

**Reading smallness: micro-spatial constructions in South Africa's literature of
the interregnum**

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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

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Abstract

Twentieth-century South African literature is a subject often oversimplified by familiar binaries. These include the categories of apartheid and post-apartheid, metaphors of death and birth, and pre-occupations with the tensions between public and private life, township and suburb, and oppressor and oppressed. Such patterns of signification continue to chase their target – a centuries-old national symptomology – with dwindling degrees of success. This dissertation, in response, seeks out literary micro-spaces from the country's transition (or 'interregnum') and reads them in terms of their incursive potential on the grand historical and spatial discourses in which they lie.

To this end, the project takes its reader on a tour of small places. On one side is a compost hole from Ivan Vladislavić's *Missing Persons* (1989) – an evocator of the neuroses at the 'heart of apartheid' – and, on the other, a one-room shack from Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) – an ostensible symbol of an early *post*-apartheid imaginary. The discussion stretching between these two points, as it moves from nests and tortoiseshells to graves and train carriages, advocates reduced frames of reading. In so doing, it draws attention at once to the claustrophobia of apartheid pettiness and, in the literary sensitivities that it precipitates, to growing associations between smallness and protest, smallness and vocality, smallness and poetry. I argue that micro-spaces are not only abundant in the literature of South Africa's political transition but also yield unique insights into the stubborn extension of its interregnum.

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Into the compost hole: an introduction

This is how space begins, with words only, signs traced on the blank page.

Georges Perec, *Species of Space*

Recent South African history is regularly oversimplified by the view that it can be conveniently split into ‘apartheid’ and ‘post-apartheid’. In literature, this periodisation is often accompanied by images of birth and death. By the 1980s, the analogy goes, the apartheid body is beset by what Antonio Gramsci would call “morbid symptoms” (*Prison Notebooks* 276) – the white minority is increasingly incapacitated by a worsening neurosis. And, in 1990, the regime dies. In an inverse process, the germ of freedom – nurtured by many brave men and women – hastens towards the ‘birth’ of democracy in 1994. On one side is decay and decomposition; the slow, reluctant ceasing of a zombified regime. On the other is miraculous birth. The space between these two finalities is often called the ‘transition’, or the ‘interregnum’, and is imagined as a period of strange historical liminality – one that gives way to a ‘new country’. Three decades on, however, it is becoming increasingly obvious that the pairs of opposites that frequently accompany contemporary South African literary history – apartheid and post-apartheid, birth and death, oppression and democracy – represent little more than insufficient graspings at a far more nuanced set of problems. They are the big stories, the grand narratives.

Taking Ivan Vladislavic’s *Missing Persons* (1989), Jeremy Cronin’s *Inside* (1983) and Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995) as some of its key starting points, this dissertation seeks out literary ‘micro-spaces’ that emerge from the context of South Africa’s transition. These spaces – holes, nests, shells, shacks – will be read in terms of their disruptive potential: as small, foraging, and important incursions on overarching grand narratives.

I. The space in-between: South Africa’s literature of interregnum

“The old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum there arises a great diversity of morbid symptoms”. Nadine Gordimer’s transplantation of Gramsci’s words from *Prison Notebooks* into the epigraph of *July’s People* constitutes, arguably, the most well-known

application of the term “interregnum” to the context of South Africa’s political transition. Zygmunt Bauman, in his “Times of Interregnum”, traces Gramsci’s own use of the word to Lenin’s “revolutionary condition” in which, simply put, the “rulers no longer *can* rule while the ruled no longer *wish* to be ruled” (49). Before that, it referred to the time period separating the death of one royal sovereign from the beginning of another’s reign. Bauman speaks here of “occasions on which past generations experienced (and customarily experienced) a rupture in the otherwise monotonous continuity of government, law, and social order” (49). The old ‘system’ (that is, the existent “legal frame of social order”) “loses its grip and can hold no longer” – though the new is not quite ready, or developed enough, to take its place.

In its simplest form, South Africa’s interregnum refers to the transition of power from the National Party Government to the African National Congress (ANC) – it is the period in-between the death of apartheid and the birth of democracy, characterised by fragile political negotiations, ‘sunset clauses’, rapidly escalating violence, delayed voting ballots, and the tangible sense of the ‘dream of freedom’. It is a liminal space suspended between two political regimes. Chiolozona Eze calls the interregnum years “an indeterminate grey area of dawn and dusk” (88) and Elleke Boehmer, writing about the strange tendency of the endings of late apartheid novels to fall into uncomfortable, stunted, curtailed silence, surmises that:

What was happening was that the inescapable surrounding reality fenced in the potential questions raised by endings. Narrative uncertainty, its suggestiveness and tease, were constrained within the deathly binaries of a long history of oppression and opposition. Hoped-for but as-yet-inconceivable, the long-delayed moment of liberation, too, forced its own particular hiatus at the end of the South African narrative. What lay beyond that moment was a gap, a space of which it was impossible to imagine the shape. (45)

Of course, there are a collection of texts that are ordinarily associated with South Africa’s teetering interregnum condition of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Njabulo Ndebele’s “Rediscovery of the Ordinary” (1986) and Albie Sachs’ “Preparing Ourselves for Freedom” (1991) spring immediately to mind. Both call, amongst other things, for a turn away from the unceasing spectacle of apartheid and towards the ‘ordinary’ micro-spaces in which the majority of human life happens. The writings collected in Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly’s *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and*

Democracy, 1970-1995 – which, as the editors point out in the introduction, are imbued with a sense of their “closeness” (1) to the event of South Africa’s first democratic election – also provide valuable perspective. Attridge and Jolly’s book includes the voices of Andre Brink, Nadine Gordimer, Lewis Nkosi, Zoë Wicomb, Mongane Wally Serote, and other prominent literary figures of the time.

While it is clear that such essays qualify as ‘interregnum literature’ by virtue of being written in the ‘historical moment’ usually associated with South Africa’s transition (late 1980s, early 1990s), the problem of which texts to include and which to exclude from this ‘genre’ is an interesting one. Indeed, *July’s People* (1981), written in the early 1980s about a moment in the indeterminate future, is not – strictly speaking – a text that arises from the same context that Sachs and Ndebele’s essays do. Instead, it imagines the forced rupture of a centuries-old tension between oppressor and oppressed – a breaking point in which the minority occupying the hegemonic centre are stormed by those suspended in the peripheries. (J.M. Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, of course, contains a similar sense.) There is an argument to be made that the conception of interregnum as threshold, fracture, break, or rupture – like a cracked piece of glass – produces a distinctly refractive effect. It could, conceivably, redirect light onto any period of South Africa’s colonial history. Boehmer’s consideration of late-apartheid literature, for example, sends her all the way back to Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje’s *Mhudi* and Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of an African Farm*. The former, especially, contains a distinctive double gaze. Plaatje’s writing and rewriting around 1920, and the text’s original publication in 1930, look back on a moment one hundred years earlier – at the cyclical violence of the Mfecane. Generally speaking, the novel is concerned, on the one hand, with fading Setswana oral tradition and, on the other, with the prediction of a distant future. *Mhudi*’s prophetic ability, Halley’s comet, Gubuza’s forewarnings – all are good examples here. Indeed, Tim Couzen’s 1971 reading of the text involves the language of violent, fracturing transition – he argues that if a people “like the Matabele oppress other peoples long enough the oppressed will eventually unite and overthrow their oppressor, in open conflict if necessary” (201-202).

It is important to note, here, that the notion of ‘interregnum’ (and the images of liminality, fracture, and discontinuity that frequently accompany it) tends to encourage presuppositions of something like a clean break between ‘apartheid’ and ‘post-apartheid’ – an idea that has been

subject to extreme scepticism over the last three decades. Indeed, the language of liminality implies a moving through, a transition from an ‘old’ order to something ‘new’. Tom Penfold argues, in the early 2010s, that while the legislative end of apartheid brings with it the possibility of transforming “utopia into *eutopia*, which...is a place of happiness and order that is ‘not a phantasmic impossibility but a realizable ideal’” (993-994), this is ultimately a possibility that remains unrealized. The ‘new South Africa’ is not an “accomplished reality” but a “dystopian struggle where the past has remained very much present” (994). As a result, the space between what Boehmer calls apartheid’s “decline and fall” (45) and the birth of a new country has been conceived, not as a fixed historical time period, but as the lingering condition of South African society. “[Post]-apartheid South Africa constitutes a state of interregnum where the old is preventing the birth of the new”, writes Ernest Dominic Cole in the abstract to their 2008 doctoral dissertation, “post-1994 South Africa is characterized by paradoxes, ambiguities and uncertainties that are indicative of disillusionment” (1).

The case for the ‘interregnum state’ of contemporary South Africa – as described by Penfold and Cole – is made most convincingly, perhaps, by a turn from strictly time-based conceptions of history (in which the ‘end of apartheid’ came three decades ago, and in which the interregnum was a four-year period between 1990 and 1994) towards notions of spatiality. Penfold, for example, posits that in contrast to the “open society” that should accompany democracy – “defined by its provision of a public space that is available to all for the democratic meeting of individuals” (994) – “the private realm reigns in South Africa today” (994). And indeed, it barely needs to be pointed out that the spatial violence of grand apartheid has been largely preserved rather than brought to a halt in our twenty-first century moment. Pass-laws, Land Acts, segregation, widespread restriction of movement – the apartheid machine, as we know, was fueled by a distinct creation of the kinds of “spatial inequalities” that Ernest Mandel insists are necessary for capitalist “accumulation” (Soja 81). An aerial view of a city like Johannesburg – designed by city planners so that the economic centre, buffered by suburbia, is readily supplied with cheap labour by pristinely constructed roads¹ from ‘homelands’ and informal settlements² – attests to this. “Urban reality” – and a specific breed of racially divided urban reality at that – becomes what Lefebvre calls “a productive force” (15) for the National Party Government. The centre and periphery, in the language of Walter D. Mignolo, are not only ‘enunciated’³ by the colonial oppressor, but physically constructed in the city space. That these spatially organized inequalities largely

persist in the South Africa of 2023 is already enough to bring the notion of ‘post-apartheid’ under question.

II. Micro-space

Though Ivan Vladislavić, for example, is often thought of as Johannesburg’s pre-eminent city writer and Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* has been read as the story of an ‘itinerant flaneur’ who “[invades] the cityspace and [makes] it his own” (Ngara 20), I will not be specifically concerned with the large, ‘macro-spatial’ sites associated with the South African context – homelands, informal settlements, city-centres. Instead, the research project will aim to undertake a ‘micro-spatial’ analysis – in which a collection of ‘micro-spaces’ will be read as sites of concentrated exception – or transgression. There are a handful of key secondary texts that underlie this decision.

Stephen Greenblatt, Joel Fineman, and Harold Veese’s writing about the so-called ‘New Historicism’ comes to mind first. “New Historicists”, writes Veese, “have evolved a method of describing culture in action” (xi). Theirs, in the method of Geertzian cultural anthropology, is an extraction of microscopic units of behaviour or experience – a wink, a sheep-theft, a cockfight – which are then shown to contain hints of ‘overarching culture’, rather than the other way around. The idea is that by ungracefully ripping anecdote (or *petite histoire*) from the *grand recit* of ‘history’ – and thus removing it from the teleological chain of cause and effect in which it has been previously (perhaps exclusively) read – the New Historicism “lets history happen” (Fineman 61). For Fineman, the anecdote – which he conceptualises as *historeme* (that is: “the smallest minimal unit of the historiographical fact” (57)) – “introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless, narration of beginning, middle, and end.” (60). It punctures holes in the great arching mass of the *grand recit*. The ‘micro-spaces’ that I collect in this project are, essentially, the spatial equivalents of Fineman’s anecdotal kernels – or, to put it differently: the ‘micro-space’ is the stage on which anecdote is acted out. Small places like swimming pools, shacks, holes, and bathrooms, under this conception, in spite of their unassuming appearances, become potential containers of moments that can interrupt the kinds of historical grand narratives that accompany South Africa’s transition. These grand narratives, as I have suggested, often present themselves in the form of overly general pairs of opposites: ‘apartheid’ and ‘post-apartheid’, ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’, ‘minority rule’ and ‘democracy’, and what Albie Sachs, referring to apartheid literature more specifically, calls “good people” and “bad people”. He writes:

[W]hether in poetry or painting or on the stage, we line up our good people on the one side and the bad ones on the other, occasionally permitting someone to pass from one column to the other, but never acknowledging that there is bad in the good, and, even more difficult, that there can be elements of good in the bad. (188)

In addition, however, the ‘micro-space’ poses disruptions to the overarching grand *spatial* discourses to which I have already pointed. Aerial views, “mushrooming peripheries”, the comfort of suburbia, the “Jim comes to Joburg” trope.

Nicky Falkof’s “Sex and the Devil: Homosexuality, Satanism, and Moral Panic in Late Apartheid South Africa” provides a useful initial opportunity to consider this kind of ‘spatial incursion’. Her essay examines the crumbling late-apartheid government’s plunging of the country into a state of frantic “moral panic” over a collection of so-called attacks on the “purity” (Jones 405) of its population. ‘Gay’ white males (alongside, interestingly, the lurking, never-present figure of the white Satanist) are cast as what Falkof – drawing on the work of Stanley Cohen – calls “folk devils”. That is, they are “imagined as the cause of social disintegration far beyond [their] actual sphere of influence” (275). One of the most commonly cited roots of this “moral panic” and desperate suppression, interestingly, is one particular house party in the Johannesburg suburb of Forest Town in January 1966. In his article, titled “Keeping Sodom out of the Laager”, Glen Retief provides a telling excerpt from a police report – its author, upon entrance into the house, is confronted by:

... a party in progress, the like of which has never been seen in the Republic of South Africa. There were approximately 300 male persons...who were all obviously homosexuals...Males were dancing with males to the strains of music, kissing and cuddling each other in the most vulgar fashion imaginable. They also paired off and continued their love-making in the garden of the residence and in motor cars in the streets, engaging in the most indecent acts imaginable with each other. (101)

The language of this account draws attention, precisely, to a collection of transgressive micro-spaces. The Forest Town house, its gardens, and the cars parked in the road outside are all sites of ‘vulgarity’ and ‘indecent’. They hold startling moments of incursion upon the state’s ‘moral values’ – explicitly contradicting the “specific form of hegemonic [Afrikaner nationalist, Christian,

etc.] masculinity” upon whose dominance apartheid depends (Falkof 274).⁴ With the above excerpt in mind, it is telling that the apartheid government, in section 20A of a 1969 amendment to the Immorality Act, prohibit “[acts] committed between men at a party” – where ‘a party’ is defined as “any occasion where more than two persons are present”. The micro-space holds such transgressive energy here, it seems, that it earns its place in national legislation. This strange sense of interplay – of the flowing of language and ideation between parliament and the many small spaces that make up the country – is one that the dissertation concerns itself with at length (particularly in the next chapter).

Finally, the influence of Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space* (1958) on this project cannot be understated. Most striking to me has always been the structure of the text – Bachelard’s division of his book into chapters with names like “Corners”, “Nests”, “Shells”, “Drawers, Chests and Wardrobes”. While the sections of this dissertation do not keep pristinely to Bachelard’s naming conventions, they are undergirded by an instinct to ‘collect’ micro-space: to stack up and read in categories. In other words, it is also the *mode* of thought in which *The Poetics of Space* takes place – Bachelard’s intuitive reasoning, his associative way of traversing the great ranges of his reading – that inspires my methods of inquiry. Many of the connections that I make between micro-spaces in the coming chapters are based on my own sense of evocation: the ways in which passages and images are ‘called to mind’ by others. More pressingly, though, these Bachelardian overtones pose a series of important questions about how to approach the study of literary micro-space in the context of apartheid South Africa. Indeed, the micro-spaces that I collect here need to be untangled from the felicitous – often warm, protective, cosy – connotations that have attached themselves to Bachelard’s nests and shells. This will be my primary concern in the next chapter. For now, I would like to very briefly offer an overview of the trajectory of my dissertation-length argument. The best way to do this is to turn to our first micro-space: the compost hole.

III. Into the compost hole

The dissertation that follows began when these words from Ivan Vladislavić’s *Missing Persons* were read to me in a second-year lecture hall:

I climb into the hole. The bottom is marshy, it sucks at my feet. Granny rocks closer to the edge so that she can look down on me. Her eyes are as pale as the sky behind her. Her face comes and goes on the horizon. With the flat edge of my spade I scrape the piles of food

along the rim and into the hole. Potato peelings, bones, bread-crusts, meat. I dig it in. The mixture bubbles and steams. (86)

I suspend the signifiers apart from their ‘context’ on purpose here. Indeed, when I first encountered this passage, it struck me at once as calling to be read – it was richly evocative, deeply suggestive – and yet resistant to my attempts at reading. One of the options in our final exam that year was to write a short essay about “Tsafendas’s Diary” – the story in which the compost hole appears. In the build-up, I remember preparing to respond to ‘the Vladislavić question’. I felt I needed to say something about the compost hole that lay at its centre. But when the time came, I couldn’t write the essay – at least not on that day. In truth, I haven’t been able to write it on any day since. Though the compost hole – its earthy bubbling, the stickiness of its marshy bottom, the scraping of the narrator’s spade – sparked the *élan* for this research project, and though during the period of preparing this dissertation, I have written more words about the compost hole than anything else, it surfaces in little more than a series of passing comments in this final version. In retrospect, it occurs to me that the above passage holds a seminal tension – a kind of taut doubleness – that runs through my entire discussion, and that provides a good opportunity to introduce the project’s trajectory.

