounter in these city novels: the dreams of those living in Maroko in Abani’s Graceland, the dreams of Ndibe’s Iyese and even Brother’s dreams and aspirations in Waiting for an Angel are never realized. Poverty and shattered dreams are ingrained in his body and self, as in Kela’s voice:

I was haunted by the infinitely sad expression on his face just before he left the restaurant: the theme of sadness emblazoned on every inch of skin, every wrinkle, every hair on his face – it was so impossibly perfect it looked inhuman, like a tragic mask. (138)

Among the inhabitants of “Poverty Street”, an eclectic mix of people gather around Joshua, the teacher, for regular political debates. Ojikutu, alias Mao, a man from the Niger Delta, grounds his call for violent protest in the diction of Marx and Franz Fanon by demanding a revolution and uttering words such as “comprador bourgeoisie; lumpen-proletariat, reactionaries, militariat” (160). Joshua sees him as a “romantic fool” who has “read too many books about revolutions in China and Russia” (Habila 162). This group of friends is joined by a crowd of demonstrators to protest their dissatisfaction with contemporary conditions of existence on Morgan Street (Habila 173). This is the moment when the inhabitants of Morgan Street re-appropriate their space discursively, by re-defining it as “Poverty Street”:

“First, from today, we refuse to be known as Morgan Street!” [...] “We don’t know who Morgan was – some colonial administrator, perhaps, a reminder of our hopeless, subjected state. No, that name is too grand for us. We are a poor, neglected people. If we were to choose a name for ourselves, we’d choose a plain and simple one, something that reflects our reality.” [...] “This is our decision: that our street, presently known as Morgan Street, ceases from this moment to be known by that name. It shall, from this moment, be known as Poverty Street!” (174)

The anti-riot police violently subdue the demonstration. This happens in the larger context of oppressive measures against the voicing of any protest, against the media, against political critics. Fiction here converges with fact: the violent death of Dele Giwa, founding editor of Newswatch Magazine (199), the persecution of government critics, the assassination of Kudirat Abiola, wife of the then jailed businessman and politician Moshood Abiola (213). After attending a poetry reading for two arrested poets, Lomba chooses to get involved and leaves “in the comforting twilight to the gathering at the Secretariat” to write on the demonstration of the people living on Poverty Street (222).

In Waiting for an Angel, Lomba is the anti-hero: his move from inertia to breaking his silence is not configured as heroic activism based on utopian political ideals. He has ambivalent feelings about getting involved in political activism before finally deciding to give voice to the local concerns of people on Morgan Street. Political protest, in Waiting for an Angel, as the example of the demonstration illustrates, is envisioned as local urban activism. The protest of people on “Poverty Street”, however, albeit containing a moment of empowerment, is – just like the protest of the people inhabiting Maroko in Abani’s Graceland – doomed to failure. Another novel, Everything Good Will Come, looks at possible forms of urban activism from the perspective of women.
Gendered transformations

Sefi Atta’s *Everything Good Will Come* partakes of the urban discourse opened up by the other novels. In it, we can trace the poetics and politics of urban spaces and identity through female-gendered perspectives. *Everything Good Will Come*, unlike Abani’s *Graceland* or Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel*, is set largely in a more affluent, middle-class setting and narrates the coming of age of the narrator, Enitan, contextualized in the social, political and economic upheavals of 1970s–1990s Nigeria. As the life histories of the novel’s key female characters unfold, the novel sets up a space for enacting contested imaginations and practices of urban female identity, which are not dissolved into a feminist utopia. Instead, a variety of female subjectivities are explored in their different facets, and these subjectivities come to constitute viable spaces from which women can and do formulate empowering identities.

Central to *Everything Good Will Come* is the friendship between Enitan, the daughter of a Cambridge-educated, middle-class lawyer and his wife, and Sheri, the daughter of Engineer Bakare (alias Alhaji or Chief Bakare, the head of a polygamous household) and a British mother who has allegedly passed away. Sheri is “funny” and “rude”, presumably because she did not have any “home training” (Atta 16), while Enitan appears to be well behaved, but – according to Sheri – “must be spoilt rotten” (15). Urban space is ingrained in both girls’ identity formation – for example downtown Lagos, where Sheri spent part of her childhood with her grandmother, Alhaja:

> What would it be like to know downtown as Sheri did, haggle with customers, buy fried yams and roasted plantains from street hawkers, curse Area Boys and taxi cabs who drove too close to the curb. My only trips downtown were to visit the large foreign-owned stores, like Kelwarams and Leventis, or the crowded markets with my mother. (34)

Sheri is well aware of the effect of space on her subjectivity: “‘I was raised in downtown Lagos,’ she said. ‘Bring the Queen of England there. She will learn how to fight’” (170). Their childhood innocence ends abruptly when the unspeakable violence of living in urban dystopia is inscribed onto Sheri’s body in a brutal rape. While the rapes and killings of prostitutes in Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* are symbols of the ruthless power of political authorities, Sheri’s experience is rooted in the everyday violence that pervades dystopian urban spaces. The ensuing silence in the face of the unspeakable disrupts the relationship between Enitan and Sheri: from here, their lives follow very different paths. By following these paths, the novel sets up a field of contested female identities.

