

**From "sad black stories" to "useful tragedy":  
Trajectories of hope in Johannesburg from Kgebetli  
Moele's *Room 207* to Perfect Hlongwane's *Jozi*.**

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**COMPULSORY DECLARATION**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

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## Acknowledgement

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In the course of completing this project I discovered for myself the full power of thesis-writing to frustrate, to challenge, and to induce full-blown existential crisis. I have also discovered that it is true that frustration teaches patience, challenges herald growth, and existential crises create the space to want to make things better. It has been a humbling experience. I have no doubt that without the guidance of my supervisor, Meg Samuelson, this experience would have felt very different. Always encouraging, without being lenient, she has offered astute comment on my work and pushed me to think harder. I am so grateful, Meg, that you have been so generous in devoting some of your considerable intellectual energy and rigour to my thesis. Thank you. I must also extend my heartfelt thanks to my co-supervisor, Khwezi Mkhize, who not only offered rich intellectual support, but who also asked sincerely after my emotional wellbeing, listened with a kind ear, and dispensed advice from personal experience. Finally, I thank my wonderful parents, Bryan and Brigid, and my brilliant siblings Elizabeth and William, who have always believed in me, listened to the blow-by-blow account of this journey as it has unfolded, and who have (sort-of) offered to (try) to read my thesis. I am so proud to call you family.

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# Chapter 1

## Introduction

### Permutations of Johannesburg: Race, modernity and belonging

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Johannesburg as a city-concept has long occupied the imaginations and theorisations of scholars across numerous disciplines, and has been a central figure in scores of literary texts.<sup>1</sup> It remains a fertile site from which to create and theorise, as is made clear by the debut novelistic offerings of Kgebetli Moele and Perfect Hlongwane, both published within the last decade, and both of which present a gritty, realistic inner city. In this project, I place *Room 207* and *Jozi* in conversation with each other in order to listen for the ways in which they speak together or differently on the possibility, or the impossibility, of writing new scripts about black subjectivity in the post-apartheid city. The primary question I ask of these texts is: what do Moele's "sad black story" (50), and Hlongwane's city "where dreams come to die" (1) have to say about the potential for change in these scripts? Furthermore, what do these texts have to say about hope for the present?

The dissertation, as the title suggests, is structured as a trajectory moving from *Room 207* to *Jozi*. This works not only because of the texts' chronology, but because together they enable me to think through a complex and interlinked set of issues about inner city Johannesburg in the post-apartheid. I map out how Moele and Hlongwane are negotiating history, race, gender, and late capitalism in this space, as well as how they grapple with the idea of hope after the horizons of expectation for the present have collapsed – and how it might be redeemed, if it is redeemable at all.

Both texts are primarily concerned with the ways in which experiences of work, poverty, art-making, and understandings of history and success are all deeply racially inflected. Some theory after apartheid has called for an end to the use of racial categories in understanding the contemporary world. For example, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael, in their introduction to the 2000 cultural studies collection *Senses of Culture*, express concern over

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<sup>1</sup> Contemporary influential texts on Johannesburg include: Bremner 2010, Harrison et al, Holland and Roberts, Judin and Vladislavic, Kruger, Mbembe and Nuttall, Murray (2008), Murray (2011), and Nuttall.

the way in which South African cultural theorising has over-emphasised separation and segregation, which has included what they call a “fixation on race” (1). They are careful to note that “no one could deny the overwhelming presence of race as the master signifier of the South African apartheid experience” (11). However they are concerned to seek out “intimacies and connectivities” (5) that usually remain unseen by focusing on separateness, and thus they argue “less for an erasure than for a re-imagining” (13).

More recently, Njabulo Ndebele has made some strident comments on the continued presence of race as a category. For him, identification with blackness is an unresolvable tragedy (20), which keeps people uneasy. Accepting blackness as a marker of identity means for Ndebele giving up “the historic opportunity to be the new human standard” (26) and instead desiring the inheritance of “the extractive state that will always reproduce [the South African ‘black’] as a phenomenon” (25). Since blackness is a “fabrication, a figment of history”, a pursuit of blackness entails a pursuit “in perpetuity”, which means those in search of it will never “be free to be not black” (25). Ndebele’s call is for “the South African ‘black’” to begin to “appreciate the value of aspiring towards the universal” – that is, towards identification with the categorical marker of “human being” first (27) in order to be “at ease with ourselves” (28).

This article was published in 2014, a year before the nationwide and very vocal reassertion of blackness as a central identity point as a key element of the student movements for free tertiary education. While Ndebele’s concerns and Nuttall and Michael’s call for reimagining social categories deserve consideration, so too do the vociferous calls by students for white people to understand their privilege, and for black people to understand how their experiences in the world are often not just mediated but also constrained by their blackness. Ndebele’s call for ‘post-race’ identities is clearly come too soon; or it simply fails to appreciate how blackness is still central to the material and ontological realities of people.<sup>2</sup>

Xolela Mangcu points out that there is a relationship between “modernism and integrationist non-racialism” (281), which is organised around enlightenment principles of progress from superstition to truth. Given that race as category has no scientific basis, in this discourse, then, “all manner of race or cultural consciousness is of necessity retrogressive” (281). Mangcu is concerned to demonstrate that race is “a cultural phenomenon around which people, especially oppressed people, have constructed entire cultural histories” (282). This means that

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<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, Ndebele’s paper ultimately indicates a desire to be “at ease” to no longer be in a state of becoming, but to just “be” (25) – perhaps an existential longing for an ever-elusive homeostasis.

race should not, or in fact cannot, be merely discarded by theorists as an out-dated construct. In the collection *Changing Space, Changing City: Johannesburg after Apartheid* Nqobile Malaza argues that in order for urban planners to effectively “re-imagine non-racial cities” they need to “confront[] race in the first instance” (557). She shows that the idea of the “black urban” (553) should still matter because people are still navigating through a mire of meanings and tensions as they attempt to claim space in the city with pride and dignity – as one of her interviewees states: “it matters still because it just does” (563-4).

A word on *why* it does, before continuing. David Theo Goldberg’s ideas on racist cultures do great work in helping to situate the experiences of the protagonists of the two novels. For Goldberg, “racist culture” refers to “the shared meanings, values, and norms that promote and sustain the variety of exclusionary acts, principles, rules, and institutions making up the range of racisms” (108). Goldberg contends that contemporary racisms – plural as there is no “generic racism” (90) – cannot be considered irrational, outmoded, anomalous relics of the past (viii). Instead racisms are a function of modernity, and of liberalism. The ideology of modernity has committed itself to Reason and to teleological progress (civilizing, development). Concomitant with the devotion to Reason are the ‘progressive’ notions of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” and an increasing “insist[ence] upon the moral irrelevance of race” (6), as discussed by Mangcu. However, since racist exclusions still define society, liberalism, as “modernity’s definitive doctrine of self and society, of morality and politics” (1), serves then

to legitimate ideologically and to rationalize politico-economically prevailing sets of racialised conditions and racist exclusions. [Liberalism] is thus key in establishing racialised reasoning and its racist implications as *central* to modernity’s common moral and sociopolitical sense (1, my emphasis).

Thus, although the morals of liberal modernity disavow racist expressions, “they fail, and fail necessarily, to condemn and discourage such expressions exhaustively”, which results in them being either directly or implicitly condoned, “effectively authorizing discriminatory racial exclusions on the basis of the principle of moral reason itself” (39).

The site of the modern, in the linear teleological thinking of the Enlightenment, has been the metropolis – linked as it is to ideas of “civilization” and “capitalist rationalization” (Mbembe 373). The metropolis has been considered spatially and temporally separated from people and societies deemed ‘other’: primitive, traditional or pre-modern, located ‘over there’ and back then’ (Fabian). For Achille Mbembe, Johannesburg may be considered the “classical” (373)

metropolitan African city and “a central site not only for the birth of the modern in Africa, but for the entanglement of the modern and the African – the African modern” (376). The idea of modernity “insists on the ideals of self-conscious subjectivity and the desire for freedom” (Gikandi 470), and expects that “each generation does better than its predecessor” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001 17). But, as Gikandi shows, it is a duplicitous idea in colonial and postcolonial contexts since

it was colonialism that introduced what were considered to be the institutions of modern life in many African communities, while at the same time depriving people of the rights that were associated with the project of modernity itself (471).

David Attwell in the exceptionally valuable *Rewriting Modernity* articulates these paradoxes thoroughly and precisely. He describes how the promises of modernity have for most black South Africans “been fraudulent and inherently contradictory” (4) because they were offered selectively, and as Goldberg shows, have always masked a fundamental need for exclusions. However, Attwell argues, modernity’s promises “at least in their ideal forms, are so desirable that people cannot do without them” (4). It is important to remind ourselves here that the ideals of what we call “modernity” are not solely ascribable to the Western conceptual framework. However, “the *force* with which the post-Enlightenment ideoscape has been imposed on the world over the last 300 years or so has ensured that most societies have now come to define themselves in relation to it” (4). Whatever its contradictory nature, Attwell argues that “there is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity” (4). David Scott uses this idea as a starting point for his book *Conscripts of Modernity* in which he approaches the question of how we read and theorise in light of the failures of the projects of modernity and post-colonialism. The idea of conscription to modernity carries potency in the South African case – where black men were all but conscripted to the mines in Johannesburg and to the “experience of an aggressive modernisation” (Attwell 2) that begun with the mining industry and was extended throughout apartheid.<sup>3</sup>

Concomitant with the predicament of the modern and the metropolis in South Africa, therefore, is the entanglement of race and Johannesburg’s history, and as *Room 207* and *Jozi* demonstrate, it continues to play a significant role in experiences of the city in the contemporary moment. The city of Johannesburg seemed to sprout in an unlikely way from

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<sup>3</sup> It is crucial note that Apartheid policies and ideas are not in accordance with the ideals of modernity (liberty, fraternity, equality); however, as Goldberg notes, modernity and liberalism conceal their inherent condoning of racist exclusions. In this way, various forms of racist oppressions and exclusions may be considered functions of modernity.



the veld in the middle of the Highveld plateau. Migration to the farm that would become Johannesburg began with the gold rush in 1886. This saw the arrival of European prospectors who “bought into an idealized lifestyle that surrendered unreservedly to the world of *things* (wealth, luxury, display)” (Mbembe 378), seeking to create wealth from “the most superfluous raw material on earth” (379). Gold mining requires costly equipment and labour, and so thousands of black men from rural areas in southern Africa were “conscripted” to begin the task of extracting wealth to which they were to have no claim.<sup>4</sup> From its foundation, the city was formed on the basis of the generation of capital from the exploitation of black labour, drawing thousands of black people into the city and yet denying their rights to occupy any space in it. Black labour was integral to the project of modernization, and yet black labourers and their families were forbidden from residing within the city’s limits – designated whites-only areas – with strict curfews and pass laws.<sup>5</sup> In this way, the colonial-apartheid project drew in labour while simultaneously casting it out as surplus.

Mbembe, following Hannah Arendt, expresses the incongruity of the simultaneous “indispensabil[ity] and expendabil[ity]” of black labourers with the useful notion of superfluity. Johannesburg, he shows, is a product of racialised capitalism, which “instituted a contradictory relation between the instrumentality of black life in the market sphere, on the one hand, and the constant depreciation of its value and its quality by the forces of commercialism and bigotry, on the other” (380). Thus, as Mbembe notes, Johannesburg, as site of “modernity”, has also been for black people “the dominant site of their exclusion from modernity” (393). The inextricable link between capitalism and race in Johannesburg is central to an understanding of *Room 207* and *Jozzi*. So too is the idea that Johannesburg has operated as a space that is constraining and oppressive on the one hand, and symbolic of freedom and agency on the other.

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<sup>4</sup> Laws restricting black men’s ability to work on the mines, movement and access to property were put in place following the discovery of gold on the Witwatersrand. The Mining Act of 1893 prohibited African, Asian or Coloured people from operating certain machinery which meant that they were effectively only able to work as labourers (Simons and Simons 55). The Mining Code of 1896 reserved certain skilled jobs for white men only. The Black Land Act of 1913 prohibited black people from owning or renting land outside of designated reserves, which amounted to about 7% of land in South Africa (Simons and Simons 56).

<sup>5</sup> The Group Areas Act of 1950 designated where people belonging to the arbitrary racial groupings as defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950 could live (Mpe 2003 187). It was under this act that forced removals were legalised in order to eliminate “black spots” (*ibid*). As the colonial-apartheid project grew in reach and aggressiveness, so laws became more stringent, culminating in the ridiculously named Natives (Abolition of Passes and Coordination of Documents) Act of 1952 which forced all black people over the age of 16 to carry pass books and made the absence of such a book a prisonable offence. The pass laws were effectively repealed in 1986 (Mpe 187).

There has been a tradition of literature that has engaged with the simultaneous lure and severe disenfranchisement encapsulated by the image of Johannesburg. From the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, writers such as RRR Dhlomo in *An African Tragedy*, depicted the city as space of vice and oppression. The oft-cited “Jim Comes to Joburg” trope, in which “a young man from the countryside is destroyed by the evils of city life and city women” (Hoad 118), is the prime example. In this trope, the city is associated with vice and death, while the village is set as its antithesis, site of tradition, purity and stability (Samuelson 2008 64). This denial of black urbanity prefigured the relegation of Africans to ‘tribal homelands’ (Bantustans) under apartheid policies which sought to “produce city-space as white” (64). Later, writers of the *Drum* era focused on capturing the pace, rhythm, thrill, and most importantly the valid existence of African urbanity, producing for the first time literature focusing on thriving black inhabitants of the city (Samuelson 2007 249). The *Drum* era was relatively short-lived, and gave way to the intensely politicized struggle-era literature – subjected to censorship and banning. Serote’s poem “City Johannesburg” captures the texture and mood of this literature which, as Steven Clingman shows, turned its attention to the future in order to imagine new revolutionary frameworks for it (43). The lines “Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, / Listen when I tell you, / There is no fun, nothing, in it, [...] Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,” (37-39, 42) display a version of Johannesburg as restrictive, hostile and exclusive. The literature demonstrated a will to actualise the “right to the city” (Lefebvre 62) which was fuelling much popular resistance and gaining momentum as part of the anti-apartheid struggle – the burning of pass books being only the most obvious example.

In its various permutations in literary representation, the experience of Johannesburg for black South Africans has been portrayed as one of both “danger and opportunity (Mandela 56). This is a contradiction at the heart of the city-concept of Johannesburg; two sides of the same coin, bound together by the thread and threat of gold, making Johannesburg simultaneously eGoli and space of impoverishment.<sup>6</sup> Yet the promise of the “city of dreams, where one could transform oneself from a poor peasant to a wealthy sophisticate” (Mandela 56) holds great allure. And “something, perhaps the lure of money, excitement, work, bright lights, and opportunity”, the writers of the collection *From Joburg to Jozi* comment, “something

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<sup>6</sup> This kind of understanding of Johannesburg is exemplified in the titles of books like Alan Morris’s *Bleakness and Light*, Lindsey Bremner’s *Johannesburg: One City Colliding Worlds* and Martin Murray’s *City of Extremes*. This language of juxtaposition is also invoked by Sarah Nuttall, even as she complicates it, in her comments in her book *Entanglement*, where she characterizes the city as an “intricate entanglement of éclat and somberness, light and dark, comprehension and bewilderment, polis and necropolis, desegregation and re-segregation” (2009 33).

continues to draw thousands of newcomers to the city every day” (Holland and Roberts 4). Even under apartheid – where black people were denied the right to live in the city, and freedom of movement and association were severely curtailed – the city of gold represented “a sense of cultural release, a partial state of freedom” (Mbembe 390).

Perhaps no other area has been more exemplary of this than Hillbrow, where *Room 207* and much of *Jozi* are set (*Jozi* also ventures into Yeoville and Braamfontein<sup>7</sup>). Hillbrow has been subject to a narrative (especially perpetuated by the media) that portrays it as the locus of all that is dangerous or decaying in Johannesburg. From the late 1970s, the demographic make-up of Hillbrow underwent what is referred to as a ‘greying’ of the neighbourhood as Indian and coloured white-collar workers moved in, followed in the late 1980s by black wage workers (Morris 10). As the black population grew so the movement of white people out of Hillbrow, already a slow trickle due in part to growing conservatism in the white population and also to increases in rent, began to intensify into what came to be called “white flight” (Morris 61). Beginning in the 1990s there has been a rapid and “sizable” immigration to Johannesburg by transnational Africans and so the configuration of the inner city has changed profoundly (Simone and Gotz 128). These factors led to governmental and private disinvestment in the inner city in favour of the affluent second CBD of Sandton. The loss of capital combined with the burgeoning population led to the sharp deterioration of infrastructure, creating a spiralling inner city operating beyond its capacity (Murray 142). This has signified a refusal of democratisation by white capital. As Morris states, “the creation of a racially diverse neighbourhood does not necessarily lead to the development of an integrated one” (337). This has been immanently clear in the two-plus decades of South Africa’s democracy. Moreover, the “ever-increasing” numbers of transnational Africans in Hillbrow have been “subject to intense xenophobia” (337).

Thus, Hillbrow has come to represent a “decaying crime-ridden wasteland disconnected from the mainstream of city life” (Murray 137). The struggling inner city is a space that represents post-apartheid disenfranchisement and exclusion from the gains of liberation, and so does not quite inhere with the story of Johannesburg as city of gold, or its post-apartheid tagline of ‘world class African city’ (Kruger 1). In order to remain loyal to the narrative demanded by the neoliberal economy of Johannesburg, Hillbrow must be disavowed. As Murray states,

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<sup>7</sup> Braamfontein has not experienced the same capital flight as Hillbrow, and has experienced a rejuvenated interest, with new clubs, restaurants, and office spaces opening up and attracting a young, creative crowd. The suburb has also yet to be inserted into the library. In *Jozi* it is given a similar treatment to Hillbrow, and depicted as a space of contradictions. See footnotes 40 and 43.

