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Spaces and Places in Zakes Mda: Two Novels

Christopher Paul Lazley

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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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ABSTRACT

The notion of place as something at once geographic, socio-cultural and psychological is a ubiquitous concern in the novels of Zakes Mda. It is surely not by chance that Mda's interest in the novelistic form, which materialised in the publication of *Ways of Dying* in 1995, was roughly coincident with South Africa's fledgling democracy a year earlier. The end of apartheid meant the opportunity of exploring new forms of cultural discourse untrammelled by the intense politicisation of art that had tended to collapse the literary with the didactic in rather one-dimensional ways. Mda's consideration of place, this thesis argues, is one instance of an such exploration. More specifically, it examines the intersection of the social and the spatial in two of his novels: *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*. Starting at the junction of race, politics and literature, it moves into how the country's changing physical and political boundary lines have effected new ways of relating to its spaces. The focus of the *Ways of Dying* chapter is on urban space, where migrants and and settled urbanites must reconcile the rather fragmented and cosmopolitan character of the city.

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Introduction

The Importance of Place

This thesis examines the importance of place in *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness* by Zakes Mda, a writer variously considered as one of the most innovative in postapartheid South Africa, and who is praised as standing “among the most acclaimed exponents of a new artistic freedom”.¹ Mda says:

Place is key. To me place is not just background for my cast of characters. The place in fact is so important that many of my novels are suggested by the place. I ask, what kind of character would be in a place like this? And what would they be doing here? What happens is determined by who that character is and what that place is all about.²

As Mda points out here, place is something which preempts his novels’ characterisations – everything has its genesis in being *placed* in the story-world. Place, in fact, is so fundamental for Mda that many of his novels are conceived in the very first instance *by* the topographic: place galvanises characterisations (“I ask, what kind of character would be in a place like this?”), and together they fashion his novels’ diegetic trajectory. In an interview with Elizabeth Weinstein, Mda affirms: “A lot of my fiction first begins with place. I see a place and I think, ‘This is a beautiful setting for a story.’ And then from there I create characters who interact with the place, and of course interact among themselves”.³ All of Mda’s novels (save for his latest, *Cion*⁴ and his second novel, *She Plays With Darkness*) are very much rooted in the local geography of South African landscapes and places. *Ways of Dying*⁵, though set against the backdrop of an unnamed cityscape, is unambiguously South African, replete with references to local names and customs, and a kind of urban, street vernacular (“‘Merrie kressie, ou toppie’” [WD, 8], whispers a drunk to Toloki at the novel’s opening). *The Heart of Redness*⁶, in its alternating episodic narratives of past and present, takes place in Qolorha-by-Sea, a seaside village on the

¹ Maya Jaggi, “One man and his whale” *The Guardian*, August 27, 2005 Online. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2005/aug/27/featuresreviews.guardianreview11> (Accessed 03 February 2009).

² Zakes Mda, “The Africana QA: Zakes Mda” Interview with Rebecca L. Weber, May 25, 2004 Online. <http://www.rebeccalweber.com/zakes.html> (Accessed 19 August 2008).

³ Zakes Mda, “Home is where the story is” Interview with Elizabeth Weinstein, Sept. 14, 2005 *Outlook: Ohio University News & Information*. Online. <http://www.ohio.edu/outlook/05-06/September/2f-056.cfm> (Accessed 05 June 2008).

⁴ Zakes Mda, *Cion* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2007). All page references occur in the body of text.

⁵ Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (Cape Town: Penguin, 1995). All page references from here on are abbreviated as WD.

⁶ Zakes Mda, *The Heart of Redness* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000). All page references from here on are abbreviated as HR.

Wild Coast of the Transkei in the Eastern Cape. *The Madonna of Excelsior*⁷ is set in the small farming community of Excelsior in the Orange Free State, and the story of *The Whale Caller*⁸ takes place in Hermanus, on the western coast.

While in one sense geographic (involving questions of *where*), the notion of place can also be construed culturally (taking one's place in society, for instance). Mda seems to register this idea in the epigraph above, where he notes in his work a confluence of the social ("who that character is") and the spatial ("what that place is all about") as two processes that undergird his approach to writing fiction. This confluence is expressed particularly well in the concept of a "socio-spatial dialectic"⁹ (Rita Barnard's term), which captures cogently the sense of *negotiation* between characters and the topographic locales that they occupy. Taken in light of South Africa's contested history, this "dialectic" provides a fascinating starting point for exploring the mutability of spaces and places since the demise of apartheid. Jennifer Robinson writes,

The transition from apartheid urban space to – something else – draws our attention from the fixing moments of these historically divided cities to experiences of mobility, interaction and the dynamism of spaces. The enthusiasm for change which is symbolised by the end of apartheid not only sets out a new way of relating to space now; it also suggests that we look again at experiences of apartheid spaces. Were those spaces so fixed, so divisive, so certain in their form? Our imaginations have lived for so long with the lines of apartheid city space, with the blank spaces between them, the deadening images of power drawn on the ground.¹⁰

Robinson emphasises the potential for relating to space in new and dynamic ways. For if, as Kathleen Kirby says in her discussion of Jean Baudrillard's "simulacrum",¹¹ "space is only an effect of discourse" then it is through a "new way of speaking and imagining" that one can in some sense change it.¹² "Space", Kirby goes on to suggest, "is the

⁷ Zakes Mda, *The Madonna of Excelsior* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2002). All page references from here on are abbreviated as ME.

⁸ Zakes Mda, *The Whale Caller* (Johannesburg: Penguin, 2005). All page references from here on are abbreviated as WC.

⁹ Rita Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 3.

¹⁰ Jennifer Robinson, "(Im)mobilising space – dreaming of change" in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic eds., *blank_: Architecture, apartheid and after* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers and Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1999), D7, 163.

¹¹ For Baudrillard, the postmodern age is one where the image/representation precedes the real. He says "Abstraction today is no longer that of the map, the double, the mirror or the concept. Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal. The territory no longer precedes the map, nor survives it. Henceforth it is the map that precedes the territory – *precession of simulacra* – it is the map that engenders the territory [...]" From Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory* 4th Ed (London: Arnold, 2000), 275.

¹² Kathleen M. Kirby, *Indifferent Boundaries: Spatial Concepts of Human Subjectivity* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1996), 110.

aperture through which discourse can effect reality”.¹³ Robinson makes what is essentially the same point above when she asks, rhetorically, whether the spaces of apartheid were “so fixed, so divisive, so certain in their form”. She goes on to suggest a reading of *Ways of Dying* through the lens of Henri Levebvre’s “representational space”, which explores a spatiality that draws on various cultural and historical resources in order to consider “the possibility and memory of ways of living in spaces *other* than those dictated by the dominant order” (discussed in detail later).¹⁴

It is my argument that Mda’s work displays a particular attentiveness to the concept of place, both in its social and spatial aspects. A useful way of describing this is in the idea of *placement*. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, placement refers to “the action or act of placing; the fact or situation of being placed”. These two senses of the word have particular resonance for my discussion: one is the active construction (to place, the “act of placing”), the other passive (“the fact or situation of *being* placed”). To *place* is in some way to position the self as *subject*, whereas to *be placed* is to find oneself in the *objective* position. Taken in social/historical terms, one could say these two processes have particular resonance for black South Africans. On one hand, the colonial encounter, followed later by the social engineering of apartheid, were moments in which blacks were effectively being acted upon by foreign agents, be it via physical, material or, as Gayatri Spivak would put it, “epistemic violence”.¹⁵ On the other hand, David Attwell makes the point that there are equally important moments of *agency* in black culture such as the development of writing, which signified a challenging of modernity on its own terms, a way of being *active* in telling the story of history.¹⁶ His point is particularly convincing in light of the fact that the west displaced a number of societies whose primary mode of historical transmission was through oral forms. In *Rewriting Modernity*, Attwell inaugurates his study with a poem by I.W.W. Citashe in which the speaker implores his countrymen to “turn to the pen” and “take paper and ink/for that is your shield”. The poem ends, “Sit on a chair/Repair not to Hoho/But fire with your pen”. The conflation of the written word (the pen, the paper and ink) with the firing of a gun suggests a recognition, on Citashe’s part, that to counter western textuality means

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robinson, “(Im)mobilising space”, 165. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Three women’s texts and a critique of imperialism” *Critical Inquiry* 12 (1) (Autumn, 1985): 251.

¹⁶ David Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity: Studies in Black South African Literary History* (Scottsville: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005), 3.

developing one's own as a "shield" against the threat of being scripted over by the colonial project.¹⁷

In Mda, I argue, we see at work the geographic and social aspects of placement. That is, Mda takes characters who would historically have been targeted as *objects* of the apartheid system, and situates them within a geographic and historical backdrop that is constantly evolving and being redefined as those previously relegated to the periphery of main-line South African life posit themselves as fully-fledged *subjects* in what remains a relatively nascent democracy. The focus of the discussion that follows centres on this intersection between the topographic and the sociological, between space and self. In some sense, of course, these two concepts are inseparable: Ato Quayson, for instance, considers place "inherently dialectical" because "it is constructed *through* social relationships",¹⁸ or as Doreen Massey says, place is "social relations stretched out", or the "spatial reach of social relations".¹⁹ And while I will show how place *is* social, how it is constituted discursively, my focus will be on how Mda's characters *fit* in their environments, how they orient themselves in different ways to their surroundings.

I begin by positioning Mda within the broader context of race and politics, and the rather *reactive* literary tradition that has come to describe so much of the realism of local black writing. If Mda explores some of the dynamics and dialectics of spatiality, it is in part because he wrests art away from an exclusively political authorisation – from the mimetic urge to *document* – in order to explore other issues at stake in the country's changing social and political boundary lines. Moving on from the political discussion, I sketch out some preliminary points that introduce *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*. At first stance, these two novels may seem unconnected, for where the former begins and ends with urban space, the latter is rooted away from the cities in the rural village of Qolorha. Taken together, however, the urban and rural broadly constitute two equally contested spaces in this country. Urban space forms the focus of my *Ways of Dying* chapter, which I began by considering some features of apartheid legislation that were designed to spatially and socially segregate individuals and communities of different skin colours. I then move on to a character analysis of Toloki, the creative "undertaker", and suggest that his marginality becomes, in Mda's hands, a source of genuine transformation.

¹⁷ Even an incident like the Cattle-Killing frenzy of the mid-nineteenth century was, in Attwell's reading, a defining moment of agency in black culture, because it was a moment of *choice*, albeit that its consequences were ultimately disastrous.

¹⁸ Ato Quayson, "Preface": The ethnography of nostalgia" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 41(2) (November 2005): 131. Emphasis mine.

¹⁹ Carolyn Cartier and Alan A. Lew eds., *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalisation and Touristed Landscapes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 4. Citing Massey.

Toloki may be the self-styled Professional Mourner, but he is also an artist, and fundamental to this role, Mda implies, is his capacity to unite communities through a new kind of aesthetics. I discuss Jwara's ghostly figurines via Bakhtin's idea of the grotesque body and what is at stake in South Africa's transition into democracy. Finally, I look at the power of the imagination: the role it plays in surviving the vicissitudes of the city, and its potential to change the way spaces are apprehended.

Where characters such as Toloki and Noria set out for the cities in search of "freedom and riches" (WD, 59), Camagu, in *The Heart of Redness*, finds a repose at a distance from the drab Hillbrow cityscape in a rural village in the Transkei. In this novel, I look at some of the history behind the Cattle-Killing movement, and the bipartite rift that comes to separate the amaXhosa into Believers and Unbelievers. I consider the nature of "redness" and how the term carries either an approbatory or pejorative association depending on whose eyes one looks through. I then look at the differences between cultural and natural landscapes, and how territory becomes narrativised through the lens of culture. Finally, I discuss Qolorha's entrance into the twentieth century, and what the novel suggests about participating in the global economy without being wholly assimilated into its homogenising aesthetic.

Race and Politics

The best one can hope for the novel in South Africa is that it will not remain so painfully impaled on that two-pronged fork which is history versus discourse, or reality versus fantasy. The predictability of South African English-language fiction calls out for some sort of disruption – an unsettling of carefully observed familiarity, that documentation of reality which, as Lewis Nkosi has observed, was more often than not addressed to audiences abroad, and which led many readers within the country to dismiss South African literature as “boring”. For a long time, the novel has been used as a front for other kinds of communication – for political imperatives, for the telling of history, for informing the world about apartheid. Now that freedom has made new kinds of formal and cultural daring more possible, it will be liberating to see the lens of vigilant social observation crack across to give life skewed, fragmented, upended, not by apartheid as before, but as part of the manipulation of aesthetic form, of the testing of visionary, hallucinatory, dislocating, non-camera-ready ways of representing the world.²⁰

Boehmer’s call for aesthetic innovation in the South African novel echoes a certain frustration that has tended to permeate the critical reception of local literature – namely that South African literary production is marked by a Manichean, strongly dualistic tradition which is fissured along the racial divide, what Lewis Nkosi describes as “an unhealed [...] split between black and white writing, between on one side an urgent need to document and to bear witness and on the other the capacity to go on furlough, to loiter, and to experiment”.²¹ This tendency in black writing to circumscribe artistic self-reflexivity and experimentalism in favour of a fidelity to mimetic codes of representation vis-à-vis political and social reform is itself part of a more general historical struggle against first colonialist, and then Afrikaner, hegemony. As a weapon of liberation, literature was part of the call for a “rapid-fire art”: the only forms endorsed were those which were “upfront [and] hard-hitting”, and consequently less attention was paid to formal experimentation”.²² “In a situation of oppression”, proclaimed Keorapetse Kgotsitsile, “there are no choices beyond didactic writing: either you are a tool of oppression or an instrument of liberation. It’s that simple”.²³

Lewis Nkosi seems to have been particularly vocal in his protest against these kinds of monolithic formulations: “what we [...] get from South Africa”, he says, “is

²⁰ Elleke Boehmer, “Endings and new beginning: South African fiction in transition” in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 53.

²¹ Lewis Nkosi, “Postmodernism and black writing in South Africa” in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 75.

²² Boehmer, “Endings and new beginning”, 46.

²³ Louise Bethlehem, “‘A primary need as strong as hunger’: the rhetoric of urgency in South African literary culture under apartheid” in Leon de Kock, Louise Bethlehem and Sonja Laden, eds., *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* (Pretoria: University of South Africa Press, 2004), 95. Citing Kgotsitsile.

journalistic fact parading outrageously as imaginative literature”,²⁴ and that what is expected from South African writers is “not so much art as confidential reports about the condition of society, its health or lack of it, its ability to survive.”²⁵ Nkosi’s frustration with mimetically saturated literary realism is typified in his discussion of Richard Rive’s novel *Emergency*, where Nkosi notes, disapprovingly, that “there are no real full-blooded characters with real blood to spill; no characters whose fighting or love-making has the stench of real living people: they are cardboard pieces and cardboard pieces don’t spill any blood. Embarrassingly, what comes out of the apartheid machine when it has ground to a standstill is not human flesh but cardboard pulp”.²⁶ Nkosi’s notion of an “apartheid machine” succinctly captures the notion that apartheid literature suffers from a peculiar kind of one-dimensionality and formal deficiency. The idea that literature and real life are expected to maintain a “one-to-one relationship [in which] writing provides a supposedly unmediated access to the real”²⁷ often means sacrificing stylistic or aesthetic adroitness on the altar of a strictly journalistic factuality.

More recently, Attwell has challenged what he describes as a “uni-dimensional” and condescending assumption that political consciousness is “the only story to be told about black literary and cultural history”.²⁸ Attwell uses Fernando Ortiz’s concept of “transculturation” to show the ways in which the development of a black writing culture (as opposed to an oral one) in South Africa was part of the way in which “black South African writing has from its inception sought to appropriate intrusive technologies and ideas, displace their corrupted imaginaries, and create spaces in which intellectuals and their communities can reconstruct themselves as ‘free citizens’”.²⁹ “Transculturation”, Attwell writes,

[...] suggests multiple processes, a dialogue in both directions and, most importantly, processes of cultural destruction followed by reconstruction on entirely new terms. Transculturation goes further than the weaker concept of cultural translation, which would be the translation of material from one culture into the terms of another.³⁰

Attwell uses the term to show that there was, in fact, an experimentalism well under way in black literature from the time of missionary writers like Tiyo Soga in the early

²⁴ Lewis Nkosi, “Fiction by black South Africans” in Ulli Beier, ed., *Introduction to African Literature: An Anthology of Critical Writing from “Black Orpheus”* (London: Longman, 1967), 212.

²⁵ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity* 169. Citing Nkosi.

²⁶ Bethlehem, “A primary need”, 98. Citing Nkosi.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

²⁸ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 17 and 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

nineteenth century to writers of the Black Consciousness movement a century later. Instantiating his claims through a number of texts, Attwell demonstrates how black intellectuals and writers have tried to negotiate their encounters with modernity by appropriating it in local terms. Because “writing’s relationship with modernity is particularly intimate” and because “there is no escape clause from the encounter with modernity unless one is to accept isolation or eccentricity”, the development of a black print culture was a means by which black intellectuals could not only appropriate, but also develop, certain Western literary forms as means of resistance to the encroaching hegemony of empire.³¹ The point here is that Attwell is dubious of critical perspectives that seem to negate or traduce the experimental in black writing in favour of emphasising the political alone. Though he concedes that the political has been something of a pervasive topic in the corpus of protest texts, the thrust of his argument is that while documentary realism may be *one* defining feature of this literature, there are others, and too often critical assertions about its unrestrained realism involve “generalisations based on other critical statements with little or no discussion of the literature’s actual qualities: its range, its idiosyncrasies, its very unfinishedness, and sadly, also its high points”.³² Attwell continues that

[...] it would be inaccurate to say that black writing is untouched by modernism. What we are trying to understand, then, is an experimentalism that is both socially connected and aesthetically reflexive, a practice that, in Nkosi’s terms, is both “task” and “mask”, one that enables the critique that we might associate with realism but also announces the epistemological invigoration and subject-construction that we might associate with the modernist movement.³³

The idea of an aesthetic experimentalism that is “both socially connected and aesthetically reflexive” suggests that it is critical practice not to allow black writing the luxury of both being one or the other: if such writing aims for a simple referentiality that “documents” real life, then it is labelled as stale and aesthetically adolescent, but if it aims for a more encompassing artistic vision which might include a greater degree of stylistic and formal dexterity, then it risks being dismissed as socially disconnected and politically irrelevant. This tension seems to undercut even post-apartheid literary culture when one considers a review by Norman Rush, in the *New York Review of Books*, of *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*. Following the release of these two novels, Mda was praised by his publishers for introducing what they saw as a brand of magical realism into a South

³¹ Ibid., 4.

³² Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 172.

³³ Ibid., 179.

African context. Putting aside for now the merits or demerits of this statement, what excited the publishers and many of his critics was Mda's commitment to formulating a new artistic vision for black writing, one in which art could exist as something *inherently* valuable to individuals and communities. In this sense, Mda seemed to have been ascribed a kind of intermediary role as one who would negotiate the transition from art's predominantly instrumental role into greater degrees of aesthetic freedom and possibility. Rush, however, was critical of Mda for eliding burning issues such as the AIDS pandemic in favour of dramatising an "escapist dream" that was more "fable" than "parable".³⁴ "The first fruits by writers creating in the new era", he said, was received with "overpraise driven by the emotion of welcome".³⁵ Andrew van der Vlies makes the point that "Rush's judgment suggests a fascinating expectation that, even in the post-apartheid era, black writers *should* continue to document social conditions or produce allegories in which those conditions are the subject of a didactic or moralising treatment".³⁶ Mda specifically upbraided Rush's review, in fact, for expecting "a novel that speaks to him like an article in *The Daily News*".³⁷ Like Jwara's figurines, which reappear at the end of *Ways of Dying* as a kind of visual trope emphasising the role of inventive and visionary art in uniting communities fragmented by civil strife and racial/ethnic intolerance, Mda's novels celebrate the freedom of subsuming the political and the artistic within the same medium in order to explore new ways of knowing and seeing the world. Responding to a question about whether or not it was difficult to write since the end of apartheid, Mda said:

If you're a writer, you're a writer! On the contrary, it's a lot easier for me. The end of apartheid freed my imagination. I see stories everywhere. Young writers are emerging too, such as Sello Duiker, whom I admire a great deal. Apartheid dominated our lives; we could not write honestly without talking about it. The system was such that all you had to do was go into a township and take a slice of life to turn into a wonderful piece of theatre of the absurd. Writers could be reporters then. Now that apartheid is dead, those writers are dead too. I don't regret them.³⁸

Rush's review may chide Mda for evading a more conspicuous discussion of socio-political realities, but for Mda the discursive boundaries of apartheid literature have been

³⁴ Andrew van der Vlies, *South African Textual Cultures: White, Black, Read All Over* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2007), 155. Citing Rush.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 156. Citing Mda in Wark.

³⁸ Zakes Mda, "I see stories everywhere", Interview with Africultures. Online. http://www.africultures.com/anglais/articles_anglais/40Mda.htm (Accessed April 27, 2008).

uprooted now that political emancipation has been won, and this provides an ideal platform for the telling of new stories located beyond the grand gestures of political rhetoric. Because it was closely tied with the political, this also means telling stories which are less preoccupied with racial thematics. Kelwyn Sole, for instance, has remarked on the fixation that many Black Consciousness writers had with “black” and “white” as “monolithic cultures at opposing ends of the racial spectrum”, which effectively elided any cultural dynamics *other* than race, such as one’s economic means *within* black culture or one’s social aspirations.³⁹ Black intellectuals and writers, who generally comprised the majority of the black lower to middle class, assumed that they could speak authentically for, for example, the thousands of black factory workers across the country, and so inadvertently provided a rather generalised, unbending conception of what the “black experience” was in South Africa.⁴⁰ Race became something of an inflexible preoccupation for these writers, to the detriment of other aspects of South African life. So even if we accept Attwell’s contention that experimental aesthetic forms were well under way from the high colonial period through to apartheid, the focus seemed to remain quite strongly on issues of race and its relation to power. This is certainly understandable: under apartheid, conceptual (albeit constructed) divisions between, *inter alia*, black and white, self and other, rural and urban, had as their counterpoint actual, rigid forms of social governance which regulated (and denigrated) individual rights almost exclusively on the basis of race. In a milieu in which *difference* was not only emphasised but also legally prioritised, the tendency to work within a strictly racial paradigm in the artistic realm had behind it a concrete, daily reality that affected the black writer and factory worker alike.

Now: when it comes to Mda, Attwell argues that, together with Njabulo Ndebele, “we have an experimentalism in which a process of epistemological recovery and revision is fully under way”.⁴¹ There is a distinction to be made, Attwell suggests, between the “partial” and “inchoate” (though still objectively present) experimentalism associated with previous generations of black writers like Mongane Serote or the late Esk’ia Mphahlele and the “transformative fictional practice” of Mda, which is unreservedly transformative, self-conscious, and concerned with articulating a new epistemology.⁴² Part of the way Mda articulates of this new epistemology, I would suggest, is in moving away from this totalising preoccupation with race which has dominated so much of the

³⁹ Kelwyn Sole, “Culture, politics and the black writer: a critical look at some prevailing assumptions” *English in Africa* 10 (1) (1983): 48.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴¹ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 177.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 177-8.

political realism of black writing. Instead, Mda moves towards dramatising otherwise overlooked aspects of local life, contributing to what Barnard has called a “new prosaics”,⁴³ a term she issues in its full multivalency, denoting both a dramatisation of ordinary life and textual reinvention of black literature. In *Ways of Dying*, for instance, Mda focuses on the quotidian experiences of the urban underclasses – embodied in characters like Toloki, Shadrack, and Noria – and the struggles they face in their communities as civil strife and hostility threaten to consume them. Shadrack is brutally attacked by corrupt policemen. Noria, forced into “entertaining white men who came from across the seas” (WD, 89) so she can make ends meet, loses her son (twice!), and has her shack burnt down. And Toloki has his business cart dumped by crooked municipal officials. It would be disingenuous, of course, not to acknowledge that these characters are all variously impoverished *black* urbanites whose racial classification under apartheid would have been a determining factor in the range of social and economic opportunities available to them. And to be sure, the dismantling of apartheid did not necessarily translate into an immediately substantive change for the majority of the black working class. Mda’s interest, nevertheless, lies not so much in the race of his characters as their *response* to the welter of violence that pervades their lives in the city. It is “how to live” (WD, 115) that takes his interest, how his characters survive (or fail to survive) the novel’s many “ways of dying”. The novel opens:

“There are many ways of dying!” the Nurse shouts at us. Pain is etched in his voice, and rage has mapped his face. We listen in silence. “This our brother’s way is a way that has left us without words in our mouths. This little brother was our own child, and his death is more painful because it is of our own creation. It is not the first time that we bury little children. We bury them every day. But they are killed by the enemy ... those we are fighting against. This our little brother was killed by those who are fighting to free us!” (WD, 7)

Mda’s provocative subtext here is that if the final realisation of freedom for black citizens has come at the cost of intramural violence, then it is no real freedom at all. Rather than celebrate political emancipation with a kind of post-apartheid victory call, Mda turns around, as it were, to the very communities victimised by apartheid and implores them to treat their new liberties not in a violent power-play but soberly and thoughtfully. As if anticipating his own critics, Mda continues:

⁴³ Rita Barnard, “On laughter, the grotesque, and the South African transition: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* (Summer, 2004): 282.

