From Crisis to Upward Mobility: Urban Informality in Fictions of Lagos and Johannesburg

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Abstract

Stories of the slum in African contexts often depict deprivation and dispossessed realities; the term 'slum' itself has been criticized for its emphasis on dystopic urban futures. The concept of subaltern urbanism, as outlined by Ananya Roy, goes beyond notions of dystopia, enabling more nuanced examinations of representations of the city. This article investigates the concept of subaltern urbanism in connection with four fictional works about Lagos and Johannesburg, two of Africa's cultural and economic centres: *The Restless Supermarket* by Ivan Vladislavić, *GraceLand* by Chris Abani, *Zoo City* by Lauren Beukes, and the short story collection *Lagos Noir*, with stories by multiple authors. The texts show that binaries such as authorized/unauthorized, formal/informal, and legal/illegal converge in the slum representing it as a place with its very own forms of production, creation, and survival. The balance between crisis and opportunity is portrayed in multiple ways, particularly through informal practices relating to social and economic upward mobility.

Keywords: City, informality, Johannesburg, Lagos, slum, subaltern urbanism

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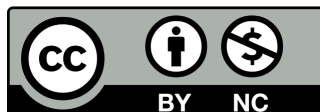
DOI: https://doi.org/10.53228/njas.v31i2.762



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This article investigates the dynamic nature of the city and its inhabitants in recent fictions of Lagos in Nigeria and Johannesburg in South Africa, with a particular focus on representations of deprived areas. Despite significant differences in terms of demographics, history, and geography, there are a number of similarities between the two cities. They are among the largest on the African continent and both have been widely fictionalized. Neither city is the capital of its respective country, but both constitute significant cultural and economic centres. The article draws on the concept of subaltern urbanism as theorized by Ananya Roy (2011, 224), which "seeks to confer recognition on spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency that often remain invisible and neglected in the archives and annals of urban theory". Such "spaces of poverty and forms of popular agency" are investigated in fictions of Lagos and Johannesburg which in different ways exemplify the political engagement and entrepreneurialism outlined in Roy's (2011) article, particularly in terms of informality. The two cities are represented as actors and agents with the power to decide the fates of their inhabitants, providing them with possibilities of upward social mobility or pushing them further into deprivation. The city is depicted as making or breaking the lives of its inhabitants through the multiple informal activities in which the characters engage.

Both Johannesburg and Lagos have been the focus of city research in multiple contexts (Falkof and van Staden 2020, 4; Nuttall 2020, 267; Smit 2018, 57). However, as Philip Harrison, Graeme Gotz, Alison Todes and Chris Wray (2014, 4) argue in their book on Johannesburg and the changes it has undergone since the end of apartheid, there is a need for more engagement with "the diversity of spatial arrangements" in the city. Nicky Falkof and Cobus van Staden (2020, 4) call for studies that examine "the city as an ever-shifting physical and emotional landscape", and Sarah Nuttall (2020, 267) states that "Johannesburg, along with Lagos and Kinshasa, is arguably Africa's most widely interpreted urban formation, capable of challenging key tenets of contemporary urban theory in ways that are definitive". Thus, a study such as this is called for, providing new perspectives on the agency of the city through literary representations of the informality that guides much of urban life in Africa's major cities. In line with this idea, Falkof and van Staden (2020, 5) argue that "[b]ecause cities do not emerge fully formed into a vacuum, because they are organic and sometimes mutant formations, the affective lives of those who inhabit them always impact, to some extent, on their shape". The inhabitants have an impact on the city in literary depictions as well, but also vice versa, as my analysis shows.

The primary material for the article consists of the short story collection *Lagos Noir* (2018) edited by Chris Abani, and three novels: *GraceLand* (2004) by Chris Abani, which focuses on Lagos; *The Restless Supermarket* (2014; originally published in 2001) by Ivan Vladislavić, which takes place in Johannesburg; and *Zoo City* (2016; originally published in 2010) by Lauren Beukes, which is also set in Johannesburg. Two nonfictional texts supplement the analysis: Noo Saro-Wiwa's return travelogue *Looking for Transwonderland* (2012), which offers perspectives not only on Lagos but also on other Nigerian cities; and Mark Gevisser's *Lost and Found in Johannesburg: A Memoir* (2014), which gives a personal account of life past and present in South Africa's largest city. Most of the texts have received scholarly attention before, with an earlier study focusing on the "the poetics and politics of urban spaces and identities" in Lagos (Nnodim 2008, 321). Lauren Mason (2014, 208), for one, writes that current city literature such as *GraceLand* presents an urge among "African city dwellers to see themselves in a different frame, a different context, outside of their own urban space". *Zoo City* has gained considerable scholarly attention before, with Lisa Propst (2017, 424) analyzing the novel's silences and

the "concealed elements of Hillbrow lives", and Shane Graham (2015, 75) focusing on the meaning of underground spaces in the novel as he "excavates the layers of history embedded in – but often partially erased from or distorted by – the city's built environments". The post-apartheid transformation of Johannesburg in *The Restless Supermarket* has been examined extensively (see Charos 2008; Manase 2009; Beilharz and Supski 2016). Bringing all four texts together, the present article moves beyond previous studies: instead of analyzing historical transition or the urban identities of different characters, the focus is on the agency of the slum-city itself as a space of alterity or otherness.