Hillbrow has become “territorially stigmatised” (149) – an “outcast ghetto” (153) formed by the mutually reinforcing processes of “social exclusion, ethno-racial marginalisation, and spatial isolation” (149).

Whatever the deleterious image of Johannesburg’s inner city and its inhabitants, it remains nevertheless the entry point for many black South Africans into the post-apartheid, and neoliberal, narratives of upward social mobility. The structures and institutions of the inner city are symbols of this mobility. And Hillbrow especially is endured because of its cheapness and proximity to potential opportunity, as a launching pad in the project of self-making. However, the rapid population growth, demographic changes, constant population turnover, swift decline in infrastructure and the figuring of the inner city as dystopian space has meant is that there is a sense of rootlessness that pervades Johannesburg’s city centre (Simone 1998).

AbdouMaliq Simone and Graham Gotz write that “the inner city represents a veritable vacuum of belonging, where almost no one presently living there can claim an overarching sense of origin [...] or profess a real wish to stay” (129). Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall complicate this somewhat by noting that the fact that black people have historically been excluded from not only the city but the experience of being lawfully urban means that for many there is a *struggle to belong*, not just a sense of unbelonging. They speculate that the exclusions black South Africans have had to face perhaps explain “the force and power of attempts to conquer the right to be in the urban in the present. To occupy the centre of the city, [...] to draw on a culture of indifference and restlessness that nourishes self-stylisation” (282). In fact Mbembe goes so far as to say that “most social struggles of the post-apartheid era can be read as attempts to reconquer the right to be urban” (391). Henri Lefebvre refers to this as “the right to the city” (62) by which he means not just “simple visiting rights” but rather “a transformed and renewed *right to urban life*” (158), that is a right to not only have access to the city but to participate spatially, economically and politically.<sup>8</sup> This is a struggle central to both *Room 207* and *Jozi* as they work through the sedimentations and scripts for what their protagonists can and cannot say about, or what they are able or unable to do, in Johannesburg.

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<sup>8</sup> See Kofman and Lebas’s Introduction to Lefebvre’s *Writings on Cities* (19, 34).

Hillbrow entered the literary archive decisively with Phaswane Mpe's now definitive 2001 text *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.<sup>9</sup> The novel has been widely studied, and has helped literary and other scholars to think about a range of important issues in contemporary Johannesburg.<sup>10</sup> The influential nature of this text and its prominence among contemporary South African novels make it an almost certain interlocutor for both Moele and Hlongwane who choose to set their works in the same place, and who engage with the ways in which black inhabitants of the inner city grapple with racisms, xenophobia, HIV/AIDS, poverty, rural/urban migration, and death. Both also notably make use of the second person narrative voice which is so integral to Mpe's text. I want to pause to focus briefly on this text in order to evoke and invoke a sense of literary "haunting" (cf. Nuttall 2009 91), that is, to listen for the resonances and echoes that carry through from literary predecessors such as Mpe to Moele and Hlongwane.<sup>11</sup>

One of the most significant aspects of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, for my reading of *Room 207* and *Jozi*, is that the novel opens up a space for thinking about who gets to be welcomed to the inner city identified as "ours" (Hoad 113), as well as who is willing to accept this invitation. The focus here is on what kind of community is drawn to Hillbrow. As Mpe maps it, community seems to form in the social imaginary, in networks that crisscross over urban and rural spaces, across national borders, and even across the boundary between life and death (Samuelson 2007 251). Places are infused with one another, we find "Hillbrow in Hillbrow. Hillbrow in Cape Town. Cape Town in Hillbrow. Oxford in both. Both in Oxford" (Mpe 104). Mpe conceives of a community that remains permeable and inclusive. The community to which the narrator welcomes Refentše, and implicitly the reader, is not just "our Hillbrow",

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<sup>9</sup> Another important text from the same year is Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* which charts the shifting demographics in Hillbrow from the perspective of Aubrey Terle, a figure of what Sarah Nuttall calls "the aging white man" (2009 56). The novel is set in 1993, in the time of transition and uses the device of its protagonist as a proof-reader to insert language into the city scape as a marker of the city in flux.

<sup>10</sup> See for example the engagements of the following theorists with *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: Clarkson on identity, Crous on masculinity, Dannenberg on postcoloniality, Davis on contagion, Gaylard on African humanism, Hlongwane on race, Hoad on cosmopolitanism, Nyamnjoh on xenophobia and Samuelson (2007) on hospitality.

<sup>11</sup> In the chapter "Surface and Underneath" in her book *Entanglement*, Sarah Nuttall examines the entanglement in Johannesburg of its readable and occult spaces (83). For Nuttall, Johannesburg is a city "studded with texts" (84) with a "subliminal memory of life below the surface, of suffering, alienation, rebellion, insurrection" (83-4). In the essay, she is concerned to draw out "the oblique, the haunted, the latent" (89), noting that "Johannesburg is haunted, not least by writing itself; it, too, is a literary city, built of linguistic and philosophical layerings of imagination and consciousness, acts of recall to which we can return, an underneath which accumulates beneath the surface, giving the city and our presence in it depth, memory, textuality, a sense of loss and the possibility of re-enchantment" (91).

but “our All” (104), “our Humanity” (113), “our Heaven” (124). Thus, Hillbrow is not so much “a place of non-belonging” (Clarkson 452) as a place constituted by and constitutive of all places, a place to which it is impossible *not* to belong.

The acceptance of the novel’s welcome is, as Neville Hoad shows in his astute reading, to claim citizenship and in turn share the responsibility for “the work of mourning” (123). Mourning, Hoad states, is “a way of incorporating the loved and lost object in order to be able to continue in the face of its passing, rather than be crippled by its loss” (114). The notion of living on in the face of loss is central to my consideration of *Room 207* and *Jozi* – texts which are so centrally concerned with either leaving the city and losing hope, or enduring. In fact, Hoad goes a step further in arguing that Mpe’s novel invites the reader to share in its melancholia – that is, to keep the “ongoing historical wounds of rapid urbanization, xenophobia, resurgent witchcraft, and the HIV/AIDS pandemic *open*” and thereby expose “the fantasy of coherent national and/or communal identities as false palliatives” (116, my emphasis). As I work towards the idea of “useful tragedy”, what Hoad calls the “melancholic work of fiction” (115) comes to the fore, as *Room 207* and *Jozi* refuse to offer neat solutions to the complex socioeconomic realities with which they engage.

Another important interlocutor for these two texts is K Sello Duiker’s beautiful if rather sprawling novel, *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*. Right at the end of the novel, Tshepo, the main protagonist, moves to Hillbrow and gets a job working in a children’s home. In this move, the novel enacts a turn to the ethic of care as a mode of building a community in diversity and thereby coming to belong in the city. Tshepo comes to live in Hillbrow “with all its decay” (452), and not in spite of its decay. He seems to embrace the inner city as it is, with “foreigners” (454) and orphans, poverty, crime and drug use and comes to “believe in people, in humankind, in personhood” (454). This, crucially, enables him to begin for the first time to “feel at home” (454). In his work at the children’s home, he accepts that he is “[his] mother’s child” (456) and takes up the role of his mother, the nurturer, rather than that of his father, the gangster. The novel gestures toward the labour of care, usually considered ‘women’s work’ as a means through which a community of belonging might be found, or rather created, in Hillbrow. Both Mpe’s and Duiker’s novels, then, enact a turn to the other and a building of a new community in post-apartheid Johannesburg. The texts engage with the idea of hope in the context of death (Mpe) and decay (Duiker), and they present ways of living on in the city. *Room 207* and *Jozi* enrich this thinking.

This, then, is my rationale for selecting these two quite different texts for study. They build on the fast-growing contemporary archive on inner city Johannesburg, even as they offer new nodes from which to explore similar questions of belonging in the city. There has not yet been adequate scholarly attention paid to either *Room 207* or *Jozi*. Little has been offered in review of Hlongwane's *Jozi*, besides some praise from online blogs,<sup>12</sup> and it has yet to be the subject of a published academic paper. Although Moele's *Room 207* has won several awards,<sup>13</sup> the novel was also criticised for its apparently raw writing style.<sup>14</sup> Michael Titlestad's scathing newspaper review to this effect, "The Pitfalls of a Literary Debut" (2007), has elicited a few academic responses.<sup>15</sup> Many of these condemn the novel for its treatment of women; however, for the most part literary analysts' engagements with the novel have been cursory, offering little of substance.<sup>16</sup> By choosing to focus on recent and as yet understudied texts, I hope to generate new links in fictional writing on Johannesburg, and scholarly engagements with it.

Sarah Nuttall in "Literary City" considers it important to explore how writers are engaging with the Johannesburg of what she elsewhere calls "the now" (2004 731). She asks: "What might a Johannesburg text be? How does Johannesburg emerge as an idea and a form in contemporary literatures of the city?" (2009 33). In her exploration of some Johannesburg texts, Nuttall finds that "blackness [is] no longer locked into an overarching binary with whiteness as in most earlier South African fiction" (56) and that Johannesburg writing is "still a text finding its form" (57). Yet for her it is clear that the city in contemporary fiction is emerging as "an aesthetic, a political and an imaginary site, a vivid and explicit template for an entire array of social fears and possibilities" (36). *Room 207* and *Jozi* offer both extensions and challenges to Nuttall's explorations. We may read her city figures of stranger and hustler into these two texts, and find that they flesh out and also revise Nuttall's figurations. The hustler for example who acts "to his own advantage" does so not merely because of "aggressive ventriloquism, and parody" (55), but because he operates from a position of disenfranchisement, and enchantment with the commoditised world. My sense therefore is

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<sup>12</sup> See Kona, and Maserow

<sup>13</sup> 2007 Herman Charles Bosman Debut Novel Award, the University of Johannesburg Debut Novel Award, received an honourable mention at the Noma Awards, and was short-listed for the Commonwealth Literary Award in the Africa region

<sup>14</sup> See Ratele and Ngobeni who call it "a hotchpotch of misogyny and ethnic drivel" and "not writing but typing" (28).

<sup>15</sup> See Frenkel, Ibinga, Putter, Raditlhalo, Rafapa.

<sup>16</sup> Marzia Milazzo's (2013) paper on *Room 207* and institutional racism, which is thus far the most insightful engagement with the text, is an exception.

that *Room 207* and *Jozi* are rich works, which bring greater complexity to writing on the inner city, and which merit considered readings.

Developing this complexity, Phaswane Mpe argues, is one of the primary “role[s] of literature in a changing society” (2003 191). For him, literature should “remain sensitive to the importance of details [...] and] continue to reflect on and articulate these subtleties” (197). In this way, writers are able to “resist dogma” (196) and thereby avoid melodramatic and stereotyping (mis)representations. He shows that Hillbrow – for him remarkably underrepresented in literature, both fictional and otherwise – has often been represented as “nothing but evil and dangerous” (196). This reductiveness “fails to recognise other places, other people, other identities for what they are: *complex*” (196). In addition, it fails to account for the everyday lives being conducted within the city. I hope to demonstrate the *Room 207* and *Jozi* fulfil the terms of Mpe’s mandate.

Many theorists of the cities of ‘the global South’ are concerned to demonstrate that although life in these cities is challenging, the people who live there are “making do” (Bremner 166), often in quite creative ways with the resources at their disposal.<sup>17</sup> The editors of the collection *Under Siege: Four African Cities* write in their introduction to that text that “the contemporary African city is today in crisis” (Enwezor et al 14) given that at least 40% of Africa’s population live in cities (17), and within those cities unemployment or underemployment rates of 70% are “the norm” (19). However, in spite of, or because of the challenges that African cities face, they find that

there is a great deal of experimentation in the production of space and habitat. The resilience and inventiveness of urban dwellers have kept many cities functional. Everything is translated and reprocessed to fit new of modalities of living. Urban life, far from being dystopic, is outlined by the apparent exuberance of the everyday (18).

This is a crucial recognition to make before undertaking a reading of texts that present characters who are living lives of what Lauren Berlant refers to as “crisis ordinariness” (10). Although they are concerned to demonstrate the ways in which their protagonists are constrained by structural grooves, *Room 207* and *Jozi* also remind us that “an aesthetics of the everyday is fully compatible with life on the margins, life under severe uncertainty, and life as a terrain of danger and suffering” (Appadurai and Breckenridge 353). These texts not only

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<sup>17</sup> AbdouMalik Simone’s work on “Globalization and the identity of African urban practices” (1998), “The Visible and Invisible” (2002), “People as Infrastructure” (2004) and “Pirate Towns” (2006) provide further examples of this scholarship.



grapple with Appadurai and Breckenridge's "aesthetics of the everyday", but they demonstrate the "exuberance" (Enwezor et al 18) of the city lives of ordinary people through their protagonists' searches for love, friendship, and comfort in one another, and their strivings to create music, paintings, poetry, and literature from within the city.

In sum then, central to this dissertation's exploration of the texts will be the question of how they approach the narratives of progress that attend Johannesburg as a space over-determined by the complex and contradictory sets of images, narratives and ideas discussed in this introductory chapter. These ideas of progress are informed by the post-apartheid narrative, which David Attwell refers to as "the basic *script* of the present" (6, emphasis in original). This is a script that is "an attempt to re-enter the world of global modernity". It is therefore enmeshed in the current world order of neoliberalism, which advocates that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterised by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey 2). A sense of humanness in this narrative is linked to economic markers of the self.

Although there has been a fundamental change in South Africa's political and moral discourse, *Room 207* and *Jozi*, as I read them, are both concerned with exploring how the *terms* of the post-apartheid script draw on the racisms of liberalist modernity and the economic rationalisations of neoliberalism. And whilst politicians, economists, writers, workers and many other members of South African society attempt to access the desirable promises of modernity for all, the question, Attwell writes in 2005, "is whether the country will repeat liberal capitalism's manifest failures or whether it will translate its underlying promises" (6). The texts I examine, situating themselves as they do in the context of a post-apartheid moment where narratives of progress seem to be faltering or have collapsed completely, would seem to indicate the former. And my concern is to place the novels beside one another try to understand what stories they tell in the wake of this perceived collapse, to examine what they say about the availability of new scripts for black subjectivities in post-apartheid Johannesburg

## Chapter 2

### Writing scripts but no “reel life”: dreaming and “sad black stories” in Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207*

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*Room 207* follows the lives of six men who share a room in a converted hotel in Hillbrow. Through each of these lives runs a common thread: they are instantiations of a “sad black story” (50). This is the result of the collapse of a particular set of expectations for their presents and futures in Johannesburg. These expectations, or “dream[s]” (19) as they are somewhat more intangibly termed in the novel, are for upward mobility and a realisation of the post-apartheid narrative of “a better life for all”.<sup>18</sup>

The narrator, Noko, generates a lens through which *Room 207* can be productively read. Noko writes film scripts and though he seems to be feverishly attempting to generate stories that are new and important, his scripts are yet to see “reel life” (80). That is, the narratives he has created occupy a liminal zone – imagined but not acted upon or realised. The hopes and dreams of the characters thus are suspended in the hopeful yet uncertain temporality of the ‘not yet’. I want to use this idea to approach the novel, asking what scripts Moele chooses to engage with and question or challenge, and what scripts he perhaps employs less critically, or which are more implicit (and complicit). I will try to do this primarily through throwing open spaces of ambiguity in the text. Ultimately I want to examine what Moele is saying about the possibility of writing and realising new scripts for black subjectivity in Johannesburg in the post-apartheid.

The chapter treads difficult ground. I do not want to attempt to detect the ‘real stories’ behind the surface story and thereby perform a symptomatic reading of the novel.<sup>19</sup> But I do want to

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<sup>18</sup> This is a phrase introduced by Nelson Mandela in his election victory speech on 2 May 1994, where he mounted the call to “begin to build a better life for all South Africans. This means creating jobs, building houses, providing education and bringing peace and security for all”. The phrase has become a slogan of the ANC government, used widely on campaigns.

<sup>19</sup> Rita Felski, in her delightfully fresh book, *The Limits of Critique*, opens up new ways of thinking about how to engage with literary texts without presuming to diagnose them by either ‘digging down’ or ‘standing back’. She demonstrates that these spatial metaphors betray an attitude of suspicion and of looking down upon a text as a critic who claims to “know the text better than itself” (109). Her suggestion is that, “rather than looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen” (12). She suggests that when we read and interpret texts we begin from a point where the text

track the threads of narratives of black subjectivity that Moele seems to be invoking. I want throughout the chapter to tease out some of the contradictions that Moele generates between dreams and their undersides, and between his protagonists' words and their actions. And I also want to note ambiguities and lacunae within the text itself which may display, but not quite interrogate, more insidious narratives.

## **The contradictory script of the “dream city”**

Johannesburg has been experienced and mythologised as South Africa's ‘land of opportunity’, or what Noko repeatedly calls “dream city” (*in passim*). Yet in *Room 207*, Moele shows the narrative of the dream to be ineluctably intertwined with the “sad black stories” he presents. Bhekiziwe Peterson identifies two motifs of “entrapment” and “flight” (207) in the ghetto in Kwaito music, and in *Room 207* Moele employs the same contradictory set of gestures operating in Johannesburg's city centre. There is a centripetal gesture in which the narrative of the modern city draws people into its social and economic fabric with the promise of potential for progress and upward mobility. And there is a centrifugal gesture, in which inhabitants of the inner city figure their stay as an incarceration from which they are attempting to escape in order to actualise the prosperity they so desperately seek. The word “dream” as it is used throughout the novel connotes hope, which Braidotti calls “a sort of ‘dreaming forward’” (217), a story about the future. In other words it is a relationship of expectation and optimism with an imagined, anticipatory time.