We mumble. It is not for the Nurse to make such statements. His duty is to tell how this child saw his death, not to give ammunition to the enemy. Is he perhaps trying to push his own political agenda? (WD, 7)

The identity of “enemy” may have been more apparent during the thick of apartheid rule, but now things are less, for want of a better idiom, black and white, because this funeral is for Noria’s son who has died, we learn later, at the hands of his own peers, the Young Tigers (hence the Nurse’s rebuke that this death “is of our own creation”). Mda destabilises the tendency to think in terms of binary linguistic constructions (“we” versus “enemy”) by complicating notions of community and complicity.

The novel also highlights the cardinal role played by a non-instrumental aesthetics in uniting communities fractured by apartheid. It was Ndebele, in fact, who recognised something similar some twenty years ago in his call for a “rediscovery of the ordinary”, which signalled a recognition that “the history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of the spectacle”.⁴⁴ What Ndebele meant was that black writing has, for the most part, served a purely functional role in the broader quest for mobilising political action. But to rediscover the ordinary is to remember that “the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all-embracing [and] cannot be reduced to a single, simple formulation”.⁴⁵ It is, suggests Christopher Warnes, about moving away from the “crude binarisms propagated by apartheid” – and insisting, rather, on “more subtle, intimate and localised ways of seeing, promoting a focus on categories of experience that are overlooked in the literature of the spectacle”.⁴⁶ As an aside, it is worth mentioning that Albie Sachs has also made some important criticisms about the putative one-dimensionality of political literature, noting that

[...] the range of themes is narrowed down so much that all that is funny or curious or genuinely tragic in the world is extruded. Ambiguity and contradiction are completely shut out, and the only conflict permitted is that between old and new, as if there were only bad in the past and only good in the future.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Njabulo S Ndebele, “The rediscovery of the ordinary: some new writings in South Africa” *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12 (2) (1986): 41.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁴⁶ Christopher Warnes, “Chronicles of belief and unbelief: Zakes Mda and the question of magical realism in South African literature” in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming).

⁴⁷ Albie Sachs, “Preparing ourselves for freedom” in Ingrid de Kok and Karen Press, eds., *Spring is Rebellious* (Cape Town: Buchu Press, 1990), 20.

While Sachs berates local black writing as one-dimensional, it is Attwell who turns that same critique around, volte-face, *against* the critical orthodoxy that ascribes an exclusively political value to black literary output. As a kind of critical “middle ground” between these two perspectives, Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly suggest that

South Africa has passed through a period that has for obvious reasons produced a large body of what one might call judgmental texts, both critical and creative; texts that assume an ethical sufficiency to exist in the condemnation of apartheid and its agents. For this reason, the current South African situation forms a productive arena for the exploration of the uses and limitations of, as well as alternatives to, judgmental writing. For one can grant a historical strategic importance to judgmental writing in the struggle against apartheid without denying the fact that it has produced a paucity of options for creative responses to post-apartheid freedoms and their attendant challenges.⁴⁸

What these authors suggest is that one can acknowledge the historical importance of mimetically saturated writing in South Africa as a *strategic* move in the larger battle for social emancipation, without denying the fact that the range of aesthetic responses permitted within this writing was severely limited. Art carried a fervid politico-historical agenda that provoked the “judgmental” epithet critics accorded to it. But to acknowledge a formal deficiency in black writing does not mean that one dismisses it wholesale. In an atmosphere of struggle, the notion of art for its own sake was a dubious concept when faced with the urgency of mounting a united front against apartheid.

This is not to say Mda made no contribution to what could broadly be termed “protest literature” and the racial *idée fixe* that seems to have pervaded so much of it. As he mentions in the interview above, it was impossible for him to “write honestly” without discussing apartheid to some degree or another. A number of his earlier plays deal forthrightly with the effects of social and racial injustice, and some of them even suggest the need to take up arms in the struggle for freedom.⁴⁹ Mda says:

I would still write works set in South Africa, and they would still be political works because I did not think it possible to write an apolitical story about South Africa, a highly politicised society where apartheid’s attempts at social engineering touched every aspect of life. Even a love story could not avoid politics because apartheid governed the private areas of a person’s life. It determined whom you could or could not love subject to dire punishment, where you could live, what jobs you could do, all depending on a hierarchy of

⁴⁸ Rosemary Jolly and Derek Attridge, “Introduction” in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 7.

⁴⁹ Margaret Mervis, “Fiction for development: Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*” *Current Writing* 10 (1) (1998): 39-41. See also Chijioke Uwah, “The theme of political betrayal in the plays of Zakes Mda” *English in Africa* 30 (1) (May, 2003): 135-144.

complexion that was established by the state as a matter of political expediency.⁵⁰

As apartheid was dismantled, Mda turned to writing novels, and though he still interrogates questions of race, these interrogations are always presented with a certain irony or as part of some careful and cogitative critique. In *The Heart of Redness*, for example, Mda turns any centrality of race on its head through the character of John Dalton who, though he is white and “looks like a parody of an Afrikaner farmer” (HR, 7), is said nevertheless to have “an umXhosa heart” (HR, 7). Zim, elder of the Believers, says that “Dalton is not really white, [...] it is just an aberration of his skin. He is more of an umXhosa than most of us. He was circumcised like all amaXhosa men. He speaks isiXhosa better than most of you here” (HR, 169). Zim’s somewhat humorous observation about Dalton’s “aberration” of the skin emphasises the idea that skin colour cannot be relied upon as an accurate signifier of one’s cultural allegiances. If anything, it is Camagu, black as he is, who is more a true citizen of the west than Dalton.

In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, which is set during the 1970s, Mda’s problematising of racial essentialism allows him to consider more thoughtfully the very type of culprit that had been so vilified in judgmental writing.

The Madonna of Excelsior was the first (perhaps, to date, the only) novel by a black South African writer to extensively explore Afrikaner characters beyond the stereotypes of workplace boss, policeman, soldier, magistrate, and other agents of the oppressive apartheid state. Here we saw a range of characters, the good and the bad, functioning in family and home environments, people who had hopes and fears about the future.⁵¹

In the same article, Mda says,

[...] in the experience of a liberated South Africa we have come to appreciate the grey areas. Some of our politicians who were once larger-than-life heroes of the liberation struggle have turned out to be the worst villains – moral degenerates, rapists, and embezzlers. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearing demonstrated that even some of those Afrikaners who were known to us as the most heartless agents of the apartheid state possessed redeeming qualities. We began to understand what drove the particular Afrikaner to torture and murder black youths when other Afrikaners did not, what made him a tool of the state’s violence when his neighbour was not. For the first time we had some idea of the motivational dynamics that drove these individuals, though we still found their behaviour inexcusable and reprehensible.⁵²

⁵⁰ Zakes Mda, “Justify the Enemy: becoming human in South Africa” *Boston Review* (May/June, 2008) Online. <http://bostonreview.net/BR33.3/mda.php> (Accessed 15 June 2008), 2.

⁵¹ Mda, “Justify the Enemy”, 5.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

To begin to understand, in Mda's words, "the interiority of the Afrikaner"⁵³ involves a recognition that Afrikaner nationalism is not something synonymous with the hostility that characterised agents of the apartheid state. As Mda says here, his challenge in writing *The Madonna of Excelsior* was to try and conceive the Afrikaner as a figure of some complexity, someone who occupied multiple roles in society and who himself had "hopes and fears about the future". But if Mda moves toward a more sympathetic or at least more thoughtful exploration of Afrikaner interiority, he also suggests that true reconciliation will not always be the result, a fact born out in Popi's final confrontation with Tjaart Cronje. Tjaart, who is dying, is adamant that Popi accept and make use of his "gift" of hair-removing cream. This has been sore point for Popi: she has been told by Lizette de Vries that "most black women don't have hair on their legs [... but that] it is quite normal with white women", to which Popi screams, "But I am not a white woman!" (ME, 198). Tjaart himself has used her insecurity tactically in council chambers because Popi is less outspoken at the thought of her legs being mentioned again. When, on his deathbed, he hands Popi the Immac hair remover, his intentions now seem in perfectly good faith (for he says to her, "You are a beautiful woman [...] very beautiful. This cream is going to enhance the beauty of your long legs" [ME, 263]). But as Ralph Goodman points out, his "kindness is flawed by his deeply-seated obliviousness: he fails to appreciate the inherent human value of both women and black people and he is unaware of the assumptions which have led to this".⁵⁴ Abdul R. JanMohamed has said that a true conception of Otherness "is possible only if the self can somehow negate or at least severely bracket the values, assumptions, and ideology of his culture".⁵⁵ The irony here is that Tjaart and Popi share a common paternity, and have such similar physiognomies that Jacomina finally says to Johannes Smit, in whispered tones, that "she [Popi] looks so much like Tjaart" (ME, 264).

Popi says she will accept the cream because "in my culture they say it is rude to refuse a present." (ME, 263) But she qualifies her response by admitting she will never use it because she loves her body "the way it is." (ME, 263) It is a poignant moment for Popi, but it also underscores a larger role that Mda seems keen to carve out for her. As the product of a miscegenation between an Afrikaans farmer and a black woman from

⁵³ Ibid., 5.

⁵⁴ Ralph Goodman, "Race, satire and postcolonial issues in *The Madonna of Excelsior*" in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming).

⁵⁵ Abdul R. JanMohamed, "The economy of manichean allegory" in Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 19.

the Mahlatswetsa Location, Popi can be a powerful agent in deconstructing the racial polarities of apartheid. Her hybridity, once perceived as a disability, a visible marker of difference among both white and black, becomes reconfigured as something to be both accepted and celebrated. Mda's goal, according to Goodman, is "to redefine identity as open-ended, denying the existence – and the discursive usefulness – of stable, unitary signification and offering instead a complex of ambivalent discourses".⁵⁶ Popi says to Niki, jokingly, "At least as a coloured person I can complain that in the old apartheid days I was not white enough, and now in the new dispensation I am not black enough" (ME, 259) to which Niki laughs "for the first time in many years [...] until tears ran from her eyes and disappeared into the cracks of her face" (ME, 260). Popi says, "God made me coloured, Niki, not you. You have no business to be guilty about anything" (ME, 260). It is in Popi's movement into self-acceptance and her rejection of parochial notions of race and culture that the novel is able to realise its most compelling and convincing reconciliation: it is with the *self* that one must make peace first, Mda seems to say, if the healing of apartheid is ever to follow.

⁵⁶ Goodman, "Race, satire and postcolonial issues", forthcoming.

Places and Spaces

Having positioned Mda within some of the debates surrounding South African literature, I now move to make some preliminary points about place in the novels discussed. As already mentioned, nearly all of Mda's novels evince a commitment to local place-settings. And even though his latest novel, *Cion*, is set in the village of Kilvert, Ohio, it is the return of Toloki, from Mda's first novel, who really inaugurates the novel's *raison d'être* (a professor asks the sciolist whether he had "ever thought of taking Toloki the Professional Mourner to another culture, say to Durham in the United Kingdom" [*Cion*, 2]), suggesting that even though this is new and unfamiliar territory for Mda, the novel shares a connection with a character who is very much *locally* constructed and who pre-dates *Cion's* own textual ontology.

In *Cion*, Toloki finds himself separated from the sciolist who brought him first to Durham, and who then decided on "dumping [him] at the famous cemetery at The Ridges in Athens, Ohio" (*Cion*, 4). Mda seems to want us to read this sciolist as a textual marker of his (Mda's) own presence in the novel, not as some implied or inconspicuous authorial force, but as someone visible to both the reader and the characters of the novel itself. The novel mentions, for instance, a conversation the sciolist has with "one Sam Cowl, a Shakespearean professor at Ohio University" (*Cion*, 2), where Mda presently teaches and where Cowl is an actual, though now retired, Professor of Shakespearean and Renaissance drama.⁵⁷ The framing device Mda constructs for *Cion* is quite elaborate: as a textual construct, Toloki "breaks out" of his fictional universe – being granted an animating force that supposedly individuates him from his creator. After ruminating on the continuing deaths which occur every day in South Africa, Toloki says he hopes for more "exciting deaths" and the opportunity to "learn new tricks from other mourners" (*Cion*, 4). "A combination of these factors", he says, "contributed to my *allowing* the sciolist to drag me all the way to Durham" (*Cion*, 4 – my emphasis). And by the end of the novel, Toloki realises he needs his independence from the sciolist, and so decides that, together with Orpah, he will "discover how to live in the present [...] without the aid of the sciolist" who is still busy with "rambling narratives in Athens" (*Cion*, 286). By asserting his own separation from the sciolist who created him, Toloki celebrates a kind of metatextual agency, emphasising his supposed independence from his creator. Mda, of course, is being ironically self-reflexive, because Toloki can speak only *because* of the

⁵⁷ Ohio University English Department, Staff Directory. Online. <http://www.english.ohiou.edu/directory/facultypage/crowlsa/> (Accessed 27 January 2009).

sciolist's typographic act of generating the novel. But by "freeing" Toloki, Mda foregrounds on a narratological level one of the novel's central thematic preoccupations which is freedom and its counter-correlative, slavery. And even though *Cion* takes place in a setting quite different to the rest of Mda's novels, it does not divorce itself entirely from a local, African chronotope,⁵⁸ because both Africa and America, or what Orpah respectively calls the "motherland" (*Cion*, 142) and the "new world" (*Cion*, 143) share in slavery's history. In a sense, Toloki's transposition from Africa to Ohio mirrors the journey of slaves before him as they were transferred from their homelands to cotton plantations in places like Virginia. The novel also links these two territories through the quilts, which appear in both the past/slavery narrative and present-day one. The quilts possess a montage-type structure that both contains and extends the history of the slave trade and its aftermath. Ruth frets at the notion that Orpah threatens this history with her (Orpah's) new designs. But Orpah is adamant that "she will not do slave patterns [...] because she does not need to escape to any place" (*Cion*, 144). Orpah refuses the quilt-as-map function, because she wants to "invent patterns that tell [her] own story" (*Cion*, 144). These quilts are essentially place-based artifacts which, because they function in part as maps, are very much rooted in the local terrain. The Abyssinian Queen's designs are meant to indicate, albeit with not too much accuracy, actual landmarks in Putnam County, Virginia:

These were not crazy designs in the true sense of the later tradition. In the seemingly haphazard arrangement she taught them to identify some landmarks. A hill here. A forest there. A creek. A river. The Kanawha River, the boys later learnt. She had painstakingly stitched and knotted the map of the plantation and beyond, using information she had gathered from those who had seen those places. Patches of different colours represented actual landmarks. [...] It was a rudimentary map, but to the boys it represented a world of dreams out there. (*Cion*, 44)

The Abyssinian Queen teaches her sons that "in the old continent works of art, including garments that people wore and lids that covered pots, talked secret languages that could be understood only by those who had been initiated into the circle" (*Cion*, 48). The quilts, then, admit at least three levels of reading: as works of art they are considered beautiful

⁵⁸ Bakhtin gives the name chronotope "to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature." He goes on to note that "in the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterises the chronotope". From M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* Trans. M. Holquist and C. Emerson, M. Holquist, ed., [Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981] cited in Pam Morris, ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994), 183.

by casual admirers (“those who saw the quilt admired its beauty – the way she has arranged each of those designs and the colour combinations that made each pattern stand out and yet blend in with the rest”[*Cion*, 48]), as texts of history, they trace out the journey of an entire people from the “old continent” to the new up until the present day (it is interesting to think that the word “text” derives from Latin “texere” which means to weave, an action closely linked with quilting), and finally, as cartographic ciphers they “talk a secret language” (*Cion*, 48) known only to the “initiated”, which point the way to freedom.

In *Ways of Dying*, which is in many ways the forerunner of *Cion*, Mda focuses primarily on urban space, where traditional notions of tribal and communal authority intersect with the more fragmented and heterogeneous lifestyles of the modern city. Attwell makes the point that from the 1930s onwards, modernity became increasingly associated with city living and its ties to America and the “glittering metropolis”.⁵⁹ Urban centres, with their close-quarter living conditions and high-rise buildings (one thinks of the opening description of the cityscape in *The Heart of Redness* where a funeral takes place “in a tattered tent on top of a twenty-storey building in Hillbrow, Johannesburg” [HR, 27]), were sites of densely compacted physical and social space where what were often antagonistic cultures and factions would have to try and peacefully co-exist. Noria speaks of the “amagoduka” as “those whose roots are in the rural areas and who return home after their contracts in the city are finished” (WD, 56). The amagoduka (essentially hostel migrants) were temporary residents in the city, housed by either mining corporations or the state until their services were no longer needed.⁶⁰ In *The Madonna of Excelsior*, Pule (Niki’s husband) would be considered one of the amagoduka as he works in the “mines of Welkom” (ME, 33), and returns home every long weekend. For the more permanent township residents, however, the amagoduka were an unwelcome presence:

They were looked upon with contempt by most of the township people. They were regarded as illiterate rural people lacking in any urbane manners and sophistication. They were looked upon as people who had strange ways, spoke Xhosa with a peculiar accent, dressed slovenly, and were unfamiliar with basic hygiene...The hostel dwellers never felt that they had any responsibility to the larger community.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 65.

⁶⁰ Steven Robins, “Bodies out of place: Crossroads and the landscapes of exclusion” in Hilton Judin and Ivan Vladislavic, eds., *blank_: Architecture, apartheid and after* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers and Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 1999), J12, 461.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, Citing an Interview with M.T., May 1987, Cape Town.

Not only were hostel migrants scorned by their township compatriots, they were spatially segregated as well, which only enforced the social estrangement felt between these two groups.⁶² In *Ways of Dying*, this estrangement culminates in the “second death” of Vutha, who is murdered by the Young Tigers after he betrays information to hostel dwellers for rewards of sweets and some meat:

The children had to confess that they told the hostel inmates about the planned ambush. The leaders of the Young Tigers were very angry. They called all the children to come and see what happened to sell-outs. They put a tyre around Vutha’s small neck, and around his friends. They filled both with petrol. [...] “Now, all of you children who have gathered here, watch and see what happens to sell-outs. Know that if you ever become a sell-out, this is what will happen to you as well. Now you two, light the matches, and throw them at the tyres.” (WD, 189)

The matches are thrown, and Vutha’s tyre

[...] suddenly burst into flames. His screams were swallowed by the raging flames, the crackle of burning flesh, and the blowing wind. He tried to run, but the weight of the tyre pulled him to the ground, and he fell down. The eight-year-old was able to stagger for some distance, but he also fell down in a ball of fire that rolled around for a while and then stopped. Soon the air was filled with the stench of burning flesh. The children watched for a while, then ran away to their mothers. (WD, 189-90)

The young age of the culprits only heightens the brutality of this scene. The police even remark at one point that “it is the six-year-olds that throw stones and petrol bombs at us” (WD, 47). Though political leadership is vested in the “older boys” (WD, 188) and “battle-scarred cadres” (WD, 181), the children who stand there and watch this scene, who eventually “[run] away to their mothers” are Vutha’s age-mates. And because the Young Tigers are a political collective, individual perpetrators find anonymity in the group identity. When Noria, “transformed into a madwoman”, roams around the settlement looking for the culprits, the narrator can only state that “none of the children could say who was actually responsible for the atrocity. They just said it was the Young Tigers. Who in particular? Just the Young Tigers. Who had given instructions to Danisa and the other child to light the tyres? The Young Tigers. Who among the Young Tigers? Just the Young Tigers” (WD, 190-1). My point here is that urban areas were sites of particular political and social unrest. The civil conflicts between the amagoduka and the township residents, or the internal executions carried out by the Young Tigers are just a few of the many challenges which urbanising villagers had to surmount. Toloki sums it

⁶² Ibid.

up best when he says to Noria: “death lives with us everyday. Indeed our ways of dying are our ways of living” (WD, 98).

In comparison with the cities, the rural areas had far fewer fatalities (“unlike the village”, the narrator says at one point, “death was plentiful in the city” [WD, 125]). But it was not without its own complication, because though it was place where custom and tradition could presumably be sustained, it was also, Attwell notes, “tainted with apartheid policy, which was designed to tie people to traditional identities”.⁶³ “Colonial (and apartheid) administrators”, Steven Robins points out, “came to view ‘tribal’ village elders as a conservative bulwark against the militancy of the younger generation of modernising Africans”.⁶⁴ To legitimise this strategy, these administrators came to regard the urban environment as both a pathogenic and psycho-debilitative danger for Africans:

It was believed that the exposure of ‘detrribalised’ Africans to the alien urban environment would result in physical, moral, cultural and psychological decline and degeneration. Urban Africans were thought to be especially susceptible to syphilitic or tubercular infection, for instance, it was widely held that the urban environment encouraged ‘impulsive’ sexual behaviour and aggression amongst Africans. In addition to these sanitary and behavioural dangers, urbanisation was seen to place the actual physiology of the African body at risk.⁶⁵

To protect Africans from psychological and physical decay (due to “Westernisation”), rural reserves were deemed the most apposite place to preserve African cultural heritage.⁶⁶ The remarkable irony here is that for more than a century, colonial powers had been trying to usher the African into “civilisation”. But when Hendrik Verwoed instituted his policy of “good neighbourliness”, a project engineered to minimise white and non-white interaction, what was in fact an act of social hegemony became cloaked in the quest to preserve some primordial African identity.

Toloki stands poised between these two worlds: though he denounces a man like Nefolovhodwe who “made it good in the city, and now pretends that he does not know the people from the village anymore” (WD, 13), Toloki makes this city his home where, at the harbour, he must survive amidst the “boisterous noise of [...] drunken sailors and their prostitutes” (WD, 41), the alcoholic hobo who “passes wind thunderously” which then smells of “rotten cabbage” (WD, 116), or the bellicose policeman who threatens him when he showers at the beach change-room. One of the most important ways that Toloki and his “homegirl”, Noria, sustain themselves in this city is through living

⁶³ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 65.

⁶⁴ Robins, “Bodies out of place”, 458.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

imaginatively. I devote a substantial amount of discussion to this later on, but for the moment I want to suggest that for Toloki and Noria, part of the way they relate meaningfully with their immediate environment is through a selectivity of naming. When Toloki goes to visit Noria's home in the city,

He alights from the taxi at the rank in the middle of the squatter camp. He walks among the shacks of cardboard, plastic, pieces of canvas and corrugated iron. He does not know where Noria lives, but he will ask. Squatter people are a close-knit community. They know one another. And by the way, he must remember that they do not like to be called squatters. "How can we be squatters on our own land, in our own community?" they often ask. "Squatters are those who came from across the seas and stole our land." (WD, 48)

This community deliberately refuses the label of "squatter" because for them it is a startling misnomer that they should be unlawful occupants on what is historically their own land. Toloki also notes that Noria herself "never refers to the area as a squatter camp, or to the residents as squatters" (WD, 53). It is by eliding certain names and their attendant pejoratives (in this case, "squatter") that Noria is able to in some sense reconfigure her environment, personalising space into place. As Erica Carter and her co-editors have expressed it:

It is not spaces which ground identifications but places. How then does space become place? By being named; as the flows of power and negotiations of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed.⁶⁷

For Noria, rejecting the term "squatter" does not mean that the violence which plagues her community subsides or that the squalor of living in the urban slums is ameliorated. That is, I do not believe that naming is used here to blindly disregard or at least disguise the reality of Noria's situation. Rather, naming is part of the way Noria individuates space as her own, as a "way of living" (WD, 115) in this city, making a "symbolic [...] investment" that is meant to cement her stake in urban life.