When Enitan and Sheri meet again, many things have changed. Enitan has completed a law degree in England and worked in a London firm before returning to Nigeria to take up a position in her father’s law firm. Sheri has changed, too: “She moved with the rhythm of big women” (96). “Sheri was sugary, as we said in Lagos; she had a man, an older man, a man as old as my father even, and he would pay her rent” (97). She carves out a space for herself at the margins of society, but still remains within the framework and constraints of possible models of urban female subjectivity. Sheri negotiates her life through instrumental relationships with men, such as Ibrahim Hasan, the brigadier, who pays for her apartment in exchange for an extramarital relationship. She answers Enitan’s concern about her subjugation with sarcasm and cynicism: “Scream and shout, if you like, bang your head against this wall, you will end up in the kitchen. Period. Now, where I differ from most women is, if you lift your hand to beat me, I will kill you” (104). She disentangles herself from the confines imposed on her life by the brigadier, after starting a successful catering business that involves her entire family, particularly Mama Gani and Mama Kudi, her stepmothers.
The power, energy and struggle of these women are located in modes of female identity that Enitan wrestles with but ultimately comes to understand as one of the many facets of womanhood. Her own struggle with received gender identities is summed up in her analysis of female types:

By the time they came of age, millions of personalities were channeled into about three prototypes: strong and silent, chatterbox but cheerful, weak and kindhearted. All the rest were known as horrible women. I wanted to tell everyone, “I! Am! Not! Satisfied with these options!” (200)

However, as she comes to realize, all these seemingly prototypical identities are appropriated, inhabited and reshaped in surprising and empowering ways by the women she encounters. Enitan’s marital life becomes a space for enacting her own struggle with received figures of female subjugation. This results in an increasing dislocation of her marriage, exacerbated by her husband’s silence. Her identity is questioned when she battles with fertility problems: “I shrunk to the size of my womb. […] That was how my thirties found me, in a silent state” (Atta 189). The recuperation of her lost voice is expressed both in terms of gendered identity and political activism. Central to this is her encounter with Grace Ameh, a journalist working for Oracle magazine. Her voice re-focuses Enitan’s quest for a meaningful identity towards the socio-political field and opens up ways for urban political activism.

Enitan’s impetus for seeking to get involved is her disillusionment with political ideals held by her father’s generation, a critical exploration of her own and her generation’s complacency and the need to contribute to society in a positive way.

Grace Ameh founds her activism on voice: “Use your voice to bring about change. […] It amazes me that privileged people in Nigeria believe that doing nothing is an option” (258–59). In a literary reading in support of journalists in detention, she delineates her own vision of activism in a context “where words are so easily expunged, from our constitution, from publications, public records, the act of writing is activism” (263). In Habila’s Waiting for an Angel a similar conceptualization of activism is manifest in the motives of James Fiki (editor of the Dial) for continuing to write in times of terror.

As we have seen, political activism in Waiting for an Angel has a strong local community dimension. In Sefi Atta’s novel, on the other hand, political activism is envisioned through a gendered perspective, exemplified by the formation of a women’s group that fights for political detainees. For a long time, Enitan feels much more ambivalent about political activism than Grace Ameh. This ambivalence is comparable to Lomba’s feelings in Waiting for an Angel, but Habila’s novel is permeated by a general sense of ambivalence about any form of activism which borders on pessimism. While the novel ends on Lomba’s resolution not to be silenced, the reader is very well aware that the community protest was brutally subdued, and that Lomba ultimately disappeared in the Nigerian prisons.

Everything Good Will Come offers a more positive outlook. Enitan and Sheri – inhabiting urban dystopian spaces in their different and personal manifestations – finally recuperate the potential for imagining a different world and for transposing these imaginings into activism within their respective life contexts: “‘What I really want,’ she [Sheri] said. ‘Really, really, sha, is to work for children’” (Atta 307). This is what she comes to do through raising money for charity. Enitan, too, makes her choice, opting out of accustomed structures of marriage and deciding to get involved in the campaign for political detainees: “How terrifying and how sublime to behave like a god with the power to revive myself. This was the option I chose” (Atta 333). Everything Good Will Come inscribes onto urban dystopia multiple sites of possible conceptualizations of
womanhood, as well as ways of creating a meaningful life and recuperating silenced voices.

Conclusion

This selection of contemporary, third-generation Nigerian novels “writes” the city of Lagos, its poetics and politics of space by opening up a kaleidoscope of multiple urban spaces and identities. Lagos constitutes a site for staging a range of themes, all of which could be further traced across contemporary Nigerian socio-political, cultural and literary discourses.

I have tried to show how multiple and fragmented urban landscapes are ingrained in the conceptualizations of self and how the vulgarity of state power is inscribed into the very bodies of urban inhabitants: Enitan’s friend Sheri in *Everything Good Will Come* is a good example, as are the figures of prostitutes in Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain* and Chris Abani’s *Elvis*.