That *Room 207* engages with the narrative of Johannesburg as golden city of opportunity is signalled clearly in the epigraph from T.E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, which implies that the protagonists are among the “dangerous men” who dream in the day, and attempt to “act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible”. What is encoded in this dream is the prospect of opportunity and prosperity, the promise of excitement, and an accompanying acquisitiveness, all of which have historically drawn people to Johannesburg (Mbembe 390). Associated with Johannesburg's image as city of dreams is the image of the city as the location of modernity. And as Frédéric Le Marcis notes, the city space is regarded

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is seen as a “potential source of knowledge” (84) so that reading becomes a matter of forging connections and generating attachments. This does not mean reading uncritically; we can still disagree with aspects of a text. However, taking issue with a work of art need not become a “judgement [which] is held up as sufficient or self-evident proof of a text's oppressive effects” (171). Instead, as Felski also reminds us, the critic as reader is always present in the interpretation, and advocates that this should be explicitly so. Thus, “interpretation becomes a coproduction between actors that brings new things to light rather than an endless rumination on a text's hidden meanings or representational failures”. (174)

by “theorists of modernity” as “the place par excellence for the realization of the individual (454). The men’s attempts to “act their dream” are modes of self-authoring. This is a dream of modernity, of making the self, or actualising individual subjectivity and freedom as the end-point of a teleological progression toward being most advanced, developed or free. However, the concept of modernity is fraught with duplicity, entangled as it is with colonial inflections, and racist exclusions. Dreams and hopes of self-making are embedded within this troubled space.

Moele’s characters demonstrate this, with each of the men of 207 migrating to the city as conscripts of neoliberal capitalism and consumerism through which they are supposed to be able to lift themselves out of disenfranchisement.<sup>20</sup> Moele has his protagonists enter the search for prosperity in Johannesburg through the migrant quarter of the inner city suburb of Hillbrow. Hillbrow in *Room 207* represents a contradiction at the heart of “dream city”. It is narrativised as the gateway to the opportunities of the city yet it is seen by the men of 207 as something between an obstacle and a stepping stone to the realisation of the dream. In keeping with the narrative of progress and upward mobility, the men of 207 cannot allow Hillbrow to become a home. Instead, they spend more than a decade as “refugees” (170), “not really staying there” (13). From the start, their time in Hillbrow is destined to be temporary, a means to an end. Their “out of Hillbrow party” (14) is planned from the beginning, even though “it doesn’t have a set date” (14). The men come into the city to ‘make it’, but more importantly, to make it *out*. It is the latter impulse that drives their lives in the inner city. These tensions between hating Hillbrow and needing it, and being both exiled to and within it, animate the whole novel.

The men’s difficult relationship with the inner city is drawn from the popular narrative that portrays it as the locus of all that is dangerous or decaying in Johannesburg. The men of 207 employ this kind of dystopian narrative in order to understand their life-worlds in Hillbrow and to justify the pressing need to get out. Group leader and originator of the idea of the longed-for “out of Hillbrow party”, Matome, articulates the 207s’ constructions of Hillbrow as what Marzia Milazzo refers to “as a state of mind, an epistemological space” (48) – a space which is pathologised as one of lack, a space for the marginalised. For Matome, “missing something about Hillbrow would be a step *backwards* into slavery” (Moele 196, my emphasis). Hillbrow in the text is an othered space associated with a past temporality or with

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<sup>20</sup> This notion of conscription to ‘modernity’ is drawn from David Scott’s work in which modernity is not a choice but “one of the fundamental *conditions* of choice” (19).

a set of dreams about modernity not yet realised. The party is a detoxifying process, a rite of passage into the future, a symbol of progress. The men of 207, in search of “dream city”, gaze outward longingly. The direction of this gazing operates to make the city into what Soja’s calls the *expolis* – “the city without, but also the noncity, the city without a centre” (Hutchinson 261).<sup>21</sup> Johannesburg, a city turned inside-out, seems to operate for the men of 207 as a city of dreams in spite of its ‘dead’ city centre.

This is the case for each of the men, except for S’busiso, nicknamed Zulu-boy. Zulu-boy is an interesting character as he is a site of some important contradictions in the text. Of particular import here is his defiant love for Hillbrow. In an area which is perhaps the most transnational space in the country, with migrants from all over South Africa as well as Africa, Zuluboy is the most overtly xenophobic and ethnophobic character and is vehemently insistent on his Zulu heritage and its superiority. Yet paradoxically, he is simultaneously “a Hillbrowean in true nature” (62) and is the only character who embraces “our little mother earth in Africa” (19), Hillbrow, as home. He seems to enact Hillbrow, to interact with it; enactments and interactions that *change* it: “he breathed it and so it breathed him [...] felt its pain and made it feel his pain” (62). Yet while he is the only one who has “lived” (62) Hillbrow, he is also the only character in the novel to die in Hillbrow. Living in the city, loving it, and dying in it are in keeping with the familiar narrative for city as moral antithesis of the village, for the city as a space of death.<sup>22</sup> However, following *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Moele refuses this simple binaristic encoding of space because for Zulu-boy “Hillbrow was his Heaven” (226)<sup>23</sup>. Zulu-boy’s death seems to delineate, like the deaths of the protagonists in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, “the limits of belonging and becoming possible within this urban world” (Samuelson 2007 251). Yet that Hillbrow is Heaven to Zulu-boy also opens it up to “the world of our continuing existence” (Mpe 124), to endure in narrative, rather than foreclosing it and consigning it to unknowable, unrecoverable death.

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<sup>21</sup> Loren Kruger notes that such edge city developments as Sandton “generate profit by keeping out of reach of central city taxation, thus usually at the expense of the old centre” (156), forming an *exopolis*.

<sup>22</sup> This narrative follows the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ trope.

<sup>23</sup> In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the village, Tiragalong, and the city permeate one another. The novel shows that the places, separate though they may seem and may be imagined, are in fact influenced by one another, sharing the same problems. Although all of the characters die after having lived in the city, “the danger of the city is never allowed to settle into the negative term in a binary that sets it against the rural” (Samuelson 2007 251). In Mpe’s novel, the spaces to which we are welcomed are continuously broadened, spanning the globe and eventually, the after-life. Heaven in the novel is figured as “the world of our continuing existence” (Mpe 124), likened to the space of stories.

The idea of “dream city” is thus entangled with the idea of dystopian Hillbrow. If at first Hillbrow seems to be “dream city’s” underside – both an obstacle and a stepping stone to the dream – through Zuluboy, the notion of Hillbrow is shown to be a contested term, less fixed than imagined – at once reviled and disavowed, but also central to the project of bringing “dream city” to fruition. With Zulu-boy’s contrary position on Hillbrow, Moele negates a simple re-statement of the narrative of Hillbrow offered by his other protagonists.

A further glaring contradiction in the idea of “dream city” comes to light in the tragic successes of Matome, Modishi, and D’nice. By the end of the novel, each of these men succeeds in actualising the “dream city” narrative. But their success is problematized. For one, their making money and leaving the city for the suburbs sees the dissolution of their friendships. Just as they “indifferently became united” (15), the 207s indifferently disintegrate, leading Noko to declare that “poverty and suffering unites people” and “good living makes people greedy and greed divides them” (195). Success in the city is individualised rather than shared. This is in keeping with AbdouMaliq Simone’s observation that cities in Africa have been “the means through which bodies were turned into individuals” (*For the City Yet to Come* 2004 144). The self-oriented way in which the men live in and engage with Hillbrow operates against the development of a sense of community.

More disturbingly, upon the realisation of the dream, the successful men become abusive husbands. Modishi and D’nice in particular demonstrate a violence and rage which is presented by Noko as being quite unexpected. But the misogynistic language of the men throughout the text, and the silence of the novel in voicing a challenge to the protagonists’ rhetoric and behaviour, portends Modishi and D’nice’s violence so that it seems only inevitable. *Room 207* demonstrates that the “dream city” script is imbricated with the script of patriarchy that operates as an ‘elephant in the text’, informing the subject positions and actions of the characters in the novel without ever being confronted.

Moele’s characters display a form of hyper-masculinity, which seems to be taken as the norm. Proving and displaying this misogynistic and heteronormative masculinity underlies and provides justification for many of the actions and beliefs of the men of 207. With this behaviour, the men police each other in order to present and protect their interpretation on how ‘real men’ should behave. This is one of the primary means through which hegemonic masculinity is produced (Connell 844). The concept of hegemonic masculinity, introduced in the early 1980s by Raewyn Connell, refers to a normative mode of being masculine. It is not a

“fixed, transhistorical” (838) ideal of masculinity, but rather “the currently most honoured way of being a man” (832).<sup>24</sup> For the men of 207, masculinity means domineering, violent, sexist behaviour. It is this form of masculinity that is most associated with hegemonic masculinity, though as Connell notes, this need not be the case, as “hegemony has numerous configurations” (840).

The hyper-masculinity of the protagonists cannot however simply be labelled ‘hegemonic’ in the context of South Africa. Intersectionality has become a key concept in feminist thinking, and Kopano Ratele has cogently argued that the same should be applied to thinking about masculinities. Ratele’s work on masculinity in South Africa has consistently emphasised the importance of reading hegemonic masculinity among black South African men within the context of high levels of inequality, unemployment and relative powerlessness. He establishes that “African hegemonic masculinity is always in a state of inherent uncertainty” (2014 124) because African men, especially young men,

must seek to advance themselves within a global network of violent, capitalist, racist, patriarchal, homophobic ideological structures which, on the one hand, they are urged to support but which also, on the other hand, *are the source of their own subjugation* (118, my emphasis).

As a result, he contends, the “very idea of hegemonic African masculinity is problematic and perhaps untenable”, or at least African masculinity must be considered as “hegemonic and subordinate at the same time” (118).<sup>25</sup>

Moele seems to be concerned to present some of the conflicts of what it might mean to be a black man in the post-apartheid and yet still profoundly disenfranchised. In the first place he shows that the policing of the protagonists’ masculinity is embedded in a culture of hyper-masculinity, as Noko demonstrates when he asks: “how do you comfort a man? It’s not there in *komeng* [masculinity]” (57). He has, in other words, never been taught about other potential forms of legitimate masculinity. In fact, Noko later makes the desperately sad admission that

nobody ever explained anything about your feelings. Nobody ever said anything about love and loving people; everything I have learned about human relationships I have learned in the street, the hard way” (174).

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<sup>24</sup> Connell explains that hegemonic masculinity “require[s that] all other men to position themselves in relation to it”, and it “ideologically legitimate[s] the global subordination of women to men” (832). It also “silences or subordinates other masculinities” (Connell in Morrell 10). Hegemonic masculinity is a mode of “bestowing power and privilege on men who espouse it and claim it as their own” (*ibid*).

<sup>25</sup> Connell refers to this subordinate hegemony as a “locally hegemonic form of masculinity” which “can be used to promote self-respect in the face of discredit, for instance, from racist denigration” (842).

Instead, he has been taught that “real men don’t need comforting. Their hearts and souls comfort them, they never cry and if they do, no one sees their tears” (57). Yet, the novel demonstrates that the men of 207, though they may aspire the idea that “a man doesn’t cry” (233), are in fact struggling to contain their grief and pain. Thus, the form of masculinity to which the men of 207 ascribe is more likely an expression of their “fantasies, and desires” (Connell 838) than something secure and realised. Through the course of the novel, we see each of the men (except D’nice) crying.<sup>26</sup> And even when Moele does not depict the men crying, he indicates that there is a world of unexpressed emotion beneath the surface: “although we are laughing on the outside, inside it’s a very different story” (77). But Moele always avoids expressing the depth and pain of *what* the story of the inside is. Instead, he gestures toward it so that it exists always at the corners of the narrative.

The second way Moele complicates generalised criticisms of the men’s aspirations to hyper-masculinity is by demonstrating that misogyny is an expression of a profound unhappiness, insecurity, and self-loathing. For example, Molamo, in one of their ‘poverty talks’ on the question of black pride, poses a telling question to himself and his roommates. “Do you think I’m happy?”, he asks, when “I use and abuse every female and leave them crying” (88). This is linked in the novel to the men’s disenfranchisement, to their subordination to a “hegemonic capitalist patriarchal whiteness” (Ratele 2013 252). However, although Moele takes care to demonstrate that the men’s misogyny is harmful to them, and borne out of a conflicted relation to the world, he does not turn to explicitly examine how their behaviour affects women. The men may be “powerless in relation to other males” (517), but they are still oppressors of women. The patriarchal script is displayed in numerous ways in the novel, but it is not sufficiently problematized and explicitly critiqued. One reason for this may be in order to question the ability of women to belong in the city as depicted in *Room 207*, and thereby to demonstrate that in a city and culture where men are not taught about “love and loving people” (174) the marginalisation and oppression of women can only be reproduced.

This is demonstrated by the novel’s treatment of the women’s stories, which are muted and rendered background noise. Each of the women associated with the men of 207 has finished

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<sup>26</sup> Modishi cries about his break-up and girlfriend’s abortion (49); Zulu-boy cries in desperate anger at the pain of being black, and at incidences of what he describes as self-hate such as the rape of babies (91); Matome cries about the pain and suffering of life in the city, especially for others, such as the street children (197); Molamo weeps in anger at institutional racism (57), at the shame of not feeling adequate for the love of Basedi, a doctor (135), and later, at “the resentment, the failure and the anger” of returning to his long-time lover Tebogo with nothing to his name (215); and Noko sits on the pavement in tears at the feeling of failure in having to leave Johannesburg and return home (234).



her education, and many of them have secured good jobs as doctors or lawyers or businesswomen, and bought houses and cars. They too have actualised the dream, although this is something that Noko fails to note. The women's achievement in realising their educational and financial dreams is underplayed, glossed over. Instead, the women, despite having the strength and willpower to be successful in Johannesburg against great odds, appear pathetic, pining for love and validation from the men of 207. The 207s demand the reader's sympathy for the difficulties they face, yet refer to women repeatedly as "the female species" (27), "whore[s], gold-digger[s] and bitches[s]" (59). There is no impulse to learn from the women, to understand how they persevered through university without dropping out, or how they have managed to find good jobs and move into the suburbs. "Dream city", in short, is an idea that applies only to men.

Furthermore, for the women in the novel, 'success' does not necessarily mean freedom and agency. Ntombifuthi, sex worker and Zuluboy's Swazi girlfriend, is "a graduate of that great institution of education" but she has to sell her body in order to "keep her [head] above water" (116). Not only is she looking after herself, but is most likely, as we shall see in *Jozi*, remitting the money she earns home to her family. Basedi, Tebogo, Lebogang and Lerato have studied, made money, and moved out of the city, but Basedi becomes nothing more than an "incubator" (200) to Molamo, Tebogo ends up wanting to commit suicide just to keep Molamo around, and Lebogang and Lerato become trapped in abusive relationships. Their stories become *black women's* sad stories. It seems that women figure in the city of dreams only as counterpoints to the men – as symbols of their unattainable desires. Their stories might have offered a site of resistance to Noko's mediation, or the potential for an alternative mode of relation between women and men, and women and the city. Instead, *Room 207* collapses these possibilities even as they are signalled.

This collapse takes place at the level of citizenship. Molamo tells the story of his childhood household, in which boys could claim the "right of citizenship" (42) to the boys' room by 'poking' a member of "the female species" (27). That citizenship is claimed through sex with women indicates that not only do women have no right to citizenship, but they are not even considered potential subjects of citizenship. Instead, they are nodes in the narrative of becoming and belonging for men. This may be said to apply not only to Molamo's childhood boys' room, but to the hotel room in which the men live, as well as to subjectivity in the city. Sex here is an expression of power and exclusionary belonging, and women are displayed and consumed in the same way as the expensive clothing the 207s wear. The novel seems to be

unable to offer women a safe or shared space; instead the city is designated as a space for men.

*Room 207* is implicitly deeply concerned with who gets to claim citizenship of “dream city”, as it establishes from the first page in which “you” are “welcomed” (13) to the room. This second-person form of address reappears throughout the novel, and the referent of the ‘you’ shifts between a reader-interlocutor-guest, indicating an ambiguity of the relationship between ‘you’ and the 207s. The “you” speaks directly to the reader as *interlocutor*, and implicates the reader in the novel’s philosophy, drawing and redrawing the boundaries of inclusivity and exclusivity. At times the interlocutor is “welcomed” (13) as an insider with the assumption of a shared world view. At others, Noko, acting as a guide to life in the city centre (165), seems to constantly be imploring the reader/interlocutor *as guest* to “understand” (79). Here then, “you” are an outsider who does not understand Venda (165), who thinks the city “looks dirty” (158) and who asks insensitive questions that demonstrate a lack of understanding (165, 167). Thus, “you” are constantly repositioned relative to Noko.

The text is framed then by a gesture of what Derrida calls ‘hostipitality’<sup>27</sup> – a simultaneously inclusive and exclusive gesture, prompting us to question who is being invited into this narrative and national community. In the first place, as Noko plays host, he invites the reader-interlocutor-guest into his space, while also retaining that othering gesture – the reader remains a guest and outsider. Here we must be sensitive to the text and its subjects – “you” are invited into a space as precarious as a dilapidated old hotel room, already shared by 6 men and their girlfriends. In addition, the implicitly guest-like, and at times even tourist-like (165-167), nature of the figure being ‘welcomed’ means that the relation that this figure has to room 207 and the men who call it home is fleeting in duration; there is no expectation of permanence nor is there an expression of desire to stay and join the men’s community. However, it is also essential to recognise that the use of the second person performs a second exclusionary gesture – it positions the reader-interlocutor-guest as male and thereby imagines and creates a narrative community of men. “Brother, you are home” (15), Noko declares to the reader. This renders the reader-interlocutor complicit in much of the misogynistic

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<sup>27</sup> Hostipitality is a term used by Derrida to express how hospitality is also hostile, where the guest is also the enemy. The host is “he who receives, who is master in his house, in his household, in his state, in his nation, in his city, in his town, who remains master in his house” (4). The host “defines the conditions of hospitality or welcome; where consequently there can be no unconditional welcome, no unconditional passage through the door” (4). Hospitality is then for Derrida an aporia, an impossible condition that paralyzes itself (5) – and yet it is also “the impossibility which must be overcome where it is possible to become impossible” (14), where I cannot, therefore I must.

language that Noko and his friends employ, as is seen when he states conspiratorially, “you know how the female species are” (30). As a female reader, I cannot conspire with Noko with regard to the female “species” or hating prostitutes (66). I am not a citizen of the room, or of the text.