By naming *space*, by attaching a signifier to an otherwise unsignified expanse, one invests it with meaning and signification with the result that it becomes a *place*. In this view, space is the broader, more abstract term which, together with time, forms a basic pre-condition of human existence whereas place, as the a socially negotiated concept, is

⁶⁷ Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall, "Introduction" in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall, eds., *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 3. Citing Carter.

more geographically delimited, referring to a specific area of space to which meaning has been ascribed. “To name a landscape”, remarks Carrol Clarkson, “is to mark sites of human significance on indifferent ground”.⁶⁸ In his discussion of place, Tim Cresswell incorporates the important qualification that the act of naming is almost always in the service of some or other power relations. “Place”, he says, “at a basic level is space invested with meaning *in the context of power*”.⁶⁹ Anne McClintock provides an apposite example of this when she considers the myth of the empty lands as figured in the colonial discourses of conquest and terrestrial appropriation.⁷⁰ As explorers mined further into the interior of unchartered territories, they were traversing supposedly undiscovered, “virgin” lands. Because these lands were figured as virgin, the colonised were said to have no legitimate claim of ownership on them, which meant that colonisers could affix new names to these “empty” spaces. Colonised peoples were displaced into what McClintock calls an “anachronistic space” where they “do not inhabit history proper but exist in a permanently anterior time within the geographic space of the modern empire as anachronistic humans, atavistic, irrational, bereft of human agency – the living embodiment of the archaic ‘primitive’”.⁷¹ Place and power, then, have become mutually implicated terms in narratives of conquest and domination. In this sense, it is not only the act of naming which is relevant to an understanding of place, but *who* it is that names as well. As James Duncan and David Ley note, “topography is [...] a science of domination – confirming boundaries, securing norms and treating questionable social conventions as unquestioned social facts”.⁷²

In Mda’s third novel, *The Heart of Redness*, this interplay between place, power and the socio-linguistic force of naming is dramatised in both the nineteenth century and present-day chronotopes that structure the text. In the earlier narrative, the repeated failures of Nongqawuse’s prophecies (“the dead did not arise” the narrator notes, after the Believers are thrice disappointed that the ancestors did not “venture out of the mouths of the rivers” [HR, 242, 150]) led to the starvation of around forty thousand of the amaXhosa. Those that did survive had little choice but to be absorbed into the British

⁶⁸ Carrol Clarkson, “Remains of the name” in Attie de Lange, Gail Fincham, Jeremy Hawthorn and Jakob Lothe, eds., *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 135.

⁶⁹ Tim Cresswell, *Place: a Short Introduction* (USA, UK, and Australia: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 12. My emphasis.

⁷⁰ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York and London: Routledge, 1995), 30.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² James Duncan and David Ley, “Introduction: representing the place of culture” in James Duncan and David Ley, eds., *Place/Culture/Representation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 1.

colony as wage-labourers or, in the case of Twin and Qukezwa (both hitherto staunch Believers), to barter their skills in exchange for shelter:

[...] many Believers [...] had taken refuge with various families. They were provided with shelter in exchange for their labour. They looked after cattle, hoed the rich fields, and did guard duty for their amaMfengu hosts. This was very humiliating to many Believers who came from some of the noblest families of the amaGcaleka clan. (HR, 294)

The Man Who Named Ten Rivers (referring to Sir George Grey who, Mda notes with some irony, styles himself as The Great Benefactor of the Non-European Peoples of the World) orders that “only those who agreed to work for the colonists would be given famine relief” (HR, 296). “Suddenly”, the amaXhosa discover, “those [...] who continued to occupy their homesteads [...] were squatters on their own land and now had to work for the new masters” (HR, 296). The British continued to sequester more and more territory which, together with various statutory laws that were later passed, led to a situation where a mere thirteen percent of the land – and this the most barren part, largely sterile to the planting of crops or as grazing grounds for cattle – was allocated to black South Africans, despite their occupation of some three quarters of the country’s population.⁷³ For the nineteenth century Dalton, this is a good tradeoff: “What is land compared to civilisation?” he says, “Land is a small price to pay for a gift that will last you for a lifetime ... that will be enjoyed by your future generations. The gift of British civilisation!” (HR, 141). As the British empire extends its boundaries to include land that once belonged to Xhosa chieftains, so new names begin to replace older ones: Mhlakaza, who takes pride in being the first umXhosa to receive Anglican Communion becomes Wilhelm Goliath who “looked hilarious in his ill-fitting black suit that used to belong to Merriman” (HR, 54), the Anglican archdeacon of Grahamstown.⁷⁴ We also encounter names like the Kaffir Relief House (a “benevolent” act of charity for the now starving amaXhosa), and a near-hysterical Gray who rides wildly throughout kwaXhosa celebrating a “pacified Xhosaland” (HR, 312). The narrator, explaining how Grey acquired his sobriquet, says:

He had been a governor in Australia and New Zealand [...] where his civilising mission did many wonderful things for the natives of those countries. Of course he had to take their land in return for civilisation. Civilisation is not cheap. He had written extensively about the native people of those countries, and about

⁷³ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, 324.

⁷⁴ Mhlakaza later returns to the god of his people after feeling he is treated like a slave in the Merriman household.

their plants. He had even given names to ten of their rivers, and to their mountain ranges. It did not matter that the forebears of those natives has named those rivers and mountains from time immemorial. (HR, 95)

Grey's plan is to construct his own taxonomy of naming, writing over the place-names of the colonised and so ignoring that they were there since "time immemorial." To quote Clarkson again: "it is when the *name* changes that certain histories are elided, and that the place is marked in a different way for future recollection: the name of a place gives an indication of whose past is deemed worthy of recalling as history".⁷⁵ The implicit irony in Mda's novel, however, is that many of these Xhosa place-names were themselves birthed in the scripting over of histories which preceded them. As Anthony Vital notes,

The narrative [...] works to unsettle any assumption that the amaXhosa before the colonial encounter have first claim to the land of their ancestors or even a pre-contact culture distinctly their own. Before the amaXhosa were the Khoikhoi, and while some in the village recognise the Khoikhoi as "original owners", others, in ways that suggest a history of marginalising outsiders, recall traditional "derogatory" names for the Khoikhoi that prompt laughter.⁷⁶

In a particularly illuminating discussion of Twa or "Bushmen", Vital continues:

In the narrative strand that tracks contemporary events, the narrator explains parenthetically that 'abaThwa' is the name for people "called Bushmen by the colonists of old; but the implied charge of insensitivity glosses over the fact that abaThwa itself is a name given by the amaXhosa to peoples who had their own names for themselves. The Twa who enter the narrative are depicted as wanting to reclaim a ceremony which they believe some among the amaXhosa have stolen from them. They emerge briefly into a world of pick-up trucks, tourist hotels and people with American doctorates, and then quickly disappear. The history of this place, the narrative suggests, is a history of belonging that is fluid and involves successive displacements and cultural appropriations (which include appropriation by naming).⁷⁷

The idea here is that place is not some insuperable or permanent entity. The colonial mission may have tried to create a kind of grand-scale "meta-place" the world over through seizing such a massive portion of the earth's territory and investing it with the cultural logics of the metropole,⁷⁸ but the amaXhosa, too, as Vital shows here, were

⁷⁵ Clarkson, "Remains of the name", 136. Emphasis original.

⁷⁶ Anthony Vital, "Situating Ecology in Recent South African Fiction: J.M. Coetzee's *The Lives of Animals* and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*" *Journal of Southern African Studies* 31 (2) (June, 2005): 307-8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 308.

⁷⁸ Elleke Boehmer writes: "A country was 'mapped' or spatially conceived using figures which harked back to home ground. Travellers' rough, rudimentary descriptions charted unknown lands in the same tentative and provisional way as did early maps. Classifications and codes imported from Europe where matched to peoples, cultures, and topographies that were entirely un-European. And having once done the work of interpretation, the imported symbols, even if entirely arbitrary, often stuck. Colonial maps grew dense with old toponyms applied to next contexts – names like New York, Windsor, Perth, East London, Margate, or the many Newcastles the world over. New places, named after regions and towns left behind, recreated in some part the symbolic experience of the old word. But at the same time they marked out a new region,

themselves implicated in displacing a nation which claimed the land before them. In a broader sense, then, constructing place concerns the capacity of *any* culture to secure discursive jurisdiction over territory.⁷⁹ To claim this jurisdiction, to “territorialize”, as Deleuze and Guattari would say, is to ground one’s activity in spatial terms. Paul Carter writes: “What he, the nomad, black or white symbolised, when he wrote or danced or simply made tracks, was not the physical country, but the enactment of historical space”.⁸⁰ I read Carter as suggesting here that historical space is “enacted” through textual and symbolic inscriptions on, and within, the landscape. The landscape becomes a kind of slate or template onto which cultures can imprint their own narratives of memory and community. As I will show later on, for instance, the land is an often integral element in Xhosa histories of nationhood, and is brought intimately into the biographies of individuals. The landscape is not some extraneous backdrop in these narratives, but becomes a part of the way history is encoded in spatial form. As Tim Oakes affirms, “the power of place is found in its insistence on *grounding* the flows of people [and] information [...] in a precise location – a point of intersection – where such flows meet the deposits of collective memory, the sediment of past encounters”.⁸¹ So when, in *The Heart of Redness*, Sir George Grey annexes the territory of the amaXhosa, or when the modern-day developers threaten to overrun Qolorha with a casino and an amusement park (albeit that this is something welcomed by the Unbelievers), it is as much a taking of the land as it is an assertion of discursive control over culture.

where a new life could begin to unfold. Naming set up a synchronous time frame for colonies: though not Europe, they were declared to be contiguous to Europe, and subject and secondary to it.” (Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* 2nd Ed. [New York: Oxford University Press, 2005], 17-8).

⁷⁹ According to Cresswell, however, a phenomenological approach to place would remind us that we are in the first instance *emplaced* beings. That is, although place is discursive, it is also in some sense a pre-condition for the very possibility of discourse (see Cresswell, *Place*, 22-3). Edward Casey puts it well: “to be at all – to exist in any way – is to be where somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is as requisite as the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. We are surrounded by places. We walk over and through them. We live in places, relate to others in them, die in them. *Nothing we do is unplaced*. (Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* [Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1997], ix. Emphasis mine)

⁸⁰ Eric Hirsch and Michael O’Hanlon, eds., *The Anthropology of Landscape: Perspectives on Place and Space* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 3. Citing Carter.

⁸¹ Tim Oakes, “Tourism and the modern subject” in Carolyn Cartier and Alan A. Lew, eds., *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalisation and Touristed Landscapes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 51. Emphasis mine.

Chapter One

Ways of Dying: Starting with Urban Space

The National Party won the 1948 national election with “apartheid” as their political watchword and the foundation on which they promised to govern the country. But there were two opposing ideas as to what apartheid should look like in practice: one view called for a complete separation of black and white, holding that cultural diversity and integration should be avoided as far as possible; the second view, which arose principally from Transvaal farmers who supported the NP on the condition that they have access to cheap black labour, held that separation was fine only insofar as it did not mean an economic compromise.⁸² For them, segregation would need to give way to the advantages of a cheap, black labour force. These two views would form the basis of official apartheid policy which would govern South Africa for some forty years: on one hand, the spatial division of the country was effected on the basis of race (apartheid meaning literally, “separateness”); on the other, the Urban Labour Preference Policy held that Africans would be permitted in the urban areas only insofar as the white labour market required them.⁸³ To administrate this, Africans were required to carry, according to the oddly titled Abolition of Passes and Consolidation of Documents Act of 1952, a “reference book” that listed the details of their employment and thus residence rights in the cities.⁸⁴ In order to qualify for permanent residence in an urban area, an African had to have been born in that town and worked for the same employer for ten years or alternatively different employers for fifteen.⁸⁵ Failing to meet this requirement, Africans were relegated to the so-called Bantustans, often situated at a considerable distance from the city centres. As Robert Ross notes,

The zoning of the country under the Group Areas Act of 1950 into white areas and black areas meant that millions of Africans, coloured and Indians (and very few whites) found that their places of residence had been designated, by officials using small-scale maps and a rigid vision, as land for the occupation of some other racial group, usually whites. Many of these areas were in effect city suburbs, whose occupants worked in the major cities. Their inhabitants were carted off to the neighbouring Bantustans, from where they had to commute, often for two or three hours by bus, to their places of employment, and also had to pay exorbitant rates for the rent of their stands or for water.⁸⁶

⁸² Robert Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa* (2nd Ed.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 124-5.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 127-8.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

A number of Africans, however, had managed to acquire for themselves tracts of urban land in places like Sophiatown, northwest of Johannesburg. Established in 1904 when blacks were still accorded freehold rights, Sophiatown emerged as a vibrant “non-white” community comprised of mostly Africans, Indian and coloureds. It was considered by many to be the epicentre of local black culture in South Africa, a cultural hub of artistic celebration and excitement amidst the daily struggle against racial intolerance. Barnard makes the point that the state’s tacit policy of divide-and-rule, exemplified in social segregations, led, ironically, to certain spatial *aggregations* – that is, “that imposed divisions open[ed] up the possibility of new communities, new identities, new affiliations”.⁸⁷ Sophiatown embodied this sense of urban community which apartheid legislation had sought to prevent. Acting swiftly, the state moved to evict Sophiatown citizens to what would become Soweto (South Western Townships), Lenasia, Westbury and Noordgesig. Resisting the forced removal, residents collectively protested, “Ons dak nie, ons phola hier” (we won’t move) against the thousands of heavily armed policemen and soldiers.⁸⁸ The area was finally cleared, and the state built an exclusively white suburb in its stead naming it, rather obstinately, Triomf (meaning triumph).

When Hendrik Verwoed, considered to be apartheid’s “grand architect”, became Prime Minister in 1958, he instituted state policy to the effect that those not classified as whites were to be placed into their respective homelands where it was believed they could develop according to their own traditions.⁸⁹ Though these homelands had *de jure* independence, South Africa was the only country that officially recognised them. That the chiefs of these homeland reserves were in the pockets of the state, and that each homeland relied on South Africa for matters of finance and internal security meant that their independence was in practice a farce.⁹⁰

By the mid 1960s, those contained within the reserves began to feel an increasing sense of purposelessness, separated as they were from the promise of modernity as embodied in the city, and fenced within an increasingly devastated landscape:

In all the reserves, communal grazing areas, with only distrusted chiefs to control access, deteriorated rapidly. Erosion, everywhere a danger in a country where grass can be thin as the torrential rains of early summer arrive, stripped much of South Africa of its topsoil. A simple path could quickly become a bed

⁸⁷ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 8.

⁸⁸ Lucky Sindane, “Sophiatown: recalling the loss” (10 February 2005) from *SouthAfrica.info: Gateway to the Nation*, Online. <http://www.southafrica.info/about/history/sophiatown50.htm> (Accessed 18 August 2008).

⁸⁹ Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa*, 145.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

of a rivulet, and within a few years a deep donga. Erosion was not irreversible. In the 1930s, the wheat field of the Swartland to the north of Cape Town had offered a terrible warning to the rest of the country; they have largely recovered. However, this recovery required concerted action and its acceptance by all those who managed the land. This could probably never have been achieved in the conditions of South Africa's reserves, where overcrowding was exacerbated by the regular dumping of those the apartheid government regarded as unwanted in the cities.⁹¹

Greater numbers began to settle in the city and on its outskirts (albeit illegally), and by 1975 one magistrate's court in Langa was convicting over one hundred pass offenders each day.⁹² Urban migrants began to settle in what were called informal settlements or "squatter camps", whose numbers soared: Crossroads, for instance, a Cape Flats settlement designated an "emergency camp" through a loophole in the judicial system, had by the mid 1980s a population of over 100,000.⁹³ David M. Smith points out that "urbanisation under apartheid, no matter how carefully the state contrived to control it, [...] undermined apartheid itself".⁹⁴ If white South Africa scorned racial integration, they also tacitly recognised that an on-hand black labour force was necessary for economic progress. Verwoerdian legislation clung to a Nationalist ideal in its enactment of "grand apartheid" relocations. The state even created, at large cost to itself, industrial and rural jobs in the homelands to make these places more economically and politically viable.⁹⁵ But these schemes were not commensurate with the rate of rural impoverishment and, "despite annual subsidies of hundreds of millions of Rand, and despite millions of pass-law arrests, Black people continued to migrate to the cities in search of a better life".⁹⁶

In total, it has been estimated that as many as 3.5 million homeland relocations took place between 1960 and 1980. This is to say nothing of the so-called "petty apartheid" laws, which, under the 1953 Reservation of Separate Amenities Act, required that whites and non-whites make use of different public facilities and amenities, from park benches to communal toilets. The state's near-fanatical obsession with "separateness" translated into even the minutest forms of spatial segregation. At the Apartheid Museum, adjacent to Gold Reef City in Johannesburg, this sense of separation

⁹¹ Ibid., 158-9

⁹² Ibid., 159.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ David M. Smith, "Introduction" in David M. Smith, ed., *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), 1.

⁹⁵ Jeff McCarthy, "Local and regional government: from rigidity to crisis to flux" in David M. Smith, ed., *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), 28.

⁹⁶ Ibid. Citing Giliomee and Schlemmer.

is cleverly evoked by having visitors pick classification cards which randomly designate them as either white or non-white. Visitors are then required to use separate entrances according to their racial group. While “white” and “non-white” visitors can still see each other as they advance through their separate walkways and move down the initial exhibit, their field of vision remains fragmented by the prismatic barbed wire fencing which divides them. This reenactment of apartheid proxemics recalls the fact that while certain spaces were ineluctably shared by blacks and whites (forcing a *visual* contact), one’s experience of these spaces remained quite different depending on one’s racial group. The fencing here becomes a symbol of both a cordoning off and a hemming in: for the apartheid adherent, urban restrictions meant delimiting the scope of black freedom, protecting whites against the cultural “contagion” of blackness, reified in the phrase, “die swart gevaar” (the black danger), a popular watchword at the time; for the black urban dweller, however, the fence becomes a prison of sorts, a containment, and a visual reminder that he is under constant surveillance by the state (more on this later). The museum thus foregrounds on an aesthetic level the sense of trauma and social marginality that South Africa’s spatial history has come to symbolise for so many people.

I make this brief excursion into South Africa’s urban past to demonstrate that when Mda scripts Toloki into the unnamed cityscape of *Ways of Dying*, he (Mda) unavoidably positions Toloki within a distressing and much-contested socio-spatial history. As already mentioned, Mda maintains that place is the *a priori* condition of possibility for his novels’ characterisations: everything starts with place. If one applies this textual process to *Ways of Dying*, then the post-apartheid city would presumably be the novel’s point of inception. In leaving the city of his story unnamed, Mda may have had in mind J.M Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*. In a recent essay for the *Boston Review*, Mda recalls how Coetzee was upbraided by some critics for setting *Barbarians* in a “nameless empire [...] lacking specificity of locale and period” which made it susceptible to an “ahistorical and apolitical reading”.⁹⁷ Coetzee was accused of shirking his ethical responsibilities as a writer in what was still a tumultuous period in South Africa’s history by evading a more conspicuous commitment to local territory. Mda says he disagrees with this assessment:

What others saw as a failure to represent lived experience appeared to me – I then living in exile – as a refreshing way to reimagine South Africa and transcend the repetition of the horrors reported every day in newspapers. *Waiting for the Barbarians* addressed the brutality of colonialism in a timeless manner and

⁹⁷ Mda, “Justify the Enemy”, 1.

extended the borders of “empire” far beyond those of South Africa: to the rest of Africa, Asia, Europe, Australasia, and the Americas. Springing from the particular circumstances of South Africa, it spoke to a universe in which the state became increasingly terroristic in its defense of imperial values.⁹⁸

It would be tempting to think that Mda is consciously imitating Coetzee by figuring the *Ways of Dying* cityscape as an unnamed (even if highly suggestive) location. But where Coetzee’s novel resists any clear alignment to a specific geographical region, admitting a manifest allegorical reading of the text, Mda’s is very much rooted in local terrain. Coetzee himself has said that “there is nothing about blackness or whiteness in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. The Magistrate and the girl could as well be Russian and Kirghiz, or Han and Mongol, or Turk and Arab, or Arab and Berber”.⁹⁹ Mda, by contrast, evinces a distinctly South African aesthetic that preserves a specificity of location. This is achieved most visibly through language: Toloki, staring longingly at what would eventually become his mourning attire, leaks “izincwe, the gob of desire” (WD, 27) from his open mouth; Noria shouts “Voetsek” (WD, 50) to the children and barking dogs who dance behind Toloki when he comes to visit her; and the entrepreneurial Archbishop of the village rides from homestead to homestead selling his offal by shouting “Mala mogodu! Amathumbo” to which the children mockingly reply “Thutha mabhakethe! Tshotsha mapakethe!” (WD, 104), calling him a carrier of buckets. These are all instances of either local vernacular, or language specific to one or other local culture. Other locally-suggestive features of the text include Vutha’s execution-by-necklacing (discussed earlier), which recalls the civil strife that plagued South Africa in the years just prior to the 1994 elections, and Xesibe’s concern that Napu, Noria’s erstwhile love interest, has no family who might negotiate lobola, a form of bride-price or dowry that is specific to Xhosa and Zulu custom.

Some critics have tended to speculate about the real name/location of Mda’s implied city. Margaret Mervis has suggested it is Cape Town,¹⁰⁰ though she cites no explicit reason for her inference. Presumably, it is because Toloki’s home is at the harbour, where he sits and watches the “ships come and go” (WD, 28). Grant Farred disagrees with Mervis, pointing out that the novel’s preoccupation with the internecine tribal wars precludes Cape Town because, unlike Johannesburg, Cape Town lacks

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ J.M Coetzee, “Interview with Richard Begam” *Contemporary Literature* 33 (3) (Autumn, 1992), 424.

¹⁰⁰ Mervis, “Fiction for Development”, 42.

significant migrant numbers housed in tribalised hostels.¹⁰¹ For the purposes of my discussion, it is enough to say that the setting is distinctly urban South African, despite the absence of a more geographically specific frame of reference. Trying to pinpoint precise co-ordinates for the novel's location testifies, I think, to a critical tradition that tends to *expect* a point-for-point equivalence between the real and the representational (discussed earlier), an equivalence that Mda seems here to be consciously resisting.

It is into this city that Mda places Toloki, the entrepreneurial black urbanite who styles himself a "Professional Mourner" of which "he is still the only practitioner" (WD, 17). One of the very first things the omniscient voice tells us about Toloki is his rank smell:

Toloki thought he would need to elbow his way through the crowd, but people willingly move away from him. Why do people give way? he wonders. Is it perhaps out of respect for his black costume and top hat, which he wears at every funeral as a hallmark of his profession? But then why do they cover their noses and mouths with their hands as they retreat in blind panic, pushing those behind them? Maybe it is the beans he ate for breakfast. [...] Or maybe it is the fact that he has not bathed for a whole week, and the December sun has not been gentle. He has been too busy attending funerals to go to the beach to use the open showers that the swimmers use to rinse salt water from their bodies. (WD, 1-2)

Later in the novel, Noria asks Toloki to "[...] please take a bath. Just because your profession involves death", she says, "[...] doesn't mean that you need to smell like a dead rat", to which Toloki laughs "good-naturedly, and promises that before he visits her again, he will take a shower at the beach" (WD, 98). There is no indication in the novel that Toloki's stench is something he deliberately cultivates in fitting with his chosen vocation. Though he imagines himself part of a holy order that "cooks [...] food on the fires of a funeral pyre, and feeds on human waste and corpses" (WD, 15), his bad smell is in part a symptom of his dire economic position. Toloki shares quarters with the hoboes and drunkards of the city, his possessions are few (consisting of a shopping cart and of course of his mourning attire) and his vocational "headquarters" are a "public place" (WD, 14). Toloki has also been busy, we are told, attending funerals and, without his own private amenities, must make use of the public showers at the beach. He is described as physically unattractive: the communal narrator says, "We felt that Toloki should not have been overly jealous of Noria. Although we always remarked, sometimes in his presence, that he was an ugly child" (WD, 32), and Nefolovhodwe, surrounded by

¹⁰¹ Grant Farred, "Mourning the postapartheid state already? The poetics of loss in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*" *Modern Fiction Studies* 46 (1) (Spring, 2000): 205.

his high walls and electric fencing, tells Toloki, “Your face is a constant reminder that we are all going to die one day” (WD, 133) which, ironically, becomes the inspiration behind the idea of Professional Mourning, for Toloki “was going to make his face pay” (WD, 133). But urban dwelling has taken its toll on Toloki, and “the salty winds have ravaged his face, leaving deep gullies” (WD, 52). What I am trying to show here is how Toloki ostensibly comes across as the living embodiment of a kind of urban grotesque: he is impoverished, fetid, and unsightly. Mda, in fact, says that he found his inspiration for Toloki in the character of Vercueil from Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*:

In *Age of Iron*, I was drawn to a character named Vercueil. I found nothing remarkable about him except for the fact that he had quite a rich odour. Just the fact of the smell fascinated me. I said to myself: “If Coetzee can create such a stinking character, so can I.” And I did. But mine had to stink for different reasons. Through a process of justification Toloki, my stinking character, become a professional mourner, and later featured in my first novel, *Ways of Dying*.¹⁰²

Mrs Curren, Coetzee’s dying protagonist, whose confessional letter to her daughter forms the structure of the novel, describes her first impression of Vercueil:

Yesterday, at the end of this alley, I came upon a house of carton boxes and plastic sheeting and a man curled up inside, a man I recognised from the street: tall, thin, with a weathered skin and long, carious fangs, wearing a baggy gray suit and a hat with a sagging brim. He had the hat on now, sleeping with the brim folded under his ear. A derelict, one of the derelicts who hang around the parking lots of Mill Street, cadging money from shoppers, drinking under the overpass, eating out of refuse cans. One of the homeless for whom August, month of rains, is the worst month. Asleep in his box, his legs stretched out like a marionette’s, his jaw agape. An unsavoury smell about him: urine, sweet wine, moldy clothing, and something else too. Unclean.¹⁰³

Attwell has suggested that “Vercueil is not a historical being, or if he is that – as a recognisable tramp surviving in the crannies of the suburbs – he is so only in part”.¹⁰⁴ Attwell goes on to say that it is a misconception to “fix Vercueil’s social position” ethnographically”, and that his role “is to serve as an Archimedean point of reference outside of the dimensions of what is recognisably real, and outside of Mrs. Curren’s world, and thus to enable her to speak from within her consciousness of her impending death”.¹⁰⁵ It is beyond the scope of this discussion to go into a detailed analysis of

¹⁰² Mda, “Justify the Enemy”, 4-5.