Urban spaces are not only ingrained in the conceptualizations of self. The people inhabiting the city are also represented in their attempts to appropriate urban space, create habitats of meaning and negotiate their own existence—sometimes with tragic or tragi-comic and at other times with hope-enhancing results (as the examples of Abani’s Joshua Bandele-Thomas and the people of Habila’s *Morgan Street* remind us). Culture—writing poetry (in the case of Habila’s *Lomba*) or consuming and participating in the global flows of books, songs, films and dance (as done by Sefi Atta’s Enitan and Abani’s Elvis)—is central to the politics of space and identity. But identity is also shaped in spaces experienced as dystopian, as exemplified in the fate of the people of Maroko in Abani’s *Graceland*. In the novels, individual identities become representative of subjectivities of crisis; we read about characters compromising, lowering their expectations and ambitions, and “making do”: while Elvis’s father has given up in a world that has fallen apart, his friend Redemption exploits the crisis to his own advantage.

In the novels, the city of Lagos is also a site for the debate of political ideas. The novels show how notions of citizenship collapse under the general feel of disillusionment in the face of tyranny and endless repetition. I would argue that this disillusionment is not unlike a more general postmodern mood. In the novels by Abani, Habila, Ndibe and Atta, the loss of belief in utopian urban imaginings is related to an absence of loyalty to the postcolonial nation-state and, by implication, to other grand narratives, metanarratives, and the very notion of a unitary self. Thus, Sefi Atta’s character Enitan questions the idea of nation and national identity when she asks: “What was the country I loved? The country I would fight for? Should it have borders?” (Atta 299). In a similar vein, Pa Ata, the father of the Honourable Minister Reuben Ata in Ndibe’s *Arrows of Rain*, questions the identity of the Republic of Madia, asking why its past bears no mark on its present. He envisions a concept of nationhood that is open to change and reconfigurations of space (Ndibe 122–23).

What takes up the place of these lost beliefs? The chosen texts explore multiple facets of the ensuing void. One facet is a feeling of ambivalence, as when Atta’s Enitan questions the legitimacy of fighting for political detainees. Another is indecisiveness and inertia, demonstrated by the young successful middle class in Sefi Atta’s novel as well as by Ndibe’s Bukuru and Habila’s Lomba. Yet another facet is a general sense of fragmentation, when characters experience their own identity as fragmented (Abani’s Elvis and Ndibe’s Bukuru). A fundamental notion of dislocation, a feeling that “things have fallen apart”, seems to characterize this void. The figure of the writer and the practice of writing are central to this cluster of concerns. Journalist and writer Lomba in Habila’s *Waiting for an Angel* embodies a non-heroic figure deciding to break his silence and give voice to the
concerns of the people. Grace Ameh in Atta’s novel deplores the passive attitude of the middle class and fights relentlessly against the attempts of the postcolonial regime to curtail freedom of opinion. Finally, the emergence of new urban identities and spaces and the integration of self, identity and society are explored from a gendered perspective: Sefi Atta’s exploration of female subjectivities in urban Lagos further diversifies Nigerian novelistic imaginings of urban concerns and voices.

It is arguable that each of the narratives discussed here in its own way moves beyond disillusionment, inertia and complacency, and opens up perspectives on the possibility of hope and change – simply by virtue of the act of telling their stories. Instead of formulating new utopian perspectives or imaginations of the postcolonial nation, these novels explore forms of urban activism through which people engage with local concerns. Across the novels studied, we perceive a shared poetics and politics of space and identity, where “writing Lagos” becomes writing a dynamic practice of fragmented, plural and changing selves, within equally plural imaginings of urban spaces.

Notes
1. My deepest gratitude to Ranka Primorac for her extensive and very valuable comments on the final draft of this paper.
2. The notion of “habitat of meaning” is adopted from Hannerz (22–23), who draws on Zygmunt Bauman and defines habitats of meaning as idiosyncratic or collective spheres of meaning that may intersect or be shared in various ways. Central to this concept is the notion of agency.
3. A “regime of subjectivity” can be understood as an “ensemble of ways of living, representing, and experiencing contemporaneousness” and “inscribing this experience in the mentality, understanding, and language in historical time” (Mbembe and Roitman 154).
4. This infusion of global culture into the constitution of individual selves permeates the poetics and politics of identity not only in Abani’s Graceland. In Sefi Atta’s novel, Enitan’s childhood and adolescence is informed by global and local flows of culture: on TV, she encounters Tarzan, Zorro, Bonanza and the commercials of multinational companies (Atta 11–12).
5. Ndibe’s novel is set in the fictive state of the Federal Republic of Madia, in the city of Langa, where Bukuru goes into exile on B. Beach. These can be identified as the Federal Republic of Nigeria, the city of Lagos, and one of Lagos’ popular beaches, Bar Beach, respectively.
6. The use of highly emblematic and allusive names permeates both Abani’s Graceland (as discussed previously) and Habila’s Waiting for an Angel.

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Works cited