The notion of women’s citizenship in men’s writing has been brilliantly problematized by Florence Stratton in her discussion of what she refers to as “the mother Africa trope” (39). This is a mode of writing in the male literary tradition in Africa that “excludes women from the creative production of the national polity or identity and of literary texts” (51) and thus from citizenship and subjectivity. Stratton demonstrates that male writers have been “attracted primarily by the metaphorical potential of the situation of women” (53) to demonstrate either the beleaguered state of the nation/ degraded male identity, or act as “an embodiment of [the writer/ protagonist’s] literary/ political vision” (51). This has often been achieved through the figure of the prostitute, who represents the degraded nation (46). This figure is sometimes contrasted to and sometimes collapsed with the mother figure (49). ‘Woman’ as mother Africa, prostitute or “Madammadonna” (49), is once again identified with her sexuality to suit men’s visions: “he is the active subject/citizen, She is the passive object-nation. She symbolizes his honour and glory or his degradation as a citizen” (51). Thus, the trope both masks and “exploits the male-female power relations of domination and subordination” (53), and in doing so “also justifies and therefore serves to perpetuate the status quo of male domination” (55).

The novel is concerned to display a patriarchal space and thereby to offer a critique of subjectivity in Johannesburg, neoliberal rationality, the insidious operations of race, and lead us to question what it is like to be a man in the context of all of this. What it is not doing though is offering an explicit critique of the “status quo of male domination”. This marks a notable shortcoming in the text and its vision. However, it is the argument of this thesis that it is not helpful to vilify either Moele or his novel in response to it. In this respect in particular I part ways with critics such as Ngobeni and Ratele, and Titlestad.<sup>28</sup> Instead, I propose that it is more interesting to engage with the text as it is, and unpack *why* it stops short of criticism, why it is hinted at but not allowed to happen. In my view, *Room 207* does not to perpetuate or

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<sup>28</sup> In newspaper opinion pieces they have taken Moele to task over the misogyny of the characters in *Room 207*. However, in his third novel, *Untitled*, which is written from the perspective of a teenage girl, Moele demonstrates not only an identification with the issues of feminism, but a sensitivity to *voice*. It should go without saying, but following the criticism that the novel has received, it is worth noting explicitly that Moele’s characters cannot be assumed to be expressing his views or subject position.

justify patriarchy in entirely the same way that texts conforming to Stratton's trope do, in that it does not make use of women's subordinate positions in society to demonstrate men's degradation, or use the fates of women to act as conduits for a national patriarchal vision.

Crucially however, the novel does seem to demonstrate an exhaustion of a set of possibilities for black masculinities and their aspirations. It exposes the limits of the scripts with which it is engaging, but is either unwilling or unable to offer an alternative narrative. Yet it certainly creates space for, what Zoë Wicomb in another context calls, "illegitimate meanings" to "percolate through" (51). Wicomb (54) demonstrates this point in an analysis of a scene in Bessie Head's *Maru* in which a drawing is explained rather than captioned. She argues that

contradictory relations between image and text demand that the image be re-read, and re-assessment of the visual information involves a change in the underlying presuppositions. The transparency of the image is questioned. The process of reading brings home the fact that what we see is ideologically mediated and that alternative intervention in the process of seeing can produce new meaning.

I would like to propose that this same process of re-reading patriarchy is demanded by *Room 207*. There is similar a gap brought about by contradictions within *Room 207* which can be widened and explored. This is at the level of intersectionality in thinking about masculinity. An awareness of intersectionality offers some understanding of the men, yet it still allows for a critique of their misogyny. This brings out the possibility for "illegitimate meanings" and an interesting intervention might be made by foregrounding the women's stories, and reading with Noko sympathetically but not conspiratorially.

## **Mechanisms of the dream: education, art and hustling**

One way of performing a reading that is sympathetic yet not conspiratorial is to understand the scripts that the 207s are subject to, the scripts that they are struggling to be subjects of, and the ways in which these are implicated in one another. In this section I want to show that as the protagonists go about the project of self-upliftment, as they attempt to write themselves in as agents in the city, they buy in to fantasies of the good life. These fantasies are defined by the post-apartheid narrative that espouses progress, post-racialism and prosperity for all, as well as by the consumerist agenda of neoliberalism, which reinforces the privileges of the elite.<sup>29</sup> These are scripts that Moele flags and challenges. However, we shall see again that

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<sup>29</sup> David Harvey notes that the "redistributive effects and increasing social inequality have in fact been such a persistence feature of neoliberalization as to be regarded as structural to the whole project" (16).

there are other scripts that are more insidious, which remain unquestioned or reiterated in the novel, as with the overarching patriarchal ideology that informs the men's language and behaviour. The men attempt to realise the "dream city" script through three important mechanisms in the novel: through tertiary education, creativity and entrepreneurship. Yet even as they do so, they feverishly write and rewrite the same script. I want to unpack each of the mechanisms of dreaming, and explore how each is shown to reach its limit.

Each of the men of 207 has migrated to Johannesburg from various rural or peri-urban elsewhere in order to study at what is repeatedly referred to, both seriously and sardonically, as "that great institution" (*in passim*), Wits University. It is their "main reason for being here", through which they hope to obtain "a degree for a better tomorrow" (174). The university is an expression of an aspiration for mobility and a desire for self-assertion. This dream of a better tomorrow through education, as Noko tries to illustrate to the reader-interlocutor-guest, "is not only for you, but for those that care for you and those that you have an obligation to and those that you will have obligations to" (174). Young people are thus harbingers of hope for their families. Noko's portrayal of the University carries a great deal of tonal ambiguity, and through this, Moele begins to challenge the post-apartheid and neoliberal narratives that claim to offer a better life to those who work hard enough to uplift themselves.

The dream of tertiary education is shown to be "a very sad black story" and one that the men "can all tell [...] very well" (17). In just one illustration of this story, Noko asks his reader-interlocutor-guest the pressing question: "have you ever been at a tertiary institution of education and witnessed what the black students are going through?" (35). The phrasing of the question implies that it assumes ignorance: "you" have not been there, "you" could not possibly know. This distances the reader from the narrator, giving Moele the space to deliver an uncompromisingly direct passage, weighty in the wake of the student protests that have swept through universities in the past two years. He chronicles the struggles of black students to not only pay fees but also to afford food and clothing, as well as to cope with the stress of coming from broken homes, or dealing with heavy family expectations, and juggling this all with peer pressure and student life and the excitement of city living. It is not surprising that many drop out because that struggle gets too much. And there ends the dream of education for five out of the six of the men of room 207 (each endowed with an excellent school-leaving certificate) and many whom they know besides. But even those who make it through and get

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Moreover, studies have shown that "neoliberalization was from the very beginning a project to achieve the restoration of class power" (16).

degrees are subjects of the “sad black story” – D’nice and Tebogo’s ‘other’ boyfriend Khutso “survived” (35) university, but as Noko notes in Khutso’s case especially, although he has come out the other side with money and friends, “the pain and pressure that he’d felt when he was still poor was encoded somewhere in his heart” (44).

Although Noko is concerned to demonstrate the reality of the “sad black story”, and to bring the reader to a point of understanding, he constantly elides its most important source through the use of ellipses and silences when it comes to apartheid. Moele indicates from the opening line of the novel that his narrator refuses to engage with the effects of apartheid on the “social struggles [...of black South Africans] to reconquer the right to be urban” (Mbembe 391). The text marks its awareness of apartheid in its silence: “back in the days of ... *you know*” (13, my emphasis).<sup>30</sup> Here Noko assumes that the reader-interlocutor has insider knowledge. Whether or not this knowledge is in place, Noko repeatedly demonstrates a reluctance to engage with the history of racialization and dispossession. At the approach of such topics, he breaks into ellipsis or delivers throwaway comments such as “Johannesburg: ‘it’s a city founded by some people’” (69). Thus, even while the novel demonstrates the on-going pertinence of race, its narrator refuses to name the role that the legislated segregation of apartheid continues to play in generating possibility in the city. The implication here is that the 207s refuse to locate themselves as having emerged from apartheid, and in so doing attempt to claim that they are not constrained by its structural grooves, that they are self-made men. They are orientated away from the past, and away from their presents in Hillbrow. In their attempts to enact the “dream city” script, they face only toward the future and it is this alone that allows the idea of the “dream city” to persevere.<sup>31</sup> For Ronit Frenkel, this refusal to explicitly contextualise the sedimentations of apartheid indicates a “young black South African disavowal of apartheid history” where Johannesburg as “dream city” takes precedence over it as “apartheid-inflected space” (35). However Frenkel goes too far in claiming that “Moele is not concerned with any residue [of apartheid] that is left behind” (36). I argue instead that though Moele’s *protagonists* attempt to disavow the effects of the structural grooves of history on their lives,

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<sup>30</sup> Another reason for such an elision is given by Moele in a 2009 interview with the *Mail and Guardian*. He is posed the question: “What subject is now passé in South Africa?” To which he answers with some sarcasm “Racial segregation based on colour and tribe. Oh! No, it rears its head as economic segregation, today. Sad!”

<sup>31</sup> See a comment made by an interviewee who states: “We understand where we come from, but I am not interested in politics and about what happened in the ‘80s because I wasn’t there. And even if I was, I live for the future” (Farber in Nuttall “Stylizing the Self” 439).

Moele's *text* in fact resists their disavowals, demonstrating the dominance of the scripts of racism, and racialised capitalism in their narratives.

The notion of future-oriented self-making is further expressed in the men's creative pursuits. Matome is a DJ and producer; D'nice, Modishi and Zulu-boy are talented musicians; Molamo is "the writer, the director, the actor, the poet, the comedian, the producer" (40) and Noko dreams of making films. The men of 207 hope to use their artistic talents to express themselves and make a living – to find, that is, both security of food and finance, and also a sense of wellbeing and fulfilment. But they also dream of making something new, something that rings with the vibrancy of their own unique subjectivity. For the artists of room 207, creativity is a means to claim the agency to write new narratives for themselves in the city, to render themselves subjects. This means not submitting themselves to a system in which they play subordinates to the whims of capital and those who control it. Of course, Matome, D'nice, Modishi and Molamo do end up subordinating themselves to capital – and who can blame them? In *Room 207*'s Johannesburg, being a black creative and making money do not comport. Zulu-boy, again the outlier, eulogizes the other men's creative pursuits upon their dissolution, saying that "you were in a system but you didn't live in this system" (203).

Here Moele uses Zulu-boy to express an idealistic opposition to a capitalist and oppressive system. Creative work is, in Zulu-boy's understanding, a way of opting out – maintaining a sense of self, producing neither goods nor services, but ideas and aesthetics with an unquantifiable 'use-value'. It is a way of scripting oneself out of the constraining grooves of an oppressive system, of scripting a new way of being in the world. However, dreams of making art and living outside the system are crushed repeatedly in the Johannesburg of *Room 207*. There seems to be no space for the music, paintings and would-be films that the men produce. While their art gestures to something outside of the system, the men remain bound to its promises and thus even in their attempts to write their way out, they are scripted back into the "sad black story".

This is demonstrated in Noko's experience with a potential investor in his film scripts in which he is treated patronisingly and with "pity" (147). David, who occupies a position of privilege and who by implication (given the racialised disparities in wealth and privilege in South Africa) is white,<sup>32</sup> speaks the exclusionary power of institutional racism in its home

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<sup>32</sup> Milazzo points out that white South Africans constitute less than 10% of the population, yet own 91% of the companies listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, 87% of all arable land, and about 85% of

language – euphemism, claiming that “the industry is very complicated” (147). This euphemism is another instance of the silence in the text on the presence and defining power of race. Noko’s experience is prefigured with Molamo weeping in rage and desperation at the feeling that there is “no punishment more painful than being born black” (143). Molamo pinpoints the source of his pain as his blackness, rather than the historic, hegemonic persecution and pathologization of blackness. Thus, he feels that “even if [he] was a billionaire, living the life of a king, with slaves and servants, there would be always something which would remind [him] that [he is] black and [he] do[esn’t] belong” (144). Noko’s response is yet another silence: “sorry to say it, but we are as black as...” (145).

Noko’s ellipses can be considered a form of what Milazzo refers to as “colourblind talk” (Milazzo 36) of the post-apartheid, ‘rainbow-nationist’ discourse. This discourse attempts to claim that race is no longer a significantly determining factor in South Africa. I follow Milazzo in arguing that the refusal to recognise institutional racism in fact “poses a more insidious threat to the achievement of racial equality than does explicitly racist rhetoric” (36). It does so because it obscures racial power, and protects it from confrontation. Thus, it ultimately sanctions “ongoing racialization via racially coded methods” (Kim in Milazzo 36). *Room 207* demonstrates “the devastating consequences of institutional racism” (Milazzo 37) by showing that attempts to both find expression and fulfilment *and* gain financial stability are futile. Yet as with the patriarchal script, the novel displays this discourse without explicitly critiquing it.

Noko, we are told, has “more than ten film scripts back there at 207, all in need of some cash injection so that they can die a script life and live a reel life” (82). This is a metaphor for not only the way that creativity operates in *Room 207*, but also for the outcome of the men’s attempts to write their own stories. Although Noko is literally attempting to write his own narratives, it is clear that he is caught in the looped script of the “sad black story” (50) that circumscribes the trajectories of the lives of the men of 207. Equally as potent a metaphor is Molamo’s inability to imagine a system radically different from the violently hierarchical one that requires the oppression of a group to occupy the position of “slaves and servants”. Molamo laments not the system itself, but its terms of inclusion and exclusion. This is an individualistic and individualising politics. It is a politics concerned with self-advancement within the terms set by a post-apartheid neoliberal narrative, rather than being concerned with

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“all wealth, salaries, and assets”(35). She also cites the shocking disparity in life expectancy, which is less than 50 years old for black people and over 70 for whites.



the devastating structural deficiencies of those terms. *Room 207* refuses to imagine a situation in which new scripts can be written, as well as enacted. The novel forecloses on this kind of potential repeatedly, seeming to come up against the barriers inherent in the system without either choosing or being able to imagine a way out. I would like to propose that *Room 207* is concerned with demonstrating the ways that institutional racism and neoliberal rationality (which I will elaborate on below) come together to foreclose on the potential for creativity, and so it collapses an alternative mode of being in the city even as it gestures toward it. Herein lies the reason for the novel's unwillingness to imagine a world in which the men might be able to create art.

Thus, "dream city" is not so much a city of hope as a city of what Lauren Berlant calls, "cruel optimism". This describes a condition where the horizons of expectation generated in the neoliberal narrative for progress seem to be painfully dissonant with the realities of existence, and where those realities are in fact implicated in neoliberalism – not just caused by it, but actually sustaining it as well. For Berlant, a "relation of cruel optimism exists when an object of your desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing" (1). These desires include "upward mobility, job security, political and social equality, and lively, durable intimacy" (3). Such notions are deeply entwined with the protocols of capitalism, and increasingly seem to be what Berlant calls "fantasies that are fraying" (3), friable and elusive because they are invested in the same system that endlessly defers them. The idea of "cruel optimism" is valuable in coming to think about the hopefulness and disenchantment that accompany the post-apartheid narrative of expectations for "a better life for all". The terms of this "better life" are exactly those desires that Berlant mentions. And while the actualisation of this "better life" seems constantly to be deferred, it remains the object of hope.

This relation is also symptomatic of what Wendy Brown refers to as "neoliberal rationality" (43), a "sophisticated common sense" that is "remaking institutions and human beings" (35) into "*homo oeconomicus*"<sup>33</sup> – where people are configured "exhaustively as market actors" (21). The individuals of this new 'species' are expected to conduct themselves as corporations and states do, needing to "maximise capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so *through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors*" (22, my emphasis). *Room 207* displays the rise of *homo oeconomicus* and the need for entrepreneurship and self-investment through the dual

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<sup>33</sup> A term coined by Foucault for whom the "neo-liberal figure of *homo oeconomicus* is the eminently governable subject" (Dilts 136).

behaviours of hustling and consuming. As we have seen with the 207s' attempts at creating art rather than labouring to generate capital, and as we shall see through Molamo's ideas of community-driven success, the novel also demonstrates that those who veer from this practice of neoliberal rationality face the risks of "impoverishment and a loss of esteem and creditworthiness at the least, survival at the extreme" (22).

The chapters "Noughts and Dreams" and "Hard Living", which constitute a substantial portion of the novel, are dedicated solely to the 207's pursuits of their artistic and economic dreams by 'hustling', and 'looking expensive'. Hustling (143) is so closely associated with what it means to be in the city that it is referred to as "Johannesburging" (156). Here the city becomes a verb, synonymous with the act and active pursuit of moneymaking. This is a story that is as old as the city itself. Yet it is a story in which the men of 207 must struggle to become protagonists. Hustling and consuming are set in motion by the three dominant and interrelated scripts with which the novel concerns itself, namely: the need to actualise the good life fantasies of "dream city" and enact the script of flight from the inner city; the ideas of self-upliftment and agency as espoused by narratives of modernity; and the script of neoliberal rationality and *homo oeconomicus*. However, we shall see that "Johannesburging" is not only an integral part of the "sad black story" from which the men of 207 seem unable to escape, but it also perpetuates the story. As the men try to include themselves in the social economy of the neoliberal post-apartheid, they in fact re-inscribe the discourse of neoliberal rationality, and in doing so, they write themselves in at the expense of others, particularly women.