¹⁰³ J.M. Coetzee, *Age of Iron* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 3-4.

¹⁰⁴ David Attwell, “Dialogue’ and ‘fulfillment’ in J.M. Coetzee’s *Age of Iron*” in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly, eds., *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 174.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

Coetzee's narratology, but if we can accept, as Attwell concedes, that Vercueil could have at least in part some historical substance, then a fascinating intertext emerges between Vercueil and Toloki – one that seems to register, insofar as these two figures are read allegorically, a radical reassessment of the grotesque, the peripheral, and those on the margins of society. Vercueil is a misanthropic figure that is mapped both as a point of estrangement from Mrs. Curren and, paradoxically, one also of contact. “Why do I write about him?” Mrs. Curren asks herself. “Because he is and is not I. Because in the look he gives me I see myself [...] When I write about him I write about myself”.¹⁰⁶ For Mrs. Curren, it is Vercueil, in his laconic, elliptical words, who comes to represent in some way her own muted answer to the country's social crisis, and her realisation that she has evaded a more active, ethical response to its political realities. Her first impressions of Vercueil, quoted in the excerpt above, might typify a kind of dispassionate middle-class perspective: Vercueil is “unclean” and “unsavoury” and is perceived as more animal than human with his “long, carious fangs” and urinary odour. He is also figured as a part of an anonymous greater/general mass of “homeless” in and around the city “for whom August, month of rains, is the worst”.

Although Vercueil comes to play a pivotal role in Mrs. Curren's growing apprehension of her tacit complicity in apartheid praxis, her ostensible impression of him at the novel's opening is one of aversion. In Mda's novel, however, this kind of impression is inverted, and we see that the derelict wanderer occupying a space on the margins of society (embodied by Vercueil in *Age of Iron*) is thrust onto centre stage as an agent who is active in society's transformation (embodied, of course, by Toloki). This is perhaps partly effected through narration: whereas in *Age of Iron*, narration is vested solely in a white, bourgeois perspective, *Ways of Dying* oscillates between the omniscient and communal voices, allowing a sense of distanced perspective without jettisoning a local, collectivist voice. Seen through different eyes, Toloki the vagabond wanderer has as much potential to effect change in the country as anyone else.

On this reconstellation of the marginal onto centre-stage, Barnard, in her discussion of the novel's opening funeral scene, reads in symbolic terms the conflict between the funeral and wedding processions. The driver of the wedding party states, “We are a procession of beautiful people, and many posh cars and buses, while yours is an old skorokoro of a van, and hundreds of ragged souls on foot” (WD, 11), to which

¹⁰⁶ Coetzee, *Age of Iron*, 9.

the funeral driver can only reply, “It is not my fault that these people are poor” (WD, 11). Barnard says,

This taunt sets up a symbolic opposition that remains throughout the novel: an opposition not only between the celebration and mourning, but between the ‘beautiful’ and the ‘ugly’ and, by extension, between the world of official power and prestige, of the central business district and the shopping mall, and the world of the informal economy, of the ‘spaza shop’ and the shack settlement. The novel’s sympathies, of course, lie entirely with the ragged mourners in the funeral parade. [...] The democratic spirit, essential to a just new dispensation, seems only to reign at the funerals of the poor. Though the food may be simple at these events (everyone eats the samp and beef from communal basins), the hierarchies [...] that pertain at the funerals of the better off are cast aside.¹⁰⁷

Barnard goes on to conclude that Mda’s suggestion is that “the hope for any kind of change [...] lies not with the beautiful people, but with the improvisational ways of living of the poor.”¹⁰⁸ Toloki is one who embodies this improvisational spirit: when he first arrives in the city, he makes do with part-time jobs loading ships, and after saving enough money starts his own business selling meat and boerewors for which “he made a lot of money” (WD, 122). But Toloki underestimates the extent of urban treachery and in his absence his cart is removed to the local dump and demolished, a matter that is “to this day [...] still being investigated” (WD, 123).

Even the character of Nefolovhodwe stands as a model of economic ingenuity, despite the novel’s obvious antagonism to the way he scorns his rural roots. Nefolovhodwe capitalises on the abundance of death in the cities to the extent that “every day there was a line of people wanting to buy his coffins” (WD, 125). But when he deliberately eschews the company of his “homeboys” and “homegirls”, retreating behind his “Pearly Gates” (WD, 165), electric fencing and “well-trimmed hedge[s]” (WD, 127), and occupies his time with ridiculous pursuits like operating a flea circus which he believes will one day be able to compete internationally, it is clear that Nefolovhodwe’s financial success has been to the detriment of his cultural loyalties.

Carolyn Cartier notes that historically the seduction of the city is about “surplus, excess, in a word, luxury, and the conditions and contradictions of modernity it engenders. [It is] the vortex for the concentration of things and affords the most extreme views of consumption”.¹⁰⁹ Nefolovhodwe epitomises the man at first enticed but then

¹⁰⁷ Barnard, “On laughter”, 286.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Carolyn Cartier, “Introduction: tourist landscapes/seductions of place” in Carolyn Cartier and Alan A. Lew, eds., *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalisation and Touristed Landscapes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 11.

consumed by this excess. He comes to the city after a man tells him that he could enjoy great financial success for his skills as a coffin maker in the towns, seeing as “people die like flies there” (WD, 125). And though Nefolovhodwe promises “that he would always have the village in his heart” (WD, 125), he starts severing ties with his more impecunious companions as he finds greater and greater success. This separation is gauged as much in economic as geographic terms. When Nefolovhodwe first arrives in the city, “he live[s] in one of the squatter camps [...] *like everyone else*” (WD, 125 – my emphasis). He then moves into a township house and has enough money even to “bribe the officials” (WD, 125) to ensure his immediate occupation. Eventually, to accommodate his expanding needs and, the narrator tells us, his “expanding frame” (we are told that Nefolovhodwe eventually balloons to “ten times the size he used to be back in the village” [WD, 128]), he buys a house in “one of the very up-market suburbs” (WD, 125) separated from his erstwhile company not only in terms of his new address, but behind his carefully guarded property. Indeed, when Toloki arrives to see Nefolovhodwe, it is as though he has come to see royalty: Nefolovhodwe is called “master” (WD, 128) and Toloki must make his way past guards armed with big Alsatians and who frisk visitors upon entry. Nefolovhodwe’s wholesale embrace of the urban lifestyle is connected, we are told, to the way he sleeps:

[Toloki] curls up on the bench and sleeps in the foetal position that is customary of his village. Although he has been in the city for all these years, he has not changed his sleeping position, unlike people like Nefolovhodwe who have taken so much to the ways of the city that they sleep in all sorts of city positions. In all fairness, he has not seen Nefolovhodwe in his sleep, but a man like him who pretends not to know people from his village anymore now that he is one of the wealthiest men in the land, is bound to sleep with his legs straight, or in some such absurd position. (WD, 15-6)

The “absurd” sleeping position also links, it would seem, with the source of Nefolovhodwe’s great income, which is coffin construction. Mimicking the dead bodies laid out in his coffins, their legs extended horizontally, Nefolovhodwe also “sleep[s] with his legs straight” perhaps suggesting that he has undergone a kind of cultural death to his tribal/communal fidelities. The result is that he becomes an obese and largely hermetic man, one uninterested and disconnected from the needs of his less fortunate friends. This is in marked contradistinction to Toloki who, we are told, still sleeps curled up in the foetal position. This birth/death dialectic runs throughout the novel, but here it suggests that the excesses engendered by an unthinking and impulsive capitalism can create a social and cultural distance, which threatens the communal spirit so essential for

life in the city. So even though I agree with Barnard that Mda *does* place his hope for the new dispensation in the “improvisational ways of living of the poor”, I would say that Nefolovhodwe embodies Mda’s essential qualification of that entrepreneurial spirit, a reminder that economic advancement should never come at the expense of abandoning one’s own people.

To return now to Toloki: his role as Professional Mourner is at once both an instance of the improvisational impulse just described, and a realisation of the potential for aesthetic fecundity even amidst material deprivation. In Toloki’s case, his profession is both art *and* income, but the novel’s essential point is that there exists a yet-unearthed creative potential in the quotidian experiences of the city’s underclasses. To rediscover this potential is to disinter in some way a sense of cultural and collective agency. As Attwell notes,

Mda reinstrumentalises modernism’s anti-instrumentalism, bringing it into an effective relationship with a given context and history. This contextualisation precludes the delivering the messages, the flattening out of performance or its reduction to simple meaning, but what Mda dramatises is the power of non-instrumental art to awaken listeners 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.¹¹⁰

Nowhere is this sense of a new communal creativity more explicitly dramatised than in two instances at the novel’s close, the first of which I will now discuss in detail. Noria, resuming her role as muse, inspires in Toloki a sudden rush of “frenzied” creativity:

Noria sings her meaningless song of old. All of a sudden, Toloki finds himself drawing pictures of the children playing. Children stop their games and gather around him. They watch him draw colourful pictures of children’s faces, and of children playing merry go-round in the clouds. The children from the dumping ground and from the settlement are able to identify some of the faces. These are faces they know, faces of their friends, their own faces. They laugh and make fun of the strange expressions that Toloki has sketched on their purple and yellow and red and blue faces. The draw becomes frenzied, as Noria’s voice rises. Passers-by stop to watch, are overcome by warm feelings. It is as though Toloki is possessed by this new ability to create human figures. He breathes heavily with excitement and his palms are clammy. His whole body tingles, as he furiously gives shape to the lines on the paper. His breathing reaches a crescendo that is broken by an orgasmic scream. (WD, 199)

Noria’s “meaningless song of old” is in fact a potent source of inspiration for Toloki. And after Toloki is finished, the onlookers “say that the work has profound meaning. As usual, they cannot say what the meaning is. It is not even necessary to say, or even to

¹¹⁰ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 194.

know, what the meaning is. It is enough only to know that there is a meaning, and it is a profound one” (WD, 200). Mda may be intimating here that to recover a non-instrumental aesthetics is to permit an art that is multivalent both in its constructive and receptive aspects, and that even where no ostensible meaning is perceived it should be enough to say that meaning has been produced, and “it is a profound one”. As a tool for ushering in a new kind of artistic inventiveness that rejects a solely political teleology, Mda may be drawing on the modernist adage that art needs no justification for its existence, or that art itself is justification enough.

Toloki draws pictures of the children’s faces and when they come and observe his drawings, they are “able to identify some of the faces” even though these faces have “strange expressions” in “purple and yellow and red and blue”. Though recognisable, the drawings remain abstracted in their non-representational colours and contours. This conflation of real and abstract becomes a source of joy to its onlookers, who seem to revel in the power of these new and bricolaged aesthetic forms to show (and I repeat Boehmer’s words here) “life skewed, fragmented, upended [...] as part of the manipulation of aesthetic form, of the testing of visionary, hallucinatory, dislocating, non-camera-ready ways of representing the world”.¹¹¹ But Mda is careful to show that these are not superfluous drawings disconnected from the community or meaningless to the throngs of onlookers who have gathered to watch their creation. They retain a *semblance* of the real (prompting a recognition in the children’s eyes) while still traversing a more expansive and penetrating artistic terrain. And at the performative level, Toloki’s frenzied act of drawing is itself an instance of live artistry because both the children and passers-by actually *watch* him draw, and he himself undergoes an “orgasmic”, multi-sensory experience which causes his palms to sweat and his whole body to tingle. The sexual connotations here are clear: Toloki’s crayon becomes phallic in its generative capacity which, together with Noria’s affecting song, results in the birthing of a new kind of aesthetic creation.

Mda may be inadvertently suggesting that *Ways of Dying* be read as one instance of this new textual birthing. If so, then reader, author and character(s) all converge as witnesses to, and participants in, this creative undertaking. For as we witness the scene taking place in the novel, we simultaneously hold an instance of its realisation tangibly in our hand. Toloki is of course involved in *drawings*, while we are involved in reading the text, but both it would seem are part of a more general inauguration of Barnard’s “new

¹¹¹ Boehmer, “Endings and new beginning”, 53.

prosaics” in black literature (mentioned above). This has not been without its detractors. Toloki’s relative unfamiliarity with local politics is in part what inspires Farred to call *Ways of Dying* a “flawed work that is, in part because of its shortcomings, symptomatic of the condition of postapartheid South Africa”.¹¹² Farred contrasts the commitment to politics that one finds in the Praise Poets (or *imbongi*) of the 1980s with Toloki’s relatively self-serving career choice as a Professional Mourner. Whereas praise poems “contributed to the spirit of the rally, gave the meeting a dramatic focus, or enabled the mourners to understand the sacrifices made to the struggle by the deceased”, Toloki, Farred writes, is “focused mainly on himself and his interests, esoteric though they be”.¹¹³ Farred continues:

Professional mourning does not require its practitioner to understand the pain, the sense of loss, and the anguish experienced by “genuine” mourners. Unlike the “amateurs”, the Professional simply performs the act of bereavement, without being in any way an empathetic participant in the funeral ceremony: it is the Professional Mourner’s job to produce tears, not to comprehend the profundity of the loss. Toloki stands, even as the pivotal figure at the funeral, removed from the event: he an individual who melds a community together for a brief period, but his singular alterity is never in question. He acts at the funeral, producing affect, but he himself is never affected by the event, never acted upon – which is to say, even though he is surrounded by trauma, he is not really changed, transformed, or moved to rethink his removed position within the community. Clad in a strange costume performing a unique task, Toloki undermines the communal element so central to the burial ceremony by drawing attention to himself. It is the “I”, the artist and creator of appropriate tragic behaviour, who takes narrative precedence over the larger social (and personal) losses incurred by the other mourners.¹¹⁴

Barnard rightly takes issue with Farred for failing to consider that “the very point of the novel may be to offer a new frame of reference”, a “relinquishment of the strictly national optic that has been so crucial in South African literature to date, and the adoption of one that is at once broader and more minute”.¹¹⁵ Toloki is admittedly ignorant of many of the problems facing Noria’s settlement. When he, Noria, and Shadrack discuss some of these issues, Toloki realises he does not appreciate the gravity of their situation:

Toloki is out of his depth in this discussion. He knows there is war in the land, and has mourned at many a funeral of war casualties. But Noria seems to know more details about this whole matter than he thought possible. She talks with

¹¹² Farred, “Mourning the postapartheid state”, 188-9.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 192.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 188-9

¹¹⁵ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 155.

authority, and the man under the van seems to take her views seriously. (WD, 56)

But just because Toloki displays some degree of political ignorance does not mean he undermines the communal spirit. And though Farred holds up the *imbongi* as the height from which Mda's protagonist has sadly fallen, Mda seems to have his own reservations about the use of public gatherings (including funerals) for political philippics:

Some members of his ethnic group, especially those from the rural areas who still believe in the tribal authority of the chiefs, follow him [the tribal chief] ardently, and have taken up arms whenever he has called upon them to do so. They are often fired up at rallies by his lyrical praise, and panegyrics, of their superiority as a group ordained by the gods; a chosen people with a history of greatness of warfare and conquest. They have internalised the version of their own identity that depicts them as having inherent aggression. When they attack the residents of squatter camps and townships, or commuters in the trains, they see themselves in the image of great warriors of the past, of whom they are descendents. Indeed the tribal chief, in his rousing speeches, has charged them with what he calls a historic responsibility to their warrior ancestors. (WD, 55-6)

Mda suggests here that politically inspired rallies are as inspirational as they are dangerous. In fact, it is the panegyrics of the tribal chief that inspire the warring mentality that has been so detrimental to Noria's struggling community. So for Farred to mourn the loss of the "dramatic focus" of meetings which placed the deceased within the larger context of the political struggle seems a decidedly anachronistic observation. While such meetings were undoubtedly of important *strategic* value in unifying communities against apartheid praxis, Mda, crucially, is gesturing toward a less militant frame of reference in his novel, one in which the artist can be one who heals, unites and points the way forward. And while it is true that Toloki, as an artist figure, produces affect even where he has no prior relationship with the deceased, his role as mourner is to lend a dramaturgical quality to the funerals, mourning as a form of ritual that complements the emotional grief felt by the deceased's more personal relations. Toloki, then, really operates in two capacities: artist and mourner. Obviously, there is some degree of overlap here, but his dual roles are actually quite distinct. As an artist, Toloki's theatricality gives vent to the need for what could be called an urban cultural aesthetics. If the city is a place where survival is often the only aspiration for each day, where the poor must battle to eke out a living, and where a fidelity to ethnic customs can so easily be evanesced in the more cosmopolitan milieu of "urban culture", Toloki provides a means by which transplanted communities can immerse themselves in what Mda calls the "creation of

their own narratives”¹¹⁶ where they can be reminded that they are still, in Attwell’s phrase, “agents of culture”. Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murray affirm that Toloki “uses and adapts traditional performance techniques, at once affirming old traditions and reworking them to suit the needs of the new society emerging in South Africa at the time”.¹¹⁷ Toloki, they argue, is a “figure of liminal positioning, [who] seeks to mediate between a copious range of cultural forms and expressions, both marginal and mainstream, of modernity and rural past”.¹¹⁸ It is in and through his role as artist that Toloki is able to enact this mediation. In *The Heart of Redness*, Camagu, responding perceptively to John Dalton’s idea of a tourist-focused cultural village, reminds us that cultures do not exist in a vacuum, but are dynamic and continually evolving. Toloki can at once draw from a rich and variegated cultural heritage while still adapting it within, and for, an urban milieu. Clad in his thespian attire, Toloki’s performance embodies the theatrical mode that Mda sees as powerfully didactic, enabling marginalised groups to “help themselves by employing their traditional performance modes”.¹¹⁹ The artist Toloki reminds the bereaved that they still retain the capacity to enact defining cultural narratives of self and community within the potentially homogenising environment of the city.

Then, as a mourner, Toloki’s role functions as a tacit form of resistance to conceiving death in inordinately political terms – that is, in terms of which a death in the community is apprehended only insofar as it provides another opportunity for a political caucus, or in terms of its contribution to a “struggle” ideology. Professional Mourning adjusts the collective focus on the act of bereavement itself, and by extension the person for whom the community grieves (the deceased), whose death is afforded all the ministrations of a mourning ritual. These rituals mark important moments of communality. When the funeral proper is over, it is no surprise that feasting follows. Bakhtin, discussing the carnivalesque, notes that the feast is always

[...] essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of

¹¹⁶ Mervis, “Fiction for development”, 40.

¹¹⁷ Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murray, “Of funeral rites and community memory: ways of living in *Ways of Dying*” in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming).

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Mervis, “Fiction for development”, 40.

the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts.¹²⁰

The funeral attendees “march to the home of the deceased” (WD, 160), where we witness this “festive perception of the world” with quite specific customs and traditions in play. Samp and beef are served “as usual” in separate basins for men, women, and children and the food is governed by a tier system in which those relatives closest to the deceased enjoy more luxurious fare and eat inside the house, while the “final stratum” (or “rabble”) are served outside in the settlement from communal basins. In this sense, of course, the funeral feast is not completely consonant with the true spirit of carnival, because a defining feature of carnival is the “*suspension* of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions”¹²¹ whereas the funeral feast in Mda’s novel is characterised by a loyalty to the communal pecking order. But I mention Bakhtin here because the feast is itself a practice of ritual that serves a celebratory function, marking, as Bakhtin says, “moments of death and revival, of change and renewal” and uniting the entire community for a brief period of time. In the same way, Toloki’s act of mourning (as ritual) can also unite communities by augmenting a sense of collective sodality. Though the concept of a Professional Mourner is a new one, the practice of mourning has a firm historical basis in many African societies.¹²² Toloki the mourner reinvigorates the festive and the ceremonial at public gatherings, which is why he is not strictly required to possess an intimate knowledge of the deceased. Not only is this in any case the Nurse’s job, but mourning marks the solemnity of the occasion and functions as a kind of objective correlative to the more personal grief of those closest to the deceased. As the old woman who approaches Toloki with coins (a gratuity) says, “I particularly invited you because I saw you at another funeral. You added an aura of sorrow and dignity that we last saw in the olden days when people knew how to mourn their dead” (WD, 109).

I return now to the second instance of an emerging and communal artistic inventiveness. As already mentioned, Mda is keen to suggest that a nascent creativity resides within ordinary communities, and that to discover this creativity is to unearth a powerful new aesthetics. I looked at Toloki’s artistic reawakening and the nature of the figures he draws as Noria resumes her role as muse and inspires in him a frenzied urge to

¹²⁰ M.M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* Trans. H. Iswolsky (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), 8-9

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 9. My emphasis.

¹²² Elke Steinmeyer, for instance, has drawn attention to the similarities between the ritual laments of Andromache in Homer’s *Iliad* with Toloki in *Ways of Dying*, examining in some detail the mourning ceremonies found in Zulu custom. See Elke Steinmeyer, “Chanting the Song of Sorrow: Threnody in Homer and Zakes Mda” *Current Writing* 15 (2) (2003): 156-172.

create. I now look at a scene at the novel's close, where Nefolovhodwe arrives to deliver Jwara's figurines to Toloki. Jwara, it seems, has been goading Nefolovhodwe for some time because the figurines, entombed in his workshop (which had now become "just a pile of stones" [WD, 207]), were suffering and Jwara could not join the world of the ancestors unless they were passed on to his son. Nefolovhodwe orders his workers to unpack the boxes of figurines next to a shack in Toloki's new community, and the figurines are "so many that they occupy [a] space that is many times bigger than the shack in height, breadth and length" (WD, 210). The community is so captivated by the "strange and sinister-looking" sculptures that they ignore Nefolovhodwe's grand exit:

Some of the figurines are so strange and sinister-looking that they are afraid that they might scare the children. But to their surprise the children love them. They look at them and laugh. Everyone is so engrossed in the figurines that no one notices Nefolovhodwe and his truck drive away. He honks the hooter of his limousine, which produces a few bars of a hymn that is an all-time favourite at funerals. But no one pays any attention. Everyone is absorbed in the figurines. The children are falling into such paroxysms of laughter that they roll around on the ground. Toloki is amazed to see that the figurines give pleasure to the children in the same way that Noria gave pleasure to the whole community back in the village. (WD, 210)

The first thing to notice here is how the grotesque and eldritch form of these figurines in fact possesses a preternatural force to induce laughter. Toloki and Noria worry that the children will be frightened by the figurines, but are surprised to see them "falling into [...] paroxysms of laughter" instead. If we return now to Bakhtin, we see that laughter and the grotesque body-public are both underlying features of carnival, which marks particular times of change and new beginnings. The "strange and sinister" likeness of Jwara's figurines seems consistent with Bakhtin's own description of the history of the grotesque. "During the classic period", he says, "the grotesque did not die but was expelled from the sphere of official art to live and develop in certain 'low' nonclassic areas: plastic comic art [...] Kerch terracotta's, comic masks, Sileni, figurines of the demons of fertility, and the popular statuettes of the little monster Tersitus".¹²³ Some of the examples Bakhtin uses here (demonic figurines and monster-like statuettes) closely resemble the figurines of the novel. As such, these figurines give concrete form to the broader function of the carnival grotesque, which is to "consecrate inventive freedom, to permit the combination of a variety of different elements and their *rapprochement*, to liberate from the prevailing point of view of the world, from conventions and established

¹²³ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 31.

truths, from clichés, from all this is humdrum and universally accepted. This carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things”.¹²⁴ This leads Barnard to make the point that moments of collective hilarity in the novel are consistent with the carnivalesque because the novel intimates that “it is by means of laughter that the doors to a better world will be opened”.¹²⁵ She continues:

The quintessential aspect of the carnivalesque vision [...] is a peculiar and productive ambivalence. It is in this crucial respect that *Ways of Dying* is wholly congruous with the Bakhtinian vision. The grotesque image, as Bakhtin repeatedly asserts, is one that emphasises the incompleteness of the human body – its openness to the world. For all its gross materiality, the grotesque body is therefore also figurative: standing on the “threshold of the grave and the crib”, it serves as a sign of particular temporality – of the moment when the old is making way for the new. At stake in this ambivalence is thus a vision of the profound and regenerative connection between life and death, of the world of the living and the earthy netherworld.¹²⁶

In the scene under discussion, the figurines can be said to attest to the transitional and transitory conditions (what Barnard, above, calls the “sign of particular temporality”) of the period in which the novel is set. The country is on the cusp of a new democracy, radical social transformations are underway, and, just as Bakhtin predicts, we see a movement from the “prevailing point of view of the world” into a “completely new order of things”. It is a time of the liminal and the metamorphic and, reified in the form of the grotesque (and incomplete) body, it is a period of history that stands at variance with the image of the “finished, completed man, cleansed, as it were of all the scoriae of birth and development”.¹²⁷

The novel ostensibly views this interregnum in an optimistic light, because it ends with the smell of tyres that burn without “the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber” (WD, 212). But there remains an unsettling ambiguity in Toloki’s observation that ““our ways of dying are our ways of living. Or should I say our ways of living are our ways of dying?”” (WD, 98). Obviously, his statement makes reading the novel through the lens of the carnival-grotesque particularly germane, seeing as Bakhtin speaks of the grotesque body as standing on the “threshold of the grave and the crib”¹²⁸ (i.e. between dying and living) which, as Barnard suggests in the quotation above,

¹²⁴ Ibid., 34.