Literary urban studies is a rapidly expanding field in African contexts, with critics such as Elleke Boehmer and Dominic Davies (2015), Anne Putter (2012), Pablo Mukherjee (2012), and Tom Odhiambo (2005) to mention just a few, offering perspectives on Sub-Saharan African writing that deals with urban life. The African slum and how to theorize it has gained attention in recent years (cf. Huchzermeyer 2011; Myers 2011; Murray and Myers 2006). In addition to these multiple viewpoints and positions, there have been calls for more nuanced perspectives on the notions of agency and entrepreneurialism in the slum. It is here that Roy's (2011) study emerges as significant. Roy suggests going beyond understandings of the slum as mere dystopia: "Subaltern urbanism provides accounts of the slum as a terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics" (2011, 224) – a statement that informs the present article as well. While literary texts produce representations of the city, their socio-political dimension as cultural expressions of urban life remain central.

Informality has been defined as "a state of existence that is independent of formal frameworks (if they exist) and that does not comply with official rules and regulations" but is not to be equated with 'illegal' (Heisel 2016, 16). The fictive stories examined in this article indicate that the line between 'informal' and 'illegal' can sometimes become blurred. Informality in African cities has been addressed and criticized previously by, among others, Garth Myers (2011, 73), according to whom "not all slums are informal settlements, not all aspects of the informal economy are confined to informal or slum settlement areas". This forms the starting point of this article. Further, Myers (2011, 82) asks whether it is possible to bring different realities together, both formal and informal, and calls for "hybrid governance" (103). In the context of this study, it ties in with the focus on the political agency of people living in the slums. The analysis provided here supports the notion of cities and slums as balancing between crisis and opportunity, becoming unique places of creation and survival for those who are upwardly mobile, yet often ending in disaster for those less fortunate. An examination of Roy's concept of subaltern urbanism in connection with the texts analysed offers novel insights into representations of the slum condition and examines to what extent the slum-city can and should be seen as subaltern.

Looking at examples of entrepreneurialism and political agency in the primary material through the lens of subaltern urbanism, as outlined by Roy (2011), can help determine to what extent the slum (or city as a whole) is presented as subaltern and to discover new ways of addressing its specific challenges. A central part of the discussion is related to the ways in which the fictional texts define the slum and the spaces in which the characters live, contributing to what Felix Heisel (2016, 30) terms "resilient cities". This analysis must however be carried out with caution. As Mona Atia (2019, 5) outlines, it is necessary to be careful "in reading these incremental everyday practices of survival as a new form of urban citizenship". This connects with what Ryan Bishop and John W. P. Phillips (2013, 225) state when they warn against romanticizing the slum, which is inevitably characterized by poverty and lack of basic infrastructure. The slum remains a site of daily struggle in

the texts examined, but the city itself, with its deprived and more affluent areas, retains its separate trajectory particularly through notions of informality.

Subalternity and the slum

Subaltern urbanism, as defined and developed by Roy (2011, 224), explicitly takes issue with theorizing cities and their slums: "Writing against apocalyptic and dystopian narratives of the slum, subaltern urbanism provides accounts of the slum as a terrain of habitation, livelihood and politics". Roy (2011, 233) goes on to introduce four focus areas, of which one is urban informality, which centres on "state legitimacy" and the relationship between that which is "authorized and unauthorized". Roy's notion of subaltern urbanism has been discussed previously by, among others, Pushpa Arabindoo (2011), who seems to suggest that the concept remains somewhat abstract (640). This article attempts to respond to Arabindoo's appeal for more practical and concrete applications of subaltern urbanism, here interpreted from a literary perspective. Portrayals of social and economic upward mobility in the text corpus emerge as central, particularly for the discussion of informality.

Subaltern is here understood in the sense outlined by Stephen Morton (2007, 97) in his book on Gayatri Spivak "as a general category of subordination". However, Spivak herself clarified the concept in an interview with Leon de Kock (1992, 45), stating that people may easily think that "the subaltern is just a classy word for oppressed". In the original article "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak (1988, 79; italics in the original) argues that the "colonized subaltern *subject* is irretrievably heterogeneous" and that "the elite" must "watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern" (90). Hence, caution must be exercised when applying Roy's concept of subaltern urbanism to literature about the slum-city. Tariq Jazeel (2014, 89) engages with the concept of subalternity from a geographical perspective and argues that certain terminology and concepts "work in fact to *ideologically constitute* the geographical imagination in particular kinds of ways" (italics in the original). Thus, revising views of the slum as suggested by Roy can be seen as an ideological intervention.