The hustler is one of the figures of the city quintessential to post-apartheid Johannesburg (Nuttall 2009). For Sarah Nuttall, the hustler "defly rummag[es] among the conventional modes of institutional life, with a view to re-routing them" (56). This is a particularly urban figure, and might be considered the 'street' version of the businessman. Being a 'street' term associated with the ghetto and with American hip-hop in particular, hustling carries with it inflections of race – that is, blackness – and of dominant modes of masculinity, which Bhekiziwe Peterson explores in his paper on Kwaito. Hustling is an attempt, in the face of serious odds to satisfy desires for "success and a sense of belonging" (209). It is then a mode of self-narrativisation, another way in which the men of 207 seek to become self-made men. Hustling is intimately tied up with commodity culture and with what Nuttall (2004) refers to as "stylizing the self". This is "a language of aspiration" in which "people seek to transform themselves into singular beings" (432). For Nuttall, the "engine" for this self-stylization is the

city (449) and it demonstrates a move toward “a ‘postracist’ society” (436) as it begins to classify people in new ways.

However, the practice of hustling and its attendant dreams of self-making cannot be so easily separated from race. Hustling in South Africa is associated with a somewhat romanticized apartheid-era gang criminality and with creative entrepreneurship.<sup>34</sup> It was in some ways a “refusal to be subject to the idea of working for and within the [apartheid labour] system” (Bogatsu 10). It has remained attractive to contemporary youth, who can aspire to an “entrepreneurial approach which allows them to work outside the system” (10-11). The system to which Bogatsu implicitly refers here is South Africa’s post-apartheid neoliberal economy, with high levels of inequality and limited economic opportunity for black youth. Jean and John Comaroff note the global phenomenon of the “predicament of youth” (16) who are ensnared by the “allure of accruing wealth from nothing” (22). This is a result of “the sense of impossibility, even despair, that comes from being left out of the promise of prosperity, from having to look in on the global economy of desire from its immiserated exteriors” (25). In this economy of desire, “the will to consume outstrips the opportunity to earn” (27). While hustler identity may be an attractive narrative for these young people, and seen as a way of writing themselves out of disenfranchisement, it is important to note that entrepreneurialism is central to the neoliberal project, rather than outside it. Thus, the youth forms “a kind of counternation: a virtual citizenry with its own twilight economies, its own spaces of production and recreation, its own modalities of politics with which to address the economic and political conditions that determine its plight” (18). Furthermore, the darker figurations of the entrepreneurialism of youth, which either bend the bounds of what is legal, or break them entirely, “form a replica of consumerism, not its antithesis but its “dark side” (19).

*Room 207* stages different understandings of success and responsibility through different characters. Matome is the ultimate hustler (81) in *Room 207*. He manipulates what seems to be charisma rather than trustworthiness in order to make “smiling-happy enemies” (152). Matome has great capacity for self-invention, and as a result of his refusal to talk about his past it is to Noko as though “he had given birth to himself” (25). Not only does this erase the

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<sup>34</sup> Mac Fenwick discusses this idealisation by *Drum* writers, for whom the criminal aspect of the lives of gangsters was downplayed in favour of an emphasis on their glamorous lifestyles, positioning gangsters as figures of African urbanity. In this portrayal, gangsters become “urban survivors who are able to achieve a standard of living (both materially and socially) normally denied blacks” (618). Also see Bogatsu (10) and Driver (227).

figure of the woman entirely, but this self-made man ideology intersects with the ellipses that Noko employs in that it attempts to edit out the constraints of history. Matome operates with what is very clearly an individualist's approach, with the unapologetic maxim that "on your way up you'll have to step on other people's heads" (152), and the feeling that "when I get out of here I will be doing it for myself" (197). This is clearly the rhetoric of the dream. Matome buys in – literally – to the script of self-advancement which looks to a future-facing, linear, teleological narrative as the marker of the culmination of modernity. "Forget the past", Matome intones, and "think about now, today and tomorrow" (25). He is the prime example in the novel of Brown's *homo oeconomicus* and neoliberal rationality. It is not surprising then that Matome is governed by the belief that "an injury to one is an injury to one" (197). This demonstrates what Nuttall calls "the rise of the first-person singular within the work of liberation" ("Stylizing the Self" 432).

Matome's statement directly invokes the anti-apartheid struggle slogan that "an injury to one is an injury to all", giving expression to the idea that the pain felt by an individual or community reverberated across the nation of resisters – activists and the oppressed – drawing all in toward a sense of responsibility for one another. Even if the idea of hustling has the potential to give people something outside the system to aspire to, it is clear that if Matome is the ultimate hustler, then hustling is not a disruptive practice capable of resisting the mores of neoliberal society. Instead, it is a normative practice, drawing the men in and directing their creative energy in the direction of moneymaking.

It is deeply significant that where Matome, who makes his cash and gets out first, employs the me-first method implied in the capitalist narrative, Molamo, whose attitude stands in direct contrast, is only able to move out of Hillbrow as a "*Rra-baki*" (220), into long-time lover Tebogo's home, surrounded by the trappings of *her* financial success. Molamo refers to himself as the "thank you man" (44) because his successes have been due to other people. He is self-aware, stating that on "my ladder to the top, every step that I have passed, has a face that I have thanked, and those faces are holding me, this ladder, together" (44). Noko understands success in the same way, turning to the "wall of inspiration" (16) – a collage of photographs on a wall of room 207 of people who have "lived through this Hillbrow" (17) and made it out – to create a community of people raising each other up. This, unlike Matome's, is a community-centred view on success, which draws on the philosophy of *ubuntu* in which 'I am because we are'. It is a view that represents the alternative to hustling, or making oneself as an individual.

However, as Noko reminds us, ultimately this approach – the reliance on community in a dog-eat-dog world<sup>35</sup> – gets Molamo nowhere: he “thank you’ed and thank you’ed until the great institution barred him from entering the examination room” (45). Success in the city, the novel shows, can only be realised in the terms of neoliberal rationality expressed here as individualist hustling or entrepreneurial behaviour. Veering from this rationality, as Molamo does, reveals no supportive community, instead it only further impoverishes him. Thus, once again, *Room 207* collapses alternative ways of being in the city – such as Molamo’s – even as it gestures towards them.

To note that hustling is a normative practice in a capitalist society is not to cast it or its objects of desire as immoral practices or objects. Hustling expresses a desire to transcend spaces of lack and poverty, to realize the neoliberal promise through the cultivation of an alternative culture. Yet, this culture is deeply enmeshed not only with the practises of self-making in terms of creating wealth, but also in terms of consumption. Although she is writing about what she terms “conspicuous destruction” in the township, Megan Jones’s point that “forms of commodity display [...] are less about wealth attained than wealth and belonging *aspired to*” (210) is instructive and useful in thinking about the ways that Moele has his characters perform consumption in the city. Whereas conspicuous destruction can be figured as a mode of “disruptive consumption” (210), conspicuous consumption is a normative practice, in which consumption itself has taken on an element of compulsion and need. The practice of looking “expensive” (174), which the men are concerned with throughout the text, is a way for young men who have been “denied access to orthodox routes of financial attainment” to “lay claim” (Jones 219) to what we might call the mode of city – the shiny surfaces which act as metaphors for accomplishment and belonging in the consumerist cultures fostered by neoliberalism.

For the 207s, a primary method of ‘flight’ from a space of chronic deprivation and lack is to perform a capacity to buy, and therefore to take part in economies of desire from which they are otherwise largely excluded. Milazzo points out that consumerist desire seems to “exercise

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<sup>35</sup> Niq Mhlomo’s 2004 novel *Dog Eat Dog*, set just after the 1994 elections which signaled the end of apartheid, draws on the awareness of the culture of Johannesburg as being individualistic and viciously competitive, as a result of its attachment to the protocols of capitalist production. This is contrary to expectations of freedom and access to education held by black youths, such as the novel’s protagonist Dingz, whose desperate attempts to stay in university despite financial difficulty drives the action of the novel. Dingz is the character from which Sarah Nuttall generates her concept of the hustler figure, as he evades writing examinations and then tries to hustle his way back into university by drawing on the contestations around race and culture that were new weighty and difficult conversations in 1994, when the novel is set.

a tyrannical hold” on the characters (48). Consumption manifests in the novel as excessive drinking and partying and general irresponsibility with money. At the club in the scene entitled “Pushing Corruption” Noko and Molamo do what they can to look “expensive” (174), with branded clothing and a walk that looks like a strain “because you are used to driving yourself around” (175). Noko is fully aware of the performative nature of their club night. It is a “show” (179) of their wealth with rolls of fake notes, and of their masculinity with demonstrations of their drinking prowess and ability to ‘get girls’ out on the dance floor and turn them into one night stands (182). And in putting on this show, they seem to have no qualms about following this particular script, which seems to “see reel life” repeatedly. This is a gendered script that Noko and his roommates seem doomed to write and rewrite.

Feminist critics have noted that the protocols of capitalism – and consumption in particular – are aligned with patriarchy.<sup>36</sup> Thus, the desirable commodities available to the men include women. The women in the club (and elsewhere) operate as what Dorothy Driver calls a “sign” (234).<sup>37</sup> The symbolic function of “woman” operates not in relation to women living in the city, but to men as a terrain upon which urban masculinity and desire can be mapped. Thus, in the club scene, the consumption of things, alcohol and women enables the men to perform their version of hyper-masculinity and their purchase (in both senses of the word) in the world, or rather what they believe this purchase should look like. They are, in Desiree Lewis’s words, “entrapped in cycles of desire, compulsion and oppression” (4) which are coded in terms of patriarchy. Thus, the text demonstrates again the limits of the scripts with which it engages – here patriarchal consumer capitalism – but it does not attempt to imagine something different and so does not mount an explicit critique.

## **Stuck in a “sad black story”**

By engaging in the practices of hustling and consumption, the men of 207 demonstrate that they have bought in (literally) to the script of neoliberal rationality. This is an integral part of the “sad black story” from which, try and dream as they might, they just cannot deviate. This is partly because neoliberal rationality

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<sup>36</sup> Megan Jones notes that “the ownership of costly objects is aligned with male domination” and the “failure to consume is bound up with a failure to realise oneself as a man in other aspects of life, particularly sex” (216). For Lewis (4), commodity capitalism is engaged in the “reproduction of patriarchal values, images and desires”. She also references studies on the consumption of alcohol and the need to wear “lavish clothing” as performances of masculinity that emerge directly out of a patriarchal capitalism.

<sup>37</sup> From 1951, Driver argues, “woman” was used as a “sign” in *Drum* magazine by its male writers to demonstrate a move from the rural/ traditional to the urban/ modern (234).

eliminates what [...] thinkers termed ‘the good life’(Aristotle), or ‘the true realm of freedom’(Marx) by which they did not mean luxury, leisure, or indulgence, but rather the cultivation and expression of distinctly human capacities for ethical and political freedom, creativity, unbounded reflection, or invention (Brown 22).

The elimination of these modes of being is made clear in the depoliticization and dehistoricization that we witness in the novel from its first sentence. History, politics and art seem to become secondary to the self-as-capital, and there is a sense that although the characters’ lives are framed by the notion of the “sad black story”, the structural scripts that author these stories “frequently remain beyond the characters’ grasp” (Milazzo 40). This willed forgetfulness does not seem to be a method of forgetting a history of “prior antagonism as an enabling condition that would make possible the founding of a new polis” (Worby and Allen 462). Instead, it is an illustration of a kind of exhaustion and profound disillusionment with the state of things, as Noko expresses when he admits “I thought I could handle it but the world’s ways and the world’s history will make your heart heavy, make you think things that can make you hate your own blackness” (145).

Unlike the explicit violence of apartheid, the ideologies of “a better life for all”, multi-racial equality of opportunity, and neoliberal rationality do not allow space for collective mobilization and action and so leave the men of 207 to turn inward and wonder at themselves and their blackness and their masculinity (Milazzo 39). These are ideologies that silence and obscure the structural scripts of poverty, institutional racism, and patriarchy. This silencing leaves the men of 207 deeply aware that they are protagonists of a “sad black story” but bewildered in trying to identify *why*.

Thus, while it may be easy to criticise the men’s behaviour, it is important to take careful note of the ways in which Moele creates fissures in the text, which render an indiscriminate condemnation of their behaviour (and the novel) a simplistic reading. The final image of the text is a desperate one. We leave Noko, alone on the pavement, in tears, waiting for a taxi to take him out of Johannesburg to return home to keep company with “the *bomhlalela*” (233). He is facing a future devoid of hope as he sits

reliving-living fourteen years of hard nothing and always ending up in the future, a future that I have to face, a future which, every time I think about it, turns pitch black, so that I can’t see anything, even my big nose (235)

This scene demonstrates all too clearly the exhaustion of the possibilities of “dream city” – of creativity, education, and self-upliftment and how the hope for these possibilities for freedom

and self-narrativisation is deeply entangled in the same scripts which work to constrain young black men in the city, such as the men of 207. It is in this final image that the hopes and dreams that have informed *Room 207* eventually collapse irredeemably. Here the novel devastatingly demonstrates that dreams enmeshed within the conditions that lead to disenfranchisement, that hope in this system, in these terms, is untenable.



## Chapter 3

### Em-bodied endurance in the city of dead dreams: Perfect Hlongwane's *Jozi*

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“Johannesburg”, Hlongwane’s text begins, “is a heartless place”, a city “where dreams come to die” (1).<sup>38</sup> If *Room 207* narrates the dying of dreams in inner city Johannesburg and denies that there is space to write new kinds of stories for young black subjects in the city, *Jozi* opens at the point of collapse of these dreams. The text inhabits a space in which its protagonists have abandoned attachments to fantasies of the good life and it asks ‘what now’? This chapter considers what happens in the aftermath of dead dreams, asking what kind of sociality emerges out of the ruins. It considers what the text has to say about the potential to generate new stories in Jozi in the aftermath of hope, and explore how the text thinks about what happens after the dreams of ‘a better life for all’ have given way to a narrative of endurance.

The text narrates in short episodes the stories of Frank and his friends and their lives in the city. The narrative territory is not white Johannesburg, Jo’burg, the City of Gold, but black “*eJozi, eGoli, eRrhawutini, kaJoni*” (1). The title of the text is a vernacularization of Johannesburg that generates a sense of place.<sup>39</sup> It is a space which is composed of the suburbs of the inner city – “Braamfontein, Joubert Park, Hillbrow, Berea, Yeoville” (1).<sup>40</sup> For the characters of *Jozi* the hope of “a better life for all” has given way to something else, and the impulse to leave the city in order to realise dreams of success has given way to a staying put.

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<sup>38</sup> This phrase closely follows Lesego Rampolokeng’s lines in the poem “Johannesburg” in which he writes “Johannesburg my city/ Paved with judas gold/ deceptions and lies/ dreams come here to die” (in Nuttall 2009 35).

<sup>39</sup> Jozi is a contraction of Johannesburg. As illustrated in the collection *From Jo’burg to Jozi*, the nickname captures the changing identity of the city. It is almost a term of endearment that connotes a certain aesthetic: the black city post-apartheid, a sense of belonging to the gritty, ever-changing ‘real’ Johannesburg (the inner city rather than the whitewashed suburban surrounds), and often a street-ness and hip-ness.

<sup>40</sup> These are suburbs that suffered capital flight at the end of apartheid and so have seen a decline in infrastructure and access to municipal services. They are also spaces which signify entry points into Johannesburg, urbanity, and trajectories of upward mobility for black South Africans, as well as transnational African immigrants, who were denied access to the city even as they were forced to migrate into its centre for work and out to its peripheries. Braamfontein is a little different, in that it has seen less decline and is currently experiencing a concerted surge in investment (see footnote 43 for further elaboration).

## **“We drink to erase tomorrow”: writing the city in the aftermath of hope**

Dreams of “a better life for all” do not inform the ways in which *Jozi*’s protagonists conduct their lives in the city. Early in the text, this sentiment is expressed by Senzo, a character who at first seems to be of secondary importance as a friend of the narrators/ focalisers Frank and the poet, but who comes to be central to the text’s ideas. Senzo asserts that

There is a mass impulse toward suicide in this city that operates, most of the time, at low intensity. It appears in the guise of alcoholism, risky sex, sudden violence, road rage, and daring acts of crime. (8)

In this section, I explore the first of the questions posed above: what happens in the aftermath of hope?

*Jozi*’s protagonists have lost hope in the potential of entrepreneurship or creative work to emancipate. Hlongwane has his protagonists grapple with their alertness to the constraints of the structural grooves of institutional racism and neoliberal rationality. He introduces insanity as a trope for thinking through this struggle. A primary illustration of writing post-hope is *Jozi*’s politics of work and creativity. The text’s main protagonists – Frank and the poet – have been artists in the city. But they constitute part of a city populated by “musicians who don’t rehearse. Writers that don’t write. Artists who would rather buy brandy than buy paint” (19). Initially, it seems that their creativities are stunted, atrophied by the demands of living in a city such as Jozi.

At least, this is the reason intimated by both characters for their antipathy toward actually creating artworks. Frank, who came to the city with dreams of writing a novel “that would make the world weep, or wake up, or both” (78), now writes (sporadically) for magazines. Hlongwane offers one reason for Frank’s stagnation through his experience as a freelance writer for a magazine in which he is asked by the editor to ‘tone down’ (32) a CD review because it is too explicitly political and “some of [the magazine’s] advertisers might take exception” (33). Frank, angered at this request to obscure the truth, refuses to change anything, preferring his article to remain unpublished and himself unpaid – “not for all the money in the world” (35) he says. It is clear that market thinking drives publication in this magazine, and is a very interesting scene in light of an almost throw-away comment made by Perfect Hlongwane in a radio interview in which he states that the book is a product of him “trying to use [his] story to preach a certain message”, and that some of the more “overtly

political” aspects of his book were “cut out” by the publisher.<sup>41</sup> Thus, *Jozi* seems to collapse, to some extent, Hlongwane’s creative work and Frank’s ‘no holds barred’ CD review.