¹²⁵ Barnard, “On laughter”, 285.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 284.

¹²⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 25.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 26.

points to the novel's vision of a "profound and regenerative connection between life and death, of the world of the living and the earthy netherworld", one which captures the "hopefulness inherent in the human capacity for change".¹²⁹ Jwara's persistent badgering of Nefolovhodwe to rescue the figurines and deliver them to Toloki is a perfect instance of this regenerative relationship between the world of the living and the dead, because the figurines not only provide Toloki and Noria a material resource with which to aid their community (they consider selling the statues and taking the money to Madimbhaza's dumping ground), but their delivery also forces Nefolovhodwe out of his self-imposed seclusion from the community-at-large.

But Barnard fails to mention that there are instances in the novel where this connection between life and death, far from being regenerative, is in fact conceived in what are more *degenerative* terms. I use two examples. One Nurse, after visiting a government mortuary and seeing the morning delivery of bodies – "perhaps twenty bodies of old and young men and women, beautiful girls with stab wounds lying in grotesque positions, children who were barely in their teens, all victims of the raging war consuming our lives" [WD, 19-20]) – exclaims to her listeners: "I tell you, mothers and fathers, there is death out there. Soon we shall experience the death of birth itself if we go on at this rate" (WD, 20). At one level of reading, this Nurse refers to physical deaths, perhaps those of mothers specifically, whose capacity to *give* birth would be truncated by their own death. Read through the lens of carnival, however, the Nurse's warning can refer to a frustration, or perhaps a corruption, in the incipient move toward Bakhtin's "new order of things". That is, where carnival reveals the *cyclical* nature of human existence (moments of birth and death, of change and renewal), a "death of birth" means a interruption of that cycle, a moment in which the buoyant hope that some kind of armistice might loom just ahead is frustrated and there is no "new outlook on the world", no end to the calamitous feuds which plague the country, only the chaos of the present moment. Alternatively, one could say that these cycles of change and renewal are never really interrupted, but they *are* vulnerable to being distorted and perverted such that new outlook the novel anticipates is deteriorative and regressive.

The second example is where Toloki, making his odyssean journey to the city, encounters the desperate lengths to which a local community was prepared to go in their punishment of a group of thugs:

¹²⁹ Barnard, "On laughter", 284.

Deaths and funerals continued to dog his [Toloki's] ways throughout. For instance, in one village he found the whole community in mourning. The previous week, in a moment of mass rage, the villagers had set upon a group of ten men, beat them up, stabbed them with knives, hurled them into a shack, and set it alight. They had danced around the burning shack, singing and chanting about their victory over these thugs, who had been terrorising the community for a long time. It seemed that these bandits, who, who were roasted in a funeral pyre, had thrived on raping maidens, and robbing and murdering defenceless community members. The police were unable to take any action against these gangsters, so the members of the community had come together, and had decided to serve their own blend of justice. According to a journalist who wrote about the incident 'it was as if the killing had, in a mind-blowing instant, amputated a foul and festering limb from the soul of the community.' When Toloki got there, all the villagers were numbed by their actions. They had become prosecutors, judges and executioners. But every one of them knew that the village would forever be enshrouded by the smell of burning flesh. The community would never be the same again, and for the rest of their lives, its people would walk in a daze. (WD, 66)

Paradoxically, this community has become the very thing to which they were so violently opposed, because by designating themselves "prosecutors, judges and executioners", they end up only perpetuating the crimes they had sought to punish. The narrator tells us that after their brutal acts of retribution, the community "would walk in a daze [...] for the rest of their lives", having been so "numbed by their actions" that their existence seems fixed in a kind of medial state, one that now borders the space *between* life and death. Taken in this context, the notion that "our ways of dying are our ways of living" can mean that incessant act of violence can so traumatise and benumb communities that they begin to live as if they were *already dead*. Here, one might say, the grotesque and the gothic unite, because while the former speaks of a transitional moment, a moment of incompleteness and imperfection, the latter transmutes this moment into something terrifying and almost otherworldly: a gothic undead – animated yet in fact "in a daze" and "numbed". Although these examples are meant to attest to the fact that Mda complicates issues of life and death, of change and renewal, the novel's ultimate prognosis is, I think, a positive one. As already stated, the novel ends by transmuting the necklacing image into the innocuous smell of "pure wholesome rubber without the "sickly stench of roasting human flesh" (WD, 212). The very instruments of brutality are themselves now burning, suggesting an end to hostilities and a future that is hopeful, even if still inchoate.

To return now to the figurines: I discussed earlier how Mda inverts the ostensible perception of Toloki as a social pariah by suggesting that those who might historically have been labelled as marginal or peripheral figures can in fact be powerful agents in transforming society. In the excerpt under discussion, Mda seems to be extending this

notion to the realm of the aesthetic as well. It is not the frenetic vigilance of the Young Tigers that bands the community together, but rather the power of these uncanny iron-wrought statues. The potential for change, Mda seems to say, can often be found in the least expected places. Barnard makes the point that if Toloki and Noria decide to act on Nefolovhodwe's suggestion (that they sell the figurines through an art dealer) then the sculptures would effectively be robbed of their critical power, because "if sold, the grotesque objects would be incorporated into the world of beautiful people and the official economy as commodities".¹³⁰ I contend that in this apparent quandary may lie Mda's very point: namely, that the divisions between the haute bourgeoisie art connoisseurs (and by extension the world of fashionable society), and the meagre fashionings of a village artisan, can in some sense begin to find a *rapprochement* in a transcultural aesthetics, one which cuts across the fence lines of class and economic rank.

Obviously at a material level, the distinctions between these two classes (between high society and the indigents of the informal settlement) are enormous, but the novel nevertheless insists that while the impoverished can participate (albeit imaginatively) in the opulent lifestyles of the wealthy, the wealthy have an opportunity to sample the creative potential that resides within poor, seemingly nondescript communities. Jwara's figurines, once ignored by a group of thieves because, according to Toloki's mother, "they were wise enough to see that they were useless" are appraised by an art dealer and a museum man who both agree that the works have "some value" (WD, 209). The museum man says that they are "folksy" and "folksy works were always in demand with trendy collectors" (WD, 209). Lying dormant in Jwara's workshop for years, the figurines nevertheless possess creative (and commercial) value. By being subsumed into the world of beautiful people, the figurines do not lose their critical power. Rather, a recognition of their artistic value points to a recognition of the nascent inventiveness and social value of communities that are typically disregarded by the privileged and fashionable. And as already mentioned, this has material benefits too, for Toloki and Noria have the option of selling the figurines and donating the proceeds to their community.

Contrariwise, Mda dramatises the potential of the poor to participate in the world of the "city beautiful" by evoking the power of the imagination:

Toloki mixes flour and sugar that he has bought from Shadrack's spaza shop, with water. He makes a paste to use for plastering the pictures from the magazines and catalogues onto the walls. The four walls are divided into four sections. On some sections, he plasters pictures of ideal kitchens. There are also

¹³⁰ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 158-9.

pictures of lounges, of dining rooms, and of bedrooms. Then on two walls, he plasters pictures of ideal gardens and houses and swimming pools, all from the *Home and Garden* magazines. By the time he has finished, every inch of the walls is covered with bright pictures – a wallpaper of sheer luxury. (WD, 111)

Toloki uses the pictorial and the visual – rendered in the form of cutouts from a magazine devoted to affluent homes – to set the stage for his and Noria’s movement from the compacted, physical space of the urban shack settlement into the expansive, imaginative space of his mind’s eye. Moving into what is most fully described as *place* – a thoroughly appropriated and substantive space, one pregnant with meaning – Toloki takes Noria’s hand and

[...] strolls with her through the grandeur. First they go to the bedroom, and she runs and throws herself on the comfortable king-size bed. [...] Toloki kicks his legs up, and jumps up and down on the bed, like an excited child. Noria kneels on the bed, and also jumps up and down. They laugh like two mischievous children, and fight with the continental pillows. They play this game until they are exhausted. Then Noria sits on a stool and admires herself in the big dressing-table mirror. She makes up her face. There is a built-in radio on the head-board, and Toloki fiddles with the switch in order to get a station that plays beautiful music. (WD, 112)

It is through imaginatively reconstituting the space of their immediate surroundings that they are able to in some sense transcend them. And this spatial reconstitution is something embodied (they move *in* and *through* their new space) and multi-sensory (it involves sight, touch, sounds and smells). Their experience of this space is what David Crouch would call a “multi-dimensional encounter” in which spaces are felt and heard in a “multi-sensual interplay of the bodily senses”, and in which to *see* (much as Toloki and Noria “see” their luxurious world) is a “complex faculty that is not restricted to the gaze [but is] mutual, haptic, multi-focal”.¹³¹ Toloki and Noria may inaugurate their new space initially through the visual, but once established, their space becomes something more: they *feel* the “comfortable king-size bed” as they fight with their pillows to the point of exhaustion; Noria, in a kind of self-reflexive, double-gaze *sees* herself seeing herself, so to speak, for in this imagined world she sees herself on a stool, admiring her own image in the “big dressing-table mirror”; and Toloki fiddles with the radio switch so they can *bear* a “station that plays beautiful music”. Crucially, this space is also something shared – when Crouch says that to “see” is something mutual, he is referring to the way shared spaces

¹³¹ David Crouch, “Flirting with space: tourism geographies as sensuous/expressive practice” in Carolyn Cartier and Alan A. Lew, eds., *Seductions of Place: Geographical Perspectives on Globalisation and Touristed Landscapes* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 29.

are always inter-subjective. “By our own presence”, he observes, “we have an influence on others, on their space and on their practice of that space” and, in the same way, “the movement of others, and ourselves in their relation, complicates and nuances [the] process through which we make [...] sense of [...] space”.¹³² For Toloki and Noria, the fact that they are both of them participants in this new, imaginative expansion is something mutually reinforcing. When Toloki takes Noria’s hand, it is an invitation to her to both share and co-create this new world with him.

Moving into their fully-stocked kitchen, then into the lounge where they “stretch out on the black leather sofas” (WD, 112), they end up in their new garden:

They walk out of their Mediterranean-style mansion through an arbour that is painted crisp white. This is the lovely entrance that graces their private garden. Four tall pillars hoist an overhead trellis laced with Belle of Portugal roses. A bed of delphiniums, snapdragons, cosmos, and hollyhocks rolls to the foot of the arbour. Noria and Toloki take a brief rest in the wooded gazebo, blanketed by foliage and featuring a swing. [...] The whole garden is a potpourri of colour, designed by expert landscape architects. Petals and scents drift above the pathways that twist and wind up the slope. The paving is made from flagstones, fitted together like a jigsaw puzzle, and curving around a bright bank of salvia, azeleas, petunias and nicotiana. There are also varieties of grasses that create a natural palette of textures, rhythm, and soft colours. There are slashing brooks and waterfalls that cascade to a collecting pool. Pools and ponds are a haven for wildlife and water plants. (WD, 112-3)

The detail here is striking, and nowhere else in the novel is the narrator more picturesque or expansive in his descriptions. Toloki’s new world becomes an opportunity for a more effusive and expressive style – a welcome respite, perhaps, from the more sober descriptions of shack life and the extreme vicissitudes of the city. After walking in their garden, they return to their house to get their cakes from the oven:

The oven automatically switched itself when the cakes were ready, and while Toloki and Noria were frolicking in the garden. Using some of the silverware and china that is kept in the dining-room sideboard, Toloki serves Noria with a variety of cakes. For himself, he serves only Swiss roll and green onions. They eat quietly for some time. (WD, 113-4)

We know that up to now their journey into this world has been an imaginative one, inspired by the *Home and Garden* cutouts and then expanded and explored through what seems a combination of wish-fulfillment and a willful suspension of disbelief in learning “how to live”. But whereas Toloki serves Noria a “variety of cakes”, using “some of the silverware and china that is kept in the dining-room sideboard” (lavish utensils which

¹³² Ibid.

could only exist in his imagination), he serves himself “only Swiss roll and green onions”. By this point in the novel, it has been well established that this is Toloki’s “favourite food, a delicacy” (WD, 14). But Toloki is still at this moment in the world he and Noria have created, and so by serving himself his regular diet, he is in effect cojoining the concrete, physical space of the shack settlement with the mental space of his fairytale mansion. Because the Swiss roll and green onions exist coincidentally in *both* these spaces, Toloki is able to merge imaginative and real, a practice Noria later resolves to imitate when, clearing the catalogue pages on her mud flow, she realises they “will come in handy again when she eats” (WD, 114). The appearance of the cakes also inaugurates the return to the shack, because Noria thinks they are a “waste of money” (WD, 114) compared with more practical items like “mealie-meal, sugar, tea, dripping, or paraffin” (WD, 114). Such frugality is a far cry from the lavish vistas of their Mediterranean-style mansion, and it brings the reader back down to the more sober conditions of Noria’s home which is “devoid even of a single stool” (WD, 114). Toloki, however, has taught her how to live, and she realises that even a routine practice like eating or walking can be imaginatively transmuted into something powerfully transcendent; she now wants to walk in [the] garden with [him] every day” (WD, 115).

There is a striking intertext here between *Ways of Dying* and *The Whale Caller* that deserves some mention. In a manner similar to Toloki and Noria, Saluni and the Whale Caller participate in a practice called “window shopping” which “entails strolling along the aisles, stopping at the shelves displaying food they like, and then eating it with their eyes” (WC, 91).

They walk together pushing a trolley. Saluni stops in front of a shelf containing cans of beef stew. She looks at the pieces of meat, tomatoes, carrots and potatoes swimming in brown onion gravy on the label. She swallows hard as she eats the stew with her eyes. Then she moves on to the next shelf, and this one is stacked with cans of corned beef with a picture of the beef, potatoes and fried eggs sunny side up. And then to cans of chicken á la king in thick mushroom sauce. Food fit for a queen. She gormandises it all with her greedy eyes. (WC, 91)

“By the time they walk out of the supermarket”, we are told, “they have satisfied their tastes, now they go back home to satisfy their hunger with macaroni and cheese” (WC, 92). Like Toloki and Noria, Saluni and the Whale Caller use the tactile and the visual to imaginatively transcend what their economic resources will allow them (in this case, they are unable to afford food more luxurious than macaroni and cheese). And again, it is something decidedly sensuous and willful on their part, involving things like sight and

swallowing. As an aside, there are a number of other intertextual markers that emerge between these two novels. Both Toloki and the Whale Caller, for instance, are given to the mystical/spiritual: Toloki in his emulation of the *aghori sadhu* and the Whale Caller in his routine confessional – iconised in the figure of Mr. Yodd. The Whale Caller “dons his new tuxedo” after performing a “ritual spraying of his body with essence” (WC, 49), and Toloki mourns in a “black costume and top hat” (WD, 11) and “splashes his whole body with perfume” (WD, 100) after washing at the beach changerooms. And where the Whale Caller blows a kelp horn, Toloki chants in wailings and moanings.

For the purposes of this discussion, the point I want to make here is that Mda seems anxious to show, in both these texts, how the imagination can be a formidable ally in the onerous task of surviving the urban environment, especially in relative poverty. This is something that is typically *outward* reaching: Toloki appropriates, for instance, the ritual practices of the *aghori sadu* whom he joins in distant lands to cook food on funeral pyres and feed on human waste and corpses. This idea, “imported from away [...] transforms Toloki’s experiences of every day life: it enables him to think of his poverty as a form of monkish austerity and to consider the shopping trolley in the smelly waiting room as his ‘headquarters’ – the base of operations of a serious professional”.¹³³ Barnard refers to AbdouMaliq Simone’s research on cities like Cape Town, Johannesburg, Khartoum, and Dakar in which Simone suggests that “it is the very vulnerability of [...] city dwellers [such as Toloki] that produces their need for extended networks of association, expanded circuits of movement, and imaginative affiliations that reach far and wide”.¹³⁴ When he first arrives in the city, Toloki looks for his first job at the docks, because many of his homeboys “told stories of sea adventures, as if they themselves were sailors. They bragged of a world that Toloki had never imagined, even for a day, he would see with his own eyes, let alone be part of” (WD, 120). This is why the waterfront is such a useful place for Toloki: it permits him a kind of “imaginative expansion” where, watching the ships come and go from far-off ports, he can mentally (re)position himself within a multiplicity of spaces (distant lands, foreign cultures) allowing him the opportunity of staging “new modes of self-invention”¹³⁵ as he has need of them. For instance, those that think of Toloki’s combination of “Swiss cake relished with green onions” (WD, 14) as unusual is for him “all the more reason to like it”, because “it gives him an aura of austerity that he associates with monks of eastern religions that he has

¹³³ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 155.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

heard sailors talk about” (WD, 15). This association is something inspired by a pamphlet given him by a “pink-robed devotee who disembarked from a boat two summers ago” (WD, 15). Toloki can now use the pamphlet to appropriate the holy practices of these “oriental monks” (WD, 15) and walk “the same ground that these holy men walk”(WD, 15) in fitting with his own monastic profession.

The Whale Caller, too, looks out onto the ocean, but his connection is with the natural/aquatic itself, more specifically Sharisha, a southern right whale with whom Saluni is at war for the Whale Caller’s affections. *The Whale Caller* is of course much darker than *Ways of Dying*, so the intertexts between these two novels do have their limitations. What both texts dramatise, however, is the power of the imagination to evoke alternate ways of seeing and perceiving oneself in relation to the world. Whether this be a night of fine-dining just by perusing the shelves of a local supermarket, the stretching of oneself out across the globe simply by watching mariners and their cargo come and go from a waterfront port, or the transformation of an enclosed, dilapidated shack space into an expansive and fetching Mediterranean-style mansion, the imagination, Mda seems to say, is for some people the only resource they have to lay claim to a reality less severe or testing than the one which defines their daily lot. As Simone notes, “Even though it is difficult for a man, woman, or child to imagine, reflect, conceive, or create on an empty stomach, empty stomachs do not terminate the existence of the imagination”.¹³⁶

I want to make a few more points specifically about Toloki and Noria’s ascent from the shack settlement into the realms of the imagination. Firstly, I would agree with Christopher Warnes that describing a scene such as this in magic realist terms (as many critics have done) is something of a misdiagnosis. Whereas magical realism, in as concise a definition as possible, “signifies a mode of narration that naturalises the supernatural, representing real and non-real in a state of equivalence and refusing either greater claim to truth”,¹³⁷ Mda’s point, by contrast, concerns “the empowering qualities of the imagination, fuelled by desire, rather than having anything to do with the supernatural.”¹³⁸ But then we must ask: what do Toloki and Noria desire? Does a sense of capitalist entitlement (striving only for a bigger house and a larger garden) mark the limits of their imaginative escapade? I would say no: the novel is too critical of a character like Nefolovhodwe for it to condone materialist profligacy. In fact, Nefolovhodwe is only redeemed when he uses his wealth to *serve* the community by transporting Jwara’s

¹³⁶ Robinson, “(Im)mobilising space”, 165. Citing Simone.

¹³⁷ Warnes, “Chronicles of belief and unbelief”, forthcoming. Referencing Chiampi, Chanady, and Faris.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

figurines to their rightful heir. And when Toloki is presented with the opportunity to make money off the figurines, his first thought is to “take the money to Madimbhaza’s dumping ground” (WD, 211) rather than keep it for himself. So though Toloki and Noria sample, vicariously, the opulent lifestyles of the rich, the thrust of their imaginative journey is about learning “how to live” – invoking the imagination as something that is transcendent without being escapist, something that revels in the grandiose and luxurious without making these things part of some strictly materialist ambition. Robinson writes,

The magical realism of the novel does not undo the spaces of poverty – but it refuses to treat experiences of these spaces as one-dimensional. Shack settlements may be spaces of exclusion, of poverty and neglect on the part of the authorities. But they are still part of the city, part of the creative potential of modern urban life. They are places where people build everyday lives, imagine and reimagine themselves, and make homes from which they set out to negotiate – and change – city spaces.¹³⁹

Robinson goes on to cite research by Escobar and Alvarez on urban movements in South America in which they suggest that “rather than seeing [the] movements of the poor as being simply about material resources and needs” we consider the idea that they are also about “reimagining identities, [...] using creative cultural capacities to remake the meaning of places and communities”.¹⁴⁰ Though Escobar and Alvarez’s observations are centred in a different context/location to Mda’s novel, and though I would tend to disagree with Robinson’s magical realist designation, the underlying point these critics are making seems fully consistent with the way Toloki and Noria treat the spaces around them. Through the lens of cultural forms and representations, spaces can become multi-dimensional and mutable. In this way spaces, while certainly territorial, are also in some sense discursive, constructed, and therefore susceptible to de/reconstruction. Toloki and Noria, by relating to space in new and imaginative ways, can therefore remake and rework their environment. Though constricted by the narrow dimensions of Noria’s one-roomed shack, they learn to bypass the limits of territoriality and begin to speak a new kind of space into existence, one which though not fully tangible, nevertheless profoundly changes the way they relate to this space and to each other.

Their imaginative conjuration also connects, like so much of the novel, with the role of the artist, because by imagining their new world (which they plan to revisit), by in a sense giving it shape from the pictures of a magazine, and by moving through it in their minds, they are inadvertently operating in a *creative* capacity. And certainly if read, as

¹³⁹ Robinson, “(Im)mobilising space”, 164.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid.

Mervis suggests, as a unique South African black *künstlerroman*,¹⁴¹ this would form part of Toloki's own maturation as an artist figure, a maturation in which Noria has played a decisive role. Not only is it with Noria that he takes his imaginative journey, but it is she who inspires his frenzied drawings (discussed earlier) and who revives in him the memories of his rural past which Mda describes, revealingly, in painterly terms:

Noria. The village. His memories have faded from the deep yellow-ochre of the landscape, with black beetles rolling black dung down the slopes, and colourful birds swooping down to feed on the hapless insects, to a dull canvas of distant and misty grey. (WD, 28)

But after being reacquainted with Noria after many years, the "dull canvas" is enlivened with colours:

Now, however, it is all coming back. Pale herdboys, with mucus hanging from the nostrils, looking after cattle whose ribs you could count, on barren hills with patches of sparse grass and shrubs. Streams that flowed reluctantly in summer and happily dried in winter. Homesteads of three or four huts each, decorated outside with geometric patterns of red, yellow, blue and white. Or just white-washed all around. (WD, 28)

Certainly, this is a far cry from the utopian wonderland of his imaginative mansion for the cattle here are skeletal, the hills barren, the grass and shrubs sparse, and streams flowing reluctantly. But the moment is crucial: Noria has helped Toloki recover the memories of his rural past in a way that is evocative without being overly sentimental or a part of some idyllic, pastoral utopia. And this recovery would seem to inaugurate Toloki's return to his artist self, stunted when Jwara, absorbed in his figurines, derided his son by giving him scant recognition for a picture which Toloki won in a national art competition. The return of the figurines at the end of the novel therefore marks a kind of reconciliation with the life of the village, a bringing together of past with present, rural with urban. Barnard writes that "it is telling that Toloki and Noria decide to keep one of the figurines in their shack to 'remind themselves where they came from' (WD, 211). In accepting the strange bequest of the figurines from his father, Toloki is in effect learning to view his rural past in a more positive way. He is reconnecting with his artistic heritage in both a generational and in a more broadly cultural sense".¹⁴² Because of the magical nature of Toloki's culture, it is through the figurines that father can reach out to son and confer on him something of this heritage. "In my culture the magical is not

¹⁴¹ Mervis, "Fiction for development", 42.