Jazeel (2014, 92) emphasizes that his use of the term *subaltern* "refers not specifically to marginal groups or subjects, but to space itself", and explains that it is more about "ways of thinking spatially that may be considered lower ranking" (95). This has to do with examining the margins from the perspective of the centre, and Jazeel eventually asks the most pertinent question: how to study and analyse the margins and the marginalized on their own terms (2014, 96). Going beyond ideas of centre/periphery, privileged/underprivileged, and superior/subaltern motivates my analysis, as well. Studying literary representations of the slum obviously builds on texts written by authors generally far removed socially and economically from deprived urban realities. The value of these texts lies not in their perceived accuracy or fidelity to historical, geographical, or spatial truth, but in the varied depictions of urban life that transcend dichotomies and Manichean divides, offering novel insights as cultural representations about the relationship between centre and periphery and formal and informal.

To summarize the problems with the concept of the slum, Alan Gilbert (2007, 700) highlights its relativity and that it "cannot be defined safely in any universally acceptable way". As Bishop and Phillips (2013, 222) assert, "the city represents the hazardous threshold of crisis, the vulnerable cradle of humanity's future". Slums in the texts examined have elements of crisis in them: personal difficulties and loss; collective disasters; communities on the brink of destruction; and political transition, as in both *GraceLand* and *The Restless Supermarket*, though from quite opposite ends. Elvis, the sixteen-year-old protagonist in Abani's novel, faces destruction and demolition twice: first when his father is

forced to move with his family to Maroko, one of the most notorious slums in Lagos, and a second time when the entire area is destroyed by the authorities. Tunde Agbola and A. M. Jinadu (1997, 281) make an important observation in their study of the evictions that took place in Maroko in 1990, arguing that "what a government labels a 'slum' is not necessarily viewed as a slum by its inhabitants". They explain that for the inhabitants of the slum, "it can be a vibrant community of upwardly mobile individuals who may, at present, be living on the edge of society and have many problems but who are struggling to solve these". This rings true of *GraceLand* as well, which is largely based on Elvis's endeavours to improve his life.

A completely different situation is presented in Vladislavić's novel *The Restless Supermarket*. In the novel, Aubrey Tearle, the retired white proofreader and master of words, finds himself in a changing Hillbrow in the middle of Johannesburg; Hillbrow not being a peripheral part of the city such as Maroko in Lagos, but very centrally located. The story takes place at the time when Nelson Mandela was released from prison and later elected president of the new post-apartheid nation. Thus, Hillbrow is yet to transform, but is on the brink of a new existence, and Tearle represents the past, to which he clings fiercely but in vain. He sees the gradual erasure of his former lifestyle, of a South Africa that is no more, and finds it hard to adjust. Elvis, on the contrary, although unable to adjust to the new reality after Maroko is destroyed, suffers a more personal crisis as he returns to his demolished home after having been captured and severely beaten and tortured by the military. The turning point is not so much the destruction of Maroko but the realization that he will never be like Redemption, his industrious and creative friend who makes the most of life in the slum, by whatever means necessary, for example by becoming involved in the local drug trade. Hence, it is eventually Redemption who offers him a way out and who could be called an upwardly mobile individual in Agbola and Jinadu's terms. Crisis and opportunity converge throughout the texts examined here, which also connect through histories of oppression, enabling new perspectives on the city and its inhabitants that go beyond mere notions of periphery and alterity, and which show that the slum-city retains an agency of its own.

Defining the slum in stories of Johannesburg

> Dream city is dreaming.
> (Beukes 2016, 324)

"The sole reason for [Johannesburg's] creation was the pursuit of material wealth" write Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall (2008, 18) in their work on Johannesburg as "the elusive metropolis". They outline how the history of the city is linked to goldmining, making it a place of hopes and dreams from the very beginning. This is echoed by Gevisser (2014, 28) who writes in *Lost and Found in Johannesburg* that Johannesburg consists of people who arrived from other locations to "make money". He confesses that the city "eludes" him, with the many physical and mental barriers among its inhabitants. These barriers are clearly visible in fictional representations of the city. What particularly defines the city, according to Mbembe and Nuttall (2008, 18), is how it is "caught between what it could be (potentiality) and what it ended up being (actuality)". This is strongly tied to the city's – and the entire nation's – long history of apartheid. Incidentally, the same connection between past and present can be made in relation to Lagos as well, for example in Saro-Wiwa's *Looking for Transwonderland*, in which the author sets out from Lagos and then returns to the city at the end of her travels: "Throughout the town I saw glimpses of how handsome Lagos could have been" (2012, 302). Dreams and hopes clash with a reality not quite so forgiving and promising.