For one thing, Hlongwane purposefully depicts an incident that encourages us to ask questions of the politics of publishing. Clearly, the industry has the power to legitimate certain voices with certain messages, and can potentially operate as a space which obscures narratives that challenge hegemonic comfort zones and sensibilities. As is made clear by Frank’s exchange with the magazine’s editor, publishing is driven by the market – by advertisers’ interests, and by what those who can afford to buy books or magazines want to read. Given that in South Africa white people still hold most of the capital, Hlongwane seems to be suggesting that the publishing industry panders to white sensibilities – or the sensibilities of that sector of the economy with the most buying power, which amounts to the same thing. As the poet declares, “what the world wants is poets not poetry. Inspired opportunists smart or stupid enough to play the roles assigned to them” (64). In other words, the demands placed on artists are that they follow the script assigned to them, rather than creating their own scripts, which are likely to challenge the *status quo*.

The poet employs the excuse of not wanting to pander to market sensibilities, which he claims would amount to taking part in an exploitative system that only values work that generates capital. He “refuse[s]” (37) to take part in what to him is a materialism borne out of our neoliberal modernity, a consumerism that is its own kind of slavery (38). In this reasoning, this would entail either making art that is depoliticized, or being silenced if the art becomes too challenging or refuses to accept the terms of the system. In a country where “a poet is nothing”, the poet too is then “nothing, a nobody” (36) with no readership and no expectations of ever being published (38). Thus, he chooses instead to live on the margins of society as a drunk, claiming that his “alcoholism and non-productivity are the eloquent expressions of [his] rejection of the world and life in it” (36).

These lines of reasoning – in which Frank and the poet insist on speaking the truth as they see it without bending to white capital and are therefore barred from sharing their truths, and which in turn leads to the stultification of their creative work – need to be acknowledged. These are the same constraining structures we witnessed in *Room 207*. However, it is crucial to note that Hlongwane is not entirely satisfied with this logic, as he generates several internal criticisms that require that we pause before absolving Frank and the poet of mere apathy and

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<sup>41</sup> This comment is made in a radio interview on Khaya FM on 19 February 2014

cynicism. In the first place, in spite of whatever difficulties he may have faced, Hlongwane mounts strong socio-political critique *in a published novel*. The writer may have alluded to more “overtly political” aspects cut from the work, yet *Jozi* is certainly not depoliticised. In addition, the text makes frequent reference not just in Frank’s CD review but throughout, to musicians who are producing work that asks searching questions of South Africa’s post-apartheid situation demonstrating disillusionment and keen political critique. These include real-world influential South African musicians such as Letta Mbulu whose music reveals “hope and despair” (34), Thandiswa Mazwai who sings of “revolution and bitter discontent” (10), and Simphiwe Dana whose song “Ndiredi”, about African women’s power, “lift[s the protagonists] to its sublime heights” (29). These are artists who are also managing to create and be critical at the same time. Finally, the text mounts a stinging critique of artists that do not create through Senzo, who again speaks ideas central to the text. He reprimands artists such as Frank and the poet for their “defeatist attitudes”, declaring “we imagine that we are complex because we have chosen to make disillusionment out motto [...] but it’s just an excuse for drinking and our fear of failure” (19).

This fear might be linked to the kind of damaged sense of confidence and self-worth that the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) took as its impetus. In his writings as Frank Talk, as well as in his leadership of the South African Students Organisation (SASO) and political life in general, Biko’s overarching aim was to develop “a very strong grass-roots build-up of black consciousness such that blacks can learn to assert themselves and stake their rightful claim” (21). This was necessary, Pumla Gqola shows, as apartheid had placed such a strong emphasis on division and had sought to “reinforce a negative self-image” (132). In fact, the poet and Frank’s characters together might be seen as an allusion to Steve Biko’s *nom de plume* in the SASO newsletters, Frank Talk. The characters share a political sensibility and a “frank-ness” of language, and what Frank at times cedes to the poet in forthrightness, he makes up in name.

In “Black and white” Frank laments in outrage “the shit that we have to put up with in this country, in the name of freedom and reconciliation” (9), which seems to demand that black people continue to have to make compromises in the name of ‘race relations’ while white people “continue to wallow in their privilege” (9). The section begins with reference to the factual Skierlik shooting of 2008, where a white teenager shot and killed four black people and injured eight. The mass shooting is just one of the frequently occurring incidences in South Africa that demonstrate that not only are racisms after apartheid still omnipresent and

very violent, but also the extent of poverty and class divides are so desperate that people, in the words of Zwelinzima Vavi at the funeral of the murdered, “are not even in a position to smell the promise of a better life for all” (Mail & Guardian, 26 January 2008).<sup>42</sup>

However, Frank’s concern in the text is less with white supremacy, which is taken as a given, than with black self-hatred. This is directly in line with Biko’s idea of Black Consciousness (BC) as well as with the ‘frankness’ of his writings. This is explicitly explored in the section entitled “Coconuts”. Here, Hlongwane through Frank depicts the violence of the “cultural suicide” that causes people to “maim and murder their given African names” (21) – where for example Jabu becomes Jah-boo – so that the names sound like “some white person’s distortion of [them]” (20). BC thinking is explicit here: “if we do not subconsciously believe that other people are superior to us, then why do we put so much effort into sounding like them?” (21). “We South Africans”, Frank claims, and the implication here is black South Africans, “are disgracefully insecure” (21). Despairingly, Frank demands “is it any wonder that others despise us, when we despise ourselves?” (22).

Thus, *Jozzi* registers the violence of the links between institutional racism and the post-apartheid neoliberal economy, a system which, according to the poet, is “quite literally madness” (38). For both Frank and the poet, trying to live and operate within it manifests in their inability to maintain a firm grip on their own sanity. Madness in *Jozzi* is used as a metaphorical device, and the links are drawn constantly between the “mad, bad, insane world” (38) that the protagonists live in, and their own psychoses. Frank’s experiences of racism in the workplace make him feel like “he is going nuts, fast” (51). And for the poet, it is the system, which he refers to sardonically as “your wonderfully progressive, just and fair modernity” (38), that is enough to “make [him] lose [his] mind” (38). Break-downs and madness are expressions of the effects of living in this ideologically violent space. These are the reactions of people to the “bitter discontent” of a “miracle” revolution having “gone wrong” (10). The recognition that something has ‘gone wrong’, that black people in *Jozzi* are living in a present that is a far cry from the future that they had envisioned, signifies a simultaneous loss of hope for the future.

The connection between space and mental state is seen in Frank’s excursion in to Braamfontein, which is described as “a character marked by schizophrenia” (41). Given that

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<sup>42</sup> Vavi is also quoted as saying that “the killing of our people here in Skielik, Swartruggens, demonstrates another reality—that we still have a long way to go to build a united, non-racial, non-sexist, democratic and prosperous South Africa” (Mail and Guardian 26 January 2008).

Frank himself has been diagnosed as schizophrenic, it is clear that Hlongwane is encouraging us to draw links between the place, and the person. For Frank, the suburb on the one hand operates as a metonym for the country since “the welcome and promise and threat of Braamfontein is the welcome and promise and threat of the so-called ‘new South Africa’” (41).<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, his experience of the place means little more to him than the time spent with his lost lover Fisanga. This space which is simultaneously so symbolic and so personal becomes less the “indisputable bustling physical presence” of Braamfontein, and exists “more as a memory, a mystery, a mourning” (43), an expression of his own personal history, and mental state.

Madness for both the poet and for Frank manifests as a suppressed voice or silenced narrative forcing its way out. Chapters 2 and 3 present the image of two alcohol-ravaged writers walking through the city, thinking aloud. The poet’s thoughts are “forcibly making themselves heard” (39), while Frank’s words “are forcing their way to the fore [...] and at times he finds that a line or two has snaked through his defences and become audible” (44). The characters both ruminate aloud on oppression and loss, on the difficulties of living in a city where the ability to hope is constantly overshadowed and overwhelmed by the racialised distribution of privilege. The experiences of depression and mental instability, and the impulse to suicide that so many of the characters face is tied intimately to the city of dead dreams, a city in the aftermath of hope, a city where the narratives of progress have been forestalled and the bright, non-racial futures imagined in the transition to democracy have passed.

In the same way that the poet and Frank may together be read as allusions to Biko’s Frank Talk, the poet can be read as Frank’s alter-ego. He is the only unnamed character in the text, and his behaviour and beliefs often parallel Frank’s – only they tend to be more extreme. That the two characters which dominate most of the text are more or less indistinguishable from each other has implications for how we think about subjectivity in *Jozi*. In their self-imposed isolation from the world of entrepreneurialism – of creating something from nothing – that is so intimately connected with what Johannesburg has come to symbolise, the two characters

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<sup>43</sup> Braamfontein in the text is somewhat collapsed with other inner city areas such as Hillbrow or Berea. Braamfontein has not suffered the same capital flight, nor is it generally associated with the same sense of risk and degeneration. In addition, it has been the site of post-apartheid regeneration projects attracting a youthful, multiracial, artsy and ‘hip’ community to the clubs, restaurants and second hand stores that populate the precinct. However, Hlongwane treats Braamfontein in the same way as he treats the other areas that his characters encounter, and I follow his treatment.

can no longer be defined “exhaustively as market actors” (Brown 21). It is as though they have rejected this scripting and now operate outside of it, unable to be recognised except as madmen. For how can one be a person, the text seems to ask sarcastically through these two characters, if one rejects the idea of personhood as defined by modernity – modular, individualistic, a self-made man, unique and always progressing, defined by the drive to work? Frank and the poet are instead characters that demonstrate an anti-modern impulse to “erase tomorrow” (8).

This erasure happens in a very visceral way in *Jozi*’s repeated representation of the representation of the ubiquity of death in the city. It is as though the recognition that the notion of progress cannot be redeemed plays out on the bodies of the city’s subjects, and often violently and fatally. The city where “dreams come to die” is a place where people die too. The poet disappears into the city, his narrative refracted through the pages of a chaotic piece of writing entitled “Dead Man’s Journal”. The journal reveals that he is dying of AIDS, and has been avoiding treatment and living with the guilt of having infected his wife (71). By the time Frank reads the journal, left for him at a police station, the poet is most likely already dead. His is the least explicit in a string of deaths in the text culminating in Frank’s death, where he is stabbed in the shoulder and clubbed in the back of his skull. He lies alone, in the gutter, bleeding out, unable to move or call for help and weeping. This scene – sudden, violent, desperate, lonely death – reverberates through the text. In fact Frank’s time in Jozi has been haunted by an eerily similar incident early in his time in the city, in which he left a young thief, beaten to the ground by Frank and his friends, and impaled on his own knife, to either bleed out or find help. Frank is plagued by nightmares and agonises about whether or not the boy died and “every time he suffered any kind of bad luck, out came the memory of that night, lying in wait for him” (77). It seems that Frank’s fate is tied to that young man’s; Frank’s death spells the death of the thief, or vice versa. These deaths are connected to a third – the nameless man who is stabbed to death in Hillbrow for thirty rand who also lies alone “bleeding in a gutter” and crying (7). And this man is in turn connected to all of the countless stabbings that have taken place: “he has been here, walked this corner in the night a hundred, a thousand times. He has been the footsteps fleeing the scene before” (7). The section is chilling as it ripples wider and wider. The nameless figure, a distressing everyman of the city, is a migrant from “somewhere in Langa or Mpumalanga, in Manzini or Maputo”, yet another young man who has come to the city “with stars in [his] eyes” (6) and whose story ends in blood on the pavement.

Frank is in fact implicated in two more deaths. His close friend Duma commits suicide after his girlfriend leaves him, and after Frank fails to offer the kind of support that Duma clearly needs. And another thief falls to the ground with Frank's involvement, this time as he is on the run from a mob. The man is quickly engulfed and beaten to death as Frank stands watching in horror, once again contemplating his culpability. It is not my interest to figure out whether or not Frank is to *blame*. What interests me is that what connects the deaths in *Jozi* is a general disinterest or disconnect between people and the community around them. This disinterest is characterised by Georg Simmel as the "blasé attitude" (329). To Simmel the city is a place of encounters which seem to be governed by "indifference" but which are instead "elementary forms of association" (76).<sup>44</sup> These associations are ways of relating to each other, but often take place with a "mental attitude [...that] may be designated formally as one of reserve" (331). Simmel positions this reserve as necessitated by the sheer number of interactions that take place between people in a city, to which an individual simply cannot afford the same "inner reactions" as they might with people with whom they have "a positive relationship" in a small town (331).

In pushing Frank and us as readers to ask questions about culpability, the text helps us to start thinking about a city of inhabitants who take active care for one another, versus one in which that care is muted. This is demonstrated in Senzo's comment to Frank after they attend a friend, Siphos, funeral together, in which he asks desperately, "do you know how many girlfriends Siphos had? Aids is decimating our nation and we have chosen to be part of the problem, not the solution" (19). It is with tears in his eyes that he declares "no man, a man must do something" (19) – a declaration he eventually follows through with as an AIDS councillor in the hospice.

In this section I have been trying to demonstrate the ways in which *Jozi* explores what it is like to live in the city without the hope and dreams that have defined so many Johannesburg narratives. In the wake of the realisation that the notion of progress can no longer be redeemed, the text shows the city to be a space of stunted creativity, mental instability and death. These manifestations of hopelessness are direct results of the inequalities engendered

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<sup>44</sup> Indifference, Simmel posits, is in fact only an appearance. He observes that "our psychological activity responds to almost every impression that comes from another person with a certain determinate feeling. The subconscious, fleeting, changeful nature of this feeling only *seems* to reduce it to indifference" (76). This "antipathy", he claims, is a form of protection "without which we could not lead the urban life at all" (*ibid*). Thus, he finds that "what at first glance appears in it as dissociation, actually is one of its elementary forms of association (*ibid*)



by a neoliberal economy, and the violence of racism, and the way these two discourses unite to constrain any questioning of or challenge to the existing hegemony. In addition, I posited that in was a sense of disconnect, a lack of a sense of community that linked the deaths in the text. I now turn to explore this notion, as well as to ask: in the face of this loss of hope then, why and how do Hlongwane's characters stay on in the city?

## **Boundaries of community and belonging**

Even as *Jozi* works to demonstrate the abandonment by its protagonists of the notions of optimism and progress, it simultaneously explores the everyday, non-spectacular lives of people who stay on in the city. The title of the text indicates that it intends to function in some way as a portrait of Johannesburg. Frank's opening sentence suggests that not only is the text about "*eJozi, eGoli, eRrawutini, koJoni*", but it more importantly is about "the Johannesburg we know" (1). The use of this 'we' sets up a community, and this community's act of 'knowing' implies a real sense of belonging. There is, therefore, an immediate departure from the conventional narrative for Johannesburg as a "city of migrants" (Harrison et al 7) for which there is a "vacuum of belonging" (Gotz and Simone 129). In spite of (or perhaps because of) its representation of a city of people who have rejected post-apartheid optimism and who are dealing with the aftermath of such a rejection, the texts' protagonists demonstrate a loyalty to the inner city quite different from the disavowal of Hillbrow demonstrated in *Room 207*. The characters that populate the text are subtly yet firmly embedded in the inner-city streets and institutions – they are regulars at the local taverns, they use the libraries and parks, they walk the streets, and their experiences of the city carry layers of memory. They are people for whom the city is haunted with de Certeau's "stories and legends" (106).

The city as home is, following de Certeau, a set of narratives composed by a community and so *Jozi* seeks to register the city through the community – through Frank's community. We, as readers, need to "meet [his] friends" and hear their stories in order to get to know his city (2). *Jozi* is what Hlongwane refers to as a "people-centred narrative"<sup>45</sup>, in which the black city residents of Jozi become, in AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) language, an infrastructure, creating the city through their enactments in its spaces.

A prime example is Duma, a friend of Frank's who has been living in the Highpoint building in Hillbrow since the early 1990s. Duma tells Frank that even as the building and suburb

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<sup>45</sup> In the radio interview on Khaya FM, 19 February 2014.

decay around him, “in a strange kind of way I feel like I belong here now” (16). The strangeness being referenced here recalls the idea of ‘the stranger’ as used by Simmel, for whom the feeling of strangeness emerges from a sense of both nearness and distance. The stranger, for Simmel, represents the synthesis of wandering and attachment, and is “a member of the group itself” (147) rather than a disavowed other. The stranger “arrives today and stays tomorrow” (143). Duma and the other protagonists of *Jozi* occupy the position both of stranger and local. Their position in the city and their urbanity as black subjects, having been denied throughout the colonial-apartheid era, is now there to be claimed. *Jozi* makes clear that Frank and his friends seem to still be denied respect by white people – this mainly happens at work as an expression of power and bigotry, as illustrated by Frank’s anger, and subsequent resignation from his job where his colleagues who are “middle-aged black men with families” must sit and listen to the offensive announcements of “some white executive with his mother’s milk still fresh on his breath” (51). However, in spite of this, *Jozi* also makes very clear that its protagonists have *chosen* to stay in the city.