Before I lay out my sense of this ‘doubleness’, it is worth lingering for a moment on the fact that the dissertation has ended up collecting around a central absence (the compost hole). There is something to be said here, I am sure, about the nature of research – its ironic tendency to resist simple disclosure, perhaps, or the strange ambivalences of its starting points. Most interesting to me is the appropriateness of ‘absence’ to the mode of my inquiry. My seeking out of micro-space, of locating a nest or a shell, a cottage or train, and trying to ‘open’ it up for analysis, has turned my attention again and again towards the ways in which such analyses ‘close off’ other possibilities – not only of other, similar micro-spaces that remain unattended to but of the evocations and possibilities necessarily cut off by the process of academic writing. Between each chapter, then, the reader will find a chain of micro-spaces that do not find their way into my analysis. My hope is that, by remaining closed, they are left open.

Returning to the discussion at hand, “Tsafendas’s Diary” is probably best explained as a semi-autobiographical return by Vladislavić to his 1960s childhood in Verwoerdburg and the assassination of Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd by Parliamentary Messenger Dmitri Tsafendas

in 1966. Before its appearance as the ninth instalment in *Missing Persons* (1989), the story was published in *Staffrider* (7(1)), a literary magazine run by Johannesburg publishers Ravan Press. Rather than a realist representation of its subject matter, which would have been in keeping with the common prerogative of South African writers at that time to respond to what Katie Reid has called the “political anti-apartheid urgencies” (264),⁵ the coinciding occasions of the narrator’s childhood and the Prime Minister’s assassination are figured through an anti-realist, blurred, dreamlike version of the family home in which the collection’s first story (“The Prime Minister is Dead”) begins.

From the comparatively large cast of “The Prime Minister is Dead” (which includes the boy’s father and mother, Government officials, and waving crowds), “Tsafendas’s Diary” homes in on two characters: the boy and his grandmother, by whom he is constantly monitored and influenced. Her obsession is with finding the imaginary diary of the Prime Minister’s killer – a document, to her mind, that holds “the key to all mysteries...of meat and the imagination” (86). She enlists her grandson in the search, knitting him a “thinking cap” that he must wear to bed and that, save for two eye holes, covers his entire face. At night, once Granny has tucked him in with his “meat blanket”, the cap allows the two of them to go on dream missions aboard a motorized rocking chair. But when the hunt for the diary turns up fruitless, the boy begins to write it himself – “I am composing Tsafendas’s Diary”, he says, “dredging it up from my dreams, bringing it back in a bottle” (89). When the thinking cap becomes too stifling, and he pulls it off, his punishment is to be sent to dig all kinds of waste into a compost hole in the garden. As the story goes on, the mixture livens – it “bubbles and steams” (86). Eventually, Granny “rocks herself over the edge” (91): she falls into the compost hole; her feet “stick out like boiled hams”. The boy can “hear her cooking...in the meaty broth at the centre of the earth” (91). From here, we read:

I’m digging it in. I have to feed the insatiable earth. I put in bones, leaf-mulch from the gutters, vegetable peelings, blankets, papers. I soak it all down. The ink begins to run. I take up my spade and I dig it in. (91)

Worth noting is that passages like this one – and the bizarre details of the story in which it appears – are notoriously resistant to interpretive reading. One could (and I have) been sucked into endless scrabbling after fragments of meaning in what Hedley Twidle calls “arcane webs of signification” that offer “no possibility of explication or diagnosis” (9). To be clear, I am not undertaking any

kind of diagnosis in this introduction. Quite the opposite. Indeed, research must begin with unresolvedness becoming a ‘problem’. What I mean to do here, then, is to point towards my problem – to lay out my confusion.

The compost hole, to be sure, is precisely the kind of thing I am referring to when I talk about ‘literary micro-space’. That is: it is a small, enclosed (or partially enclosed) physical space that exists in the world of a text. Further, it is an enclave inside a larger, overarching milieu. In this case, by digging, the boy opens up a hole in the ground. When he steps inside, he is no longer on the surface of his family’s garden but underneath it. In the South African literary tradition, gardens are exemplary colonial sites – they embody the tensions between what Sally-Ann Murray calls “‘strange wilderness and ‘familiar’ domesticity” (47). To occupy the latter was to be in a state of difference – or, better, a state of having overcome – the former.⁶ In one sense then, the garden is metonymic of the boy’s subject position – an inherited whiteness. Most critical readings of the story arrive at this general starting point: that “Tsafendas’s Diary” stages an interaction between Vladislavić’s narrator and the beginnings of apartheid’s slow decay.⁷ Here, then, is the question that yields the paradox: is the boy stuck inside or liberated by the compost hole? Does it designate a way out of the garden space, or is it emblematic of deeper entrenchment?

“The ink begins to run. I take up my spade and I dig it in”. In these sentences from the above-quoted section, Chris Thurman hears echoes of Seamus Heaney’s “Digging” – a poem that describes the vocational departure of its speaker from his potato-farming father and grandfather. (“Between my finger and my thumb / The squat pen rests. / I’ll dig with it”, run the poem’s final lines.) Among other affirming symbols,⁸ this resonance suggests a reading of “Tsafendas’s Diary” as a kind of *Künstlerroman*. Like Heaney’s speaker, Thurman argues, Vladislavić’s “boy-writer” is able to formulate “a writing ‘position’ by making creative use of the problem of inheriting ‘whiteness’ in South Africa” (49). Under this formulation, the space of the compost hole is representative of such a writing ‘position’; the death, decay and neurosis of apartheid,⁹ evoked by the gurgling mulch at the bottom of the hole, is the fertile mixture from which the boy’s writerly consciousness grows.

But in addition to the connotations of fecundity and growth implied by this reading, it remains insistently evident (to me, at least), that the compost hole is also a limiting, restrictive, deeply claustrophobic space. It is boiling hot; from the bottom it “sucks” the boy down by his feet;

from the top, his grandmother's pale eyes bear down. Like the thinking cap, then, which is at once generative of the dreams that inspire the boy's writing¹⁰ and stifling ("I wake up choking", he says at one stage, "[t]he thinking-cap has fallen down over my face, my mouth is full of warm fur, my nose is full of stench. Meat stew" (88)), the compost hole is both enabling and restrictive. It allows for growth, for writerly development, and at the same time functions as a kind of cage.

To Thurman's Heaney intertext, then, we might suggest another image evoked by the meat stew at the bottom of the compost hole. Around the time of the writing and publication of "Tsafendas's Diary", as it happens, literary representations of meat were coming to bear on the condition of white, liberal South African writers. Consider the opening of Nadine Gordimer's 1987 short story "Spoils", for example:

In the warmth of the bed your own fart brings to your nostrils the smell of rotting flesh: the lamb chops you devoured last night. Seasoned with rosemary and with an undertaker's paper frill on the severed rib-bones. Another corpse digested.

'Become a vegetarian, then.' She's heard it all too many times before; sick of it, sick of my being sick of it. Sick of the things I say, that surface now and then.

'I want no part of it.'

We are listening to the news.

'What? What are you going on about. *What?*'

What indeed. No: which. Which is it I choose to be no part of, the boy who threw a stone at the police, had both his arms broken by them, was sodomized by prisoners into whose cell he was thrown, the kidnapped diplomat and the group (men, as I am a man, women, as she is a woman) who sent his fourth finger by mail to his family, the girl doused with petrol and burned alive as a traitor, those starved by drought or drowned by flood, far away, the nineteen-year-old son of Mr and Mrs killed by the tremendous elemental thrill of 220 volts while using an electric spray gun on his motorbike, near by. The planned, devised, executed senselessly by elemental forces. *Senselessly*. Why is there more sense in the conscious acts that make corpses? Consciousness is self-deception. Intelligence is a liar.

'You're not having great thoughts. That's life.'

Her beauty-salon philosophy. Stale, animal, passive.

Whether I choose or not; can't choose, can't want *no part*.

The daily necrophilia.

'Become a vegetarian, then!' (161-162)

From the relative confusion of this opening, which serves as a kind of disembodied preface to the rest of the story, Gordimer's narration attaches loosely to a couple on a weekend away at a private game lodge – their dinner table conversations and impromptu game drives. Of interest to me, with the compost hole in mind, are the metafictional resonances of the above lines. Peter Anderson draws these out in his 1990 essay on the story – lingering, productively, on its strange opening in order to describe a particular kind of writing position:

White writing like Nadine Gordimer's short story "Spoils" (1987), acutely conscious of itself and its mission, is writing as *tua culpa*, self-righteous writing, writing whose hypersensitive moral reflex seems almost indistinguishable from a stalemate of self-rejection and disgust. It is writing which strives to be a self-justifying literary act, too, because exact – holding itself up to as a mirror of the bad faith, bad conscience and malaise of one of the most privileged social classes in the world (to which Gordimer herself belongs), the white high bourgeoisie under apartheid. (37)

Rather than being burdened with the task of representing 'The Struggle' to an international audience, the writerly position that Vladislavić might have been in danger of automatically entering into is a moralizing, *tua culpa* ('your fault') form directed at a local white, English constituency. Fiction like "Spoils", according to Anderson, gains its realist impetus from an instinct to hold up a mirror to white society – to act as a kind of conscientizing nose-piece that sniffs out the rottenness of the high bourgeois. The rottenness, or 'spoiling', here, can refer to a number of things. Most obviously, to the "spoils of imperial and colonial conquest" (Anderson 37) which fuel the "cushy lifestyle" of the white upper and middle class and the murder and violence on which that conquest depended (and continues to depend). By acting as a "voice of conscience" to this privileged class, the writing's aim is to inspire moments of "morbid self knowledge" (37) and therefore, hopefully, some kind of action on the part of the newly conscientized reader. It carries "the smell of rotting flesh" to the nostrils of the ruling class.

Importantly, however, the same “odour of death and corruption” (37) that the white writer recognizes and diagnoses in their audience clings, inevitably, to them themselves. Like Gordimer’s speaker in “Spoils”, who is repulsed by the moral ineptitude of white South Africa and yet, as Anderson puts it, “can’t let go of his own share of the spoils” (38), this realist uncovering of apartheid’s hidden truths locks the white writer into an implicating subject position. “For it is the bourgeois subject”, writes Anderson, “that is trapped” (38). In denouncing the forces of high apartheid, they are continually reminded of their collusion with, precisely, those forces.¹¹ From this position, the “renunciation of meat” (of spoils, rottenness, death) is “merely another pretence” (38). Here, then, is a possible explanation for the claustrophobic aspects of the compost hole. White writing precipitated by a desire to tunnel below privilege, to forge a response to the moral decay of apartheid South Africa, is often destined to happen instead on the realisation that the rottenness is in fact *internal* – blown out, as it were, by writing-as-fart. “Still I can smell it” (88), says the boy-writer, in spite of his best efforts to launch the meaty thinking cap from his head.

Of course, this is not to say that Anderson’s ‘bourgeois cage’ constitutes anything like an exhaustive reading of Vladislavić’s story. What is clear, though, is that the compost hole accrues layers of paradoxical evocation. There is an argument to be made that the boy-writer is *both* stuck in and apart from the garden. If I were to offer a tentative thesis statement for the project, it would be that this is a characteristic trait of literary micro-spaces in late apartheid. As we will see, they are at once centrally emblematic of the constriction of petty apartheid (arguably its most debilitating aspect) and places from which to assert exception: to resist, to speak back, to imagine difference.

IV. Chapter Outlines

Chapter one, titled “Tales from the nest”, concerns itself with the ways in which literary micro-space attests to apartheid legislation’s invasion of the close quarters of human life. Taking Gaston Bachelard’s writing about nests and shells as its starting point, the chapter uses a dove’s nest from Es’kia Mphahlele’s address at the Congress of the People in 1955 and a tortoiseshell from Jeremy Cronin’s *Inside* (1985) to formulate a sense of what I will call ‘breached micro-spaces’. The discussion concludes with a six-foot deep impromptu gravesite from Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa*. I argue that it draws out early traces of a specific kind of writerly voice that issues from such sites of oppression.

Chapter two moves from Plaatje's gravesite to Jeremy Cronin's "liberated zone" – a formulation in which poetry, protest, song, and other forms of human vocalisation, when combined with micro-space, make foraging, puncturing incursions on apartheid hegemony. Keeping Cronin's essays and poetry of the 1980s as its main focus, the chapter collects micro-spaces of exception: hostel canteens, train carriages, the swimming pools and coffee bars that make up Nat Nakasa and Lewis Nkosi's "fringe country", prison cells and corridors repurposed by song, poems hidden under pillows and squeezed into book spines. In the final analysis, I suggest that this fractured landscape comes to emblematised Cronin's anticipatory poetics of the 1980s.

Chapter three, sensitive to the tensions between breached micro-space and the liberated zone, begins to suggest the possibility of a literary deferment of the 'post-apartheid' by the continued reversions of writing imaginaries to anticipatory notions of micro-spatial exceptionality. It makes this argument through a reading of the collaged shack in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* – a space that has become an iconic literary symbol of early post-apartheid hope and 'transcendence'.

The earth seemed to give way beneath my feet and I dropped

vertically downwards.

My chin hit the ground almost at the same time as my elbow, nearly dislocating my right shoulder. I found myself standing straight up, but being partly underground I was unable to move. Then at last I was no longer afraid to die. I had done everything to avoid danger and death, and further endurance seemed impossible. All things in this world have an ending, thought I, and my pursuers had now overtaken me; and so, surrendering myself to impending tragedy, I calmly awaited my doom...but nothing happened. Then, pulling myself together, I found that I had stumbled into a porcupine's hole, or it may have been that of an ant-eater, from which I extricated myself after a long struggle.

Sol Plaatje, *Mhudi*

When John Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* came to South Africa Mr Carr, chairman of the Non-European Affairs, in his unfettered arrogance as the guardian of the morals of nine million Africans, decided against a special staging of the play for us because the play was too immoral. I had read the play. Jeanne and Malcolm Hart introduced me to Alan Dobie, the British actor invited to play Jimmy Porter. Alan Dobie negotiated an arrangement for me to watch the play through a hole at the back of the auditorium, and with due respects to Mr Carr my morals survived the play.

Bloke Modisane, *Blame me on History*

The 'beds' are wooden bunks or concrete slabs the size of a narrow single bed, without their own mattresses and bedding. The usual arrangement is for the man and his wife or girlfriends to share the bed with the youngest child they have; other young children and teenage girls sleep in between their parents' beds.

...

In this situation the bed is the image that mediates between the inhabitants of the hostels and the larger society. That human beings, as individuals or as families, can be reduced to 'bedholds' has serious implications for both these individuals and society as a whole. They have to either 'shrink' to fit this space or expand the space to accommodate their needs.

Mamphela Ramphela, *A Bed Called Home*, 1993

I stick a screwdriver under the rim of the iron cover and lever it up. In the space beneath I find: a brown ribbed jersey, army issue; a red flannel shirt; a small checked blanket; two empty bottles – Fanta Grape and Lion Lager; a copy of *Penthouse*; a blue enamel plate; a clear plastic bag containing some scraps of food (bread rolls, tomatoes, oranges). Everything is neatly arranged. On one side, the empties have been laid down head to toe, the plate balanced across them to hold the food; on the other, the blanket has been folded, the shirt and jersey side by side on top of it, the magazine rolled up between. In the middle, behind a lens of misted glass, white numbers on black drums are revolving, measuring out a flood in standard units.

I kneel on the pavement like a man gazing down into a well, with this small, impoverished, inexplicably orderly world before me and the chaotic plenitude of the Highveld sky above.

Ivan Vladislavić, *Portrait with Keys*, 2006

Her room under the stairs of the Côte d'Azur had been intended for air-conditioning equipment, which had never been installed. On the door was a sign: a skull and crossed bones painted in red, and underneath the legend DANGER–GEVAAR–INGOZI. There was no electric light and no ventilation; the air was always musty.

J.M. Coetzee, *Life and Times of Michael K*, 1983

I arrive at a secluded cliff at midnight, amid a heavy, windy downpour. It is as if thousands of waterfalls have suddenly been let loose from some faraway planet. Below is a neglected caravan. The rainwater has washed the caravan, exposing rusted and stained windows (greased with child palm prints). The caravan door is ajar, the wind blowing water through the doorway. It stands askew, sinking further with each passing day, the rubber on its tyres exposing wire, its walls used as chalkboards. Daring drawings. Done in soot. An old shoe, without a heel, is under the bed, amid wet cigarette butts. On the wall next to the cracked window is a crooked nail, on which hangs a stringless, unloved acoustic guitar. The wardrobe doors are off at the hinges, their backs used as havens for the imagination.

Nthikeng Mohlele, *Small Things*, 2013

This young wandering family decided to dig a grave under cover of the darkness of that night, when no one was looking, and in that crude manner the dead child was interred – and interred amid fear and trembling, as well as the throbs of a torturing anguish, in a stolen grave, lest the proprietor of the spot, or any of his servants, should surprise them in the act. Even criminals dropping straight from the gallows have an undisputed claim to six feet of ground on which to rest their criminal remains, but under the cruel operation of the Natives' Land Act little children, whose only crime is that God did not make them white, are sometimes denied that right in their ancestral home.