The history of apartheid is visible in *The Restless Supermarket*, which begins toward the end of 1993, mentioning the release of Mandela from prison after 27 years in February 1990. The protagonist Tearle is unimpressed by these developments, feeling his own position to be more and more under threat. The potential of Johannesburg has transformed into something in which Tearle no longer finds his place, which is paradoxical with regard to the end of apartheid as a moment of elation for most South Africans. As James Graham points out, "Tearle's unpleasant attitude to the people around him is necessary in order for him to be perceived as being stuck in an apartheid-era mindset" (2010, 94). Thus, the city reclaims its place centre stage. Tearle is a remnant of the past in this regard, unwilling and unable to accept the changes in Johannesburg and his community in Hillbrow, the inner-city area which has become one of the most densely populated areas of the city: "And growing denser by the day. (…) No one who could afford a car wanted to come here anymore" (Vladislavić 2014, 17). These lines imply changing demographics, which is echoed again by Gevisser (2014, 171), who explains that after apartheid, the area became available to people with low incomes. Tearle calls himself a "true Johannesburger" (Vladislavić 2014, 25) and despite his admiration for the "European ambiance" in Café Europa, Tearle's favourite establishment, he has never been abroad (61). He ponders the city's short memory and pictures himself dead, the essence of him seeping out "on the dirty macadam of an unmemorable corner of a lawless conurbation" (30). This emphasizes the fact that, from the point of view of Johannesburg or Hillbrow, Tearle is just one of many inhabitants: unremarkable and anonymous, and about to be removed from centre stage in the new South Africa.

Inevitably losing ground is further exemplified towards the end of the novel, as Tearle's beloved Café Europa is closed down, causing him to describe it as "a haven in an urban jungle, and now the jungle was in here too, on our side of the pale" (Vladislavić 2014, 265). This is not the only reference to Hillbrow as a jungle; Tearle's friend Wessels also defines the area as "the jungly flatland that go by the name of Hillbrow" (17). 'Jungle' here gives the impression of something unruly, unkempt, potentially even dangerous and lawless. For Tearle, the visible change in Hillbrow destroys his old lifestyle and ruins the city itself. This is shown first and foremost in the more surreal part of the novel about Alibia, a fictional model town, a metaphor for the work Tearle did as a proofreader trying to bring order into texts. Disorder, however, creeps in and soon there is a "spectacular descent into chaos" (207) and the city "fell into ruins" (209).

Alibia is eventually saved and restored by the proofreaders who join forces to bring order back to the city: "[N]ow the appropriate social distance could be restored between the haves and have-nots, the unsightlier settlements shifted to the peripheries where they would not upset the balance, the grand estates returned to the centre where they belonged". Finally, "block after block was knocked back into its familiar, ordinary shape" (Vladislavić 2014, 224). The colonial reference is explicit here in relation to Tearle's anxiety about the new Johannesburg. His living space is irrevocably changed as he is symbolically removed from the centre, or at least forced to share it, as the apartheid laws come to an end. For Tearle, Hillbrow has come to represent "the vulnerable cradle of humanity's future", as outlined by Bishop and Phillips (2013, 222), but it is not a future in which he wants any part. Despite seeing himself as a true Johannesburger, he is no longer at home in his own city. Crisis and opportunity clash in Tearle's life, but in contrast to Elvis, who finds his way out thanks to the help of Redemption, Tearle manages to alienate all his friends and even Alibia fails to bring him the release he is looking for. Hillbrow is presented as an urban area in transition, and Tearle as its desperate,

misinformed, and prejudiced keeper trying in vain to safeguard it from inevitable change.

Referring to Hillbrow as a jungle is symbolic of the informality it comes to represent in a later work of fiction. For Zinzi December, protagonist of Beukes's science fiction novel *Zoo City*, living in Johannesburg is a different matter entirely. She lives in Hillbrow, now nicknamed Zoo City: "It was inevitable I'd end up in Zoo City" (Beukes 2016, 60). Zinzi tries to find an apartment in the suburbs but is turned down by rental agencies due to the sloth that accompanies her, a consequence of her having been "animalled", a punishment for serious crimes, and paired with a sloth for life after causing her brother's death. As Jocelyn Fryer argues in her article on abject spaces in the novel, "[t]he Hillbrow of Beukes's imagining is not so very different in its social and economic make-up from the current-day Hillbrow" (2016, 116). Zinzi sometimes refers to her "Former Life" before her brother was killed and she was imprisoned, events which changed her life forever. She explains that Hillbrow, too, had a Former Life:

> There was big talk about comebacks and gentrification a few years ago, which led to months of eviction raids by the Red Ants, with their red helmets and sledgehammers and bullhorns, and bright-eyed landlords buoyed up on the property boom bricking up the lower stories of buildings. But the squatters always found a way back in. We're an enterprising bunch. And it helps to have a certain reputation. (Beukes 2016, 51)

This reputation, and the enterprising nature of its inhabitants, begs the questions as to whether it is Hillbrow that has shaped its citizens or the other way around.