¹⁴² Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 157.

disconcerting”, Mda has said, “it is taken for granted. No one tries to find a natural explanation for the unreal. The unreal happens as part of reality. The supernatural is presented without judgment. A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernisation”.¹⁴³ In relocating the figurines, the rural and hence the magical are being brought to bear upon the urbanised sons and daughters of the village, reminding them of their beginnings, and insisting that they reckon and engage with the culture of their birth.

Ultimately, the imaginative is presented as something potentially catalytic: it precipitates the growth of Toloki in his capacity as mourner, as artist, and as companion and “homeboy” to Noria. It is something which can be shared, lived in, and moved through. It also, as already mentioned, changes the way spaces are used and apprehended, as suggested by the following passage:

In the afternoon Toloki walks to the taxi rank, which is on the other side of the downtown area, or what is called the central business district. The streets are empty, as all the stores are closed. He struts like a king, for today the whole city belongs to him. He owns the wide tarmac roads, the skyscrapers, the traffic lights, and the flowers on the sidewalks. That is what he loves most about this city. It is a garden city, with flowers and well-tended shrubs and bushes growing at every conceivable place. In all seasons, blossoms fill the air. Sometimes when he goes to a funeral he picks up a flower or two, as long as no one sees him, as you are not supposed to pick the flowers in the city parks, gardens and sidewalks. And that gives him a great idea: he might as well pick a few flowers for Noria. Just to make doubly sure, he looks around, then picks a few zinnias. He would have preferred roses, but he would have had to cross two streets in the opposite direction to get roses. So, zinnias will do. (WD, 45-6)

The first thing which strikes me about this scene is the sense of freedom Toloki must feel as he struts “like a king” in this city which, at least for today, seems to belong entirely to him. To understand just how revolutionary it is for a black urbanite like Toloki to adopt this type of kind of self-assured attitude to the spaces of the city, one must place it in the context of apartheid and the state’s domination of even the most minute dynamics of urban space. Though this has been discussed in part already, I want to use Foucault here and his discussion of Bentham’s *Panopticon* which, together with Levebvre’s notion of abstract space, provides a useful template for understanding the mechanisms of state surveillance and control. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Foucault devotes an entire chapter to panopticism, which he bases on Bentham’s architectural model of penal authority and control. Foucault describes this model as follows:

¹⁴³ Zakes Mda, “Acceptance speech for the Olive Schreiner Prize” (1997) *English Academy Review* 14: 281.

[...] at the periphery, an annular building; at the centre, a tower; this tower is pierced with wide windows that open onto the inner side of the ring; the peripheral building is divided into cells, each of which extends the whole width of the building; they have two windows, one on the inside, corresponding to the windows of the tower; the other, on the outside, allows the light to cross the cell from one end to the other. All that is needed, then, is to place a supervisor in a central tower and to shut up in each cell a madman, a patient, a condemned man, a worker or a schoolboy. By the effect of backlighting, one can observe from the tower, standing out precisely against the light, the small captive shadows in the cells of the periphery. [...] The panoptic mechanism arranges spatial unities that make it possible to see constantly and to recognise immediately. In short, it reverses the principle of the dungeon; or rather of its three functions – to enclose, to deprive of light and to hide – it preserves only the first and eliminates the other two. Full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap.¹⁴⁴

The panopticon “induce[s] in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power”.¹⁴⁵ What Foucault means here is that the panopticon’s design is such that the exercise of power can be perfected without the need for perpetual maintenance, because the prisoner believes himself *always* to be observed, having in his sight only the “tall outline of the central tower from which he is spied upon”.¹⁴⁶ This “fictitious relation” between observer and observed eventually creates a “real subjection” in which “he who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power” by making them “play spontaneously upon himself”, “inscrib[ing] in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection”.¹⁴⁷ Because the observed is under the impression he is constantly surveyed (a fact he cannot know for sure, but is forced to assume), he conforms without question, thereby perpetuating and concretising his own subjection. And just who are these observed? They are the *personae non grata* of society, the “lepers”, those who find themselves on the underside of a binary branding: “mad/sane; dangerous/harmless; normal/abnormal”.¹⁴⁸ Foucault in fact opens his chapter with a story of plague and contagion – something that is met with *order*, which “lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterises him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him”.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁴ Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 200.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 202-3.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 197.

The panopticon is as much an architectural design for the penitentiary as it is a metaphor for the exercise of authority. Foucault says, “Whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used”.¹⁵⁰ In the context of apartheid, we could say that non-whites (particularly blacks) were effectively branded as the symbolic lepers of urban society. Skulking to and fro between their homes on the urban periphery and their places of work in the suburbs and city centres, they lived under threat of constant surveillance by not only state officials but members of the public, too. Being immediately recognisable by their darker physiognomy, they would feel always watched yet were ever unsure of who exactly was watching them. What is certain is that nearly everyone would to some degree or another have registered their presence. Just as Foucault says above, visibility is a trap: blacks were under surveillance because they were visible *as blacks*. And because skin colour is something so loaded with social and political fictions that parade themselves as essentialist attributes of blackness or whiteness, many Africans internalised their status as “lepers” and became inadvertently implicated in their own subjection.

So for Toloki to “strut like a king” in this city, for him to imaginatively take ownership of its spaces, is progressive because it represents such a radical break from his diminished citizenship under apartheid. Although it could be said that Toloki’s self-assurance hinges on the absence of other gazes (for today, the “streets are empty” and “all the stores are closed”), he still moves from oppressed subject to “king”, despite his poverty, his rank smell, and his unattractive visage. It is as though Mda deliberately set out to destabilise the idea that such a character cannot meaningfully refashion the everyday spaces of the cityscape.

Robinson reads this scene via Levebvre’s notion of “representational space”. For Levebvre, “representational space” “*overlays* physical space, making symbolic use of its objects”.¹⁵¹ This type of space, he says, “speaks”, is “alive”.¹⁵² In Andrew Merrifield’s discussion, it is “an elusive space which the imagination [...] must seek to change and appropriate”.¹⁵³ In order to fully appreciate the transformative potential of “representational space”, it needs to be understood in contradistinction to “abstract space” or “representations of space”, which Levebvre designates the dominant space of society. This space represses the possibilities for alternative spatialities, emphasising

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 205.

¹⁵¹ Andrew Merrifield, “Place and space: a Lefebvrian reconciliation” *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* New Series 18 (4) (1993): 523. Citing Levebvre.

¹⁵² Ibid. Citing Levebvre.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

instead homogeneity, specific sets of power relations, and a dominance of the visual.¹⁵⁴ For Robinson, this space was exemplified in the proxemics of apartheid: “Planners worked for decades”, she says, “to eliminate difference and diversity from the country’s urban spaces, to create single-use and single-race neighbourhoods, to keep apart rather than to bring together, to separate out the colourful mix that more cosmopolitan urban traditions celebrate and advocate”.¹⁵⁵ But representational space, she says, “invites a fairly promising tale about how we might imagine spaces *changing*, [because] every time we move around the city we potentially use spaces differently, imagine them differently. [...] Different people in the city have different resources to draw upon in their imaginative reuse and remaking of the city – different histories, different positions”.¹⁵⁶ In his analysis of space and politics, Levebvre notes:

To exclude the urban from groups, classes, individuals, is also to exclude them from civilisation, if not society itself. The *right to the city* [an idea to which Levebvre devotes an entire chapter] legitimates the refusal to allow oneself to be removed from urban reality by a discriminatory and segregative organisation. This right of the citizens (if one wants, of “man”) proclaims the inevitable crisis of city centres based upon segregation and establishing it: centres of decision-making, wealth, power, of information and knowledge, which reject towards peripheral spaces all those who do not participate in political privileges.¹⁵⁷

Levebvre contrasts “peripheral spaces” and “city centres” as two dichotomous positions, reminding me of Foucault’s panopticon (above), which refers to an annular building “at the periphery” and a tower “at the centre”. Levebvre maintains that “there is no urban reality without a centre, without a gathering together of all that can be born in space and can be produced in it [...]”.¹⁵⁸ By sharply restricting the access of non-whites to these centres, and relegating them instead to spaces on the periphery such as in the mass-scale homeland relocation policies, urban planners sought to maintain *order* – a concept common to both Foucault’s and Levebvre’s discussions. Toloki, however, by moving through “representational space”, is able to imaginatively overlay his physical surroundings so that the city in one sense becomes *his*, thus evincing a complete reorientation to urban space by relating to it in new, liberating, and transformative ways.

¹⁵⁴ Robinson, “(Im)mobilising space”, 165.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁵⁶ Robinson, “(Im)mobilising space”, 168.

¹⁵⁷ Henri Levebvre, *Writings on Cities* Trans. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford, UK and Cambridge, US: Blackwell, 1996), 195.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

Chapter Two

The Heart of Redness: Starting with Rural Space

“What choice do we have? Kill the amaGogotya! Destroy their crops! Kill their cattle! Burn their houses!” (HR, 123)

In 1853, the amaXhosa were defeated in the War of Mlanjeni – considered their last substantial military challenge against colonial domination. The British, supported by the amaMfengu (many of whom had converted to Christianity) “smashed [their] way through Xhosaland, burning crops, seizing cattle and summarily executing captives”.¹⁵⁹ But this was not the first time the amaXhosa had clashed with Britain. In 1835 (in what was called Hintsa’s war), British troops murdered Hintsa, the Xhosa king, by decapitation, burning the fields and homesteads of their enemies, driving away their cattle, and appropriating increasing amounts of their land for colonial projects.¹⁶⁰ The Xhosa were again defeated in the 1846 War of the Axe, which led Mlanjeni, a prophet, to announce the need for a national purification that involved the driving out of witchcraft.¹⁶¹ Witches were believed to cause misfortune, and so Mlanjeni constructed poles through which it was said these witches could not pass. The amaXhosa emerged from their purification reinvigorated, and determined to drive the British off their land.¹⁶²

Joining with Khoi rebels, Xhosa warriors fought “the longest and most costly war of resistance in their history”.¹⁶³ But even a number of successful ambushes in the Amatole mountains did not guarantee their victory, and the Xhosa were finally forced to accept defeat. But the War of Mlanjeni did not translate only into the loss of more land. It also paved the way for the gradual encroachment of a colonial jurisprudence, one that would increasingly supplant indigenous systems of governance. The British installed magistrates on what remained of Xhosaland in an attempt to circumvent the authority of the tribal chiefs.¹⁶⁴ “Civilisation” was finally being brought to the Xhosa people, and this meant the annexation of land, the reinscription of names, the introduction of new forms of currency, and the imposition of new laws and ordinances.

In addition to this territorial defeat and the diminishing *esprit de corps* of the amaXhosa, an outburst of lung-sickness broke out amongst their cattle in the mid 1850s,

¹⁵⁹ Ross, *A Concise History of South Africa*, 56.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 57.

in some areas killing as many as two thirds of the cattle population. It was against this backdrop, against the threat of being finally subsumed into the colonial order with precious few resources left at their disposal, that some of the amaXhosa began to listen to the voice of Nongqawuse, a young prophetess whose millenarian prognostications assured them that their ancestors would rise from the dead, riding on the waves of the ocean, to come and drive the whites off the land and into the sea. But this promise carried with it a condition for its fulfilment: the amaXhosa would have to slaughter their cattle and destroy all their grain. When the ancestors returned, they would bring with them new “herds of wonderful beasts” and the “newly dug grain pits would fill up”.¹⁶⁵ In Mda’s novel, Nongqawuse’s prophecies are transcribed as follows:

“The Strangers said I must tell the nation that all cattle now living must be slaughtered. They have been reared by contaminated hands because there are people who deal in witchcraft. The fields must not be cultivated, but great new grain pits must be dug, new houses must be built, and great strong cattle kraals must be erected. Cut out new milk sacks and weave many doors from buka roots. The Strangers say that the whole community of the dead will arise. When the time is ripe they will arise from the dead, and new cattle will fill the kraals. The people must leave their witchcraft, for soon they will be examined by diviners.” (HR, 60)

Mhlakaza, the erstwhile Christian proselyte who now violently eschews his Christian name, Wilhelm Goliath, continues:

“The rapid spread of lung-sickness is proving the Strangers right [...] The existing cattle are rotten and unclean. They have been bewitched. They must all be destroyed. You have all been wicked, and therefore everything that belongs to you is bad. Destroy everything. The new people who will arise from the dead will come with new cattle, horses, goats, sheep, dogs, fowl and any other animals that the people may want. But the new animals of the new people cannot mix with your polluted ones. So destroy them. Destroy everything. Destroy the corn in your fields and in your granaries. Nongqawuse had told us that when the new people come there will be a new world of contentment and no one will ever lead a troubled life again.” (HR, 60)

But not everyone lends credence to Nongqawuse’s predictions, and the Xhosa nation becomes fissured along the divide of belief: the amaThamba (the Believers) heed Nongqawuse’s prophecies, but the amaGogotya (the Unbelievers) reject them. This polarisation is in Mda’s narrative embodied in two brothers, Twin and Twin-Twin. After losing his prize horse to lung-sickness, Twin says to his brother, “Perhaps there is something in this Nongqawuse thing [...] perhaps she is the prophet that will save us”

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

(HR, 85). Twin eventually becomes one of the staunchest of the Believing clan, even burning his brother's fields to hasten the fulfillment of the ancestors' promise. But for Twin-Twin, Nongqawuse is just a "foolish girl" (HR, 85), and a puppet of Mhlakaza. Both brothers cling unwaveringly to their convictions, and each describes the other's standpoint as "dangerous": "Now I want you to listen very carefully", says Twin-Twin to his brother, "I can see you are taking a dangerous path. We have our own god. And he has no son either. Unlike the god of the white man or of your wife's people" (HR, 86). Twin, however, "[feels] sorry for his brother" (HR, 91) for not believing, and is depressed because "he realis[es] that his brother was too far gone to be saved. He was in cahoots with dangerous people who were servants of the colonial masters" (HR, 97).

Ostensibly, this division between Twin/Twin-Twin and Belief/Unbelief would seem to mirror a similar division between tradition/modernity – the idea being that those who embrace Nongqawuse are really rejecting their assimilation into the colonial project. But Belief *qua* belief (as opposed to the idea of Belief as a collective defence against absorption into the colony) is really something littered with Christian intertexts and Biblical allusions, all of which complicate the lines that separate a neat, bipartite boundary between Believer and Unbeliever. Hundreds of people gather to see Mlanjeni, for instance, because "word had spread up to the foothills of the Maluti Mountains that Mlanjeni cured the sick, and made the lame to walk, the dumb to speak and the blind to see" (HR, 16). The Apostle Matthew similarly records Jesus' message to John the Baptist that "the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed [...] the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up".¹⁶⁶ The parallels here are clear: in both texts, the same miracles are said to take place, and both are transcribed with near-identical features of style. Mlanjeni, however, is not meant to be read as a messianic figure himself: he does not raise the dead as Jesus did, but rather points the way forward (perhaps like John the Baptist) to the fulfillment of a promise – in this case that the ancestors will be resurrected in bodily form to come and take vengeance on the amaXhosa's enemies.

Khoi mythology, too, carries traces of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Twin's wife, Qukezwa, tells him the story of Tsiqwa, who through the prophet Heitsi Eibib brought his people to the "Great River", which "they could not cross, for the river was overflowing" (HR, 24). Fearing death, Heitsi Eibib prays "Oh Tsiqwa! Father of fathers. Open yourself that I may pass through, and close yourself afterwards" (HR, 24). "As soon as he had uttered these words the Great River opened, and the people crossed. But

¹⁶⁶ *The Holy Bible*, English Standard Version (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway Bibles, 2005), Matthew 11:5.

when the enemies tried to pass through the opening, when they were right in the middle, the Great River closed upon them, and they all perished in its waters” (HR, 24). Aside from the alteration in names, this is also the story of the Israelite exodus from Egypt, though the novel insists “the Khoikhoi people were singing the story of Heitsi Eibib long before the white missionaries came to these shores with their similar stories of Moses and the crossing of the Red Sea” (HR, 288). Moses prays to God, stretching his hand over the sea, and the Bible says that “the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided”.¹⁶⁷ As Moses leads the Israelites across the Red Sea, Pharaoh gives chase. Moses again stretches out his hand “and the sea returned to its normal course” and “the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea” so that “not one of them remained”.¹⁶⁸

These examples testify to the fact that Belief in the novel is something very much imbricated in cross-mythological influences and traditions, unmasking its essentially hybrid and composite nature. Farred rightly says of Mda’s novel that it “reveals how, often unwittingly, the ‘pagan’ Believers took many of their prophetic cues from Christian religious practices, practices borrowed, absorbed, and rearticulated from the colonialist Christians who ruled them and the colonised converts with whom they shared, almost always antagonistically, a socio-political space”.¹⁶⁹ The Cattle-Killing movement, then, and the events surrounding it, was something thoroughly syncretic, involving a multiplicity of composite (yet interconnected) narratives concerning the relationship between culture and religious belief, the world of the living and, in the case of the amaXhosa, the ancestral netherworld. And it is precisely because of this religio-mythological enmeshment that an Unbeliever/Believer and, by extension, a modernity/tradition binary is somewhat problematic - a reason why Mda treats this binary with a certain irony, a point Farred seems to miss when he says that *The Heart of Redness* is unable to “comprehend the complexity of Christian discourse, especially Christianity’s dialogic relationship to the prophetic tradition articulated by Nongqawuse.”¹⁷⁰ One of the textual examples Farred cites to support his conclusion is a scene where the narrator tells us how Mhlakaza extends a “hand of reconciliation to the white settlers” by inviting them to kill their livestock and destroy their crops so that they,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., Exodus 14:21.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., Exodus 14:27-8.

¹⁶⁹ Grant Farred, “A politics of doubt” in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 6.

too, can partake of “the good news of the resurrection.” (WD, 152) In the novel, Mhlakaza continues,

“It is not enough for you to read the big black book,” he warned. “You must throw away your witchcraft. The people that have come have not come to make war but to bring about a better state of things for all.” But the colonists were too stubborn to accept his invitation. What the Believers had suspected all along, that the whites were beyond redemption, was confirmed. What else would one expect from people who were a product of a different creation from that of the amaXhosa, people who were so unscrupulous that they killed the son of their own god? (WD, 152-3)

Farred says of this passage that it is “singularly unconvincing [that] a community of believers willing to put their all in faith, their future, and their material well being in the hands, or, words, more precisely, of a pubescent girl [would] not comprehend the possibility of a miraculous death and rebirth.”¹⁷¹

My response to Farred is twofold. Firstly, the Believer’s disgust here concerns the idea of the crucifixion specifically (that a people could kill the son of their god), which in no way implies that they do not comprehend the possibility of resurrection – that is, Farred makes a logical leap in reading their disgust as their disbelief. Secondly, even if Farred is right that the Believers’ rejection of *some* tenets of Christianity seems unconvincing in light of their inadvertent assimilation of many other Christian precepts, far from being a convincing broadside against the novel, this only testifies to the entangled nature of Belief – part and parcel of the colonisers’ infiltrating (and in many ways displacing) influence on Xhosa cultural praxis. It is not that *The Heart of the Redness* does not comprehend the dialogism between Xhosa mythology and Christianity. On the contrary, the text dramatises this religious fusion deliberately, so that the Believers are themselves unaware of the contradictions and inconsistencies that characterise their faith.

As I said, Mda subjects the Belief/Unbelief binary to a somewhat ironising treatment. Undermining the ostensibly Manichean divide between these groups, for instance, is the role of humour, specifically in the modern-day chronotope. Wendy Woodward notes that the feud between Believer and Unbeliever is dramatised so that it “occasions much laughter.”¹⁷² “Mda undermines, quite profoundly,” she says, “with recourse to traditional beliefs, dualistic (sometimes Western) thinking about differences between the human and the nonhuman, as well as between the living and the dead, or the

¹⁷¹ Ibid, 7.

¹⁷² Wendy Woodward, “‘Jim comes from jo’burg’: regionalised identities and social comedy in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*” *Current Writing* 15 (2) (2003): 182.

spirit world.”¹⁷³ Woodward cites Zim’s relationship with the wild fig tree and the *amabobobobo*¹⁷⁴ birds as example:

To the Unbelievers’ disbelief, Zim never kills, for food, the birds who inhabit the tree, not even the plump green pigeons. The conversation between him and the weaverbirds illustrates the continuity between human and nature [...]. Climatically, in the final battle between Zim and Bhonco, the former calls on the hadeda ibis to harass his enemy. The acrimony had begun at the carnivalesque concert when Zim spent all his old-age pension buying NoPetticoat to ululate until the end of the proceedings. Bhonco’s revenge for the humiliation of his wife, who had been forced to ululate until she was hoarse, was to hire a troop of ululators to perform serially outside Zim’s home. Zim’s vindictive response is to send the hadedas to laugh at Bhonco. [...] Some worry that Bhonco will send the hammerhead bird to destroy Zim’s possessions with his lightning, but most are reassured that only Zim can communicate with birds.¹⁷⁵

That the war between Bhonco and Zim is treated as “comically excessive” suggests that, as Woodward infers, there is “a rehabilitative motive to [Mda’s] humour and an undermining of oppositional thinking so destructive to the community.”¹⁷⁶ In fact, many of the oppositions of the novel (Believer/Unbeliever, rural/urban, nineteenth/twentieth century chronotopes) are constructed only to be finally deconstructed or at least seriously undermined in the author’s subtext. Of the rural/urban dichotomy, for instance, Woodward has said that “Mda challenges a number of South African literary tropes about place and identities. ‘Jim’ does not go to the metropolis to become urbanised and street-wise; instead, Camagu, the exile returned from the United States, leaves the ‘deadly streets’ of Hillbrow for the Eastern Cape village, Qolorha-by-Sea.”¹⁷⁷ Camagu, who is very much a product of a western epistemology with his PhD in communications, who desperately “needs a pedlar of dreams” (HR, 39) to help assuage the “searing longing [he feels] for an imagined blissfulness of his youth” (HR, 65), finds a certain equanimity in the rural village of Qolorha-by-Sea, an antidote to Hillbrow’s “swarm of restless humanity” (HR, 29) and the “disaffected exiles and sundry learned rejects” (HR, 28) who gather at Giggles every night to reminisce “about what they sacrificed for this country” (HR, 28). But conversely, there is the latter-day Qukezwa – a figure who cleaves intimately to her culture and its connection with nature, and who, according to Siphokazi

¹⁷³ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷⁴ I use italics for most of the Xhosa words in my discussion except when quoting from the text directly. Mda’s disglorified rendering of unitalicised Xhosa terms is considered another instance of the split-tone device that runs through this novel (discussed later) (See Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 196).

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 183-4.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 182.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 174.

Koyana, “reminds the reader of myths, unicorns, mermaids, sirens, and goddesses”.¹⁷⁸ Though Qukezwa clearly champions the rural cause, she nevertheless wears a Pierre Cardin woollen cap and wonders if she should confess to her father that she has a secret “yearning for the city” (HR, 51) where she could “be a clerk and earn better money than the small change that Dalton gives [her]” (HR, 51). The novel’s sympathies may lie with the rural, but it recognises that corruption and exploitation can happen anywhere: the city is not *simply* evil, nor is the rural *simply* good.

Even the characterisation of *The Heart of Redness* involves figures that are more complex and three dimensional than those in some of Mda’s earlier works.¹⁷⁹ If the height of apartheid didacticism tended to rely on characters who functioned as readily identifiable types (as discussed in my introduction), then by comparison many of the characters of this novel resist a final or conclusive judgment. As already mentioned, Qukezwa may be passionate about Qolorha, but she is not immune to being enchanted by modernity’s promise of a “better life”. Bhonco may be the elder of Unbelief, a revered man in his community who openly cries “because of beautiful things” (HR, 1), but he nearly murders John Dalton with a knobkierie and panga.