Solomon 'Sol' Tshekiso Plaatje, *Native Life in South Africa*, 1916

Tales from the nest

Bachelardian poetics, apartheid absurdity, and micro-spatial reading

Asked of a shell: or what makes a wave

White: but the broken light: our surgeon hands

Open oysters with a screwdriver:

They taste of answers: and compel like *ands*.

– “Oysters”

PR Anderson

Thus far, Gaston Bachelard has been something of a dimly lit presence in the wings of my discussion. The first aim of this chapter, then, will be to redirect the house lights, so to speak, onto *The Poetics of Space* – a text widely regarded for its felicitous, comforting collection of small sites. I will make some preliminary comments about the book’s conceptual mode, its connectivity to a wider, largely untranslated oeuvre, and, ultimately, lay out my sense of its applicability to a project concerned with South African interregal literature. My ‘way in’ to these concerns will be through some explicatory reading of Bachelard’s work on nests and shells – two quintessential micro-spaces that provide telling initial insights into the specific form of phenomenology from which *The Poetics of Space* unfurls. From these insides, I will undertake the chapter’s second, and arguably more pressing, objective: to begin to untangle the felicitous connotations of Bachelardian micro-space from the kinds of small places that crop up repeatedly in South African literature under apartheid, and which this thesis collects. At the heart of these concerns, as we will see, is a strange and often illusive tension between protective and restrictive smallness, claustrophobia and comfort, the prison cell and the nest.

I.

In the book that was unfinished at the time of his death,¹ Gaston Bachelard wrote that his “life work [had] almost two independent halves, one under the sign of the concept, the other under the sign of the image” (as cited by Chimisso 185).² And to his students at the Sorbonne he would reportedly say that he had “the feet of a philosopher of science but the wings of a poet” (Smith 6). Indeed, it is widely acknowledged that Bachelard’s oeuvre seems strangely divided down the middle. On one side, an epistemology of science – represented most famously, perhaps, by his notion of the ‘epistemological break’ and works like *Le nouvel esprit scientifique* (1934) and *La formation de l’esprit scientifique* (1938) – and, on the other, a philosophy of the imagination and daydreaming. Here we find entire chapters on wardrobes, on reverie, on the infinite immensity of forests, on nests and shells. It is common practice to associate this first category of thought with the ‘early’ Bachelard – who, having worked as a postal clerk, a physics and chemistry teacher at his old secondary school in Bar-sur-Aube, and having spent three years in the trenches, finally earns his Doctorate in the Philosophy of Science at the Sorbonne in 1927. In the late 1930s, the story goes, during his tenure as chair of Philosophy at the University of Dijon, he begins to turn towards an extended study of the imagination, of poetry, and what he would later come to define as an adjusted form of phenomenology. While this is a useful timeline, a more conducive understanding, it seems, recognizes the fact that Bachelard’s thought involved a constant balancing of these two categories of inquiry.³ “Once lit,” writes Roch C. Smith, “both flames did not always burn with equal intensity, but neither one was ever fully extinguished” (2).

Throughout his scholarly life, Cristina Chimisso suggests, Bachelard maintained that *la vie rationnelle* (“rational life”) and *la vie onirique* (“oneiric life”) – as he calls them in *Le Materialisme Rationnel* (1953) – worked in opposition to each other. That is, in other words, that the pursuit of images, run through with reverie and “happy daydreaming”, could hold at bay the rational, empiricist requirements of modern scientific thinking. He believed that these two warring sides constituted the “double basis of a complete anthropology” (19). That the vast majority of Bachelard’s scientific works remain untranslated, however, means that *The Poetics of Space* (1964) is often read as a stand-alone piece of literature by its anglophone audience – a misperception that obscures the important connection between Bachelard’s alternating modes of thought and the kinds of spaces associated with and generative of those modes.

For Bachelard, the world in which he lived cast the individual human being into an unresolvable double-life. In public, “diurnal” spaces, he posited, they were required to relate to people and objects from within a rational worldview – one opposed to personal emotion, subjectivity, and intuition. At the close of day, this life was temporarily abandoned. The people would return to a restful, solitudinal state – emblemized, in many cases, by their homes – which facilitated dreaming, imagination, and the contemplation of poetic images. Importantly, both sides of this “double situation”, as Bachelard calls it in *Le matérialisme rationnel*, correspond with different kinds of spaces. The rational mind – *la vie rationnelle* or *due régme idées* (the realm of ideas) – is associated with open, interactive, social space. Here, the writer and social human being alike are confronted by the obligation to “explain how various moments of consciousness are connected in a chain of truths” (*The Poetics of Reverie* 2). More imaginative, intuitive connections of images, then, are relegated to private, “nocturnal” burrows – shrunken, enclosed spaces. In basic terms, this is the realm of *The Poetics of Space*. “I shall show”, writes Bachelard at the beginning of “Nests”, “that a human being likes to withdraw “into his corner,” and that it gives him physical pleasure to do so” (112). This is a telling sentence for at least two reasons. First, for its evocation of the ‘withdrawing’ subject – an image in which the diurnal, public world is negated and vacated in favour of solitude, of dreaming, of seeking out hiding places. “Images of intimacy can become increasingly small and concentrated”, writes Chimisso, “and include wardrobes, chests, drawers, and even small boxes, which suggest secrecy and an ‘intuitive sense of hiding places” (187). Secondly, and importantly, this process of withdrawal is frequently accompanied in Bachelard’s writing by a sense of “physical pleasure” and imaginative wonder.

It comes as little surprise, then, that there seems to be a growing body of personal writing – both online⁴ and collected in prefaces and introductions – that emphasizes the warmth and nostalgia of first encounters with *The Poetics of Space*. “Over the years”, writes Mark Danielewski in his preface to the Penguin Edition,

I have discovered that it is not uncommon to mention Bachelard and hear in return a sigh of happy recognition. I have sat at tables crowded with journalists, graphic artists, urban planners, therapists, sculptors, and architects, all of whom carry some fond memory of their first encounter with *The Poetics of Space*. (ix)

The “sigh of happy recognition” comes close to capturing, in a phrase, what I have been referring to as the ‘felicitous connotations’ that tend to attach themselves to Bachelard’s work – and *The Poetics of Space* in particular. A useful exercise now will be to think, with slightly closer reference to the kinds of hiding places that Bachelard collects in his book, about where these connotations might come from.

II.

There are many ways to try to establish connections between the fourth (“Nests”) and fifth chapters (“Shells”) of *The Poetics of Space*. For the purposes of this chapter, and the nest and shell that I will pull out from the South African literary canon in a moment, two come immediately to mind. The first is that both are images of extended inhabitation – of ‘home’. For Bachelard, the nest, in particular, evokes its human equivalent; it reminds us of the hut, the house, or the cottage. Similarly, these human dwelling places tend to call to mind nests and shells. This was the case, Bachelard mentions, with Vincent van Gogh – who once wrote to his brother that “[the] cottage with its thatched roof made me think of a wren’s nest” (118). Both kinds of animal home spaces arise, to Bachelard’s mind, from a double interiority. In one sense, they are constructed from the inside: the bird bends sticks and grass around itself and the mollusk (Bachelard evokes Valéry here) “*exudes* its shell” (126; my emphasis). In both cases, the occupant of the micro-home space is at the centre of a creative, even aesthetic, process. “[The] mollusk’s motto”, writes Bachelard, is “one must live to build one’s house, and not build one’s house to live in” (126). This artistic aspect is of course complementary to the more functional sense in which the nest and the shell are protective structures. This is the other side of the double interiority: the nest and the shell, crafted in solitude, preserve solitude – they act as sites of refuge from the threatening aspects of the external world.

The second initial characteristic of nests and shells to which I would like to call attention is that both, for Bachelard, imply interactions with an array of unconscious pasts. One of these is a distant, primordial past. “With nests and, above all, shells,” he writes, “we shall find a whole series of images that I am going to try to characterize as primal images; images that bring out the primitiveness in us” (112). Chimisso’s clarification of the Bachelardian sense of the term is useful here:

Primitiveness for Bachelard is connected with the life of the imagination, with poetry and emotions. Unlike reason, which for him evolves and brings about change, the imagination maintains its links with our primitive self. Unlike Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, whose theory of ‘primitive mentality’ had a tremendous influence on a number of disciplines in the inter-war France, Bachelard believed that the ‘primitive’ approach to the world is not lost to modern people, but rather survives in their imagination. This is why our dreams are populated by primal images. (187)

That the oneiric, meditative effects of Bachelardian shells and nests have the capacity to link the modern human back to something like a premodern self begins to restate the divisions posited by the double-anthropological model. Similarly, though not identically, these small sites are also meant to facilitate a rhythm-analytical⁵ recuperation of the childhood self. In his chapter on the shell, Bachelard affirms this sense and links it to the phenomenological mode in which his inquiry is taking place. The speaker and the audience of *The Poetics of Space*, he clarifies, are not interested in systematically classifying a diverse range of shells (like a conchologist would), but in the “original amazement” of the first-time shell observer. He writes:

For here too, as with nests, enduring interest should begin with the original amazement of a naïve observer. Is it possible for a creature to remain alive inside stone, inside this piece of stone? Amazement of this kind is rarely felt twice. Life quickly wears it down. (127)

This description of the meditative, felicitous moment is a useful, albeit partial, indicator of Bachelard’s phenomenology of the nest and the shell. At least in one sense, the poetic reclamation of ‘original amazement’ involves a temporary detachment from the progression of what we might call horizontal time – the movement of which, in the above passage, corresponds with a kind of ‘wearing down’ – and a deeper immersion in the vertical depth of a disembodied moment.⁶ “A nest – and this we *understand* right away – is a precarious thing, and yet it sets us to *daydreaming of security*” (122), writes Bachelard a few pages earlier. The “answer to this paradox”, he goes on to explain, is that “when we dream, we are phenomenologists without realizing it” (122). Rather than privileging our rational understanding of the nest’s precariousness, “we relive the instinct of the bird, taking pleasure in accentuating the mimetic features of the green nest in green leaves” (123). Importantly, according to my reading, these sentences encourage a complicating view of Bachelardian micro-space – at least in the case of the nest and the shell. More than sites

inextricably linked to one-dimensional ‘security’ or ‘pleasure’, they rely on the – albeit at times oppositional – presence of loss, sadness, and even physical pain.

Two images from “Nests” come to mind here. For Jules Michelet, Bachelard notes, the nest is the bird’s “very person”, “its most immediate effort” and “its *suffering*” (121; my emphasis). Formed from the inside, the nest depends for its construction on the bird’s constant pressing of its breast, its heart, against twigs and blades of grass into the correct shapes. And earlier, invoking Jean Caubère’s *Le nid tiède* (The Warm Nest), Bachelard posits an associative comparison between the nest and what Caubère calls *la vieille maison* (the old home). For Bachelard, “at the mention of a nest, a bird’s song, and the charms that take us back to the old home, to the first home, a sort of musical chord would sound in the soul of the reader” (120). Built into this phenomenology of the nest, however, is what he calls “an *alas* in this song of tenderness” (120). The “old home” is “old” because it is no longer. Its evocation, accompanied by a temporary recollection of the place of childhood, is undergirded by a vague and enduring sense of longing. The nest, Bachelard writes, “has become a great image of lost intimacy” (120).

It is on this melancholic note, an undertone in both Bachelard’s writing and its critical reception, that I turn now towards the context of South Africa’s literary history under apartheid. In a few paragraphs’ time, I will suggest that the signature concentration of apartheid violence into the many nocturnal ‘hiding places’ of South African life warrants something similar to a Bachelardian contemplation of images of home. Before that, there is the challenge of beginning to untangle my own use of the term ‘micro-space’ from the overwhelming sense of felicity – of comfort, of excitement, of fascination – that tends to accompany Bachelard’s nocturnal work. It seems appropriate, here, to persist for a moment with nests and shells.

III.

For a nest, I turn to Es’kia Mphahlele’s famous address at the Congress of the People in Kliptown on 26 June 1955.⁷ There, having spent the first section of his speech talking to a crowd of around 3000 delegates and, Peter McDonald writes, “as many observers” (241) about the shortfalls of the newly introduced Bantu Education Act (no. 47 of 1953) and the merits of the Freedom Charter’s

alternative “modern cultural vision”, Mphahlele offers his audience what he calls a “little tale”. It is so little, in fact, that there is time to reproduce it in full here:

A snake went up a tree and found the nest of a dove. The dove had its little ones in the nest. The snake swallowed the little ones of the dove, and the dove flew away. The mother dove began to cry, and when she was crying a musician was walking by. The musician realising, hearing the cry of the dove for the loss of its chickens, started to compose a song to the time of the weeping of the dove, and he did this in such a way that his music so moved and stirred all the other animals in the world that they came together and joined forces. They drove the snake out and killed it. (203; qtd. in McDonald)

Mphahlele is quick to clarify that his tale is not intended as a rousing call for the murder of ‘the snake’ – an image, McDonald points out, that in the context of the rest of the address “most probably stood for the anachronistic and self-servingly racialized culture of the ‘white man’” (203). Instead, Mphahlele’s rhetorical emphasis, undergirded by a traditional sense of animal tales as tools of “public persuasion”, falls onto the figure of the passing-by musician. The role of artistic expression to imbue sites of suffering with a transcendent sense of empathic, non-racial humanity comes to stand for a different kind of cultural expression, here – one enshrined by the Charter.⁸ To achieve this end, however, the tale first depends on the effectiveness of the dove’s nest as a symbol of maternal homeliness and security (as with the nest of *Mmamasiloanoka* in Setswana oral literature, for example).⁹ It is from this initial understanding that the audience grasps the monstrosity of the snake – enacted by its forced entry into the home space and marked, as in many Xhosa, Zulu, |Xam and Setswana stories, by accompanying images of consumption and devouring (see McGranaghan; Hammond-Tooke).

Of course, in the context of Mphahlele’s address, which, as I have mentioned, centres on a condemnation of the Bantu Education Act, the mother dove’s stolen babies most likely represent something like a threat of cultural dislocation for children trapped in a colonial education system.¹⁰ It seems to me, however, that the image also strongly evokes the many cases of violent, *literal*, displacement that South Africa’s writers set out to represent again and again – during the aftermath of the 1913 Land Act, for example, or to the forced removals that would stretch from the early

1960s to the mid-1980s. It summons the demolished houses of Bloke Modisane's Sophiatown and Richard Rive's District Six.

Turning back to Bachelard, there is an argument to be made here that the familiar image of the nest, coupled with Mphahlele's consistent use of the diminutive form (the tale is "little", the dove's "little ones", referred to fondly in the next sentence as "chickens", are "little") evokes something like Caubère's 'old home'. This site, crafted with the language of childhood warmth, is the object of the Snake's incursive entry and the subject of the song of culture on which this section of Mphahlele's speech focuses. Like Bachelard, then, Mphahlele appeals to what we might call a phenomenology of feeling and memory – one linked to small homely space. According to my reading, though, Mphahlele's nest also illustrates at least one key point of difference from its Bachelardian equivalent.

In *The Poetics of Space*, the core defining principle of nests and shells is their evocation of individual and collective pasts; they evoke "original wonder" and "primitiveness". Suffering and loss, in this conceptual framework, exist as what we might call secondary characteristics. They are implied by the 'old home' or by the shape of the bird's nest but only upon further consideration. By contrast, in Mphahlele's tale, it is precisely the music composed in time with the mother dove's weeping that 'moves and stirs' the other animals into "joining forces" (241) and which becomes the core of the little tale's allegorical rendering of Mphahlele's cultural vision. The micro-space of the nest is lent its immediacy – and, indeed, its primary rhetorical coherence – by the fact that it exists, not just as a homely site, but as one whose violent penetration gives way to rallying artistic voice. While there are a handful of useful similarities to be drawn between Bachelardian nests and the one in Mphahlele's story, then (their smallness, their inherent warmth and comfort, their evocation of childhood 'home'), this constitutes a key point of differentiation. For Mphahlele, and for Cronin, whose shell we turn to now, micro-spatial resonances flow from images of penetration and incursion.

The shell in question comes from a poem towards the end of Jeremy Cronin's *Inside* – a collection, Brian Macaskill writes, that "stands out against" the "considerable corpus of South African prison writing" that precedes it (188).¹¹ Born in 1949 and raised in the middle-class white suburbs of Simon's Town and Rondebosch, Cronin was 'politicized' (as the strange turn of phrase went) as an undergraduate student at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in the late 1960s. During

this time, he was recruited to the underground South African Communist Party (SACP) – an affiliation still active after his return to UCT from postgraduate studies in France, this time as a lecturer of Philosophy. In 1976 he was arrested under the Terrorism and International Security Acts for his association with banned political parties. The poems collected in *Inside* were mostly composed during the period of incarceration that followed this arrest – from within Pollsmoor Prison in Cape Town before his trial, for example, and in the maximum-security facility in Pretoria, amongst death-row inmates, to which he was moved subsequently. It is worth noting, already, that the prison cell must come to feature among the most prominent small spaces in struggle literature. Indeed, Cronin’s own turn to lyrical poetry – which he feels ‘paralyzed’ about writing before his arrest (Gray, interview with Cronin, 34) – is apparently facilitated by the solitude of confinement (Macaskill 190). The poems themselves, as has been noted many times, display a collection of inward turns: towards childhood memories (as in the section titled “Naval Base”) or, in “Venture to the Interior”, towards an internal geography of language. In the prose edition to the 1987 edition, Cronin writes:

The writing of poems was strictly forbidden, along with ‘singing, whistling and the making of any other unnecessary noise’ – to quote the relevant regulation. So these poems were composed surreptitiously and paced out in my tiny cell, one two three, and back. (Maybe you can still hear those three steps in many of the lines?) (10)

The official pairing, by the “relevant regulation”, of “the writing of poems” with activities more conventionally thought of as phonic – “singing, whistling and the making of any other unnecessary noise” – already positions the three-step large prison cell alongside Mphahlele’s nest as a site from which sound issues. I will return to this sense at length in the next chapter, with Rita Barnard’s sense of Cronin’s ‘liberated zone’ as ‘speaking place’. For now, getting back to the subject at hand, we turn to “A Tale of why Tortoise carries a Hut upon his back” – one of the final poems from *Inside*. There, a “large beast” (“I am called / Tyrannosaurus” (8–9), it says) imprisons Tortoise – who is subjected to days of manual labour before being allowed to return, in late afternoons, to “the quietness of his cell” (18). “Yet”, writes Cronin,

often on return he would find

the small world he’d made was smashed,

his few books and letters scattered and awry,
 and Tortoise felt anger in his throat
 like some, half-swallowed
 prehistoric stone.