Thinking in terms of geographical alterity and subalternity, Zinzi lives the life of an outcast to some degree, as has also been noted by Fryer (2016, 118): "Beukes's creation of an urbanscape filled with animalled individuals may be seen manifesting specifically abject fears and repulsions". Fryer goes on to argue that "Beukes plays with the notion of racial stereotyping" (2016, 120). The connection can be made to apartheid here. Zinzi finds herself in Hillbrow largely because no other residential area will welcome her due to her status. Yet, despite the reputation of Hillbrow as a dangerous area particularly at night, "that's precisely when Zoo City is at its most sociable. (…) apartment doors are flung open. Kids chase each other down the corridors. People take their animals out for fresh air or a friendly sniff of each other's bums" (Beukes 2016, 136). This seems to suggest that in Hillbrow, or Zoo City, inhabitants live according to their own social rules, creating networks and a culture that is unique to their neighbourhood and separate from the surrounding city, while still having to accept their existence as former convicts unable to escape their crimes. This notion of separateness is supported by Gevisser (2014, 239), who also writes about the many frontiers of Johannesburg.

Beukes indicates that the relationship between law enforcement and the residents of Zoo City is less positive, as police and emergency responders "are slow to respond to 'incidents' in Zoo City – if they respond at all" (2016, 140). A kind of pride and resistance towards writing Hillbrow off as a bad area can be detected in the above. Beukes's essay "Inner City" features in the edition of *Zoo City* used for this article, and there she writes about reading as much as she could about Hillbrow and its history: "Hillbrow has always been a separate animal" (2016, 366). From being "the glamorous crown of Johannesburg" (Beukes 2016, 251), Hillbrow has become "the place people bring their hopes, packed up in *amashangaan*, the ubiquitous cheap plastic rattan suitcases used by refugees and immigrants from small towns in the rural areas, looking for work, looking to break in. Low income, high aspirations" (Beukes 2016, 366). The novel thus suggests that urban subalternity is largely

connected to economic circumstances and aspirations, and again, as argued in relation to Elvis's friend Redemption in Maroko, the marginalized inner city is a place for upwardly mobile individuals.

The Restless Supermarket and *Zoo City* thus speak to and from a different Hillbrow. For Tearle, the area is changing beyond recognition into something in which he, as an aging white South African, does not feel at home. The entire future of Johannesburg is changing: "[T]he southern suburbs, the buffer zones, filling up with informal settlements, and the township. (…) Languages were spoken there that I would never put to the proof" (Vladislavić 2014, 298). Tearle thus seems to resign himself to his fate of becoming obsolete, even in his professional capacities. As Mbembe and Nuttall (2008, 25) state, "[c]ities are subjects *en fuite*. They always outpace the capacity of analysts to name them". This relates to the slum-city as well, which, paradoxically enough, as in the case of Johannesburg, can be located in the centre of the city despite its socio-spatial placement in the margins. Both Zinzi and Tearle attest to the fluidity of the city and its slums and suburbs: Zinzi through the many alter egos she adopts in the novel, posing on numerous occasions, for example, as a reporter, and appearing as a Cote d'Ivoire refugee named Frances in order to work out a scam for her former drug dealer; and Tearle in his inflexible capacity as a proofreader, meticulous about order and routine.

The slum as habitation, livelihood, and politics in these two novels remains rooted in segregation policies based on race, or animal status; and as Tearle is forced to realize, proofreading and correcting the city and its many flaws is an impossible and even undesired task. The city resists ordering and enters the new post-apartheid era on its own terms. Tearle and Zinzi represent the "heterogeneous, contradictory and performative realm of political struggle" as outlined by Roy (2011, 230), albeit on opposite ends and in different temporal spaces. In terms of informality, for Zinzi the physical space embodied by her sloth puts her in the margins, where she does her best to make ends meet outside formal society, whereas for Tearle, the margins represent a mental space in which he finds himself, unable to conform to and accept the new South Africa. The two novels emphasize the disparate experiences of a changing city. The transformation that is anticipated and predicted in *The Restless Supermarket* is realized in Zinzi's Hillbrow, which is depicted as an area constructed around informality – an area that eventually persists and thrives.