The novel’s formal arrangement also becomes more complicated. The temporal shifts between the nineteenth century and present day are themselves not always absolute: aside from the recurrence of certain names (Qukezwa, Dalton, Twin, Heitsi), the dual narratives that structure the text are in the end typographically coalesced, suggesting that past and present, though chronologically distinct, in fact share a particularly intimate and important connection. The point I am making here is that Mda resists the temptation to slot things into facile taxonomic pairings. When it comes to the Believer/Unbeliever dichotomy, Mda shows that this division has never been clear-cut. The Believers may reject their incorporation into the colonial order, but they are themselves entangled in the discourse of Christianity. And though the Unbelievers reject

¹⁷⁸ Siphokazi Koyana, “Qolorha and the dialogism of place in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*” *Current Writing* 15(1) (2003): 57.

¹⁷⁹ Brenda Cooper, for instance, in her review of *Ways of Dying* has said that though the novel is “politically brave” in its suggestion that “the new leadership about to assume power has elements that are elitist and corrupt”, it is only the “eccentric quirks of its main character” that rescues the novel from a “didactic one-dimensionality.” (Cooper’s review at <http://www.complete-review.com/reviews/safrica/mdaz2.htm> [accessed 20 January 2009]). While I would agree that *Ways of Dying* is more simplistic in light of Mda’s current *oeuvre* (he has since written five other novels and a collection of plays), Cooper comes across as rather patronising when she says the novel “is not an adult one and will frustrate the English adult reader”, being more accessible to a “second-language user.” The novel’s register is admittedly quite basic, but the breadth of its conceptual terrain is particularly progressive in its insistence on a new aesthetic frame of reference for local literature.

what they see as false prophecy, they inadvertently risk becoming enmeshed in a colonial modernity that is itself difficult to separate from the vigorous Mission-school proselytising that accompanied British occupation:

“And these are your friends, my brother? These people who believe in the rule of the white man and in his god?” he asked mockingly. This made Twin-Twin very uncomfortable. His unbelief in the false prophets – beginning with Mlanjeni and now including Nongqawuse and all the others who were emerging and preaching the same cattle-killing message – had forced him to form a strange alliance with people who had deserted their own god for the god of the white man. People like Ned and Mjuza, who were descendants of amaXhosa heroes but were now followers of white ways. Nxito, however, was like him. His unbelief in Nongqawuse was not unbelief in the rites, rituals and customs of the amaXhosa, and in the god who had been revealed by the likes of Ntsikana and Nxele. Mdalidephu. Qamata. Mvelingqangi. The one who was worshipped by his forefathers from the beginning of time. The one whose messengers were the ancestors. (HR, 97)

Later on, Twin-Twin is “grappling with his conscience” because

[...] it seemed to him that his unbelief was sinking him deeper into collaboration with the conquerors of his people. Although he was strong enough to resist conversion, some of his fellow Unbelievers were becoming Christians. And when they did, they sang praises of the queen of the conquerors, asking some god to save her. That worried him a lot. He did not want the queen to be saved. He wanted nothing more than to see the complete disappearance of the colonists from kwaXhosa. But the way of Nongqawuse was not the way. (HR, 153)

Farred maintains that Twin-Twin is “not attracted by Christianity but by the rationality of modernity.”¹⁸⁰ From the excerpts quoted above, however, it is clear that to distinguish modernity from Christianity as though they were two mutually exclusive concepts is in this context something not easily done. And even if we admit that Twin-Twin is successful in making this distinction (which I think he is), his affiliation with modernity-as-rationality is credible only insofar as modernity repudiates Nongqawuse’s prophecies. As the narrator makes clear in the above-quoted passages, Twin-Twin’s unbelief in Nongqawuse should not be interpreted as “unbelief in the rites, rituals and customs of the amaXhosa”. It is not then rationality *per se* that Twin-Twin finds attractive (nor is it Christianity); rather, his association with the British is born out of a belief, or “unbelief” more accurately, that both of them share. The British see the cattle-killing movement as a “superstitious delusion” inspired by “Kreli and Moshesh, the king of the Basotho

¹⁸⁰ Farred, “A politics of doubt”, forthcoming.

people” (HR, 155). Twin-Twin believes that Sir George Grey planned the whole thing, having “invented these prophecies and used Nongqawuse, Mhlakaza and Nombanda to propagate them among the Xhosa people” because “he wanted the amaXhosa to destroy themselves with their own hands, saving the colonial government from dirtying its hands with endless wars” (HR, 181). What both the British and Twin-Twin agree on, however, is that Nongqawuse’s prophecies are a fraudulent concoction designed to destroy the amaXhosa nation, and it is this consensus that forms the basis of their relationship.

Attwell, discussing the relationship between Tiyo Soga and Mhlakaza (the same Mhlakaza who constructed poles for detecting witches and who was one of the chief instigators of the Cattle-Killing movement), notes that the choice faced by Xhosa society in the mid-1850s was “not whether to choose tradition or modernity in a straightforward way, but whether to turn one’s back on the Enlightenment and modernity, thus repudiating these things – having experienced them closely enough to know their ambivalence – or to embrace them in qualified terms”.¹⁸¹ Attwell rightly notes that this qualificatory embrace of modernity is something actively interrogated in both the nineteenth-century and present-day episodes of Mda’s novel, because in both these episodes, the encounter with modernity is foregrounded “not as a completed event, but as unfinished business over which the amaXhosa [...] must take charge”.¹⁸² Attwell continues:

Mda’s larger canvas serves his mapping of the Xhosa response to modernity at a number of levels, beginning with the shock of its intrusion in the form of the demise of Xikixa, who becomes the “headless ancestor” when during the war of Mlanjeni, in a moment of iconographic reversal, he is decapitated and the flesh is boiled off his skull to preserve it for future studies in phrenology. The psychic disturbance of this moment, which is witnessed by the old man’s sons and which robs them of the means to lay him to rest, produces [a] splitting, with Twin and Twin-Twin falling into the rivalling camps of Believers and Unbelievers, answering respectively the call of indigenous and exogenous allegiances. The contemporary heirs of Twin and Twin-Twin, Zim and Bhonco, and their homesteads, are similarly caught in this division. With the apartheid years in the background, two historical moments encapsulate the ongoing struggle over modernity. In the first, around 1857, it is the prophetic movement started by Nongqawuse and sustained by her uncle, Mhlakaza, which provides a point of reference. In the second, it is the emergence of democracy in 1994, and more especially the period immediately after the elections when political freedom needs to be translated into autonomous social development.¹⁸³

¹⁸¹ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 47.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 196.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 197.

The amaXhosa's encounter with modernity is located here as something trans-temporal, involving Believers/Unbelievers past and present. Though the specificities of these encounters vary, they are both of them moments of confrontation, whether with the British in the nineteenth century or the big-city developers in the twentieth. What unites these two moments is *where* they take place – namely, Qolorha-by-Sea.

Described as a “place rich in wonders” where “the rivers do not cease flowing, even when the rest of the country knells a drought”, and where “the cattle are round and fat”, Qolorha is so beautiful that Bhonco cannot help admiring the “breathtaking view” (HR, 5) from the summit of the hill he has climbed to the Vulindlela Trading Store:

Down below, on his right, he can see the wild sea smashing gigantic waves against the rocks, creating mountains of snow-white surf. On his left his eyes feast on the green valleys and the patches of villages with beautiful houses painted pink, powder blue, yellow and white. (HR, 5)

Bhonco may eschew the “darkness of redness” (HR, 79), believing as he does that to stand for “civilisation” (HR, 79) (as though it were the sole provenance of the west) means refusing to “remain red” (HR, 79), but his enthusiasm for the Casino resort is undermined quite forcefully here by the way his eyes “feast” on Qolorha's magnificent (and still undeveloped) landscape. Bhonco's pejorative, “redness”, derives from the red ochre that many Xhosa women, including his wife, NoPetticoat, smear on their bodies. NoPetticoat, in fact, is one of the *amahomba* – “those who look beautiful and pride themselves in fashion” (HR, 47). Wearing her “red-ochred isikhakha dress”, NoPetticoat's “neck is weighted with bead-work of many kinds. There are the square *amatikiti* beads and the multi-coloured *uphalaza* and *icangci*. Her face is white with calamine lotion, and on her head she wears a big *iqhiya* turban which is broader than her shoulders. It is decorated with beads which match her *amacici* beaded earrings” (HR, 47). Though Bhonco “is in the process of persuading his wife [...] to do away with the red ochre”, NoPetticoat is a “stubborn woman”, and much to his chagrin she remains “sold on the traditional fashions of the amaXhosa” (HR, 79). This notion that to be “red” is to somehow to remain in darkness emanates in part from Philip and Iona Mayer's 1961 study of East London that categorised Africans into two groups: detribalised “school people” and “red people” (again, because of the decorative red body ochre). “School people” were mostly educated and Christian, and integrated better into city life; “red

people”, however, were “traditionalists who resisted the lure of urban ‘Western’ culture and continued to maintain strong ties to their rural homelands”.¹⁸⁴ Robins points out that

Anthropologists have tended to be particularly sympathetic towards the plight of the “red people”, who were seen to be resisting cultural incorporation into Western society. The retention of “tribal” traditions by “red people” was often interpreted as an admirable sign of their refusal to become the “civilised” clones of Europeans. This bipolar logic reproduced a chain of associated binaries: modern/traditional, urban/rural, educated/unschooled, Christian/pagan, progressive/ conservative, and so on.¹⁸⁵

Robins goes on to suggest that for Africans, the retention of more traditional cultural practices (like, in this context, the smearing of red ochre on the body) is “not so much a sign of cultural conservatism as [it is] a creative response to the harsh and exploitative conditions of their incorporation into the capitalist system”.¹⁸⁶ Much like their nineteenth-century forebears, who responded to the similarly harsh and exploitative conditions of their assimilation into the colony by cleaving to the prophecies of Nongqawuse, the embrace of “redness” by the Believers (and Unbelieving dissidents like NoPetticoat) is in many ways a form of survival – a strategic response to the threat of being overrun by the forces of modernity and the increasingly homogenous and dominating cultural forms of the city. Indeed, when Camagu arrives at Qolorha, he is “pleased to see that there are some people [...] who still wear isiXhosa costume”, noting that “most of the men and women he passes on the road don’t dress any differently from people of the city” (HR, 61).

At “nkamnkam day”, Zim, elder of the Believers, arrives “resplendent in his white *ingqawa* blanket, which is tied around the waist and is so long that it reaches his ankles. Around his neck he wears various beads such *idilizga* and *isidanga*. Around his head he wears *isiqueqwe* headbands made of very colourful beads” (HR, 48). Bhonco, by contrast, looks “like a slob” because the “loose strands of beads known as *isidanga*”, which he wears around in his neck, are “completely out of place” with his “brown overalls, gumboots and skullcap” (HR, 47). When it comes to Zim’s and Bhonco’s offspring, the differences between Qukezwa and Xoliswa Ximiya are more than just the clothes they wear; their physiognomies and bodily proportions could not be more different. Qukezwa is “short and plump” (HR, 62), and is in Camagu’s estimation “not particularly beautiful” (HR, 62) in her “skimpy blue and yellow floral dress” (HR, 62).

¹⁸⁴ Robins, “Bodies out of place”, 458-9. Citing Mayer.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 459.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

Xoliswa, by contrast, wears a “navy-blue two-piece costume with a white frilly blouse” (HR, 10), and is “quite tall and well-proportioned”, having the kind of bone structure “which is good if you want to be a model in Johannesburg” (HR, 10). She has a “charmingly triste face, and brown-dyed hair that she braids with extensions in Butterworth” (HR, 10), and the villagers are amazed at “how she is able to walk among the rocks and gorges of Qolorha-by-Sea in [her] high heels” (HR, 10).

Camagu nevertheless finds something “quite attractive” in Qukezwa, and soon finds himself fighting against the “urge to hold this girl, tightly, and kiss her all over”, so much so that even her touch “exacerbates the madness” as “wonderful heat [consumes] his whole body” (HR, 121). It becomes increasingly clear that Qukezwa fills in Camagu the “searing longing” for which his rampant and “unquenchable desire for the flesh [...] any flesh” (HR, 30) was a substitute. Xoliswa, however, holds little genuine attraction for him, because unlike Qukezwa she eschews any association with ‘redness’. In her uncritical valorisation of the west, she perceives the United States of America to be a “fairytale country, with beautiful people [like] Dolly Parton and Eddie Murphy”, one that is “vast” and highly technological” (HR, 71), with even a subway that “moves underground, [...] very much unlike the Johannesburg–East London train which crudely moves above the ground where every moron can see it” (HR, 72). Though Camagu “does not remember seeing anyone quite so beautiful” as Xoliswa, he concludes that “it is the kind of beauty that is cold and distant, [...] not the kind that makes your whole body hot and charges it with electric currents” (HR, 70-1). Hilary P. Dannenberg notes that

Whilst Camagu is not immediately impressed by Qukezwa’s appearance, by the end of the novel he has been seduced by her rebelliously free, colourful and creative spirit, and convinced by her arguments against the ideas of the Unbelievers and their conception of progress; in touch with the local environment, she introduces him to the natural world of Qolorha. Camagu’s responses to the two women [...] plot his own cultural development in the novel. He establishes a cerebral connection with Xoliswa due to their shared knowledge of and influence by Western culture, but ultimately he becomes a captive of his fascination for Qukezwa.¹⁸⁷

Dannenberg further points out that Camagu’s initial struggle between Xoliswa and Qukezwa is really a struggle for “two cultural systems within his consciousness”.¹⁸⁸ On the one hand, he is bewitched by Qukezwa’s intimate connection with Nongqawuse and

¹⁸⁷ Hilary P. Dannenberg, “Culture and nature in *The Heart of Redness*” in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming).

¹⁸⁸ Ibid.

the Believers-of-old, for Qukezwa is the “guardian of a dying tradition” (HR, 175) who, because she is “not burdened with beauty”, is “able to be free-spirited” (HR 175). But he shares, on the other hand, a certain rationality with Xoliswa that is more consistent with the education he has received in the west. But the “wagging tongues” (HR, 110) that follow him think that Camagu’s education has made his head “rotten” (HR, 111), and stress the need for a “traditional isiXhosa education [that is received] at home and during various rites of passage” (HR, 111). Camagu himself seems to realise early in the novel his need for a cultural (re)education, something his PhD in communications could not give him. He comes to Qolorha in the first place because he is mesmerised by the voice of NomaRussia, who sings at the latter-day Twin’s funeral in Hillbrow. NomaRussia’s voice

[...] remains hauntingly fresh. It is a freshness that cries to be echoed by the green hills, towering cliffs and deep gullies of a folktale dreamland, instead of being wasted on a dead man in a tattered tent on top of a twenty-storey building in Hillbrow, Johannesburg. (HR, 27)

NomaRussia’s singing resonates beyond the constricted and confined space of the drab cityscape of Hillbrow’s high-rise buildings, and evokes a landscape saturated with a miscellany of different colours (“green hills”) and contours (“towering cliffs and deep gullies”). “No one is from Hillbrow”, NomaRussia assures Camagu, “Everyone here comes from somewhere else. I am from Qolorha” (HR, 39). Alan Mabin, in an historical overview of the dynamics of South African urbanisation, makes the point that

Not a single part of rural South Africa reached the turn of the [twentieth century] with a substantial body of people able to escape the pressures of incorporation into a rapidly growing capitalist economy. Most were deprived of independent control of what they saw as their land, and most rural households henceforth found it difficult to avoid participation in the urban economy through selling the labour of one or more of their members in the towns or mines. Nevertheless, and importantly, most South African households remained based in the rural areas, in actual occupation if not legal possession of some piece of land.¹⁸⁹

If, as NomaRussia implies, the city is never one’s true home (for “no one is from Hillbrow”), but always represents a compromise between, as Mabin suggests here, the retention of kin in the rural areas and a participation in the urban-based capitalist

¹⁸⁹Alan Mabin, “Dispossession, exploitation and struggle: an historical overview of South Africa urbanisation” in David M. Smith, ed., *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanisation and Social Change in South Africa* (London and New York: Routledge and Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 2001), 15.

economy, then Camagu is in many ways homeless, because the city is all that he has left to cling to, which does not say much for him, given Mda's bleak, dystopian description of the Hillbrow cityscape. Having moved to America when he was a teenager, gaining his doctorate, and then working for a development agency in New York, Camagu returns to South Africa with virtually no connections in either his rural birthplace or in local politics. The new dispensation (run, Mda remarks sardonically, by the "Aristocrats of the Revolution" [HR, 36]), say that they "didn't see [Camagu] when [they] were dancing the freedom dance" (HR, 31), and charge him with being overqualified. When it comes to the private sector, Camagu soon discovers that corporates would rather have inexperienced blacks to place "in some glass affirmative-action office where they [could be] displayed as paragons of empowerment" (HR, 33) than hire someone who could actually do their job.

Arriving in Qolorha, it is clear to Camagu that his estrangement from the corporate suits and political veterans is no worse than his estrangement from Qolorha's locals. Having had no attachment to the life of the village for such a long time, and astonished that the white "Dalton speaks much better isiXhosa than he'll ever be able to" (HR, 64), Camagu can only introduce himself as a "tourist from Johannesburg" (HR, 67), to which the other villagers express their surprise, for the only tourists they know of are white. Camagu's long absence from local life has kept him adrift from the issues which face modern-day Qolorha, a fact of which Qukezwa reminds him when she tells him flatly, "This is my lagoon. I live here. You live in Johannesburg. And if I were you I would go back there and stop bothering innocent people" (HR, 113).

As Camagu becomes more involved in village life, however, he gradually begins to embrace the culture he had previously abandoned. After the watershed visit by Majola, the totem of the amaMpondomise clan, Camagu is "beside himself with excitement" (HR, 112):

He has never been visited by Majola, the brown mole snake that is the totem of his clan. He has heard in stories how the snake visits every newborn child; how it sometimes pays a visit to chosen members of the clan to give them good fortune. He is the chosen one today. (HR, 112)

Camagu's response to the snake commands great respect among his onlookers, for "they did not expect a man with such great education, a man who has lived in the lands of the white people for thirty years, to have such respect for the customs of his people. He is indeed a man worthy of their respect." (HR, 113) That Camagu recognises the totem suggests a reestablishment of his connection to his clan and, importantly, the natural

world, for he realises that they both share a deeply symbiotic relationship. A snake, now, is no longer a creature to be battled by a “battalion of gardeners, handymen and [...] a petrol-pump attendant [...] armed with spades and sundry weapons” (HR, 112), but becomes renarrativised as a symbolic visit from Majola, one that is meant to promise him good fortune.

This recognition of the inter-connectedness of the cultural and the natural is in part what helps Camagu appreciate more fully the Believers’ own attachment to Qolorha, and their refusal to allow a big-city development company to build a casino resort on the Gxarha River mouth. If, as certain cultural geographers and anthropologists have suggested, “cultures [shape] the natural landscape to produce a ‘cultural landscape’”,¹⁹⁰ then within the landscape of Qolorha is bound up an ineluctable connection between place, history, and cultural identity. As J.E. Malpas puts it, “place is [...] distinguished from mere location through being understood as a matter of the *human response* to physical surroundings or locations”.¹⁹¹ This concept is born out beautifully by Zim, whose urge to “commune with the [wild fig] tree” can be so strong that “not even the cold wind from the sea can drive him into the house” (HR, 41). Zim’s close connection with the natural landscape extends even to talking with birds – an ability he uses to take vengeance on Bhonco for sending the *abayizeli* women to ululate ceaselessly outside his homestead. Whether we take this at face value or decide that Zim’s conversing with the birds is merely a narrative device associated with what Mda sees as the magical nature of the rural areas¹⁹² is largely immaterial because my point here is to show the strong connection between Qolorha and its residents. For them, Qolorha (as place) is more than a simple habitation. Rather, as Bill Ashcroft affirms, place, in its fullest sense, is a “*result* of habitation, a consequence of the ways in which people inhabit space”.¹⁹³ Discussing Paul Carter’s concept of “spatial history”, Ashcroft conceives of place as a “palimpsest on which the traces of successive inscriptions form the complex experience of place, which is itself historical”.¹⁹⁴ The prospective developers may see in Qolorha merely an open tract of land ripe for commodification, but for the Believers (and Unbelievers, whether they admit it or not), the landscape is suffused with the traces and “successive

¹⁹⁰ Hirsch and O’Hanlon, *The Anthropology of Landscape*, 8. Citing Sauer.

¹⁹¹ J.E. Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 30. Emphasis original.

¹⁹² To reiterate, Mda says “A lot of my work is set in the rural areas, because they retain that magic, whereas the urban areas have lost it to Westernisation.” (Mda, “Acceptance speech for the Olive Schreiner Prize”, 281).

¹⁹³ Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 156. Emphasis original.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

inscriptions” of their history, what Cohen and Odhiambo term the “layers of sediment in a long memory”¹⁹⁵ – one that stretches back, in this context, to the time of Nongqawuse and the painful consequences of their absorption into the colonial system. It is telling that Qukezwa, taking Camagu through Qolorha, explains the nation’s history in the language of the landscape. They start by walking

[...] silently among tall grasses that are used for thatching houses. Then they get to the rocks that are covered with mosses of various colours. Camagu is fascinated by the yellows, the browns, the greens and the reds that have turned the rocks into works of abstract art. Down below he can see a hut of rough thatch and twigs. It looks like the nest of a lazy bird. Outside, naked abakhwetha initiates are sitting in the sun, nursing their newly circumcised penises. The white ochre that covers their bodies makes them look like ghosts. (HR, 118-9)

They soon reach “Intlambo-ka-Nongqawuse – Nonqawuse’s valley” (HR, 119). Mist rises on the sea, thickens, and Qukezwa stands with “a distant look in her eyes” (HR, 120):

“We stood here with the multitudes,” she says, her voice full of nostalgia. “Visions appeared in the water. Nongqawuse herself stood here. Across the river the valley was full of ikhamanga. There were reeds too. They are no longer here. Only ikhamanga remains. And a few aloes. Aloes used to cover the whole area. Mist often covers this whole ridge right up to the lagoon where we came from. It was like that too in the days of Nongqawuse. We stood here and saw the wonders. Many things have changed. The reeds are gone. What remains now is that bush over there where Nongqawuse and Nombanda first met the strangers. The bush. Ityholo-lika-Nongqawuse.” (HR, 120)

The history of nation, here, becomes embedded in the history of place, which Qukezwa describes using topographic language. There *were* reeds, but “they are no longer” and “only ikhamanga remains”. Similarly, where “aloes used to cover the whole area”, there are now but a “few”. The landscape changes, evolves, and yet I cannot help but read a sense of entropy in this history, for everywhere the landscape seems to be in decline and recession. Qolorha in fact is under threat both from within and without. It is not just the developers who want the casino resort to proceed, but the Unbelievers as well. By vehemently eschewing “redness”, and supporting, at any cost, the “water-sports paradise that the developers want to build” (HR, 79), they risk abandoning the site of so much of their own history for a leisure resort which, Qukezwa early recognises, will not translate into jobs for all because “the owners of the gambling city will come with their own people who are experienced in that kind of work.” (HR, 118) In this way, Qukezwa’s

¹⁹⁵ Liz Gunner, “Names and the land: poetry of belonging and unbelonging, a comparative approach” in Kate Darian-Smith, Liz Gunner and Sarah Nuttall, eds., *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 120. Citing Cohen and Odhiambo.

entropic description of the landscape can be read metonymically. For if the landscape embodies its inhabitants, then its recession is symptomatic of the deep schism that since the time of Nongqawuse has separated the nation into Believers and Unbelievers, causing disunity, decline and a general dissension among the amaXhosa ranks. Only during the Middle Generations, we are told (which refers to the apartheid years), was there any cessation in this internal quarrelling because “people then were more concerned with surviving and overcoming their oppression.” (HR, 4) Now, however, this cultural division is in full force such that the Believers and Unbelievers “are in competition in everything“ (HR, 3).