The bed he'd made was ripped up,
 his once folded clothes were scattered on the floor.
 The beast had paid yet another visit
 While Tortoise was away.

They say Tortoise is a patient one, yes,
 he learnt to be by picking up the fragments of a
 shattered world
 time and time again.

So that's why Tortoise took to carrying
 His hut upon his back. (98)

With Mphahlele's nest in mind, there are two observations that I would like to make here. The first is that Cronin's poem, like Mphahlele's tale, draws from a different kind of literary history to the one that Bachelard demonstrates such affectionate familiarity with throughout *The Poetics of Space*. The title of the section in which this poem appears – "Isiququmadevu", after the bearded, female, garment-stealing, person-eating monster from Zulu folklore – signals its correspondence with a variety of oral traditions. The effect here, again, is to foreground literature as a spoken, and therefore *heard*, form. Where Bachelard's reading and thinking space involves an often-solitary retreat into the nocturnal corners and crannies of a diurnal, rational world, Cronin and Mphahlele's

micro-spaces are constructed dialogically. They are audible, collective undertakings that, in many cases, convene public audiences, invoke public imaginaries, and even call for public interventions.

The second line to be drawn between the nest and the shell here, as I have already begun to mention, is that both exist, not only as small, personal, spaces – Mphahlele’s dove nest is of course the home to a mother and her “chickens”; Cronin’s tortoise shell is filled with markers of personal space: there are books, letters, folded clothes, a bed – but as *breached* sites. In both stories, the reptilian monster acts out its monstrosity by invading the lived micro-space, which comes to contain a specific kind of focused violence. Elsewhere in *Inside*, one feels, Tortoise’s shell appears in more literal forms. A few weeks ago, I found “Faraway city, there...”, a poem from the “Love Poems” section of the collection, written in careful blue letters on the floor of the District Six Museum in Buitenkant Street:

There in our Cape Town where
 they’re smashing down homes
 of the hungry labouring people
 – will you wait for me my love?

In that most beautiful
 desolate city of my heart
 where if staying on were passive
 life wouldn’t be what it is.

Not least for those rebuilding
 yet again their demolished homes
 with bits of plastic, port jackson saplings,
 anything to hand – unshakeably

Defiant, frightened, broken

and unbreakable are the people of our city

– Will you wait for me, my love?

Like Tortoise, who is always regathering and reassembling the fragments of his shell, the people of Cronin's Cape Town are both "broken and unbreakable" (16-17). My sense, crouching to read these words on the floor, was that the poem's new physical position was in the process of generating palimpsestic layers of meaning and evocation – it had been 'rewritten' in more ways than one. In addition to the Tortoise-like 'rebuilding' described in its third stanza, for example, it now also gestured towards the District Six museum's *re-mem-bering* of history. Launched in 1994, the museum holds a wealth of memory traces – photographs, kitchen appliances, recipe books, hairdryers, combs, netball trophies – from the lives and homes of thousands of District Six's residents who were forcefully removed under the Group Areas Act of 1966. That these links to the past should predominantly take the form of domestic objects – metonyms for destroyed homes that cannot be retrieved – gestures towards a monumentalization of smallness. What does it mean to assemble communal memory from a bricolage of kettles and hairbrushes?

One of the resonances of Cronin's shell, then, is that it begins to articulate the microscopic focus of apartheid's legislative violence. Thousands of home spaces, their appliances and family photographs and hairbrushes, become targets. It is clear throughout the South African story that the unique pettiness of the apartheid system charges the many micro-spaces that make up the nation with a salient energy. "The total effect of the apartheid laws in South Africa", writes Lewis Nkosi, "is to make it almost illegal to *live*" (157; my emphasis). Pass laws, separate amenities, immorality acts – the legislature targets such innate aspects of human life as movement and affiliation, the use of public spaces, the intimacy of romantic relationships. It renders dinner parties illegal, prohibits the use of certain bathrooms and benches and playgrounds. It tries to control bedroom activities. Indeed, in Cronin's poem, Tyrannosaurus's action is to needlessly disrupt Tortoise's "small world". It scatters stacked books, dishevels folded clothes, and rips up neatly-made beds.

IV.

One variety of micro-space in the examples of apartheid literature that we have considered so far, then, is that which is repeatedly created (and emphasized) by legislation unusually fixated on the small, innate aspects of human life. Rita Barnard envisions something like a country of prison cells here. “The prison looms large in South African literature produced under apartheid” she writes, “the cell stands as a synecdoche for a vast system of confining, quarantining, containing, controlling, and segregating human beings” (157).¹² This set of continuous verbs, each denoting a different kind of ‘making smaller’, calls to mind the verbs assigned to Cronin’s *Tyrannosaurus*. And indeed, like *Tyrannosaurus*, the legislation in question (and its various uniformed enforcers) routinely penetrates nocturnal home spaces. Lewis Nkosi captures one such moment of entry in his aptly titled “Apartheid: a daily exercise in the absurd”. There, writing about life in Sophiatown – an existence which required a Johannesburg City Council permit that was all but impossible to acquire – he recalls “persistent nightly raids” by the police (40). It was common, during such raids, to be “caught with your pants down” – to hear a loud knock on the door, “[stumble] out in your pajamas”, and be taken away in a police van (40).

It is worth noting the somewhat straightforward duality here between prohibited micro-behaviours (interracial sexual relations, the reading of banned literature, and so on) and the micro-spaces (racially segregated bathrooms, benches, parks, and living areas) separately assigned by legislation. Importantly, these two categories necessarily overlap. In the first case, explicit spatial controls implicate micro-spaces by definition: bathrooms and benches are charged by otherwise unassuming activities (sitting, urinating, standing, walking) with transgressive energy. On the other hand, outlawed micro-behaviours have the capacity to imbue otherwise innocent *spaces* with illegality. A bed or a bookshelf, for example, might be made the object of a sudden police raid if the former contains an ‘interracial’ and/or same-sex couple¹³ or the latter a communist manifesto.

A particularly memorable example of petty absurdity from Nkosi’s essay involves the case of an alleged eye-witness – a police officer – bringing forward charges against a white man and a “coloured” woman for infringing upon section 16 of the Immorality Act (which refers to interracial sex). The offending micro-behaviour here is an alleged kiss. Nkosi writes:

The charge was based on a rather detailed eye-witness account by a police officer describing how he had found the couple kissing. Whereupon the white man ingeniously

argued that it was his custom to bid anybody a farewell by a peck on the lips and that the kiss had not been a sexual expression at all.

Clearly, this put the judge in a bit of a quandary. Finally, he delivered what was generally considered a Solomon's judgement. He ruled that the state attorney should establish the line where the kiss ceased to be platonic and became passionate. Up to now, it seems that the Minister of Justice has not employed his prodigious legal talents to working that one out, but I wouldn't despair if I were you. The white reporter who covered the story for the Johannesburg Daily hasn't. He wrote: *'Lawyers and laymen are certain that the Minister of Justice will now have to consider an amendment to the law which will define the various degrees of kissing from the platonic to the passionate!'* (38)

A detour into the text itself, before anything else, helps to demonstrate the applicability of Nkosi's reference to a famous maxim of the Harlem Renaissance: black people in America, wrote Langston Hughes, 'laugh to keep from crying'. In Nkosi's essay, laughable absurdity alternately gives way to an asphyxiating sense of bureaucratic claustrophobia. The national party's legislative clasp around bench usage, cold-drink buying¹⁴ and kissing certainly evokes a Kafkaesque breed of entrapment. ("At best an account of what a black man goes through in his daily life sounds like an exaggerated Kafka novel" (35), writes Nkosi.) More pressing to my discussion, though, is the strange migration of the kiss from unnamed location (street, park, theatre, dining room) to courtroom.

The "detailed eye-witness account" of Nkosi's policeman calls to mind the report of the officer at the Forest Town House party from the previous chapter. In both cases, it is a particular line of vision – an intrusive, bureaucratic gaze – that artificially encloses the minutiae of human activity. The result is a grid country of 'small worlds' under constant surveillance. J.M. Coetzee reproduces this language in a retrospective essay on "The 1995 Rugby World Cup" and its rainbowistic opening ceremony: referring to a nation "locked by its former masters into ethnic-political compartments" (352). "South Africa is a society of [insides], beyond high walls" (9), writes Cronin:

There are endless spaces inside other spaces. It is no easy feat to maintain the indigenous and overwhelming majority as excluded foreigners, while nevertheless simultaneously including them for their much needed labour. Inside, outside, inside. The spatial

engineering extends to the very micro-places of our segregated land – the park, toilet and bus shelter. (Introduction 10)

Coetzee and Barnard’s language of quarantining, locking in, and ‘keeping inside’ signals our arrival, perhaps, at the limits of Bachelard’s micro-spatial imagination. In place of pleasant, secure smallness is enclosing smallness, claustrophobic smallness, a smallness, perhaps, that is comparable to the kind that Jamaica Kincaid refers to in *A Small Place*. There, her Antigua is an island of inescapable banality for its local inhabitants. A colonial past and crippled economy mean that they cannot afford to leave – not even for a holiday. “It is as if”, Kincaid writes, “the beauty – the beauty of the sea, the land, the air, the trees, the market, the people, the sounds they make – were a prison, and as if everything and everybody inside it were locked in and everything and everybody that is not inside it were locked out” (47). What has come into view, in other words, is something like a negative obverse of felicitous smallness. Indeed, Bachelard’s sense that human beings like to ‘withdraw to their corners’ seems to come up short in diagnosing the “depth of desperation” (41) that Nkosi describes in “Apartheid: a daily exercise in the absurd”. Detectable, instead, in the combination of texts that the latter part of this chapter has considered, is the overwhelming sense of a population *backed into* a network of micro-spatial corners. Interestingly, there is a claim to be made that rather than wholly stifling creative output, this apartheid micro-spatiality comes instead to facilitate a range of literary forms of expression. It is this vocality – the songs composed in time with weeping – to which I turn in the next chapter.

V.

In closing, and in anticipation of my discussion in the next chapter, I would like to consider a section from Sol Plaatje’s *Native Life in South Africa: Before and Since the European War and the Boer Rebellion*. Plaatje’s text, eventually published during his travels through England in May 1916, documents the movements of its author through the Transvaal and Free State during the months following the passing of the notorious Natives’ Land Act of 1913. Of interest in the context of this discussion is the book’s enduring representation of the interplay between what Plaatje refers to as “debates [proceeding] in parliament” (58) and the human effects of those debates in the rural reaches of South Africa. “[The] new law”, he writes in the fourth chapter (whose title – “One Night with the Fugitives” – evokes the language of incarceration deployed by Cronin and Barnard over half a century later), “was now penetrating every part of the country” (59). In short, the passing of

the Land Act on 19 June 1913 makes it a criminal offence for black people in South Africa to live on farms unless as servants – they cannot remain as tenants, or as owners of land or livestock. Given the choice between offering up their life savings of cattle to white farmers or leaving their homes in search of areas yet unreached by the Act, thousands of families are cast out into the unforgiving winter.

Plaatje enters the scene here, having crossed the Vaal River into the Orange Free State. He cycles between abandoned farmhouses and gathering groups of dislocated people, offering advice and sympathy and collecting stories of the “operation” of the Act. One evening, in the “open country somewhere near the boundary of Hoopstad” (68), he encounters a crowd of people, wagons, oxen, and children with “chattering teeth”. Among them is the Kgobadi family – whose story Plaatje chooses to conclude his chapter with:

Mrs. Kgobadi carried a sick baby when the eviction took place, and she had to transfer her darling from the cottage to the jolting ox-wagon in which they left the farm. Two days out the little one began to sink as the result of privation and exposure on the road, and the night before we met them its little soul was released from its earthly bonds. The death of the child added a fresh perplexity to the stricken parents. They had no right or title to the farm lands through which they trekked; they must keep to the public roads – the only places in the country open to the outcasts if they are possessed of a travelling permit. The deceased child had to be buried, but where, when, and how?

What strikes me immediately here, as it does with every fresh reading, is Plaatje’s use of the diminutive form. A few paragraphs earlier, his eyes drawn to “the teeth of the little children clattering through the cold”, he cannot help but think of his “own little ones in their Kimberley home of an evening after gambolling in their winter frocks with their schoolmates” (70). Here we hear the voice of a father – one who was known to melt under the charms of his youngest daughter, Olive,¹⁵ and who most likely wrote these lines during an extended separation from his family during his travels in England. “We wondered,” he goes on, “what these little mites had done that a home should suddenly become to them a thing of the past” (70). Throughout the chapter, the diminutive form is bound to an imaginary of home and homely space through repeated association: ‘home’ becomes a thing of the past for the “little mites” in the open country, for example, and when Plaatje recalls his own “little ones”, they are at ‘home’. According to my reading, part of the

rhetorical strength of the above passage, where “darling” denotes the child-subject in the action of being carried from the Kglobadi’s cottage, stems from an extreme severing of this established emotive link. This is also the case, incidentally, in Mphahlele’s tale, where the mother dove’s “little ones” are removed from the nest when they are swallowed by the snake. These lingual parallels, perhaps, begin to suggest that our arrival at Plaatje’s account of the Kglobadi’s child is also a glimpse into one of the many thousands of ‘nests’ referred to allegorically by Mphahlele forty-two years later.

A relatively straightforward initial observation here is that Plaatje’s relaying of Mr. and Mrs. Kglobadi’s story involves a distinct narrowing of narrative space. “One Night with the Fugitives”, referring broadly to parliamentary debate in its early stages, moves into the realm of its physical effect – or outworking – when Plaatje boards a train from Kimberly to observe the Land Act’s “operation” (58). Having crossed the Vaal and ventured fondly over the terrain of his childhood, the narrative voice focuses its attention more and more specifically. From open farmlands, to the public roads that were the “only places in the country open to the outcasts if they are possessed of a travelling permit” (70), to one evening, one crowd of people, one chance encounter. The story itself, of course, depicts the penetration of a home space by legislative change. Like Mphahlele’s snake and Cronin’s Tyrannosaurus, then, we might say that the Natives’ Land Act enacts its violence from within the personal micro-space. The Kglobadis are made to pack their personal belongings (folded clothes, bedsheets, books) and vacate their cottage for the smaller, more exposed, body of the ox-wagon. In the final lines of his chapter, Plaatje zooms into an even smaller micro-space:

This young wandering family decided to dig a grave under cover of the darkness of that night, when no one was looking, and in that crude manner the dead child was interred – and interred amid fear and trembling, as well as the throbs of a torturing anguish, in a stolen grave, lest the proprietor of the spot, or any of his servants, should surprise them in the act. Even criminals dropping straight from the gallows have an undisputed claim to six feet of ground on which to rest their criminal remains, but under the cruel operation of the Natives’ Land Act little children, whose only crime is that God did not make them white, are sometimes denied that right in their ancestral home. (70-71)

These lines constitute the rhetorical knockout blow of Plaatje's chapter.¹⁶ His most probable intended readership, it is important to note, would have been the British public – whom he sets out to convince of the moral abhorrence of the Land Act. (An Act drafted by none other than Cecil John Rhodes.) “Overall,” writes Brian Willan, “*Native Life in South Africa* was a powerful and sustained polemic, shrewdly cast in the terms and language most likely to appeal to the conscience of a nation at war, and the first book-length statement of the grievances of the African people of South Africa by one of their own leaders” (197). In this context, the six-foot grave is lent a strange doubleness. On one hand, it abrades the softening metaphor and euphemism that might usually accompany representations of large-scale oppression by standing for the devastating *individual* effects of the Land Act. Mrs Kgobadi's darling is forced, literally, from cottage, to ox-wagon, to illegal hole in the ground. On the other, it is clear that Plaatje's grander rhetorical objectives depend precisely on these six feet of ground. The grave is reclaimed by language. Indeed, while *Native Life in South Africa* did not achieve its intended toppling of the Land Act, it did attract the attention of a wide and distinguished readership – *United Empire*, *The Birmingham Post*, Louis Botha himself.¹⁷ There is a kind of rebounding mechanism at play here. While bureaucratic oppression travels along a narrowing tunnel from the wide political sphere into the micro-spaces of the cottage and the hole, Plaatje's own voice issues out from these small sites and into the ears of posterity.