Political agency and entrepreneurialism in stories of Lagos

> Everyone knew that the only city where dreams could be pursued was Lagos.
> (Unigwe 2018, 45–46)

As Roy (2011, 231) suggests, going beyond subaltern urbanism is intrinsically tied to "the study of spaces of poverty, of essential forms of popular agency, of the habitus of the dispossessed, of the entrepreneurialism of self-organizing economies". This is relevant in order to break the mould of the slum and its definitions. As seen above, Beukes and Vladislavić create spaces where their fiction both challenges and confirms these traditional notions of theorizing the slum criticized by Roy, particularly in terms of seeing the city as a threshold of crisis as outlined by Bishop and Phillips (2013, 222), and connecting agency with the city itself. Hillbrow is presented as a "separate animal" by Beukes, and Tearle laments the new life of the area after the end of apartheid. The idea of separateness is less present in the fictions of Lagos that I analyse next. *GraceLand* and *Lagos Noir* largely revolve around entrepreneurialism, informal economies, and settlements, as well as political agency on a grassroots level and beyond. The concept of the informal is particularly

interesting here. Roy (2011, 233) explains that urban informality is not just restricted to inhabitants of the slum, but also occurs among more privileged groups in the city. Fictionalized accounts of Lagos provide unique material for the examination of such informalities, which become transgressive in their search for prosperity. Hence, entrepreneurialism and political agency can become part of urban informality and take part in what Roy (2011, 233) terms the deconstruction of state legitimacy.

In Lagos, "everyone who was anyone (…) was a villain in some way", writes Wale Lawal (2018, 160) in *Lagos Noir*, which suggests that realizing one's aspirations and desire for economic upward mobility requires a degree of ruthlessness. The entire short story, titled "Joy", revolves around informality, mutual exploitation, and morally dubious entrepreneurialism in multifaceted ways. The character whom the story is named after is a girl from Benin, "nineteen, though you sensed the girl was younger: fourteen, sixteen at the most. (…) What did it matter if she was underage?" (Lawal 2018, 147). The justification provided in the story is that taking her to work in the family was far better than leaving her with Mama Lateef, "who had all kinds of clients" (147). Joy joins a family in Surulere, a part of Lagos whose name, according to Kaye Whiteman (2012, 291), "means 'patience is rewarded' in Yoruba, a suitable motto for the upwardly mobile". Thus, upward mobility is not only connected with the trajectories of individual characters and inhabitants, but is something inherent in the area itself.

Several characters in the story are presented as upwardly mobile, including Joy. She is found going through the main character's clothes (Lawal 2018, 153) and using her perfume (156) and soon the narrator starts to suspect that Joy is involved with Yinka, the husband (156). The story ends with the main character being locked in the house as it burns, while Joy stands outside holding the baby and the keys to the house (166). Exploitation for personal benefit, another form of informality, thus appears on many levels in this clandestine story, where Mama Lateef exploits young girls who have few prospects back home and sells them to families for various purposes. The protagonist and her husband take advantage of this system by hiring Joy. Joy herself has her own agendas of which little is known but more is alluded to. There is no fully innocent party, and no party entirely without agency. The suburb where the family lives is not one of deprivation, but a significant level of informality is still part of the everyday practices of people living there.

A similar outcome is inevitable in the story "What They Did That Night" by Jude Dibia, where Gabriel, a police officer, tries to fight corruption but ends up in danger of losing his own life at the hands of his colleagues who are involved in burgling houses on wealthy Lagos Island. To Gabriel's surprise, his own wife becomes implicated too, as her own aspirations go much further than his. "I am the only officer's wife who is poor" (Dibia 2018, 32), she claims, as Gabriel refuses to abuse his position and accept bribes. A backdrop to the story is the wealthy part of Lagos where "the occupants of this [housing estate] also had no idea about the real Lagos life, about constant power failure and taps with no running water. Everything worked here. Everything was a big lie" (39). The 'real' city is thus to be found in its more deprived areas, whereas the wealthy suburbs are presented as mere façades. Elvis, in *GraceLand*, travels to the nicer suburbs to earn money by impersonating Elvis Presley for unimpressed tourists, who merely pay him to get rid of him. The title of the novel can be seen as a reference to the ranch in Memphis which Presley acquired. Crisis and opportunity, poverty and prosperity, converge in the title which brings together Lagos and Las Vegas, where Elvis eventually relocates with his friend Redemption's passport and appropriated identity.