Should the developer’s project eventually be green-lighted, the landscape itself will not only recede but also be overrun, literally, by concrete constructions in the form of “roller-coasters”, “merry-go-rounds”, (HR, 230) a hotel, and a casino. Discussing the idea of erecting a retirement village for millionaires, Mr Jones admits that all the trees will have to be cleared to make way for the rides. For Mr Smith this is no obstacle: “We’ll plant other trees imported from England. We’ll uproot a lot of these native shrubs and wild bushes and plant a beautiful English garden” (HR, 234). As the developers in a sense “script” over the natural terrain with imported flora from England, they simultaneously script over entire histories embedded within it. Liz Gunner, for instance, has shown how Nguni (Xhosa and Zulu) and Sotho praise poetry relies extensively on the embodying of the land in the recalling and remembering of identity.¹⁹⁶ One of the examples she uses is particularly apt for this discussion because it speaks of Hintsisa, the Xhosa chief who was murdered by the British. Hintsisa is called

The Sweet tall grass of Khala
Whose movements are a blessing
Who stares without blinking
Whose eyebrows reveal his anger¹⁹⁷

The praise poem continues:

It was spring and the wild olive trees were blooming,
The willows too and the blooms were on the twigs;
Among the grasses the most beautiful was the diritshwane,
Among the birds were such as the masked weaver bird.¹⁹⁸

In her discussion of the poem, Gunner notes:

¹⁹⁶ Gunner, “Names and the land”, 118.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 120. Citing Opland.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. Citing Opland.

In the aesthetics of naming in this poetry, the land frequently becomes the person, and becomes part of the body's text; the social and the historical self is perceived through the land. [...] it is the poetry of the peopled land [in which] the territory [is] so intimately brought into the biographies of individuals, clans and peoples.¹⁹⁹

Gunner's analysis highlights the closely-knit connection in Nguni societies between landscape and narratives of history and cultural memory, all of which enrich the idea of place as something constituted discursively. In the praise poem above, the landscape is anthropomorphically embodied as a person. The descriptions of Hinsta are formulated in metaphors that extend themselves outwards toward the natural world, suggesting that the connection between the land and the self is not just intimate, they become almost indistinguishable from each other.

But to return now to the textual passage under discussion (above, with Qukezwa and Camagu standing in Nongqawuse's valley): if we extend Gunner's point about the inter-connectedness of the "social and historical self" with the landscape it goes some way to explaining the collapsing of sequential time in this scene. Qukezwa, using the plural "we", speaks as though she were actually "with the multitudes" in Nongqawuse's valley some one hundred and fifty years ago – "We stood here and saw the wonders" she says, "Many things have changed. The reeds are gone. What remains now is that bush over there where Nongqawuse and Nombanda first met the strangers" (HR, 120). The question is: how can the Qukezwa of today claim to have stood with Nongqawuse and the Believers of 1850? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the separation of the historical self from the social self in such a way that the Qukezwa of yesterday and the Qukezwa of today can be at once separate yet cojoined as the same person. I can think of two reasons to support this idea. Firstly, it is clear that Mda is unafraid of transcending the limitations of realism. As has been mentioned a number of times in this discussion, Mda associates a certain magicality with the rural areas – a product, he says, of living in a culture which does not try to rationalise the supernatural. So for him to merge the historical and the contemporary and thus subvert linear time is neither impossible nor, perhaps, unexpected. Secondly, the novel itself is organised around a pattern of twinning and, argues Johan Jacobs, *umngqokolo* (split-tone singing), which operates on both a thematic and a formal level. For Jacobs, the novel presents a

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 121.

[...] dialectic between, on the one hand, *ubuqaba* (backwardness and heathenism) and, on the other, *ubugqobokha* (enlightenment and civilisation). Backwardness and enlightenment, and traditional belief and skepticism, are contrasted and relativised in both main narrative periods of the novel. [...] Both the 1856 and 1998 narratives are coded in terms of ambivalence and cultural heterogeneity that resonates back and forth between the past and the present.²⁰⁰

This split-tone set piece, which reverberates throughout the novel in so many forms, finds its most literal expression in Qukezwa's own singing. As she and Camagu ride in the moonlight, Camagu is in awe as Qukezwa

[...] bursts into a song and plays her umrhubhe musical instrument. She whistles and sings all at the same time. Many voices come from her mouth. Deep sounds that echo like the night. Sounds that have the heaviness of a steamy summer night. Flaming sounds that crackle like a veld fire. Light sounds that float like flakes of snow on top of the Amathole Mountains. Hollow sounds like laughing mountains. Coming out all at once. As if a whole choir lives in her mouth. Camagu has never heard such singing before. He once read of the amaXhosa mountain women who were good at split-tone singing. He also heard that the only other people in the world who could do this were Tibetan monks. He did not expect that this girl could be the guardian of a dying tradition. (HR, 175)

Camagu associates a certain mysticism with the split-tone mode, something almost transcendent, a "dying tradition" of which Qukezwa is the guardian. The evocations of Qukezwa's voice are so vivid ("laughing mountains", "flaming sounds that crackle" etc) that it is as though the landscape itself were being given a voice through her mouth. It is too much for Camagu to handle, and he realises that his pants are wet, though "it is not from sweat" (HR, 175).

Now, if the novel's guiding principle is that of *umngqokolo*, then it makes sense that Qukezwa of the present and Qukezwa of the past can also be read as two constituents of the same person, split as they are across the temporal divide. Attwell makes the point that a traditional position interprets twinship as a *single* identity.²⁰¹ "In Mda's hands", he says, "splitting and twinning comprise a warp and woof, a weaving of pattern and tension that gives definition to South African postcolonial modernity".²⁰² We see this principle of twinning operating across generational lines, too. Zim and Bhonco for instance are, like their forebears Twin and Twin-Twin,²⁰³ at loggerheads over

²⁰⁰ J.U. Jacobs, "Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*: the novel as *umngqokolo*" *Kunapipi: South Africa Post Post-Apartheid* 24 (1&2) (2002): 230.

²⁰¹ Attwell, *Rewriting Modernity*, 199.

²⁰² *Ibid.*

²⁰³ Twin and Twin-Twin's very names bespeak this twinning device. The narrator tells us that "Twin and Twin-Twin were like one person. Even their voice was one. Mothers who eyed them for their daughters

Nongqawuse, but they are both of them part of a single community who share a common patriarch – Xikixa, who is decapitated by the British and exported for phrenological study. Though split by ideology and religious belief, Zim and Bhonco are simultaneously cojoined through their ancestry. The genealogical diagram that precedes the novel proper illustrates this principle graphically. Entitled “The descendants of the headless ancestor”, the diagram bears out these concepts of synthesis and severance in which Believers and Unbelievers, though divided, nevertheless form part of the same family.²⁰⁴ In the same way, Qukezwa, past and present, also share a twinship: they are *doppelgängers*, which is defined by the *OED* as “the apparition of a living person; a double, a wraith”. The Qukezwa of the past, now “a wraith”, ghostly, and in one sense gone, lives on in the Qukezwa of the present.²⁰⁵

If Qolorha’s problems are complex with respect to the feud between Believers and Unbelievers and what this means for the future of the sea-side village, the solutions, Mda suggests, are equally as complicated and contested. To recall a few points: the Unbelievers, as Bhonco asserts, “stand for progress [...] We want to get rid of this bush which is a sign of our uncivilised state. We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness.” (HR, 105). For the Believers, this logic is faulty: “This son of Ximiya talks of progress. Yet he wants to destroy the bush that has been here since the days of our forefathers. What kind of progress is that?” (HR, 105). Zim’s

could not tell one from the other.” (HR, 13) It is their different interpretations about whether Mlanjeni is actually the resurrected Nxele that causes their first disagreement:

This difference of opinion developed into a serious disagreement between the twins, to the extent that they took up sticks to fight each other. Women screamed and called the patriarch. When Xikixa arrived he was happy. His sons had never disagreed on anything before, let alone fought each other. Now, for the very first time, they were not seeing with the same eye. A spat over prophets. (HR, 15)

²⁰⁴ Without wishing to push the point too far, it seems to me that even the novel’s formal structure, with its dual temporalities, reflects something of a metatextual twinship: the nineteenth and twentieth century chronotopes may be spatially segregated on the page, but they are both contained within the single text of *The Heart of Redness*.

²⁰⁵ It is telling, of course, that both Qukezwas name their son Heitsi, which makes the connections between these two figures even more apparent. Meg Samuelson reads their choice of this name as implying a cultural shift from syncretism to autochthony, because while the novel makes it clear that Christianity has been assimilated into amaXhosa belief systems, Mda “keeps Khoikhoi beliefs inviolable”. The novel tells us that the Khoikhoi story of Heitsi Eibib preceded the bringing of the Judeo-Christian message to Africa. Thus, Samuelson argues, “the Khoikhoi women – Qukezwa the first and second – are the bearers of a ‘pure’ and ‘uncontaminated’ African cultural tradition invested in the son [...]”. (Meg Samuelson, “Nongqawuse, national time and (female) authorship in *The Heart of Redness* in David Bell and Johan Jacobs, eds., *Ways of Writing: Critical Essays on Zakes Mda* (Durban: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, forthcoming)

defence is compelling, and it begs the question about what form “progress” should/will take for Qolorha. Anthony Vital notes that

With a strong awareness of current power differentials in the world of capital, [*The Heart of Redness*] explores the question of whether it is better to belong to a place by connecting with the global economy, drawing from it the wealth it might divert to the local (in exchange for what it would extract), or better to assert the local in opposition to the global.²⁰⁶

Locating his analysis within the broader context of ecological politics, Vital suggests that ecology can serve as a “rallying point for local resistance to the encroaching forces of global capital”. “Postcolonial understandings of ecology”, he says, “exist in the spaces defined by wariness towards the power, both economic and cultural, that flows from metropolitan centres, subverting what is perceived as damaging while engaging with what can be strategically useful in defence”.²⁰⁷ For Bhonco, Qolorha will not survive its transition into the twentieth century if it rejects the cultural and economic capital of the city. But Believers like Qukezwa feel the cost is too great. She says to Camagu:

“Are you aware that if your gambling complex happens here I will have to pay to swim in this lagoon?”
“Why would you pay to swim in the sea?”
“Vathiswa says they made you a doctor in the land of the white man after you finished all the knowledge in the world. But you are so dumb. White man’s education has made you stupid. This whole sea will belong to tourists and their boats and their water sports. Those women will no longer harvest the sea for their own food and to sell at the Blue Flamingo. Water sports will take over our sea.” (HR, 117-8)

The natural world is a readily-available source of economic (and gastronomic) sustenance: NoGiant and MamCirha make an income by selling their catch to male tourists who believe oysters to be an aphrodisiac; what is not sold is taken home to their families. The developers, by contrast, will preserve the natural world only insofar as it meets their need for a watersports attraction. Nature, it seems, is utilised only to the extent that she serves the dividends of capitalism. For Barnard, the proposed resort reads like a parody of modernist aesthetics:

Mr Jones’s dream of splendid crystal casino, surrounded by amusement park rides, roller coasters, cable cars, and a lake for jet skis, captures something of the streamlined aesthetic of speed and mobility, but it does so in a trivialised fashion, by envisioning a haven for mechanised play. Mr Smith’s vision of a

²⁰⁶ Vital, *Situating Ecology*, 306.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 299.

retirement village for millionaires, with neatly landscaped English gardens, carefully surveyed roads, Olympic-size pools, and new – and pronounceable – names like “Willowbrook Grove” or something ending in “Close, Dell and Downs” expresses modernity’s homogenising logic, its rage for order.²⁰⁸

Modernity’s “rage for order”, its insistence on homogeneity, and Qolorha’s relative diversity is rendered even in the shape of the terrain. Qolorha’s craggy and contoured landscape – its name derives from the Xhosa meaning “ridged” or “full of ridges”,²⁰⁹ a quite accurate description given the novel’s many references to mountains and valleys – stands at variance with the sort of leveled artificiality one imagines would characterise the casino resort. Mda’s resistance to the imposing architectural and cultural forms of the city is linked quite closely, it seems, with his ecological imperatives. In essence, these are two sides of the same coin: resisting the dominance of the “global” goes hand in hand with preserving the local. But the novel makes complicated the issue of just *how* the local should and can be preserved. One somewhat entrepreneurial way is in “cultural tourism”. Dalton, NoManage and NoVangeli earn a living by playing into what tourists perceive are their traditional identities:

Their work is to display amasiko – the customs and cultural practices of the amaXhosa – to the white people who are brought to their hut in Dalton’s four-wheel-drive bakkie, after he has taken them on various trails to Nongqawuse’s Valley, the great lagoon, the shipwrecks, rivers and gorges, and the ancient middens and cairns. Often when these tourists come, NoManage pretends she is a traditional healer, what the tourists call a witchdoctor, and performs magic rites of her own concoction. At this time, NoVangeli and the tourists hide some items, and NoManage uses her supernatural powers to discover where they are hidden. Then the tourists watch the two women polish the floor with cowdung. After this the tourists try their hand at grinding mielies or sorghum on a grinding-stone or crushing maize into samp with a granite or wooden pestle. All these shenanigans are performed by these women in their full isiXhosa traditional of the amahomba, which is cumbersome to work in. Such costume is meant to be worn only on special occasions when people want to look smart and beautiful, not when they are toiling and sweating. And the tourists pay good money for all this foolery! (HR, 109-10)

The tourist display here is sheer farce, and utterly disconnected from the way the amaXhosa really live. Dalton plans to display young maidens dancing, young men engaging in stick fights, and “abakhwetha initiates whose bodies are covered in white ochre” (HR, 285). ““This””, he says, ““is a proven kind of business”” (HR, 284-5). For Camagu, however, this is plain dishonesty:

²⁰⁸ Barnard, *Apartheid and Beyond*, 166.

²⁰⁹ Peter E. Raper, ed., *New Dictionary of South African Place Names* (Johannesburg and Cape Town: Jonathan Ball, 2004), 315.

“[...] we won't be showing the tourists the true picture of how the amaXhosa live. In the real-life situation you don't find abakhwetha hanging around the village, women in their best amahomba costumes grinding millet and decorating walls, while maidens are dancing, and right there in front of the house young men are fighting with sticks. It's too contrived. [...] It is just a museum that pretends that is how people live. Real people in today's South Africa don't lead the life that is seen in cultural villages. Some aspects of that life perhaps are true. But the bulk of what tourists see is the past ...a lot of it an imaginary past. They must be honest and say that they are attempting to show how people used to live. They must not pretend that's how people live now” (HR, 285).

Camagu's solution is a co-operative society, which includes harvesting the sea for *imbhaza* and *imbhatyisa*, and soon extends to making different kinds of traditional costumes for sale in Johannesburg. The essential difference between Camagu and Dalton's enterprises is that Camagu is not intent on “milking gullible tourists” (HR, 185) by staging inauthentic displays of some “imaginary past”. What I find particularly interesting about all this is that NoManage and NoVangeli actually *depend* on the gaze of these all-too-credulous tourists to fix identity according to some presumed cultural ethnography. The lines that separate observer from observed now become blurred, because while NoManage and NoVangeli are aware of themselves as objects of the tourist gaze, they are also just aware of the dissimulation of their “shenanigans” (HR, 110) designed as they are to impress and entertain their audience. This awareness suggests that it is now the *tourists* who have become the object of what is really a performative gaze and who, in their desire for the authentic (even if it is couched in the deceptive display of a pristine, immutable culture) have become unwitting victims in a swindle for which they “pay good money” (HR, 110).

In his misplaced riposte to Camagu's cooperative society, the envious Dalton secures a court order forbidding development of Qolorha because the place is now declared a national heritage site. Camagu realises, however, that the Believers' victory will not last forever. “The whole country is ruled by greed”, he thinks, and “everyone wants to have his or her snout in the trough. Sooner or later the powers that be may decide, in the name of the people, that it is good for the people to have a gambling complex at Qolorha-by-Sea. And the gambling complex shall come into being. And of course the powers that be or their proxies – in the form of wives, sons, daughters and cousins – shall be given equity. And so the people shall be empowered” (HR, 319). This is Mda at his most ironic, for it is clear that the novel endorses the idea of a cooperative venture and a Qolorha that develops on its *own* terms and not those of Lefa Laballo, the self-appointed avatar of a civilisation and modernity for the rural village. Responding to

Laballo's development propaganda, Camagu insists: "There are many people out there who enjoy communing with unspoilt nature", emphasising the kind of tourism "that will not destroy indigenous forests" or "bring hordes of people who will pollute the rivers and drive away the birds" (HR, 232). Whether or not such a tourism can ultimately hold its own against the myriad of voices clamouring for development rights is a question left unanswered; at least for the moment, "those who want to preserve indigenous plants and birds have won the day", and Camagu "feels fortunate that he lives in Qolorha" (HR, 319).

University of Cape Town

Conclusion

The focus of this discussion has been on the various manifestations of place in Mda's work. As I hope I have shown, Mda's topographic concerns frequently coincide with his ideological ones. Characters always occupy spaces, and shape them just as much as they themselves are shaped by their environment. Caren Kaplan points out that "Topography and geography now intersect literary and cultural criticism in a growing interdisciplinary inquiry into emergent identity formation and social practices".²¹⁰ Kaplan's point is particularly true of the South Africa situation, where the changing spatial fencelines have given rise to changing social ones and vice versa. Mda's work is in the vanguard of this area of exploration. It will be illuminating to see what related concerns arise in his succeeding works, and whether Mda will continue the self-irony with which he ends *Cion* as Toloki crosses the Ohio River at Pomeroy, taking leave of the sciolist and his "rambling narratives".

²¹⁰ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1996), 144.

Appendix: The Plagiarism Debate Around *The Heart of Redness*

Mda came under fire, recently, from Andrew Offenburger, a PhD student of African literature at Yale University who created a stir by charging Mda, quite severely at times, with plagiarising Jeff Peires's *The Dead Will Arise: Nongqawuse and the Great Xhosa Cattle-Killing of 1856-7*. On his website, Offenburger states that as a visiting fellow at the University of Cape Town in 2006, he was able to sift through a number of archival and other primary sources that culminated in his MA thesis on "the history and cultural memory of the Xhosa Cattle-Killing Movement of 1856–1857".²¹¹ I mention this because Offenburger's gripe with Mda is precisely one of *sources*. *The Heart of Redness*, he says, relies too heavily on Peires, to the point that the novel becomes a paraphrased imitation of its historical referent. Notwithstanding Mda's acknowledgment of Peires in his Dedication (Mda writes, "I am grateful [...] to Jeff Peires, whose research – wonderfully recorded in *The Dead Will Arise* and in a number of academic papers – informed the historical events in my fiction"), Offenburger still reproves *The Heart of Redness* for the "inordinate debt" it owes to Peires's history:

The Heart of Redness [is] a novel about postapartheid South Africa as much as the Cattle-Killing, where Mda uses historical accounts to buttress his plot's development and literary goals. Mda states his intentions up-front, in the aforementioned Dedication. He ostensibly prepares the reader for a novel replete with intertextual and historical references, a practice common to postcolonial and postmodern literature. And because of the historiographical headway made by Peires, Mda had the opportunity to create a refreshing, substantial account of the movement unavailable to his literary predecessors. But as the novel progresses, his historical borrowings accumulate an inordinate debt to *The Dead Will Arise*. Taking stock of the one-sided transactions between novelist and historian reveals a troublesome presence of preexisting text and suggests that, contrary to postmodern theoretical leniency in reading plagiarism as intertextuality, *The Heart of Redness* must be seen as a plagiarising, unoriginal work, a derivative of Peires's historical research.²¹²

Offenburger proceeds to outline four ways that he believes Mda plagiarises Peires – paraphrasing, a sequential borrowing of sections, copying, and a replicating of semantic strategies.²¹³ The article is full of adjacent excerpts from both texts that are meant to reveal the disproportionate amount material lifted from *The Dead Will Arise*. Offenburger even provides a mathematical graph entitled, "Overall Trend in the Pattern of Borrowed

²¹¹ Andrew Offenburger homepage. Online. www.andrewoffenburger.com/biography.asp (Accessed 27 January 2009).

²¹² Andrew Offenburger, "Duplicity and plagiarism in Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness*" *Research in African Literatures* 39 (3) (Fall, 2008): 168.

²¹³ *Ibid.*

Text”, in which he plots on an X-Axis the eighty-eight textual similarities he detects between the two works, and for which he gives corresponding Y-values that indicate the page numbers where these similarities are found.

While Offenburger’s attention to detail is impressive, I cannot help but read a certain overcompensation into his resort to graphs and extended appendices, almost as though he anticipated a fair amount of resistance to his claims. Firstly, it should be said that Offenburger is not the first critic to note the striking similarities between Peires and Mda. Some seven years ago, Attwell wrote an article for *The Sunday Independent* that acknowledged how Mda’s text contributed little historical substance to Peires’s already well-established account of the Cattle-Killing incident.²¹⁴ Secondly, while he acknowledges that the lines separating history and fiction are easily blurred, Offenburger seems to want to charge Mda with imitating Peires’s history as though *both* were intended to be read as histories of the same kind. In his discussion on the “The Persistent Presence of the Past in Contemporary Writing in South Africa”, David Bell notes the important distinction between history-as-fact and history-as-fiction.²¹⁵ For Bell, *The Heart of Redness* is an instance of historical renarrativisation because it “appropriates the historical narrative [in this case, *The Dead Will Arise*] by retelling it within a discourse of history-as-fiction”, which allows the past to be narrated from the perspective of ordinary amaXhosa.²¹⁶ I agree with Bell: even where Mda sticks very closely with Peires’s account, a crucial difference between the two texts is that Mda constantly weaves between the past and the present, the latter of which is entirely of his own creating, giving the reader an opportunity to consider the story of Nongqawuse from the viewpoint of Qolorha’s ordinary residents as they are *today*. In his interview with Elizabeth Weinstein, Mda says: “In a lot of my fiction, you’ll find that what I’m trying to show is that the past is always a strong presence in our present.”²¹⁷ So while history may undergird his fiction, it is still *fiction*, and makes no claim to history-as-fact. Mda says:

The Heart of Redness is a work of fiction and not a history textbook. Historical record is only utilised in the novel to serve my fiction – to give it context, for instance. [...] It is not an accident that Peires is my sole source of historical record. His book had all the information I needed for the context for my fiction. There was therefore no need for me to replicate his work by going back to his primary sources. Peires had done all the research for me, and for anyone else who wanted to use his book, in a most meticulous manner. My intention in the

²¹⁴ David Attwell, “Mda turns to Nongqawuse for inspiration” *The Sunday Independent*, 28 January 2001.

²¹⁵ David Bell, “The persistent presence of the past in contemporary writing in South Africa” *Current Writing* 15 (1) (2003): 68.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 68-9.

²¹⁷ Zakes Mda, “Home is where the story is”, 3.

novel was never to interrogate Peires and his interpretation of the Cattle Killing; it was never to “challenge or revolutionise” [...] I was quite satisfied with Peires’ version of events not because it presented the sole “truth”, but because it served my fiction effectively. I was not creating a scholarly work but a work of fiction.²¹⁸

At various points in his article, Offenburger can tend to skirt the boundary lines between vigorous scholarship and what seems like a deliberate vilifying of Mda. His language is strong (he says, for instance, that Mda’s version of the Incident is “lackluster and creatively dull, pulling material once again from Peires”)²¹⁹ and at one point he assumes he has Andre Brink’s endorsement by quoting a review the latter wrote which reads, “Zakes Mda revisits (but unfortunately does not fully reimagine) from a black perspective the great cattle-killing of the 19th century”.²²⁰ Offenburger asks, “What is not being said here? Does Brink side-step the textual abuse because it was an acknowledged theft? Can a brief acknowledgment compensate for extensively plagiarised material? And, if so, is postcolonial African literature a textual free-for-all?”²²¹ To impute to Brink a claim which he does not *actually* make brings Offenburger whisper-close to insulting both of these writers. Offenburger concedes, in a footnote, that Peires has not claimed any infringement of his intellectual property “to date”, implying (even hoping?) that such recourse might be taken in the future; Peires, however, says that he is “sincerely honoured by the notice which Zakes Mda has taken of *The Dead Will Arise*”.²²² And Oxford University Press stated that as publishers they were always aware of the similarities between the two books, but recognised them to be “of different genres [which] try to apprehend reality at different levels”.²²³ Peires, in fact, has said that his work received renewed interest because of Mda’s “fictional narrative”²²⁴ – suggesting that, if nothing else, *The Heart of Redness* compels its reader to consider history as something that dynamically and actively informs the present.

²¹⁸ Zakes Mda, “A response to ‘Duplicity and plagiarism in Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness*’ by Andrew Offenburger” *Research in African Literatures* 39 (3) (Fall, 2008): 200-1.

²¹⁹ Offenburger, “Duplicity and plagiarism”, 172.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, 177.

²²³ “Plagiarism controversy: JB Peires satisfied with Zakes Mda’s acknowledgment” *Book SA – News* Online. <http://news.book.co.za/blog/2008/07/22/plagiarism-controversy-jb-peires-satisfied-with-zakes-mdas-acknowledgment/> (Accessed January 2009).

²²⁴ *Ibid.*

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University of Cape Town