Fig. 2: This image accompanied an excerpt from *Native Life in South Africa* that appeared in *Staffrider*, vol. 5, no.2, 1982. The excerpt, called “Flight in Winter”, contains the section to which I refer in the last part of this chapter.

There was a small one-room tin shack the municipality had the sense of humour to call a ‘reading room’, on the western edge of Marabastad. It was stacked with dilapidated books and journals junked by bored ladies from the suburbs – anything from cookery books through boys’ and girls’ adventures to dream interpretations and astrology. Mostly useless, needless to say. Still, I went through the whole lot indiscriminately.

Es’kia Mphahlele, “Exile, the Tyranny of Place and the Literary Compromise”, 2002.

The park bench, hallowed,
holds the loiterer listening
to the chant of the fountain
showering holy water on a congregation
of pigeons.

Oswald Joseph Mtshali, "Keep Off the Grass", *Sounds of a Cowhide Drum*, 1971.

A turning point in my life occurred when I discovered a treasure trove of banned books in my father's garage. One day, alone at home and bored during the school holidays in the mid-1960s, I began to explore my home. There was that wooden crate at the front right corner of the garage against which the silver bumper of my father's Ford Zephyr 6 sometimes rested. That crate had been there for many years. An assortment of garden tools was often positioned around it. On top of it was a heavy layer of unused floor tiles; old copies of *Huisgenoot*, *Zonk*, and *Drum* magazines; and two bulging cardboard boxes laden with old shoes, empty oil cans, old Chinese Checkers, Ludo and Snakes and Ladders game boards, abandoned toys, and other odds and ends associated with various members of the family. All these would not encourage anyone of casual interest to open the crate.

Njabulo Ndebele, "Fine Lines from the Box", 2007

So these poems were composed surreptitiously and paced out in my tiny cell, one two three,

and
back.

(Maybe you can still hear those three steps in many of the lines?)

Jeremy Cronin, *Inside*, 1987

Speaking places and micro-spaces: sound-space dialectics and Jeremy Cronin's
 "liberated zone"

[One] of the powers of attraction of smallness lies in the fact that large things can issue from small ones

Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*

In the previous chapter, I gestured towards the tendency of literature produced under apartheid to represent the disproportionate concentration of state violence in small, nocturnal spaces.¹ Legislature drafted in parliament finds its human targets, inevitably, in their beds, at dinner parties, or on their toilets. In the literary imagination, these intimate sites become what I called 'breached' micro-spaces: Mphahlele's nest and Cronin's tortoiseshell, read in this way, are metonyms for the "ethnic political compartments" (Coetzee 352) into which the nation is squeezed by its minority rulers. As an overtone to this discussion, however, was a second feeling: that literature and voice issue repeatedly from precisely this micro-spatial geography. From Mphahlele's broken dove nest, for example, flows a song of culture and from Plaatje's child grave a powerful polemic against the Natives Land Act. Over the next few pages, I explore this overtone more directly through the poetry and essayistic prose of Jeremy Cronin.

Broadly speaking, this chapter traces a line of examples in which small spaces are implicated in the creation of artistic vocalities. In Cronin's case, this is particularly fertile ground – not least because of his emphasis on "liberated zones",² which I argue permeates his work of the 1980s. My initial task, then, will be to make some explanatory comments about "liberated zones" by referring to a 1988 essay titled "'Even Under the Rine of Terror...': Insurgent South African Poetry" and very briefly contextualizing Cronin's thought as part of a pre-existing tradition of theories of spatial contestation to apartheid. What emerges here is a view of the 'liberated zone' as a formulation in which collective oration (the performance of poems or the singing of protest songs, for example) 'opens up' spaces of exception (of self-governance, racial integration, etc.) within the overbearing framework of apartheid hegemony. As my discussion progresses to an

earlier essay about “South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s” (1985), however, these initial explanations come to be challenged.

In their place, a sense of liberated zones being constructed multi-directionally by strange, non-uniform combinations of sound and space comes into view. For Cronin, micro-spaces are more than holders of oppositional vocalisation: they can work metaphorically, for example, to describe openings in hegemonic lingual fields (as in the case of Mongane Serote’s poetry), or literally (as in the case of Cronin’s own ‘white writing’) to designate ‘places to speak’ from within previously restrictive authorial subject positions. In one sense, this sound-space dialectic provides a useful opportunity to track continuities between Cronin’s essays and *Inside* – which, as I will show, involves the repeated mutual generativity of sound and space. In another, it marks ‘micro-space’ as a key, even central, concept in Cronin’s anticipatory post-apartheid imaginary of the 1980s.

I.

Writing about *Inside*, Rita Barnard aptly calls it an “incisive analysis of South Africa’s oppressive, but contradictory political geography” (158). These last three words need some explaining. One of Barnard’s most useful examples of this ‘contradictory political geography’, I think, is the train space. Undeniably a “tool of oppression” (*Apartheid and Beyond* 7) without which the maintenance of the state’s segregationist and exploitative efforts would not have been possible, it also becomes a space – in some of the country’s most “notable” journey narratives – in which people experience profound connections to each other, chart the “lay of the land”, and even begin to envisage “an interracial community” (“Speaking Places” 158). Trains also provide “mobile meeting places” for trade unions,³ and, of course, are the source of a myriad of songs, short stories, and poems.⁴ In the previous chapter, using the word ‘doubleness’ instead of ‘contradiction’, I began to grasp this simultaneity through another micro-space: Plaatje’s six feet of ground. There, as we saw, the impromptu grave of Mrs. Kgobadi’s darling was at once a symbolic site of micro-spatially-focused oppression – which reached from general, macro-political conversations into individual family homes – and a space from which Plaatje’s rhetorical emphasis could issue outwards. In short, it was *both* a breached micro-space and what we might call a ‘speaking place’.

I would like to begin by considering this sense of contradiction in terms of what Cronin calls the ‘opening up’ of “liberated zones” during the struggle years of the 1970s and 1980s

(“Insurgent South African Poetry” 22). These, Barnard explains, are sites within the oppressive geography of apartheid South Africa in which “the possibility of a wholly liberated land” may be experimentally “acted out” (159). In “The Miracle of Fishes”, a poem that appears midway through *Even the Dead*, Cronin depicts the action of the anti-apartheid struggle as a repeated repurposing of space. “[We]”, he writes, referring to “[t]he great majority, the excluded-included”, “turned these exclusions / Into places of empowerment” (*Inside & Out* 112):

The township, the bush college, even the prison yard

Became

School for cadres.

Of us, you said: They are foreigners.

But still you solicited our custom.

Daily you wheeled us

Through the portals of the city.

We were Greeks,

You supplied the wooden horses.

For a day, or days, or weeks

We rejected these third class inclusions.

We declared stayaway.

We boycotted buses, shops, dummy elections.

We demanded a real say, but always you declined.

So we turned micro-space into parliament.

Umrabulo ruled in the street committee,

Debate raged through the SRCs, and church halls,

Even the burial ground became Lekgotla. (112-113)

What strikes me, in these stanzas so stacked with appropriate metaphor (it is interesting, for example, to imagine trains as wooden Trojan horses from which trade unions could organize protests) is the image of “burial ground” become *Lekgotla* (a Setswana word for a public meeting or community council; Barnard translates it as “place of debate” (159)). In one sense, in anticipation of my discussion in the latter parts of this chapter, and of Mda’s *Ways of Dying* in the next, we might say that Cronin describes the space-transforming effects of dialogical language. Besides evoking the famous mass funerals of late apartheid, in which stadiums of people would congregate to mourn and at the same time listen to speeches by political activists, his words call to mind once again the gravesite of Mrs. Kgobadi’s child. There, six feet of soil – a solemn burial ground – become the source of Plaatje’s *rhetorical* utterance against the Natives’ Land Act. Cronin’s contrast between “micro-space” and “parliament” becomes particularly apt here. In ‘speaking back’ down the narrowing tunnel between “debates [proceeding] in parliament (58) and the Kgobadi’s baby’s ‘illegal’ funeral, *Native Life in South Africa* appears to be making a mechanically comparable point to “The Miracle of Fishes”. This resonance between two texts divided by time is useful to keep in mind. Though Cronin’s “liberated zones” and their micro-spatial implications arise, as a ‘theory’, from a roughly ‘interregnal’ moment, then, they can apply more broadly to a heterogenous history – and even, perhaps, to an uncertain national future (I will leave these concerns for the next chapter).

To return to a more general introductory discussion of “liberated zones”, I turn to a key passage at the end of “Even Under the Rine of Terror...”: *Insurgent South African Poetry*. There, having considered the “agonistically toned features” (20) – or “reciprocal name-calling” (Ong 43-45; qtd. in Cronin 21) – of *toyitoyi* chants, Cronin concludes:

Whether the *toyi-toyi* is a song, a chant, a march, a war cry, or a poem is a scholastic point. Functionally, like much of the emergent culture and all of the poetry I have described, it serves to mobilize and unite large groups of people. It transforms them into a collective that is capable of facing down a viciously oppressive and well-equipped police and army. In acting together, under the shadow of apartheid guns, the mobilized people are forcing open space to hold proscribed meetings, to elect and mandate their own leadership, to discuss basic matters, to resolve crime in their streets, to bury their dead, to raise illegal banners, to unban their banned organizations, to discover their strength, and even to make their own poetry. In short, through it all, liberated zones are being opened up in the industrial ghettos and rural locations, where the people and beginning – tenuously it is true – to govern themselves in this land of their birth. (22)

I would like to draw attention here to the repeated language of ‘opening up’ space through various forms of lingual practice – discussion, poetry, meetings, banner-raising. As with *toyi-toying*, which Cronin withholds from definitively calling ‘march’, ‘cry’, or ‘poem’, these verbal practices (which are essential to the formation of “liberated zones”) involve a combination of written language, oral performance, and context-dependent spatial occupation. This sense of amalgamation, I argue later, is detectable in the poems in *Inside*. For the moment, from the above paragraph, it is possible to pick out two key characteristics of liberated zones. First, as I have already suggested, they are ‘speaking places’ – sites of sound. Second, they are places of *self*-governance: a term, in Cronin’s case, which implies the precarious – tenuous, temporary – overriding of the kinds of non-consensual governance to which the self was subjected under apartheid. Keeping in mind that these two phenomena are intricately bound up within each other, there is some productive ground to be made, I think, by taking some time to consider the idea of liberated zones as sites of ‘tenuous self-governance’.

At the beginning of “Insurgent South African Poetry”, Cronin describes a scene from Glynn Thomas Hostel in Soweto during a 1984 student conference. The conference involves three days of “intense political discussions, papers, reports, workshops, and elections” (13) – and its plenary sessions, attended by some 500 delegates, are held in the hostel’s canteen. Needless to say, the canteen is too small a space for so large an occasion. A third of the attendees “are left standing, crammed up against walls and into corners” (13). It is in this cramped space, during breaks between

papers and discussions, that the conference adjourns into liberation songs and performances of oral poetry. The first of a series of scenarios offered by Cronin in his essay, this hostel conference exhibits a whole list of markers of self-governance: elections, knowledge production, heated political debate, and poetry, for example. At the same time, though, the language of Cronin's account repeatedly calls attention to the closing in of walls, the scarcity of resources, and the dangers of external penetration. "Please, comrades," says one guest speaker, "our task is not to make it easy for the enemy to arrest us. This place is certainly bugged. Comrades must please refrain from wild rhetoric; let us preserve a militant discipline" (13). In other words, while it exists as a speaking place in which apartheid authority is eschewed and resisted, the hostel canteen continues to exhibit traits of the "breached" micro-spaces to which I referred in the previous chapter. The speech acts that issue from it, while powerful, are in some ways limited.

Far from rarities, Cronin's hostel canteen and Barnard's train space are evocative of a wider terrain of alternative, resurgent spatiality – one that finds plural representation in the work of a handful of apartheid-era writers. A turn of phrase from Mark Gevisser's 2009 essay "Inheritance" comes to mind here. There, happening upon a filing cabinet of photographs collected by Nat Nakasa for a 1961 *Drum* article titled "Fringe country: where there is no colour-bar", Gevisser is led to reflect on "gaps in the stitching of apartheid" (222). The photographs hold in place various instances of what Nakasa refers to as 'fringe country' – "that social no-man's-land, where energetic, defiant, young people of all races live and play together as humans" (209). There are jazz clubs, coffee shops, boxing rings, art galleries, street crossings, and swimming pools that hold what would have been considered 'transgressive' multiracial interactions. For Gevisser, the photographs signify a utopic landscape disappeared before his birth. They are "a genie unbottled", "the stardust of what might have been" (211).

Importantly, unlike Cronin's "liberated zone", Nakasa's fringe country – while often micro-spatial, precarious, and temporary – is not constructed consciously by explicit political involvement in "the struggle". Denizens of the fringe, Ryan Brown writes, consider "freedom" to be "the thing that happened when two black men sat down in a white coffee bar and convinced the proprietor to serve them – a tiny, subversive act that shifted the paradigm, if only for a moment" (32). Lewis Nkosi, Nakasa's lifelong friend, describes something similar in the latter stages of "Apartheid: a Daily Exercise in the Absurd" (1965). "Everywhere", he writes, "members of my

own generation, both black and white, were beginning to disaffiliate from a society organised on a rigid apartheid design. We began to sense that we were being deprived of a profounder experience; a sense of shared nationhood” (40). Confronted by the ‘rigidity’ of “apartheid design” – the reptilian incursion, as I referred to it in the last chapter – sections of Nkosi’s generation “disaffiliate” from the divided, gridded society altogether.

Stories began to filter to the press of mixed racial couples taking part at University dances; of white youths from rich white suburbs defying the law and roaming black townships by night; of new clubs and jazz haunts where free racial mixing took place on an unprecedented scale. Dodging the ever-present police in these black townships these youths from the white suburbs encountered the rigours and uncertainties of African life almost everywhere. Adventurous students prying into filthy nose-running shacks encountered a life that was shorn of all trappings of official statistics. The experience was shattering. (Nkosi 41)

This passage seems to describe a flurry of enactments (or at least partial, attempted enactments) of precisely the multi-racial ‘experience’ whose absence, Nkosi writes, defines the apartheid design. While it is important not to conflate Cronin’s liberated zone with Nkosi and Nakasa’s ‘fringe’, then, it remains clear that both involve transgressive (re)occupations of designated space – townships are entered by white students; trains designed to transport black labourers become meeting places for trade unions. In both cases, the impulse to withdraw from rigid society results in the creation of enclaves that come to contain new, integrated, self-governing, nationhoods.

It is worth noting that Nkosi chooses to describe the effects of these spatial formulations as *shattering* – implying a fracturing or breaking-up of existing wholes (most obviously, perhaps, of apartheid’s ethnic compartments, which are undergirded by a pseudoscience of racial categorization). But this language of fragmentation is not unique. Indeed, it underlies many of the micro-spaces that I have collected so far. Most fresh, perhaps, is Tortoise’s shell from the previous chapter. “They say tortoise is a patient one”, writes Cronin in the penultimate stanza:

he learnt to be by picking up the fragments of a shattered world
time and time again.

So that’s why tortoise took to carrying

his hut upon his back.

That was long ago.

They tell me Tyrannosaurus is now

extinct,

while Tortoise is alive and well, but you can still see

how he had to stick together broken pieces

– he’s got marks on his shell. (84)

As opposed to the image of the breached home space that Cronin offers in his third stanza – where, as we have seen, Tortoise’s cell is strewn with scattered books and clothes – the shell in these final lines is an emblem of victory, of Tortoise’s outlasting his oppressor. Its fracture lines attest to this resilience. Reaching back to the compost hole from *Missing Persons*, there is also an argument to be made for its dependence on a “sticking together” of “broken pieces”. There, the hole, which, as I have argued, functions as a space-creating artistic foray into contested veld, is essentially a container of odd objects: potato peelings, decomposing meat, historical events, soil, fruit, vegetables, the blanket that suffocates the boy in his sleep, the body of his grandmother, and so on. Read as a site of writerly birth,⁵ then, the hole begins to point towards a conception of literary creation as an amalgamative practice – a mashing together of empty objects. The neurosis and decay of the boy-writer’s social milieu become the ink for his writing. This seems consistent, it is worth adding, with one of Vladislavić’s most recognizable creative trademarks: the compiling of lists. In an interview, he refers to himself as a “keeper of notebooks” containing pages and pages of “overheard remarks, news clippings, pamphlets handed out at traffic lights, headlines, phrases from menus” (‘X Marks the Spot’ 126; as cited by Thurman). Already, we are beginning to see the intersections between the act of writing and the construction of alternate spatialities – sites of withdrawal, of exception, of contestation. The liberated zone, fringe country, the tortoiseshell, the compost hole: all involve the creation of new space through a common mechanism of fragmenting and reassembling. This mechanism provides a useful segue back to Cronin.

II.

In a 1985 essay on “South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s”, Cronin argues that what he describes as a “burst of English language poetry” (25) written and performed by black South Africans – Serote, Gwala, Sepamla, and others – carved out a “new thetic subjectivity” (37) within the hegemonic field of the English language in South Africa. English, of course, is historically lauded by a tradition of nineteenth and twentieth-century mission schooling as a kind of light of civilization; one, Rita Barnard and others have pointed out, that simultaneously included and excluded the non-first language speaker in a manner comparable to the way in which apartheid’s economic system both depended upon and grossly exploited its black labour force. The argument that Cronin makes, I would like to suggest, depends on a language of fragmenting and fracturing.