The fact that Elvis leaves Lagos, having been unable to find his place and make a living despite help from his multitalented friend

Redemption, suggests that his existence was never fully rooted, and that he was not an active agent in his own life. His attempts to reach a better social and economic standing eventually fail. Sarah K. Harrison (2012, 97) even goes as far as to call him a "paralyzed observer of social injustice". He is both an observer and a victim. To some extent, Elvis does lack agency and is merely a bystander in his own life, in need of help from others. First, Elvis's father's friend Benji helps him get a job at a construction site (Abani 2004, 27) from which he is soon unceremoniously fired (73). Redemption then gets him a job as an escort in a nightclub (91) and later facilitates his participation in the drug business (107). From his dancing show at the beach with meagre returns, Elvis's aspirations take him into dangerous territory and face to face with the Colonel, a brutal man working to silence any opposition against ruling forces. The Colonel later captures and tortures Elvis after he has become involved with the King of the Beggars, whose outspoken politics and demands for democracy put both in danger (Abani 2004, 300). Despite this historical backdrop, with the novel being set in 1983 when Nigeria was under military rule, Mason (2014, 215) confirms that politics "for Elvis and his friends, can only be personal". Elvis is absent when the King stabs the Colonel during a rally and is himself killed (Abani 2004, 302). Paradoxically, the city itself, with its 21 million inhabitants, can only be personal, to which all the stories in *Lagos Noir* also attest. This ties in with the concept of urban informality, which in this city that never sleeps (Abani 2018, 19) takes politics down to a personal and individual level.

Slum demolition is a central theme of *GraceLand*, as noted earlier. Maroko, the area where Elvis lives with his father, is destroyed. Elvis returns to Maroko after his capture and torture at the hands of the Colonel, only to find his father dead and their home in ruins (Abani 2004, 305). Elvis ends up in Bridge City where prospects are even gloomier than in Maroko: "Time lost all meaning in the face of that deprivation" (309). Elvis's friend Okon helps him to get settled and reveals that his own participation in the informal economy had involved selling corpses for organ harvesting: "When dey start to demand alive people, me I quit. I am not murderer. Hustler? Survivor? Yes. But definitely not a murderer" (Abani 2004, 308). With regards to agency, Armelle Choplin (2016, 399) concludes in her discussion of urban subalternity that "local and micro-forms of resistance seem to be unable to connect with the multi-layered scales of governance or to reach decision-making spaces". This implies that Myers's (2011, 103) call for hybrid governance remains an impossible ideal. Choplin (2016, 408) talks of spatial injustice, which is related to social injustice; both are manifested in slum resettlement schemes such as the one depicted in *GraceLand*, although there is no actual resettlement, only destruction and displacement. Elvis is not even allowed to bury his father. This goes to show that political agency in the slum, as portrayed by Abani and by the numerous writers in *Lagos Noir*, needs to be examined on different terms.

Instead of looking at it from above, agency must be investigated from within, on a personal level, through characters such as Redemption and Okon. "Your type no fit survive here long" (Abani 2004, 318), says Redemption, underlining the difference between himself and Elvis. Both Redemption and Okon unselfishly help Elvis, who cannot survive alone and has no future in Lagos. In these actions, political agency becomes visible as yet another form of urban informality that creates networks among people trying to survive. In terms of alterity, it is well-summarized in Redemption's explanation of why he likes Lagos when he and Elvis sit in Maroko admiring the lights of Ikoyi, a much wealthier suburb, across the water: "'Because though dey hate us, de rich still have to look at us. Try as dey might, we don't go away'" (137). Agbola and Jinadu (1997, 280) state that Maroko was close to "the highly priced lands

and properties of Ikoyi and Victoria Island and was regarded as an eyesore by these high-income neighbourhoods", thus confirming what Redemption says about the rich not being able to escape the poverty of Nigerians in other parts of Lagos. The struggle for space is emphasized and the lines connect to Heisel's (2016, 30) notion of the resilient city, a city in which wealth and poverty exist side by side; as the stories in *Lagos Noir* indicate, the wealthy side is represented as equally involved in informal practices bordering on the illegal.

Slum dwellers in Maroko are thus presented as being at a significant economic disadvantage, but from the point of view of the city, they have as much right to it as those who live in the wealthier part. When Elvis attends an outdoor cinema with his friend Confusion, he notices that the people present are "the usual motley mix that was the large yet invisible heart of any city" (Abani 2004, 148). Elvis and his friend thus belong to this motley mix, going beyond alterity or otherness. While waiting to board the flight to Las Vegas, Elvis ponders his life and concludes that "[n]othing is ever resolved (…) It just changes" (320). This insight eludes Tearle in *The Restless Supermarket*, who inevitably represents the old order and is unable to transform with the city. That nothing is ever resolved can be said for cities and their suburbs and slums: their elusive nature makes definition and theorization difficult as cities inevitably keep evolving and changing as their inhabitants carry on with their lives. In her chapter on Lagos, Saro-Wiwa mentions a sign saying "This is Lagos", which welcomes arrivals at the airport. According to her, the sign is actually a kind of disclaimer: "This Is Lagos – *take it or leave it*" (Saro-Wiwa 2012, 11; italics in the original).