This choice may be driven by the “urgency” that Mbembe describes for black inhabitants of the city to make themselves “at home in the city”, and thus to re-appropriate that which has “been the dominant site of their exclusion from modernity” (393). Thus, even as they can see that Hillbrow is “going to the dogs” (Hlongwane 79), Frank and his friends stay on in the city. Another reason they choose to stay emerges out of a recognition that their attempts to survive and make the city work for them *connects them* to what Frank’s old crew refers to as the “influx” of “undesirables” (79) – prostitutes, unemployed youths and transnational African immigrants. This terminology strongly recalls the exclusionary language of apartheid, and it is implicitly moralising, othering those deemed “undesirable”/immoral, denying their right to citizenship of the city. Unlike his old buddies, Frank positions himself with these disavowed people, recognising that they are “people like you and me, trying to scrape out a living as best they can” (79). This means that there is an underlying sense of association and community which living in the inner city affords, even if it means feeling excluded from the suburbs, or associated with “undesirable” populations. Herein arises that ‘strange’ sense of belonging.

*Jozi* also invites us to consider the notion of community by employing the technique in which narrator acts as city tour guide, through the use of the second person (2, 42). This has the effect of positioning the reader – ‘you’ – in relation to the text’s protagonists and their community – ‘we’. As in *Room 207*, the reader becomes something of a guest, drawn along into the heart of the city, by knowing inhabitants. Although ‘you’ are invited along, and

invited in, 'you' are not seen to be constitutive of the community envisioned by Frank. The sense of belonging cannot yet extend to include the reader.

The incomplete or muted form of community demonstrated in *Jozzi* is best demonstrated in its treatment of women. For, although they are part of the story of the city, women do not seem to be offered the same space of belonging as Frank and his friends. *Jozzi* is a narrative told by men, and by men who often mistreat women. As in *Room 207*, the reader only meets women who are refracted through the eyes of male protagonists who are firmly embedded in a patriarchal society. There are only men to tell women's stories of subjection in the city.

Diane Jeater shows how, in the settler/ migrant labour town of Gwelo in what was then Rhodesia, the urban environment was considered "no place for a woman", and following this, that women had no place being in the city. Not only was there "nowhere appropriate for them to stay" (31), but women were also seen as not having a "legitimate role to play" (38) in the urban, public environment. Consequently, the presence of women in town is obscured from the records. Women have additionally been used as figures to deny the urbanity of black women *and men*, as Meg Samuelson shows. This took place through the figures of "degenerate urban women" (2008 67) – women who were represented as having been corrupted by the city's vices and occupying 'illegitimate spaces' as shebeen owners or streetwalkers, and as having corrupting power for men coming to the city to work. They were therefore constitutive elements of the image of Johannesburg as a city of sin.

In *Jozzi*, although they may seem to constitute part of the community, the women who appear in the text do not seem to be able to dictate the terms on which, and the extent to which they are included in Frank's "we". Pumla Gqola is one among numerous feminist critics who have questioned the Black Consciousness Movement's myopia when it came to forms of oppression other than race. She is careful to situate BC discourse in the context of apartheid's focus on emphasising difference, in its tribalising of South African black people for example, and the concomitant need for "Black solidarity" (135). However, Gqola also notes that BC generated a "hierarchy of oppression" with race as "the primary oppressive force" (134). This meant that differences in "gender, class, age, geographical location, and sexual orientation were not perceived as consequential enough to warrant inclusion into the discourse of the doctrine" (136). Gqola demonstrates that when women were included and respected as activists they were assigned one of two identities. Either a woman was motherly, taking on domestic roles to raise men within the BC world view (137). Or, if she was identified as

assertive and intelligent the woman was accorded “honorary male status (148). Thus, Gqola shows, BC was a discourse that sought to recover a positive *male* identity, and “the *space* for the politicization of Blackwomen's experiences fell outside of the language of BC” (149). Women, in other words, were not included in the “we” of BC. And while Frank is able to make explicit critiques of experiences of both racisms and negative self-images held by black people he has come across, he seems unable to make the same criticisms of gender relations.

Hlongwane again creates space for an implicit criticism of Frank in his foregrounding of Matilda's story. Matilda is the first of Frank's friends to whom we are introduced. She is “through with men” and is “forced” to accept Frank as her “sort-of-friend” (3) as he seems to get along with her son. Matilda, who dies after she is stabbed in the neck by the father of her child, draws together colonialism, apartheid and the concomitant racialised exclusions, and gendered violence when she blames black men for being “too cowardly and too stupid to prevent the theft of our land” and claiming that “they now try to affirm themselves daily by destroying the dignity of black women” (5). Although the culpability for the lack of economic power that she assigns to black men is erroneous and the connection between that and a pathology of blackness is hugely problematic, the association she makes is revealing of Kopano Ratele's ‘oppressed oppressors’ – black men who are oppressed by “hegemonic capitalist patriarchal whiteness” (Ratele 2013 252) and who in turn subject black women to their relative power. The indifference with which Frank narrates Matilda's murder is troubling. He describes the incident as “some sort of scuffle” (4), and makes no effort to understand why the other women at the house request that he stop visiting Matilda's son after her death – “I have no idea what that was about” he seems to shrug before moving on (4).

Hlongwane uses Frank's treatment of Matilda's story to display an oppressive masculinity lurking at the edges of Frank's Jozi. Although Frank seems to care for her, he states with some self-awareness that “I never really got to know Matilda. But perhaps this is true of most of the women I've known” (4). The ‘unknowability’ of women is indicative of a refusal or an inability to communicate with women on their own terms. This is demonstrated by the final image of Matilda dancing joyfully to a song she loves. She reads the song as “her[s]” (6), and dances alone, smiling, self-sufficient; whereas Frank reduces her simple delight at the song to her sexuality. To him, Matilda looks “as though she could love and be loved by all the men in the world...” (6, ellipses in original). It seems that to Frank, a woman who announces that she is “through with men” (3) cannot possibly mean what she says. In this final image of Matilda, Hlongwane opens up a small space for Matilda to exceed Frank's delimitation of her as a

gendered, sexual being. Hlongwane uses the ellipses of the last sentence give it a hollow echo, undermining Frank's words, as we remember that Matilda is to become a victim of gender-based violence. She is a site upon which male power is exercised.

Romantic love throughout the text is described in the language of possession (25), of women as objects of "conquest" (24, 46), and women "worship[ing]" men (49). Male love is therefore associated with domination. This is most clearly seen with the woman Frank calls "the rain queen" (22). Throughout the section, Frank completely objectifies her and strips her of her agency. The section opens with her being "deliver[ed]" by a thunderstorm to the shelter of Frank's umbrella, rather than with her choosing to be there, let alone delivering the rains as a rain queen would. She is described as little more than an assemblage of rose-scents, bedazzled hair, feline eyes, full lips, and so on. Of course, she is also kind and weepy (25). She is a "vision of female perfection" (23) – that is, the way that Frank describes her is as the stereotypical fantasy of a desirable female. The same holds for the "mature" and "irresistibly attractive" (46) woman Frank meets in a bar. These women conform so entirely to male desire that they seem to operate solely as tropes.

Again, Florence Stratton's work on "the mother Africa trope" is valuable in reading the text's treatment of women. Stratton shows how, in much literature by African writers, female characters must endure "textual sexploitation" (52) in order to embody the political visions of men. 'Woman' is often presented as pure physicality (41) and the embodiment of essentialised African principles of reciprocity, interconnectedness, and her role is purely collaborative: to birth men's visions (52). Stratton cogently argues that writers are "attracted by the metaphorical potential about the situation of women not really by injustice done to women" (52). Rather than troubling patriarchy, the literature that makes use of this trope "justifies and therefore serves to perpetuate the status quo", Stratton argues (52).

Hlongwane seems to be invoking this trope with Frank's "rain queen". However, he is also troubling it. The rain queen is a figure of great female power, as the only matrilineal dynasty in South Africa.<sup>46</sup> The subtle reminder of women's power is easily missed, narrated as it is by

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<sup>46</sup> The rain queen, Modjadji, of the Balobedu in Northern Limpopo is both highly respected and seen as a figure of mystery, feared, legend has it, by Shaka Zulu (Jolys). Odile Jolys notes that the rain queen is "among the traditional rulers whose rights are anchored in the South African constitution" and the rites and rituals for rain making continue to be adhered to. This is one of the few matrilineal societies in Southern Africa and the queens are expected to remain unmarried, though they may take multiple wives (Boddy-Evans). There is no current ruling rain queen as Makabo Modjadji (Modjadji VI) passed away in 2005. Her death is embroiled in mystery and gossip – officially meningitis, but suspected by

Frank, with his pride in his “conquest”. To him, she is only “rain queen” in name, for in making his move on her, he discovers that she is “merely human after all...attainable, vulnerable” (24). Yet the woman demonstrates that Frank possesses a limited definition of her by exceeding it, refusing to be delimited by his desires. She leaves Frank after he explicitly displays a need to own her: “I want to possess her, but she will not let me” (25). She is clearly more complex and strong-willed than Frank is able to see. This subtle fissure is space that Hlongwane has created, somewhat tentatively, to enable us to “hear a variety of discourses” (Wicomb), and to demonstrate that the ways in which relationships play out with women are symptomatic of the limits to our freedom.

Hlongwane does so with more conviction with the poet’s narrative of the sex workers. As the opening episode of the text, Hlongwane has chosen to foreground and highlight the ways in which women, operating within the oppressive terms of patriarchy and racialised capitalism, are creating communities that span the rural/ urban divide as sex workers. These women earn comparatively well – up to a thousand rand a day – yet they are not drug addicts, or even saving up to “make a clean break” (2). Instead, the women remit most of their incomes home, so that their money in exchange for sex is “feeding and burying grandmothers, fathers, aunties [...], raising and schooling brothers, sisters, cousins, nieces and nephews” (2). In this simple exchange, the women in urban downtown Jozi, who must use their bodies as product, are linked to rural areas not only across the country but in neighbouring countries and to kinship ties and responsibilities. No matter what the “time-honoured criticisms against the world’s oldest profession” (1) may be, the sex workers’ small remittances are lifelines to survival for those at the receiving-end. Sex work bridges the divide between rural and urban.<sup>47</sup> It is not an instance of ‘degenerate’ city hustling, but is an example of networks of care. Moreover it is work that focuses not on upliftment of the self, but rather endures in the city in order to sustain others.

The sex-workers best encapsulate an ‘excessive’ figuration of femininity. On the one hand, their experiences are mediated by the discussion between Frank and the poet – by men who speak for them, and who negotiate whether or not they exceed the bounds of legitimate

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hospital staff to be AIDS, and by villagers to be poisoning as a result of the anger of the elders at her public relationship with a man (Munnion). Makabo’s daughter would usually have been automatically installed as her successor, however there is controversy over her right to the title as she is not fathered by a “royal consort” (Boddy-Evans).

<sup>47</sup> Although they are often positioned as distinct, as Lindsey Bremner points out, the “opposition of urban and rural is not only useless and inaccurate, but also obstructive” (2014 23).

femininity, urbanity, and formal modes of money-earning. On the other, Hlongwane uses the poet to show how sex work, and the money the women earn from it, connects them to familial and financial webs throughout the country. And what is more, these women operate neither for themselves, nor out of acquisitiveness: they buy “the cheapest clothes, cell phones” (2). Instead, they work in order to take care of their extended families. Thus, Hlongwane signals from the outset of the text, the networks of care that are formed and maintained by women. In this way, although they are not invited into Frank’s “we” in the same way as his male friends are, women in the city are creating communities of belonging and care of their own. And this is very clearly a *burden* of care, to which self-upliftment narratives of progress and upward mobility just do not apply. Many of these women are “never going to get out” (2) of the city, of poverty, out of selling their bodies to raise and bury family members, “most likely they’ll just die of AIDS” (2).

## **Suffering bodies and modes of endurance**

Many of the characters in *Jozi* can be thought of as suffering bodies. It is as though the abandonment of the notion of progress plays out on the body. Women are killed by men who feel oppressed and emasculated. Love and sex with women are expressions of power and possession by men. Women must sell their bodies to maintain community networks and to look after their families. Countless people are being beaten up or killed for small change or handbags. And many more are dying of AIDS. The figure of the AIDS sufferer stalks its way through the text.

Frédéric Le Marcis, in his essay on “The Suffering Body of the City” begins to “redraw the map of the city [as being] outlined by the bodies of those who are poor, hunted, suffering, and in search of care” (454). He notes that one of the (coincidental) markers of the post-apartheid has been the rise of HIV, so that “people obtained their freedom and fell sick at the same time” (453). In spite of this, it is usually the healthy body that is theorized in work on the city. Suffering in the city in these theorisations then becomes about disembodied individualism, as when the individual suffers “it is usually from isolation and anonymity” (454). In his paper, he demonstrates that the body suffering from AIDS, far from being characterized by immobility and isolation, “moves and travels” (454) since AIDS “demands ever-increasing circles of exploration, obliging sufferers little by little to crisscross the city” (460). In this way, the AIDS sufferer draws connections across the city – connections of both contagion and care. I would like to explore this idea as it is expressed in the text in this final section.

As a form of contagion and harbinger of death, AIDS creates links between city and village. This is demonstrated in the ‘breakaway’ section entitled “Family Affairs” in which the world of Jozi recedes and the narrative of the family of Duma’s girlfriend, Buhle, located in “the small rural backwater” (84) of Pongola, come to the fore. In “Family Affairs”, Hlongwane draws on and subverts the “Jim Comes to Jo’burg” trope, where the city is cast as morally degenerate and is juxtaposed with the tradition, purity and righteousness of the village.<sup>48</sup> The section depicts a world steeped in tradition, imbued with meaning and metaphor through dreams and symbols. The symbolism of Sy Mathe’s world is eerie and filled with foreboding, and the old man feels “inexplicably uneasy” (85). In an event he interprets as being filled with meaning, Sy Mathe sees a black cat, towards which he is suspicious because of a “vaguely recall[ed] superstition” (85) – perhaps an oblique reference to witchcraft – try and fail to catch a white dove, which in Judeo-Christian conceptual frameworks is a symbol for peace. However, Hlongwane complicates this symbolism. The cat, hungry like the people of Sy Mathe’s community, has “simply strayed here in search of food” (85). And as the bird soars away from danger “with impossible fluency” Sy Mathe feels only sadness that his family and his community “could not, like the white dove, fly away to a safer place” from the precariousness of their lives which has “enveloped them on every side” (85). Here the white dove seems to take on a far more conflicted connotation, as the allusion to ‘white flight’ – the fleeing of white people from economic or political hardship or challenge to their privilege to ‘safer places’ like enclaves of whiteness in the northern suburbs of Johannesburg, or expat communities in ‘the first world’ – seems hard to miss. On his trip to Johannesburg in search of his daughter, death follows the old man, or rather “it wait[s] for him in all the places his search [takes] him” (89). Duma is found hanging from the ceiling fan of his flat, and there is no trace of Mathe’s daughter, Buhle, who has recently discovered that she is HIV positive. Thus, the old man’s narrative re-invokes the trope of the city as a “place [that] has finished our children”, it is destructive and evil (90).

However, Hlongwane complicates Sy Mathe’s reading of the city. The rural and urban worlds bleed into each other, connected not only by scattered family members, but by hardship, disease and death. Moreover, in Hlongwane’s gloss, the village is not backward but prescient.

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<sup>48</sup> This is a crucial aspect of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which blurs the stark lines drawn by villagers between Tiragalong and Hillbrow. Mpe creates a “web of connections between city and countryside” (Hoad 108) and one of the primary ways in which he does this is through the AIDS pandemic. Characters die in both the city and the village. Neither is idealised, and as Emily Davis shows, contagion in the form of HIV, as well as in the form of toxic prejudice, links Hillbrow to Tiragalong, and beyond (99).



Pongola is afflicted with an unrelenting drought, and the people are suffering from AIDS, referred to only as “the strange national pestilence”, or in the metaphor of the village as “chop-them-down” (84). If AIDS and death are connecting different spaces and people, the question must be asked: what implications does this have for the formation of a sense of community? Le Marcis shows that the suffering body exposes Johannesburg’s “ambivalence”. The city is a

sign of the harshness of the world but also, occasionally, *as one of compassion*. Just as it authorizes the exploitation of the sick, so it opens up a myriad of possibilities in terms of care and mobilization (455, my emphasis).

I argue that *Jozi* gestures toward a city of care in the final section, entitled “*Loss recovery*”. In exploring the idea of a community-spirited ethic of care, the text also tentatively suggests a narrative of endurance in the city.<sup>49</sup> In the final section, Senzo, his body ravaged by AIDS, takes up the ethic of care as an AIDS counsellor. He does so from within a hospice, “the outwardly gentle appearance” of which should not, as Le Marcis notes, “conceal the seriousness of admission[...]: one comes here to die” (459). Upon his admission to the hospice, Senzo initially embraces death, “savouring the departing sensations of being alive” (91). He seems to relish in the opportunity to convince himself of a heroic death, of martyrdom, though to what cause is left unmentioned. He has lost hope, is losing weight and strength, and is “willing death forward” (94).

The “peace of Senzo’s rising sea of self-pity” is however “shattered” by a volunteer doctor’s pressing question: “who can you help if you are dead?” (93). At this point what has until now been an understandably self-focused experience looks outward, becomes other-focused, so that Senzo is re-animated by the potential for re-directing the narrative of his life. Reminded that “there are still people I can help, right here” (94), and that he might have left it too late, Senzo suddenly feels that the overarching narrative of his life is a tragedy. However, crucially

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<sup>49</sup> A similar turn is made in K. Sello Duiker’s *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* when Tshepo leaves Cape Town and moves to Hillbrow and finds work in a children’s home. The final section of this novel embeds itself in a very similar ideological space. Tshepo chooses to live in Hillbrow “*with all its decay*” (452, my emphasis). Like Senzo’s experience in *Jozi*, staying in Hillbrow in order to take up the work of care is similarly unexpected and similarly healing for the mentally, emotionally and spiritually fragile Tshepo. Tshepo’s healing, like Senzo’s, is in accepting that he is helping other people. In his work at the children’s home, he accepts that he is “[his] mother’s child” (456) and takes up the role of his mother, the nurturer. And it is through this ‘women’s work’ that he comes to discover, or create, a community, a sense of belonging, and to “*feel at home*” (454). Interestingly, Tshepo keeps an easel in his room, waiting for the right time to use it (454), and while he absorbs images and memories, the *potentiality of art* that the easel represents “*breathes life into [his] room*” (455).

he seems to discover an opening through which he can, if not re-write that narrative, then redirect it by making it “a useful tragedy” (94). In altering the trajectory of his life, Senzo also alters the trajectory of the text itself.