The first step here is a deployment of Julia Kristeva’s distinction between ‘semiotic’ and ‘symbolic’ expression. Very briefly, the former refers to a pre-thetic, pre-linguistic stage of language acquisition – one that is “heterogenous to meaning” and often associated with “bodily drives, muscular contractions, and with the infant’s interactions with the mother-figure” (Cronin 31) – gurgling, moaning, and crying, for example. Importantly, for Kristeva, this semiotic vocabulary does not disappear when human beings learn to speak formal languages. Rather, it exists as a kind of subterranean, repressed layer that might be allowed to break the surface – temporarily – during moments of psychosis, of distress, or, interestingly, of poetry. More specifically, Cronin explains, the reversion of poetic language to this underlying, archaic level of expression can come to constitute “an emergent or disruptive use of language” (31) – one that works against the often overly determined, “transparent” sets of signifiers that make up the symbolic level. In the poetry of Mongane Serote, in particular, then, Cronin observes that the consistent use of interjections (which tend towards the ‘semiotic’ side of Kristeva’s divide) – *Hell!*, *Hhayi*, and *Shit* for example – and of rhythmic variations on common riffs constitute such a disruption. This process is imagined as a series of repeated assaults – or “glancing blows” – by semiotic-leaning interjections on the upper, symbolic layer of semantically established language. In the case of colonial and apartheid South Africa, as Serote expresses in “Black Bells”, this is a particularly oppressive ‘layer’:

AND

Words,

Make pain,

Like poverty can make pain.

Words,

WORDS,

Like thought, are elusive,

Like life,

Where everybody is trapped.

I wonder who trapped me,

For I am trapped,'

Twice

like,

a word can mean two things

Who. and Whitey

Trapped me.

I read.

Words,

WORDS.

Trying to get out

Words. Words. By Whitey.

No. No. No. By Whitey.

I know I'm trapped. ("The law that says..." 37)

Striking here, in the context of my discussion up until this point, is the spatiality of Serote's image. In the previous chapter, I considered the claustrophobia induced by micro-spatially-focused legislative violence and monitorization – by which the strict limiting of access to certain areas and the cordoning off of space created enclaves of entrapment. The Kgobadis, for example, are forced to walk the tightrope of a narrow country road – suffocated on either side by farmlands they are not allowed to touch. In “Black Bells”, however, the enclosing walls that stifle Serote's speaker are not physical but lingual. Cronin's rendering of Kristeva's symbolic/ semiotic distinction as terrain and sub-terrain employs a comparable spatial metaphor, here. The symbolic layer, in this image, is that which lies on top and presses down upon. One interpretation of the poem, perhaps, is that Serote's speaker is trapped beneath words – “trying to get out”, pushing desperately against an encroaching ceiling as it lowers and lowers. In Nkosi's writing about his early days as a *Drum* journalist in the 1950s, he recalls walking around the streets of Johannesburg “with new English words clicking like coins in the pockets of [his] mind”. “I tried them out on each passing scene,” he writes, “relishing their power to describe and apprehend experience” (10). And indeed, the transactional value of the English language – spoken in a certain way, and by “those qualified to speak” (30)⁶ – is one that is frequently emphasized in South African literature. Assimilating certain patterns of speech, under this lingual economy, constitutes a method of being absorbed into a kind of white socio-cultural hegemony. For Cronin, this implies the in many cases automatic “linguistic disqualification” (28) of black South Africans – who are:

positioned within these discourses as non-subjects (*non-whites*, *non-Europeans*, ‘*skepsels*’, etc), as permanently junior subjects (‘boy’, ‘girl’, ‘maid’, etc), or as separate, balkanized, denationalised (and inferior) tribal subjects. (28)

Like Kristeva's semiotic layer, then, which has the potential to puncture the symbolic order, Cronin suggests, “the licence of poetry” (28) – particularly in the 1970s – allows African English-language poets to “find a speaking place within” this dominant discursive field (29).

On a syntactical level, Cronin argues, Serote's interjections contest singular, privileged methods of speaking by producing moments of disrupted or multiplied ‘meaning’. The “unusual sound patterning” (39) of “Black Bells” – its repetition and one-word lines, for example – foregrounds the rhythmic qualities of the language, pushing it further away from its “referential

function” (39) (the relation of one line to the lines around it) and towards is emotive and semiotic foundations. We see this in the following lines:

WORDS

Trying to get out

Words. Words. By Whitey

The ambiguity created in these lines by the possibility of interpreting them in isolation (that is, as interjections) or referentially is, Cronin argues, what begins to constitute the puncturing of fixed symbolic meaning. Serote’s speaker could be “trying to get out” of the cage of language to which I have just referred or, if we read the line referentially, “trying to get out / words” – trying to *say* words, to speak. (Of course, there is no need for these readings to be mutually exclusive.) This second interpretation is enhanced, in particular, by the stuttering rhythm of the poem. (What Mafika Gwala, in another context, calls ‘jerking one’s talk’.)⁷ Another useful example comes earlier in Cronin’s essay – during his reading of Serote’s “Hell, Well, Heavens”:

I do not know where I have been,

But Brother,

I know I heard the call.

Hell! where I was I cried silently

Yet a sat there until now. (35)

In short, Cronin wants his readers to see that the meaning of “Hell!” could be *either* interjectional (as an exclamation of despair, alarm, or interest – depending on its intonation) or referential. That is, it could be read in relation to the previous line (the speaker hears the call, and the call is: ‘Hell!’) or the preceding line (“Hell!” is where the speaker is). The symbolic order of these lines is therefore cast into a degree of uncertainty. Rather than expounding any further on Cronin’s essay here, it is enough for our purposes, recalling Nkosi’s sense of ‘shattering’ alternate geography, to imagine the erratic, splintering imposition of the semiotic layer of expression on the symbolic order of language. Meaning is multiplied; rendered uncertain; and in the process there comes to exist “another discourse” (39) formed within the oppressive lingual field that Serote describes and

spoken by a transformed speaking subject. This is appositely demonstrated in the final lines of “Black Bells”, where the parsing of the language into non-semantic sounds gives way, again, to a new form of writing and speaking (“Black books”):

You’ve trapped me whitey! Meem wanna ge aot Fuc

Pschwee e ep boobooduboooodu blllll

Black books, (37)

III.

Moving on, then, there is a case to be made that Cronin’s own poetry, in *Inside* especially, makes repeated use of a comparable self-reflexive language of recompiled fragments and splinters. In “Speaking Places”, Barnard draws a line between the image of the “Defiant, frightened, broken, / and unbreakable” informal houses in Cronin’s “Faraway city, there...” – to which I likened Tortoise’s shell in the previous chapter – and “the creative act that opens” the collection (161). There, Cronin describes the piecing together of “unprepossessing items of prison life (a sock, playing cards, Rizla papers, nails, a tin can, and so forth)” (Barnard 161) into his “Poem-Shrike”. In line with Macaskill, who notes the “materialist tradition” (188) from which *Inside* stems, Barnard evokes the concept of the “working aesthetic” from Brechtian materialism to make sense of this mechanism. For Jameson, reading Brecht, a conducive way to imagine the “political implications” of the working aesthetic is to conceive of it “as part of an overarching “ethics of production”” (Jameson 47; qtd. in Barnard 163):

The phrase does not refer primarily to questions of subject matter (factories, workers, and the like), but to a formal self-reflexivity, a marking within the work itself of the labor of its construction: a device that serves to ward off the reified perfection of a classical work of art. The open-ended experimentation of the rehearsal is thus preserved in the final product, allowing one to “see back down into the alternative gestures and postures of the actors trying their roles”.⁸ (Barnard 163)

What Barnard describes here is a disarticulation not wholly dissimilar from the kind discussed above. As with Serote, who experiments with the collapse of his words into their pre-linguistic syllables, Cronin’s poetics are often in the process of being built and rebuilt during our reading. In

“Walking on Air”, for example, Cronin sets out – from within the prison workshop – to “[piece] together” “one comrade’s story” (5). And, in “Poem Shrike”, the construction of the poem is inseparable from its final form – its fracture lines, which render visible the various constituent parts that make the whole, are formed, perhaps, by a collection of verbs: the poem shrike, rather than a naturally existing creature, is carefully “rolled up”, “scorched”, “sharpened”, “dipped”, and “check[ed]” (2) by its creator. The constructive, incremental properties of the creative act here call to mind Barnard’s comments on Cronin’s “Prologue” in the “Venture to the Interior” section of *Inside*. There, the mouth is imagined as “pilot’s cockpit”, and the speaker as the operator of a human machine. “[By] figuring the speech organs as an airplane,” Barnard writes, “something mechanical rather than something natural (a bird, for instance), Cronin asserts that we *make* freedom, that we *fabricate* significance from the material “resources” of our bodies and breath” (162-163). This “freedom”, importantly, is fundamentally inseparable from linguistics. “[The] achievement of liberation”, writes Cronin, “will inevitably also be a major linguistic event” (159).

The poetry in *Inside*, rather than a realization of this grand national ‘event’, is something like a rehearsal of it. Barnard’s evocation of the apartheid national anthem, Langenhoven’s “Die Stem”, against the final poem in “Venture to the Interior” – which sets out, after the vocal warm-ups with which the section begins, “To learn how to speak / With the voices of this land” (48) – yields some insights here. “Die Stem”, Barnard points out, is full of symbolic nouns. It involves the issuing of ‘the voice’ (*die stem*) of South Africa from within the crevices and crags of a natural landscape strangely devoid of humans. “*Uit die blou van onse hemel / uit die diepte van ons se see / oor ons ewige gebergtes / van die kranse antwoord gee*” (that is: a voice or an ‘answer’ issues from ‘out of the blue of our sky’, ‘out of the depths of our seas’, and ‘over the cliffs of our eternal mountains’). By contrast, “To learn how to speak” is a poem that replaces these nouns with verbs: “[to] parse”, “[to] catch”, “[to] trace”, “[to] visit”, “[to] write” (48). The infinitive form, for Barnard, as opposed to the definitive noun forms of “Die Stem” (oceans, mountains, skies), serves to “open” the “grammatical subject position”, here (166). “This means”, Barnard goes on to explain,

that the poem not only validates the importance of human actions (and a demotic multiplicity of voices), but that it also, in effect, posits a speaking place for anyone who wishes to occupy the open subject position—for anyone who can at present, or who might eventually say “I trace,” “I speak,” etc. and in so doing become a part of the collective

agency of the future nation. The poem thus presents itself as an exercise, a training program for the development of a new speaking subject: the democratic nation. (166)

Barnard's sense of the "opening up" mechanism is crucial here. It evokes Cronin's language in the conclusion of "Insurgent South African Poetry" – with which this essay began (where liberated zones "open up") – and, indeed, his writing about the new thetic subjectivities forged by black 1970s poetry, where the writing of poetry leads to an opening up of 'speaking places'. Equally important, perhaps, is the sense in which Barnard's conception of "democratic nation" as "speaking subject" depends on a distinction between artificial constructedness and a kind of 'natural' unity. The latter, perhaps, belongs to Langenhoven's sense of a singular national *voice*, and the former to a proleptically gathering 'new South Africa'. This, Barnard posits, is a terrain of fragments:

The language of resistance, in short, is envisaged not as 'coherent', but as fractured, multiple, in the process of being pieced together from scraps of random, irreverent words – some of which will bear the mark of a hybrid colonial history. (167)

The contrast between singular coherency and fractured pluralism lies at the heart of the various accounts of 'liberated zones' that this chapter has collected so far. In each of the cases of Nakasa, of Nkosi, of Cronin's reading of Serote, and of Barnard's reading of *Inside*, we are confronted by hegemonic wholes – for lack of a better term. Whether stringent spatial control, prescribed English language conventions, or illusions of monolithic national tongues. (Indeed, Cronin speaks, in an interview, about the "counterhegemonic power" of poetry – a form whose role in the liberation struggle, he adds, is "often barely distinguishable" from that of other kinds of oral performance like songs, funeral orations, speeches and *toyi-toyis* (Interview with van der Vlies 523).) In each case, then, there comes to exist a spatial or phonic contestation of these unitary fields. For Nkosi, heartfelt discontent leads a generation of South Africans to cross the boundaries of their limited zones of legal occupation: jazz haunts and new clubs fester below the surface of a divided nation, making for sites of diversity, of plurality. These are romantic pockets of space in the writing of Nkosi and Nakasa – deeply human, "energetic, defiant" (Nakasa; qtd. in Gevisser 209) openings in a segregated society. In the specific essays by Cronin and Barnard that the current chapter has considered, this breaking-up of monology exists more surely within the realm of language. Serote's interjections batter the upper walls of language convention, producing a confused, plural set of

new meanings – and, in Barnard, Cronin’s verb form offers the speaking position held by Langenhoven’s non-human *stem* to a multifarious and undetermined collective. These examples, it seems to me, usefully demonstrate the greater image that Cronin posits in his essay on “Insurgent South African Poetry” – in which the ‘hegemonic whole’ is apartheid South Africa itself, and the battering ram of poetry, performance, and self-governance serves to gradually, partially, prise open windows through which something like ‘the post-apartheid’ can be glimpsed.

A more conventional way to make this point, perhaps, is to appeal to the familiar categories of public and private – as Brian Macaskill does in his essay on “Jeremy Cronin’s Lyrical Politics”. The collection, Macaskill maintains, holds these two conventionally separate ideas in a constant “dialectical relationship” (190) through a complex, palimpsestic overlaying of political incentive, lyrical aesthetics, revolutionary rhetoric, and personal emotion (borne from pain, love, isolation, etc). The result is that small, private sites become encapsulative of prospective new public realities. Macaskill writes:

Inside fruitfully reduces into rich collapse the distance between outside and inside, between politics and autobiography between exemplarity and the exceptional. Articulating themselves against an outside political order, an exceptional law of ruin known as apartheid, and announcing their insides as not exceptional but exemplary of the conditions wrought by that law, these poems engage the state of forced partition in the most powerful manner possible: they take exception to it. (202)

Macaskill implies that such observations are demonstrated by a poem like “Poem-Shrike”. While for Barnard, in her discussion of “Prologue”,⁹ the bird is evoked against the airplane as a prototype of the ‘natural’, Cronin’s poem shrike is explicitly *constructed*. It is, as I have already suggested, a bricolage of discarded objects. This strange collapsing of the categories of natural and synthetic, as well as Cronin’s imagining of the poem-form itself in the language of the fractured liberated zone, encourages some extended focus on the poem’s avian imagery:

I check your
hungry parts
over again, longing by longing then

out

over the high walls I launch you now...

sshrike! (2)

William Pinnock, in his Master's thesis, posits that the compounding of the words "poem" and "shrike" reinforces "the link between the act of naming and the material environment" (27), here. He also draws attention to the "figurative potential" (27) of Cronin's choice of bird species – citing the infamous barbarity of hunting shrikes, who are known to impale their prey on thorns or barbed wire fences.¹⁰ This predatorial prowess (evoked, perhaps, by Cronin's reference to "hungry parts") presumably leads Pinnock to interpret the shrike as a "powerful symbol of freedom" (28). The onomatopoeic "sshrike!", then, which accompanies the poet's launching of his poem shrike over prison walls, Pinnock argues, constitutes a representation of the "performative power of language", which, even for "the briefest moment", allows "for the potential to break out of prison" (28). Barnard's sense of the prison cell as metonymic for a nation defined by incarceration and limited movement comes to mind here. As, indeed, does Cronin's 1987 introduction to *Inside*, in which he describes South Africa as "a society of these insides, beyond high walls" (9). In "Poem-Shrike", the physically-rendered poem, in transcending these metonymic walls, infringes microscopically on public reality – not dissimilarly, perhaps, from the way in which Nkosi's jazz haunts or COSATU's train meeting points do.

As an aside, the simultaneity of the onomatopoeic utterance and the poem-shrike's empowered crossing over of borders calls to mind another common behaviour of shrikes. Interestingly, as Soobramoney et al. point out in a 2003 study on four species of fiscal shrike *Lanius collaris*, these birds have been repeatedly observed to "advertise" the boundaries of their territories actively with "vocalization and posturing, and passively by static marking usually with vocalization" (139). Through a combination of distinct vocal utterances (most prominently the "jertjert" call (Harris & Arnott 1988; as qtd. in Soobramoney et al.)), then, and choreographed gestures such as tail swinging, bowing, and exaggerated upright posturing, the shrike designates, maintains, and indeed *creates* space.¹¹ Coincidentally, this is a useful analogy by which to grasp Pinnock's comment about the implications of the "performative power of language". The fiscal shrike's performance – itself comprised of many of the same ingredients as spoken poetry – is constitutive and generative of physical place in a comparable manner, perhaps, to the way in which

Cronin posits that rehearsal sites or ‘liberated zones’ unfurl from moments of poetry, song, and speech. In the case of mass chants and other forms of oral performance, he points out in an interview, the creative “utterance is constitutive of the reality itself” (Interview with van der Vlies 523). That is, like an “I do” at a wedding ceremony, the joining together of thousands of voices in protest singing, for example, brings about a phonic, vocal coherence that implies a physical, social coming together. A particularly apt articulation of the movement from ‘words on lips’ to ‘new social reality’ comes earlier in the same interview. When asked about poetry and its relation to “the nation”, Cronin says (amongst other things):

Poetry doesn’t change the world, but it might make changing the world imaginable. You won’t transform society through a magical incantation, but a performed poem might forge, for a moment, a sense of community. Or a quietly read poem on the page tested on the lips of the reader might help to construct a capacitating subjective place for that reader. That sense of community, or that discursively constructed subjective positioning, reinforced by many other things, of course, might become a significant social reality. (522)

This link between the making of poetry and the construction of ‘capacitating subject places’ bears special relevance to one of *Inside*’s central images: the micro-space of the prison cell. On one hand, the cell is by definition a site of *incapacitation*. Its smallness, the closeness of its walls, means limited movement and complete separation from an urgent social world. We see a representation of this condition in “Thinks...”, where the speaker (or thinker) floats alone in a fish tank – deprived of sensory stimulation and watched ceaselessly by prison guards. Clearly, however, the image of the floating poet also sets out precisely the positionality from which *Inside* unfurls. More than merely a place from which the poetry of interiority happens to be written, the cell is a generative, enabling site – a speaking place. For one thing, as I discuss in the previous chapter, Cronin’s aversion to lyrical forms during the struggle years is apparently undone by an occupation of what Barnard, citing Jameson and ‘cognitive mapping’ calls “the structural position of the dominated other” (160).¹² In other words, Cronin’s imprisonment forces him, if only partially, into a geography that his whiteness would otherwise have prevented him from entering. This incarcerated positionality, by virtue of its exemplariness to the predicament of the majority of South Africa’s population, imbues the personal lyric form with a new capacity to reflect aspects of a wider collective experience.