All of the Lagos stories examined here give evidence of the resourcefulness and of the morally and legally questionable methods of survival required by inhabitants in a city whose entire essence is one of informality that transcends socio-economic class membership. The separation between parts of the city in terms of informality is thus presented as less overt. As Roy (2011, 233) states, "[i]nformal urbanization is as much the purview of wealthy urbanites as it is of slum dwellers" and the stories examined here support this view. This, for its part, confirms the necessity of seeing the slum as an integrated, inseparable part of the city, as the city itself, instead of reinforcing distinctions between centre and periphery. Subaltern urbanism in the stories of Lagos analysed here transgresses such dichotomies, blurring the lines between formal and informal, between legal and illegal, and most importantly between residents themselves.

When it comes to the subaltern and alterity, the novels and stories suggest that it is not the characters that are central, but the slum and the city itself. From the point of view of the slum, it is the wealthy inhabitants who are the Other: "A few generators thudded around them, and Elvis absently wondered why anyone who could afford a generator would live in Maroko" (Abani 2004, 137). This socio-economic divide runs deep but there is also another perspective to be taken into account. Saro-Wiwa (2012, 302) calls Lagos "one of Nigeria's greatest success stories" when her journey is coming to an end, emphasizing the fact that "250 ethnic groups can live together relatively harmoniously in an unstructured, dirty metropolis seemingly governed by no one". That seems, for its part, to suggest that while there is great disparity in wealth and prospects, a certain equality exists in literary representations of Lagos. Everyone has to deal with the same reality, the same potentialities and actualities of the city. In Dibia's (2018, 39) story, wealthy Lagos, with its running water and electricity, is even called a "big lie", which implies that the real, 'true' nature of the city is constituted by people who do not have access to such infrastructure or who have to deal with daily power outages. This emphasizes the view of the city as a site of everyday practice, which is also reinforced by Saro-Wiwa (2012, 303) in her sarcastic remark:

"But maybe Lagos isn't a laggard on the bottom rung of urban evolution. Perhaps the city is more futuristic than we care to realise. Isn't its low-tech overcrowding and pollution what our planet is heading towards, after all?"

Conclusion

The city and its suburbs and slums retain an agency of their own, as portrayed in the stories and novels about Johannesburg and Lagos examined in this article. Yet the city consists of its citizens, in pursuit of opportunities and prospects as they go about their daily lives. It seems appropriate here to return to the view of the city as elusive, which was highlighted in both critical and fictional texts. The binaries Roy mentions – authorized/unauthorized, formal/informal, legal/illegal – all converge in the slum, blurring boundaries and emphasizing the slum as a place with its very own forms of production, creation, and survival. Elvis tries his hand at many more or less successful careers, Zinzi adapts a number of alter egos in her quest to be free of her drug debt once and for all, and Gevisser interviews a variety of people of Johannesburg and its many suburbs and townships in order to map the elusive city. To theorize the (literary) slum does not mean capturing it at any given moment, but documenting its shifts and changes both on a personal, collective level and on a historical level. As the prospects of its inhabitants keep shifting, so does the slum itself. It simultaneously remains perpetually at the threshold of crisis and a vulnerable cradle of the future as Bishop and Phillips (2013, 222) suggest.

The literature examined here presents the slum as a place that requires adaptability from its inhabitants and that takes care of its own. The slum as represented in the fictional texts builds on a paradox: it retains the power to destroy individual people's lives or to elevate them into prosperity. It is the provider, the enabler of informal practices. The portrayals of urban informality blur the lines between different subgroups in the city and, at least to some extent, level the playing field. This is represented as the reality of Lagos to a more explicit degree than in the fictions of Johannesburg. Elvis and his friends live their lives right alongside the wealthy suburbs, whereas Hillbrow is presented as separate and isolated, first through Tearle's experiences of the changing city and then through Zinzi's endeavours.

Saro-Wiwa's words about taking or leaving Lagos can be applied to both cities discussed here. Both Lagos and Johannesburg are portrayed in the texts analysed as unique entities that cannot be controlled or forced to change. Tearle tried his best to bring Johannesburg back to its former shape before the end of apartheid; this turned out to be a futile attempt. In a similar manner, Lagos resists all outside efforts to transform and reshape the city; take it or leave it. Elvis is chewed up and spat out, and so is Zinzi in Johannesburg. The short stories about Lagos show an unequal city both in terms of prospects and infrastructure. Informal opportunities remain primary for characters in order to get a job, to improve living conditions, or to gain some basic respect. Returning to Myers's (2011) suggestion that cities may be best served by allowing formal and informal aspects of life to exist on equal terms is useful here. The subaltern condition in the literature examined is no longer imposed from the outside but dictated by the city itself. Beukes (2016, 324) writes that "[d]ream city is dreaming", while Unigwe describes Lagos as the city "where dreams could be pursued" (2018, 45–46). The present analysis shows that the dream city, in the case of both Lagos and Johannesburg, is not just dreaming: it is making and breaking the lives of people whose aspirations form the very core of its essence and existence.

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