This is not literary tragedy in a strictly Aristotelian or Nietzschean sense, but is rather tragedy in the sense used by Ato Quayson in his discussion of Ken Saro Wiwa’s execution. Quayson seeks to invoke both the literary and ‘everyday’ meanings of the term, and sums up tragedy as consisting of four dimensions: “the formal and shifting arrangement of events”, “an error of judgement”, the “presentation of ethical qualities” and, his own addition, pertinent to *Jozi*, that “tragedy often emerges in the assertion of ethical values and of selfhood in the face of forces that would negate them” (63-64). This is not standard genre-tragedy. Instead it seems as though tragedy is being used as a “tool” (Quayson 58). For David Scott, tragedy harbours great potential as a mode that “unsettles, problematizes and subverts the mastering (and self-mastering) ambition of civilisation and the knowledge/ power drive of enlightenment without offering a simple rejection of its claims” (175). I would argue that it is in this sense that Hlongwane is making use of the term, because when it is considered a tool that unsettles master narratives and resists foreclosure thereby making space for otherness, the notion of tragedy does indeed become “useful”.

When Senzo categorises his life as “useful tragedy” he does so with reference to the recognition that he will die soon, without friends or family to bury him, and so too will all of the patients he cares for. Nevertheless he is committed to asserting the communitarian values encapsulated by the philosophy of *ubuntu*, as summed up by Kamwangamalu as “respect for any human being, for human dignity and for human life, collective sharedness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, communalism, to list but a few” (in Gaylard 270).

Read retroactively, it becomes clear that the text has subtly displayed an other-centred community-spiritedness throughout. For example, Frank is chastised by the narrator for “prizing politics above people” (48), and the man who shows a simple kindness to Frank by walking him to the pharmacy says that “[he] would cease to be human if [he] failed to help other people” (59). Consistent with the notion “a person is a person through other people”,<sup>50</sup> humanity in the text turns out to be intertwined in community. It is no accident that we are

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<sup>50</sup> This is the oft-quoted English translation of the Sotho (*motho ke motho ka motho yo mongwe*) and Zulu (*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu*) proverbs (Gaylard 270).

told from the start of the text that “a place is its people” (2). Senzo’s choice to endure calls attention retroactively to these occasions of care. And of course it ends the text on a note of hope, one which recognises the direness of reality but engages with it through the work of care; work which generates hope-as-endurance, which nurtures life, and which exercises a “biopolitics from below” (Hardt 98). This hope-as-endurance is pointedly *not* the “cruel optimism” (Berlant) that informed the dreaming of *Room 207*. The “hope” in *Jozi* is not future-oriented, it is not a “dreaming forward” (Braidotti 217). There is an awareness that Senzo, and those he cares for will die. Instead this hope-as-endurance is located in the ability to create community networks of care in the present.

The work of caregivers and counsellors operate within the sphere of what Michael Hardt calls ‘affective labour’. This kind of labour includes care work, but also more generalised forms of producing affects.<sup>51</sup> Hardt argues that it has the potential to be anticapitalist, since affective labour practices “produce collective subjectivities, produce sociality, and ultimately produce society itself” (89). It can therefore be considered “biopower from below” (98). The ‘from below’ comes from the fact that much affective labour is “labour in the bodily mode” (Smith in Hardt 96) – maternal work, family life, the work of care – labour which in a patriarchal world is “traditionally women’s work” (90). Hardt is careful to note that analyses which too closely associate affective work and women risk essentialising gender and gender roles (100). His point is that although affective labour “has become firmly embedded as a necessary foundation for capitalist accumulation and patriarchal order”, that because it produces “affects, subjectivities, and forms of life” it actually harbours “enormous potential for autonomous circuits of valorization, and perhaps for liberation” (100).

Senzo’s care work, Matilda’s maternal work, and the prostitutes’ sex work are all forms of “labour in the bodily mode” – they are material. They also all happen to be forms of work conducted not out of self-interest, but for the gain of others. They are works of care, affective, otherwise to the values of capitalism. Elizabeth Povinelli, in her book, *Economies of Abandonment*, writes of “the materiality of becoming otherwise” (131), which does not mean trying to overthrow capitalism, but “to live otherwise within its seams” (129). I want to argue that this is what Senzo discovers as an AIDS counsellor in the Johannesburg of the text. Povinelli explores the idea of endurance in the context of what she terms “late liberalism”

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<sup>51</sup> Hardt argues that in the ‘first world’ affective labour has become the most highly valued form of labour, since a primary focus for most industries is now on the “communication and manipulation of affects” (95). Thus, affective labour is “exploitable by capital” and often “directly productive of capital” (97).

(29). This regime makes the wager that few people will strive to persevere, like Senzo does. Rather, it prefers to let people like him (and the poet and Frank) exhaust themselves, as he seems to do before his decision to use the last of his life to care for others. As Povinelli puts it with reference to her own project for indigenous knowledges in Australia (118),

No one is going to kill us or lock us up for trying to succeed [...]; they are just going to let us exhaust ourselves. They are making a wager that few people will be able to be like [...] the group on our boat, so few that the otherwise we represent will never be able to sustain itself, let alone extend, thicken, and become dominant. [...] As Foucault observed, the state only rarely exercises its right to kill. Instead it directs life, letting those who wish to swim against the tide to do so until they cross a line or exhaust themselves.

Exhaustion is for Povinelli, the antonym of endurance (32), and endurance entails the finding of ways to persist in the face of “these late liberal ways of making live, making die, and letting die” (29). While there may be a will to endure, the *capacity* to endure requires material support, beginning with the body (113). So Senzo’s endurance is tentative at best. His is a weakened body, a dying body, but his striving to persevere “strengthens [his] attachment to life” (116).

The hospice is undoubtedly a place where *people* come to die. It could be presented as a space of catastrophe, imagined as a camp whose inhabitants are reduced to bare life. However, this as Povinelli notes does “not help us understand how various forms of eventfulness distribute the texture of enervation and endurance in late liberalism” (133). Instead, Hlongwane reimagines the space of the hospice as a space of care, of community, and of *hope as endurance*. If the work of care is a “biopower from below” (Hardt) then Senzo is creating life in that he is creating subjectivity, sociality, community in a space (and city) of death. And so the final line, in which “a deadly virus was in his body, but hope was in it also” (94), takes on greater significance. Hope, this line implies, is not just in Senzo’s mind, but it is in his *body* and in the potential of the body, of “labour in the bodily mode” (Hardt) to produce community.

Thus, in *Jozzi*, the collapse of “cruel optimism” (Berlant) leads to a narrative of endurance. This narrative space occurs inside the hospice and inside the suffering bodies of AIDS patients, and women. Endurance is located in the body and in affective labour – that which has been associated with women, and denigrated along with women. Senzo taking up the work of care privileges ‘women’s work’ while starting to undo the idea that it is women’s

work at all. It is creative work in that it produces sociality, subjectivity, social *life*. It creates a new kind of infrastructure in the city, to recall Simone, and so has great transformative potential, beginning with the unlikely hope that emerges from a city “where dreams come to die”. This is what enables Hlongwane’s text to become a “useful tragedy”.

## Chapter 4

### Conclusion

#### From ways of leaving to ways of staying

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Having plotted a trajectory within and between *Room 207* and *Jozi* from hope to hopelessness to endurance, I have figured the texts in terms of their orientations of movement relative to Johannesburg: *Room 207* is about ways of leaving Johannesburg; and *Jozi* is about “ways of staying”<sup>52</sup>. I have also figured the texts in terms of their interpretations of narratives available for black subjectivities in the city: *Room 207* is about the reiteration of narratives of limitation in the face of dreaming and *Jozi* is about trying to revise these narratives into a “useful tragedy” without a sense of the futurely. Together, the texts enabled me to think through negotiations of history, race, gender and late capitalism in a space as over-determined by images and narratives as Johannesburg. I have worked through the texts’ ideas of Johannesburg as “dream city” (Moele 18), and the way this is inseparable from the “sad black story” (50), rendering Johannesburg a city “where dreams come to die” (Hlongwane 1), and arriving ultimately at a point where people are able to remain in the city and turn their sad stories into “useful traged[ies]” (94). The texts helped me to grapple with the question of hopefulness in the present: *Room 207* elucidating terms in which it cannot be redeemed, and *Jozi* offering one way in which the notion of hope might be re-imagined so that it becomes redeemable. I read the texts to demonstrate that liberation from the narratives that work to constrain black subjects’ experiences in the city cannot be achieved by dreaming and operating in the terms of capitalist modernity. Instead, they point to a focus on the other as a mode of creating social life in the city.

*Room 207* charts the failure of hope in the post-apartheid present. It shows how hope – cast in the novel as dreaming – is intimately tied to the expectations of what it was supposed to have

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<sup>52</sup> Kevin Bloom’s 2009 book *Ways of Staying* – part memoir, part journalism – grapples with the idea of why and how people, and he and his family in particular, might choose to stay in South Africa after experiencing brutal crimes (142). Bloom eschews hope as a neat closure to his narrative – towards the end of the text he hints at it, asking “dare one use a word like *hope*?” (217), but one does not dare it seems. Instead, Bloom looks to people who stay on, in spite of their experiences, some of whom have no other choice but to stay. And it is only in this perseverance that he gleans a sense of hope-as-endurance.

meant to be ‘after apartheid’, and to the expectations of neoliberalism. These expectations are intertwined with racism, capitalism and patriarchy. Though the protagonists may dream and try, their dreams are instances of “cruel optimism” (Berlant), invested in the same system which brings about their collapse. What seem like ways of getting out – of poverty, of disenfranchisement, of the inner city, of a space where creativity is not possible – are in fact only slightly different iterations of the same script for black subjectivity in the city. The “sad black story” that is looped throughout *Room 207* is that script, voiced by screen-writer Noko, who feverishly tries to author new narratives, but who is constrained by the structural grooves left by apartheid and deepened by the global neoliberal order. Noko is either wilfully or inadvertently unaware of these forms of constraint, and history is glossed over, minimised, avoided. The connections between the 207s’ struggles and racial “neoliberal rationality” (Brown 43) remain implicit rather than being made explicit by Noko. Thus, I found that while Moele’s protagonists strive to write new scripts for themselves, *Room 207* in fact shows them to be exhausting the old ones.

*Jozzi* opens at the point of collapse of the dreams with which *Room 207* concerns itself. It is a text that is interested in what happens in the wake of such a collapse, in what it is to remain in the city in the aftermath of hope. Hlongwane has his ‘secondary’ protagonist Senzo test out a new way of staying in the city through endurance, as well as the notion that endurance is hopeful in itself. Endurance in *Jozzi* means to stay on in a city of death (of dreams and people) and take up the ethic of care, and of care in the bodily mode. It is, as Povinelli puts it, a mode of “becoming otherwise” (113) and living otherwise in the seams of capitalism. The gesture is cautious, and frail, but it is there. In *Jozzi*, Senzo ceases to look to the future to create a better life, and thus ceases to hope in an anticipatory way that indicates a disavowal of the present. He begins to open a space that is not governed by a politics of ‘me’, but an ethic of us. It is a deliberate turn away from the actualisation of the self toward the care of the other. In using the last of his days to care for others also about to die, Senzo starts to create a new social life in which hope resides in the body not in spite of but *along with* “a deadly virus” (94). It is for bodily labour, for the work of the affect, and not for dreams of a better future that Senzo chooses to endure. This is what makes the text a “useful tragedy”.

The novels together can be said to work through the idea of the city as the space of individualism, the space of the realisation of the self as modern subject. *Room 207* depicts people living in modes of what Berlant calls “crisis ordinariness” (10) where the focus is primarily on making money to survive, by cobbling together an existence on the edges of

capital in the disavowed inner city spaces, only in order to escape the constraint of the city. It is a novel whose protagonists' lives are distanced from experiences of compassion. *Room 207* ends without offering any sense of just how notions of community and compassion might be reinvigorated. *Jozi* helps to offer one tentative answer, moving from the entrepreneurial self to a recognition of self as being composed in community, and finds that the city can be a place for discovering or creating a sense of *communitas*. Noko cannot find this; instead he watches his friends leave Room 207 one by one, and with their departures so their friendships dissolve. In contrast, it is shortly before his death, and only after the deaths of his community of friends – the poet, Frank, Duma, Matilda, Sipho are all gone – that Senzo is able to make this outward turn.

Senzo's ontological turn at the end of *Jozi* places its faith in personhood, with *Jozi* yoking itself, as do texts such as Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, to the philosophy of *ubuntu*, to the ethic of care for the other as being a mode of caring for the self. Moreover this philosophy is what enables endurance in the city, not so much *in spite of* poverty, illness, racism and neoliberal rationality which renders people such as Noko and Senzo superfluous, but rather *along with* these things. This is an example, it seems to me, of Povinelli's notion of "living otherwise within [the] seams" (129). Senzo seems to find that it is not Johannesburg itself that defines the scripts we enact, but rather it is how we act and interact in the city's spaces that determine what kind of city we experience.

Both texts fail, however, to offer up space for belonging in the city for women in that they both present a script for black masculinity in the city does not include women as subjects. The texts display the contradictions of patriarchy, and do so critically. But neither *Room 207* nor *Jozi* goes beyond this critique to open space for women, or indeed turns to women for instruction as to how to either be successful financially (*Room 207*) or endure in order to care for others (*Jozi*). *Jozi* gets close though, as it begins with the 'other' that is the dying body and with the work of nursing and compassion that in patriarchal culture is designated as women's work.

As we have seen, the protagonists of both *Room 207* and *Jozi* are artists who harbour great creative energy in spite of their circumstances. However, none of the artists is allowed by the either of the writers to see success and fulfilment in their creativity. Moele and Hlongwane comment on the institutionalised, systemic obstacles that are in place – though only covertly or implicitly – that foreclose on the creative expressions of black artists. These are self-



reflexive moments. Moele and Hlongwane reflect upon the lack of space, opportunity or acceptance for black artists in Johannesburg in their own first-time creative works. Of course, these writers *are* creating in the city. And this leads me to ask, what does this say about how we read art in the texts, and the yearning to create art? It also raises questions, unanswerable unless the authors could tell us themselves, of to what extent have the writers been constrained by not only racism in the publishing industry but also constrained by the need to make a certain product that will sell? In other words, we might ask: what novels aren't we reading?

If this project has been about exploring notions of hopefulness, then these texts only offer the faintest glimmer. As we have seen, these works concentrate on many of the themes that Michael Green caricatures as the "criteria for the post-apartheid canon" (334)<sup>53</sup> – race, capitalism, labour, xenophobia, AIDS, drinking culture, violent misogyny and so on – and they do so contradictorily at times, patchily at times. But there is something quite poignant and encouraging in the fact that they choose to do so at all. Because it means that the writers imagine that they are speaking to an audience that is paying attention, and that is open to thinking about the issues and ambiguities they raise. This is a kind of hope in itself.

David Attwell's *Rewriting Modernity* is once again useful in elucidating why writing by black intellectuals in South Africa can be said to carry particular importance. For Attwell, fiction writing in particular has been a form of "cultural struggle" (177). This struggle, H.I.E. Dhlomo writes in 1944 is "as important as the political because both aim at establishing the African as a *free citizen*" (in Attwell 1, my emphasis). While political freedom may have been attained, Moele and Hlongwane's texts demonstrate the racialised constraints that black subjects often still face. Thus, the texts remind us that it remains important to continue to assert and emphasise black writers and their subjects "as modern subjects, in direct opposition to the identities ascribed to them in colonial and apartheid ideology" (3).

In their writing about black subjectivities in the city, engaging with constraints and offering alternative modes of being, Moele and Hlongwane ensure that the space for listening to and engaging with black narratives is widened and enriched. As both writers explore the idea of

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<sup>53</sup> He presents these criteria ironically as engaging with "one or more of AIDS, crime, xenophobia, homosexuality, returning exiles, urbanisation, new forms of dispossession, and identity displacement" with "no concentration on race and little mention of apartheid" (334). The irony in this list is not only that a post-apartheid canon is generated as a nation-building exercise, contrary to many of the 'conforming' texts' ideas as Green points out (335); it is also that these experiences are deeply inflected with race and with the sedimentations of the history of apartheid.

hope in Johannesburg in the post-apartheid, they refuse neat master narratives in order to generate the complexity that Phaswane Mpe identified as a primary role of literature (2003 197). They create space for human dignity and ambiguity within the stories of difficult lives without hope. As Attwell reminds us, it is the great power of art to “to awaken listeners [or readers] to their precariousness, to stir up affective capacities, and to remind them that despite the brutalisation that is their daily lot, they are still agents of culture” (194).

Moele and Hlongwane use the creative platform of writing to explore these ideas, to display the loss of hope, to tentatively put forward a mode of persevering. And though their texts’ artists struggle to find purchase in the world of “being otherwise” through creativity; Moele and Hlongwane *do* manage. It seems to me that when read together, *Room 207* and *Jozzi* lead us to a point where we come to think about what it is to turn to care for the other and through this come to be able to care for the self, and to think about building a community of belonging within a city where notions of belonging are fraught. And when we think about these ideas of care, community and endurance-as-hopefulness in these creative works, we can also begin to think about them as being linked to the affirmative act that is art-making.

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