It is the physical geography of the prison, under this conception, that frees Cronin from a kind of writerly incarceration. Indeed, recalling the discussion of my first chapter, there is a case to be made that Peter Anderson's sense of the entrapment of the white liberal writer describes, precisely, an incapacitating subject position. The white writer, by simultaneously denouncing and consuming the 'spoils' of minority rule, is sentenced to walk in circles, so to speak – intellectually opposed to a subject position that they cannot, or will not, practically eschew. While writers like Nadine Gordimer and Neil Lazarus “accept the *status quo*”, Anderson writes, “Cronin discovers a contradiction that cracks the foundations of the system itself. For it is beyond the power of apartheid to divide those whom it unites in resistance” (51). The language of fracture reappears here – though this time, the ‘whole’ being cracked is the category of ‘white writer’ under apartheid (as opposed, for example, to Serote's ‘English’). Rather than struggling in vain, as Gordimer's narrator from “Spoils” does, to find a way *out*, Cronin's poetry designates the prison cell as a way *into* “the South African situation” (Anderson 51).

IV.

So far, this chapter has explored a terrain of alternative – or, in Macaskill's language, ‘exceptional’ – micro-spaces. This terrain has been made up of both physical sites (canteens, trains, burial grounds, jazz clubs) and lingual ‘openings’ (infinitive verb forms, ambiguous interjections, ‘new thetic subjectivities’). Both kinds take exception, or at least partial exception, to what I have broadly referred to as a collection of ‘hegemonic wholes’ – whether racially divided systems of residence or singular conceptions of ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ ways of speaking. What has become clear is that there are traces of the former in the latter and vice versa. Indeed, the *toyi-toyi*, is at once a space-occupying congregation of people – made up, as Cronin, explains, of an “anonymous” incanting leader concealed in the folds of a responding crowd (21) – and an oral performance. And, in the case of Serote's “Black Bells”, dominant discourse – a lingual construct – is imagined spatially: as a cage. While referring “first of all” to “specific geographical sites”, then, as Barnard notes, Cronin's liberated zone “also has resonances beyond the material and physical” (159). This strange dialectic by which Cronin's essays mutually implicate micro-space and artistic voice finds repeated representation, I argue now, in *Inside* – where there exists a persistent, variable, and enmeshed geography of sound and space

I suggest that there are at least two distinct ways in which this geography is achieved. First, the world of *Inside* is one in which sound and physical, spatial reality are mutually generative – that is: one becomes the source of the other. This is most noticeable, perhaps, in the “Venture to the Interior” section. The twelve poems collected there add, to the growing connotations of the collection’s title (being ‘inside’ prison, being isolated and therefore ‘inside’ one’s own mind, etc.), at least one more: the mouth. This is unmistakable in the opening poem, “Prologue”, to which I have already referred. It runs:

Now in your cockpit
 from your pilot’s seat within
 test the different parts of this machine.
 Take the tongue-tip and feel up
 t-t-t-t-t
 there, just
 behind your upper front teeth
 the ribbed shoal that runs back and up
 to a solid arch of bone.
 Beyond, slide along the soft velum’s central crease
 peeling back on your tongue’s joy stick
 until you touch
 the stem from which depends
 a strange
 perhaps forbidden fruit aaaaah!
 say aaaaah! (36)

In addition to the connection between the vocal warm-ups that Cronin guides his reader through, here, and the sense, forwarded by the essays that I considered earlier, of “liberated zones” as

‘rehearsal spaces’ for a future, post-apartheid South Africa, these lines are repeatedly concerned with what we might call the ‘space of sound’. Assuming the register of an instruction manual, (an alternative, perhaps, to the prison manual from the previous chapter), the poem matches the production of specific sounds to corresponding spatial coordinates. It does this, of course, with a language of prepositions: the reader moves “in”, “up”, “behind”, “back up”, “along”, and “back” and, for each of these movements, is shown a “t-t-t-t” or an “aaaaah!”. Space – and in this case the micro-space of the mouth in which the poem occurs – is presented as generating the syllabic, ‘semiotic’, building blocks of language. What should become apparent, as a result, is that the poem asks to be read out loud. It is a piece, as Barnard suggests, “that invites the reader or auditor to explore, aloud, the geography of his or her own mouth” (162). In contrast, then, to words on secretly smuggled notes (as in “Labyrinth I”, for example) or formal poetry examination papers, Cronin’s signifiers – themselves spatial characters on a page – are presented in terms of their status as producers of sound.

In the same section of *Inside*, we have several examples of a reversal of this process (in other words, instead of ‘space’ generating ‘sound’, ‘sound’ generates ‘space’). “I want you”, writes Cronin in “Cave-Site” – which directly follows “Prologue”:

to prise carefully

sound

from sound

to honour by speaking

(and sometimes to discard)

to lift, cough,

breccia, rock, sediment

layer through layer

in this

mouth or

cave-site of word

root, birdbone,
 shells of meaning
 left in our mouths
 by thousands of years of
 human occupation (37)

As in “Prologue”, the micro-space of the mouth is Cronin’s focus here. Rather than a pilot’s cockpit, though, it becomes what Macaskill calls “a metonym for historical and geological formations of paleographic interiority” (190). The act of speaking, of exploring the various corners of the mouth, is imagined as a process of excavating the strata of history – of reaching back, “layer through layer”, into a collection of otherwise lost or concealed pasts. In “Litany”, this sense of the mouth and throat as passage through time – into ‘deep history’, perhaps – is apparent. There, the tongue re-emerges from the “primal swamps” of a primordial, evolutionary past: “down the line of mudfish / through the snake where your ways parted / after the hardening of the palate” (38). Incidentally, the language of the poem appears to dip sporadically into a series of semiotic utterances: a “jungle of unmapped sounds” – “tchareep grrrtch-grrrtch”, “kree-kree-kree-kree”, “sszzzzzzzzzzzz(____!)”. Worth noting here is a link to Cronin’s essay on Serote. Read in terms of Kristevan lingual layering, the impression of the time-travelling tongue (“O Ark of Language”) is of course generated syntactically by repeated poetic disruptions to the familiar symbolic layer of language.

As Macaskill points out, this distant, primordial past is not the only kind that the act of speaking leads to. In the opening lines of the first poem in “The Naval Base”, the internally venturing speaker – his eyes closed – explores a personal childhood history through the language of hide-and-seek and the memory of ocean sounds (Cronin, of course, grew up in Simon’s Town). There, rather than the substrata of deep time, perhaps, the poetry peels back layers of nostalgia and “childhood innocence” (Macaskill 195) that obscure the racialized realities of white suburban life under apartheid. And in “Karoo I” and “Karoo II”, this time invoking a guttural vocabulary of Karoo life,

 stick, agh, buck, kop, grab,

shrub, rock, klip,

stick, traveller in the back of your throat (“Karoo I” 43),

Cronin ventures into a literary history. Noting the “trekking” of language “through each of our throats” (45), he calls to Olive Schreiner as she writes through the night in “some hypothetical hotel” (45). (Of course, Schreiner wrote most of *The Story of an African Farm* in Matjiesfontein – whose Grand Hotel, the Lord Milner, still stands alongside the N1.)¹³ By contrast, “Plato’s Cave” and the sixth poem in “Venture to the Interior” reflect on what Macaskill calls “the ruins of a language once spoken by a vanquished and now vanished people whose autochthonous tongue it seeks to commemorate” (195). Important here is the relationship between the language of the vanished Khoi people and the, still detectable, “sounds of their land” (“Plato’s Cave”, line 17). We see this in “Our land holds...” (the sixth poem in the section), in which Cronin searches for hidden truths and listens to the names of Khoikhoi tribes alongside natural sounds (wind through khaki bushes, cicadas’ songs) and echoes of traditional wind and percussive instruments (the *gorah*, and the *gom-gom*, for example) (Macaskill 196):

Goringhaiqua Gorachouqua: sounds

Like at the back of our sky

Cicadas’ songs ache: Hessequa

Hacumqua, like vocables swallowed

In frog’s throats: Cochoqua,

The names of decimated

Khoikhoi tribes – their cattle stolen,

Lands seized

As their warriors died

Charging zig-zag into musket fire (41)

In “Venture to the Interior”, then, Cronin poeticizes the unfurling of a diverse range of ‘pasts’ – spatial, cultural realities concealed by time – from an array of sounds: whether spoken, heard, or imagined.

In addition to this sense of the mutual generativity of language and physical space, it seems reasonably clear, in *Inside* and elsewhere, that Cronin is concerned with the ways in which words and sounds come to be contained or enclosed by space. In the “Love Poems” section, for example, the speaker – his “flesh made paper” – slides between the folds of an envelope and flies off, after three weeks of censorship, ink-checks, and code-checks, to “you” – his love (56). Earlier, in “Death Row”, there are three convicted “terrorists” awaiting their executions. Separated by brick walls and locked doors, a group of prisoners to which the speaker belongs attempt to communicate, through song, with these men on death row:

Nkosi sikelel’, we try singing, at night.

Us down here, to you,

Three condemneds, along there.

Morena... we whiteys sing,

Mayibuye iAfrika, and muffled

Far-off chortling, you guys

Call back: *Encore! Encore!* (23)

Cronin’s descriptions of these dialogic exchanges, as the poem goes on, foreground the flowing, “weaving”, and “sliding” of voice and song between the two parties – along “these concrete / Corridors of power” (25). Rather than isolated lingual or phonic instances, the sung freedom songs exist within, or fill up like liquid, physical space. In so doing, they temporarily repurpose what remains a quintessential site of incarceration. The corridors, narrowing passages leading to cells meant to silence dissenting political voices, become telephonic carriers of revolutionary (even anticipatory) language from “Us” “here” to “you guys” “along there”.

It is also worth noting that the intersections of space and language are ostensibly central to the writing and eventual release of *Inside*. In the 1987 prose introduction, Cronin attributes the trimetre of many of the poems' lines to the three-step length of his cell.¹⁴ And, in an interview, Dennis Goldberg, with whom Cronin was imprisoned, recalls the writing of some of the poems on cigarette-rolling paper – which was thin enough to render the letters, if they were small enough, invisible to the unsuspecting eye. In “Labyrinth I”, Cronin allows his readers a glimpse of this smuggled language economy. There, the speaker uses a comb and a cotton thread “unpicked” from a blanket to construct a kind of fishing rod. On the hook end is a “well read, smuggled-in, month-old, scrap of / – newspaper” (40) that, after many unsuccessful attempts, finds its way under the door of a neighbouring cell and to its intended target.

The physical smallness of the smuggled poems is interesting here, for my purposes, as are the various book spines that Cronin allegedly squeezes his cigarette paper poetry into in order to sneak it out of prison. The spatial contortions of *Inside* (most of its poems are apparently snuck out using the cigarette paper method) seem to me to follow a strange ‘closing’ and ‘opening’ mechanism. Like Cronin’s small handwriting, the poems – shreds of paper for all intents and purposes – are first made to shrink, to squeeze through gaps in book spines and wall crevices, to fit into the folds of underwear. Then, once ‘outside’, they expand, literally, into the more legible font sizes of bound poetry collections and anthologies. But, also, as with the final works of Solomon Mahlangu and Benjamin Moloise,¹⁵ the physical smallness – a kind of phonic potential energy – gives way to later oral performances. “The last poem of Moloise”, writes Cronin,

[like] that of Solomon Mahlangu, another young guerrilla executed in Pretoria Maximum Security Prison, has since been repeated at many mass rallies, and so, like most of the other poems we have considered so far, it achieves its major form of reception in public gatherings. (‘Insurgent South African Poetry’ 18)

This interest in sound-containing space is apparent throughout Cronin’s essay on “Insurgent South African Poetry”. “I hope to give at least an idea of the crucially important *context* of the poetry” (13; my emphasis), he writes in the introduction. The hostel canteen is once again a useful example here in that the performed poetry is crucially informed – indeed, it is in part created – by the physical dimensions of the room. In that instance, the two voices that perform the poem, “more by chance than design” (14), issue from opposite sides of the canteen. Even more striking, perhaps,

is Cronin's writing about what he calls "A Poetry of Testament" – a genre to which Mahlangu and Moloise's final poems belong.

I would guess that all over South Africa there are black mothers with little pieces of paper, four- or five-line poems left behind by a son or a daughter who has gone in the night to join up with some clandestine liberation movement. The poem, found the day later, is sometimes the last a parent will hear of a child. (17)

While the formal features of such poetry may be unremarkable, its containment by a variety of tragic contexts (spatial and otherwise) imbues it with layers of new meaning. "The existential acts with which they are integrated", writes Cronin, "speak as loud as the words themselves" (17). There is an argument to be made, then, that this poetry of testament, "inscribed on cell walls, smuggled out of jails on rolls of toilet paper, or left behind under pillows in townships" (17), is as much a literature of words as it is a literature of space: a poetry of cell walls, of toilet paper, of pillow cavities.

V.

This chapter has tried to observe the ways in which Cronin's *Inside* and his essays of the 1980s reflect the proleptic opening up of "liberated zones" in the oppressive fabric of late-apartheid South Africa. These are often conceived of as spaces – trains, canteens, burial grounds, prison cells – that puncture hegemonic wholes and allow for movement past the strict divisions of a society "beyond high walls" (Cronin Introduction 9). Rather than a purely physical terrain of disruptive small sites, however, I have suggested that Cronin's prose and poetry continually offer up micro-spatial geographies composed variably (and unpredictably) of both physical space and various forms of vocality (songs, debates, and poetry, for example). Emergent in my discussion has been the sense in which these sound-space dialectics – in Cronin's work and elsewhere – also possess strange time-travelling powers. In *Inside*, for example, the mouth, a sound-producing space, recalls ancient worlds; for Nakasa, to live 'on the fringe' is to create spaces temporarily loosed from their political 'moment'; for Gevisser, photographic representations of integrated swimming pools and jazz clubs from the early 1960s signify a kind of utopic 'lost age' from before his birth. Most pressingly, perhaps, Cronin's present reality in the 1980s is disrupted by the 'opening up' of sites of self-governance, which constitute multiple prospective rehearsals (or, indeed, partial *enactments*) of the mythical category of 'post-apartheid'. The micro-space, where it was 'breached', is now a

token of this anticipatory poetics. How, then, does this terrain of micro-spatial exceptionality coincide with the legislative ‘end’ of the regime by which it is negatively defined? In the final chapter, reading Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* – arguably one of the most recognizable novels of the interregnum – I explore some of the tensions implied by this question.

Beneath the wooden stairway that leads up to the balcony and servant's quarters is a recess where wood is stored and where cats retire when it rains. I crawl in and curl up on an old bag. It smells of urine, it is certainly full of fleas, I am so cold that my teeth chatter; but at this moment all that occupies me is the palliation of the pain in my back.

J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 1992

I was really lucky to have found that toilet because the winter was very cold. Not that it was any warmer in there, but once I'd closed the door it used to be a little less windy. Also the toilet was very small – the walls were wonderfully close to me – it felt like it was made to fit me alone. I enjoyed that kind of privacy. I did a lot of daydreaming too – many times imagining myself in some big hall doing a really popular play with other young actors. At school, we took set books like *Buzani KuBawo* or *A Man for all Seasons* and made school plays which we toured to the other schools on weekends. I loved it very much. When I was even younger I had done little sketches taken from the Bible and on big days like Good Friday, we acted and sang happily.

I would sit there dreaming...

Gcina Mhlope, "The Toilet", 1987

The house delighted him, in particular the walls of the house that surrounded us, shutting out everything else. Privacy was a privilege that bowled him over, like some fresh experience. Merely by swinging his eyes over the house he converted it into a palace.

Michael Power, *Shadow Game*, 1974

The sun rises on Noria's shack. All the work has been completed, and the structure is a collage in bright sunny colours. And of bits of iron sheets, some of which shimmer in the morning rays, while others are rust-laden. It would certainly be at home in any museum of modern art. Toloki and Noria stand back, and gaze admiringly at it. First they smile, then they giggle, and finally they burst out laughing. Sudden elation overwhelms Toloki. Noria's laughter is surely regaining its old potency.

'I did not know that our hands were capable of such creation.'

Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying*, 1995

‘At the end’: smallness and incantation in Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying*

So far, my discussion has arranged itself according to a dual conception of micro-space in late-apartheid South African literature. In one sense, small spaces emblemize the state’s petty constriction of its population through interventions into the close quarters of human life: bedrooms are burst in on, toilet activities are monitored and places for recreation are cordoned off. In another, it is precisely from within these sites that human life re-asserts itself. In the texts I have considered, one of the ways in which it does this is through voice – singing, reciting, responding, writing. By doing these things, it imagines and temporarily creates new micro-spatialities that look like but are in fact different from the first kind: eye holes in the fabric of apartheid hegemony through which to glimpse a post-apartheid future (or an alternate present). My previous chapter explored this space-creating vocalisation through Jeremy Cronin’s poetry and thought of the 1980s – and, more specifically, what I have referred to as his unique “sound-space dialectic”.

In this final section, the dissertation applies the vocabulary and perspective of its preceding discussion to Zakes Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995) – a text written during the multi-party negotiations that would end legislative apartheid and published in the first year of South Africa’s democracy. My aim here is to localise and respond to a trend of interpretive thought that has emerged in response to the novel. In short, this trend involves readings that emphasize the orientation of the novel, by virtue of its ‘postmodern’ representations of space, towards a ‘post-apartheid’ future. The first section of the chapter explores these readings. It finds, as Mandisa Haarhoff does in a 2020 essay, that the collaged shack built and occupied by the novel’s protagonists – Toloki, a professional mourner, and Noria, his childhood friend – is a key image for such interpretations. The second section, then, suggests a wider set of evocations. In addition to its ‘looking forward’, I argue that the shack also recalls the moment and mechanism of Cronin’s ‘liberated zone’.

I.

Though the place of Mda’s novel is left undetermined, its time period is recognizable. The reader knows that while ‘informal settlements’ are being burned to the ground by what one Nurse¹ calls “our own people”, a ruling administration is “forced to unban the political movement of the people

and to negotiate with its leaders” (181). As opposed to Cronin’s *Inside*, then, from whose early 1980s moment the end of apartheid is all but undetectable, or Plaatje’s *Native Life*, from which its legislative beginning is in the air, *Ways of Dying* attests to a more liminal condition: one suspended between regimes – in what Chiolozona Eze calls an “indeterminate grey area of dawn and dusk” (88). Before we have read a word, the title calls to mind worn metaphors of the day: about the decay and eventual ‘death’ of National Party rule and the corresponding ‘birth’ of a ‘new country’. But Mda’s ‘ways of dying’ scale down these proportions. They refer, simply, to apartheid’s many desecrations of the individual human body: by bullet wound, train murder, beating, burning, drowning in sewage, mauling by dogs. The novel is organized around the (real life) deaths that its writer hears about over the phone from friends and family, watches on television, or reads about in issues of *City Press* or *Sunday Times* found in Yale University’s library.

It might seem paradoxical, then, that in an interview Mda describes a perceived responsibility to present his reader with an “optimistic”, “upbeat” story in spite of the horror of its subject matter. “At the end”, he says, “we see that, actually, this is not the kind of situation that is going to last forever. These are just the pangs of birth of a new society. Sooner or later, things will change” (Interview with Oxford University Press 1:52-2:07). It is this sense of progression – movement *through* rather than uncertain occupation *of* interregnum – that I want to use *Ways of Dying* to think through in this chapter. Whether or not the kind of ‘seeing’ in question here differs in any meaningful way from the occluding views offered by Cronin’s liberated zone – views of the anti-apartheid, in which state bureaucracy loses grip momentarily – or by the photographs that signify Mark Gevisser’s bygone “golden era” is an obvious, but important, question. To begin to answer it we need to look first at “the end” to which Mda refers in his comment.

II.

Ways of Dying ends on New Year’s Eve. Toloki and Noria, having rebuilt the latter’s shack from corrugated iron, canvas and multicoloured plastic, exist in a state of peaceful cohabitation. Their financial prospects have just been improved by the arrival of Nefolovhodwe, a coffin salesman originally from the same village as Mda’s protagonists, who drops off three large crates of figurines sculpted by Jwara (Toloki’s late, abusive father). An art dealer and museum curator have agreed that the collection is worth a substantial amount of money. Toloki is unphased by these developments. He wants Nefolovhodwe to “just disappear” (210), to leave him and Noria with the

orphaned children from Madimbhaza's 'dumping ground' who have gathered around the shack to listen to Noria's singing and be sketched by Toloki. After midnight, once the children have gone home, the novel's collective narrator lays out the closing scene:

Somehow the shack seems to glow in the light of the moon, as if the plastic colours are fluorescent. Crickets and other insects of the night are attracted by the glow. They contribute their chirps to the general din of the settlement. Tyres are still burning. Tyres can burn for a very long time. The smell of burning rubber fills the air. But this time it is not mingled with the sickly stench of roasting human flesh. Just pure wholesome rubber. (Mda 212)

These lines bring together two of the novel's central images – both of which happen to be micro-spatial. On one hand, the shack, resplendent in “all the colours of the rainbow” (58), is a site of healing and restored communion for Toloki and Noria. (Coincidentally, Archbishop Desmond Tutu's idea of a ‘rainbow nation’ typifies the country's most publicized, reconciliatory, approach to its future.) They build it together after Noria's previous home is razed to the ground by the settlement's street committee, and inside they bathe each other, create elaborate fantasy worlds, and tell stories. This last aspect means that the shack functions, at times, as a point of intersection for the novel's multiple temporalities. It mediates between a removed village past, which the two characters share, and the present moment in which they have been reunited. Burning tyres, on the other hand, are longstanding emblems of protest – they signify the desperate material tragedies of apartheid that continue to contest abstract visions of collective reconciliation. In the excerpt in question, however, their more pressing association is with the ‘necklacings’ of alleged state informers that were common from the mid-1980s onwards. These were moments (between 400 and 700 in the years 1985-1989)² where tyres became the most harrowing (and claustrophobic) of apartheid's micro-spaces.

We learn that Noria's five-year-old son Vutha was a victim of this form of mob justice. After allegedly betraying information about a protest being organised by the Young Tigers (the youth wing of the liberation party in the novel) to migrant hostel dwellers, Vutha is publicly executed as a demonstration to the other children in the settlement of “what happened to sell-outs” (189). A tyre is fixed around his neck, filled with petrol, and lit by three-year-old Danisa – who runs back to tell Auntie Noria what has happened. Vutha's screams are “swallowed by the raging

flames, the crackle of burning flesh, and the blowing of the wind”. “Soon the air [is] filled with the stench of human flesh” (189).

“At the end”, then, is a momentary parsing of present from painful past. Burning tyres, rather than evoking Vutha’s burning flesh, smell simply like themselves: traumatic memory is separated from external mnemonics. The shack, by being a holder of concurrent social reintegration and artistic rediscovery (in it Toloki begins to draw for the first time since childhood, Noria rediscovers her singing, and Jwara’s figurines return from obscurity) becomes the stage for this disassociation. As it glows in the moonlight, then, it connotes – or at least is brought into proximity with – the kind of optimistic view of the future that Mda refers to in his interview. “For here,” writes Irene Vesper, referring to the “final stages” of *Ways of Dying* in which Jwara releases his spectral grip on Nefolovhodwe,³ “the novel presents its answer to the question of how to live, in a vision which reconciles enmity and heals psychic wounds, thus liberating the protagonists from the past and opening up a new future” (42). This is familiar early ‘post-apartheid’ language: of reconciliation, healing, liberation, and ‘new futures’. Rather than the national context to which these words are usually applied, however, Vesper’s sense of new ‘ways of living’ is confined to the psychologized individuality of Mda’s protagonists. The troublesome ‘pasts’ in question – negated by the verbs ‘reconcile’, ‘heal’, and ‘liberate’ – are, one feels, the personal tragedies that have befallen Toloki and Noria’s lives (the former’s unloving father, for example, or the terrible death of the latter’s sons) rather than the broader colonial and National Party histories that underlie their material living conditions.

This is the territory in which academic debates have played out since the novel’s publication. The object of its most sustained critique, articulated in its first form, perhaps, by Grant Farred in 2000, is Mda’s privileging of individual experience, spirituality, and development over the collectivist liberation rhetoric of the 1980s. For Farred, the abandonment of “The struggle” for Toloki’s “elliptical search for spirituality” means that the politics of *Ways of Dying* are only “locally resonant” (195) – that they defer questions of national liberation at precisely the historical juncture at which such questions should be paramount. This view, it seems, has not found much support in the academy. Vesper, for example, invokes Njabulo Ndebele’s “Rediscovery of the Ordinary” to argue that the elements taken issue with by Farred constitute “an answer to the call for a new fiction for post-apartheid South Africa” (39). The vagueness of historical detail in the

novel, she continues, which was no longer required to dodge apartheid censors, is indicative instead of a “release from the former political demands of resistance literature” (40) and an “eventual orientation towards the future of post-apartheid South Africa” (39). Five years later, in the final chapter of *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*, Rita Barnard makes a mechanically comparable point – one, interestingly for my purposes, that appeals to ‘place’. The achievement of *Ways of Dying*, she suggests, lies in its “minimal reliance on the evocation of “ghetto atmosphere” privileged by Mphahlele” (151). The implication here is that, by presenting the ‘place’ of the urban expanse and the informal settlement – with its mongrels, running sewerage, and “dirty children” – as secondary to (or as ‘stage setting’ for) Toloki’s human movement through it, Mda begins to reach beyond Es’kia Mphahlele’s “tyranny of place”. In exile, Mphahlele feels he is “straining at the tether that tied [him] to the centre of the South African experience” (282) – “tyranny that gives me the base to write; the very reason to write” (283). Mda, if we follow Barnard’s argument, begins to gnaw away at the tether: to attach his writing instead to the *people* that it represents.

III.

It struck me repeatedly, during my own reading, that Toloki’s movement through the novel seemed strangely mimetic of the tensions implied by these critical debates (that is, between focus on the individual psyche and reversion to overarching ‘place’). Indeed, though Mda’s protagonist searches for a peaceful resolution to his endless walking, constant surges of violence and death drive him out of a collection of small, homely spaces and into a kind of faceless public realm. There is a period of a number of weeks, for example, in which a kind stranger and his father invite Toloki to live with them in their house. In the evenings the three men share stories, drink beer on the stoep, and behave in some ways like a contented family. When Toloki’s friend is burned to death by a white colleague, however, this spell of stasis and happiness is cut off. After the funeral:

Toloki took his boots and hung them on his shoulders, and walked the road... He walked through semi-arid lands that stretched for many miles, where the boers farmed ostriches and prickly pears. When he ran out of money, he took part-time jobs with farmers. At some places, he joined workers to harvest the prickly pears. At others, he worked for merchants who sold coal on horse carts, and who paid him only in food, after he had loaded and unloaded bags and bags of coal.

Death and funerals continued to dog his way throughout. (66)

The sequence is strikingly cinematic: Toloki walks, barefoot, with boots strapped around his neck to save them from wearing down, past an anachronistic landscape of “boers”, horse-drawn carts, and quasi-serfdom. Open space is dramatized here and comes to interact, throughout the novel, with the various intimate enclaves that Mda’s protagonist tries and fails to occupy. The first of these is his family home – which Toloki flees after a violent confrontation with his father, Jwara. Later, having reached an informal settlement on the outskirts of the unnamed coastal city in which the events of the story take place, he wakes up to find his shack on fire and walks away in a “dazed state” (147), as though driven by some unseen force. Even a boerewors cart that he manages to procure and run is unceremoniously seized by municipal authorities and crushed beyond recognition. “All that was left”, we are told, “was the front wheel” (123).

This trajectory casts useful light on the mechanism of Veser’s reading that draws character and quest out from greater ‘political’ and macro-spatial concerns. Incidentally, such a mechanism is typical of what Mandisa Haarhoff (2020) has identified as a prevailing school of thought in the novel’s secondary literature – one that foregrounds:

“[Imaginative] transcendence,” “transformation” and “artistic commemoration” [and in so doing] renders the literal fact of the “violence and horror” dismissible, fixing the gaze on elusive moments of escape, on the intangible possibility of black social life, rather than entering into a rigorous discussion on the pervasive fact of black social death and its construction. (199)

In spatial terms, the readings described here might be thought of as suggesting the transcendence of the old, unsettling landscapes and labour relations that confront Toloki during his walking by the intimate enclaves to which he retreats. The moment of ‘escape’ most regularly seized upon by scholars, perhaps, is one in which Toloki pastes *Garden & Home* cutouts – of ovens, electric stoves, Mediterranean mansions, decadent foods – onto the tin walls of Noria’s empty shack. In a fascinating three-page sequence, Mda’s lovers imaginatively occupy this two-dimensional “wallpaper of sheer luxury” (111). They do so in bodily terms: thinking of themselves as space-filling entities strolling *through* a grandiose house and its “flower-clustered backyard” (113), jumping *on* king-sized beds, and moving *from* room to room. Once they have rolled and jumped in the bedroom, lounged on black leather couches, and grown tired of the music from their stereo

and the “American situation comedies on their wide-screen television set” (112), they withdraw into a “private garden”.

We are returned, appropriately, to the garden from which the dissertation set out. In one sense, Toloki and Noria’s is of course an imaginative repossession of the postures and ‘stuff’ of suburbia – tokens of affluence preserved by minority rule for the white population of South Africa. In place of the abrasive organic ontology of Vladislavić’s boy-writer’s Verwoerdburg home (its rotting excess fruit and abounding mud, the meat gurgling beneath its surface), however, Mda’s shack is entirely immaterial. It is an “enchantment” to be evoked, a spell incanted (177). Barnard resists magical realist terminology⁴ to make sense of the scene, deferring instead to what she calls the “capitalist realism of advertising” by which Mda’s characters are able to create space where there is none through their stage-like improvisations (149).⁵ By describing the shack in terms of its imagined geography, she suggests, the narrative voice demonstrates the potential for different concurrent perceptions of the same physical spaces and, in so doing, gestures towards proliferating optic subjectivities. “Mda’s work suggests”, writes Barnard, “that the poorest of the poor live not only in the gut of the here and now but also in the spaces of the imagination” (149). For Rogier Courau and Sally-Ann Murray, this multiplicity is quintessential, not only of the novel’s contestation of apartheid compartmentalization but of its groundbreaking engagement with “the possibilities of postmodernism in South African writing” (94). Mda’s rejection of “modes that monolithically define human experience in favour of those that acknowledge shifting boundaries and discontinuity” (94) ostensibly signals this shift.

But the shack’s imagined geography need not necessarily imply a postmodern (or as we will see in a moment, a post-apartheid) sensitivity. Thinking back to the Bachelardian maxim, for example, we might suggest that Toloki and Noria’s shack simply allows them an unprecedented opportunity to repeat that old human practice of ‘withdrawing into [their] corner’. From inside, sheltered from the buffetings of daytime, they indulge the kinds of daydreaming that *The Poetics of Space* links to creativity. (Indeed, it is only once the shack has been built that Toloki rediscovers his drawing and Noria her singing.) More specifically, though, what Barnard’s sense of the shack as a site of ‘postmodern play’ misses is the possibility that Mda’s novel restates a well-worn connection, in South African twentieth-century literature, between small space and expansive thinking. The “imaginative expansion” (Barnard 154) permitted by the shack and Toloki’s

quayside ‘headquarters’ – from which he imagines journeys across the seas⁶ – is not unique to *Ways of Dying* or even to its historical moment. Recall the ancient pasts and sweeping landscapes that issue from Cronin’s prison cell, for example, or Plaatje’s “One Night with the Fugitives”, in which a six-foot child grave becomes the space from which to appeal for a country without the Natives Land Act. Gcina Mhlope’s “The Toilet” (1987), published nearer in time to Mda’s novel, is an even clearer example. There, Mholo, a factory worker, shelters in a single-stall lavatory from the winds of her morning commute and the stark realities of her life. “The walls were wonderfully close to me”, she remarks – and inside is a place to rediscover her talent as a poet and imagine herself acting “in some big hall doing a really popular play with other young actors” (3). Like Noria and Toloki, she sits “dreaming” (3).

IV.

So far, this chapter has explored some ‘ways of reading’ *Ways of Dying*. More specifically, I have suggested that Toloki and Noria’s collaged shack – as both a site of ostensible ‘transcendence’ and the place from which the ‘end’ of the novel looks out – is a quintessential point of reference for arguments relating to Mda’s novel ‘postmodern’ concerns and, more pressingly, to his text’s invocation of a post-apartheid imaginary. The shack, as it stands glimmering in the moonlight of a new year, is certainly an emblem of potential. Outside are crates of figurines with the monetary value to actualize Toloki and Noria’s material aspirations; inside are imaginary Mediterranean gardens that – like Toloki’s quayside headquarters – signal “glimmers” of the kind of cosmopolitanism that an end to apartheid sanctions would conceivably bring; and, in the narrator’s language of re-association (the separation of burning tyres from burning flesh) are early signs of psychological healing. These are all legitimate readings.

It must not be overlooked, however, that ideas of transcendence, evanescence, and ‘potential’, rather than orientating Mda’s reader solely towards “the future of post-apartheid South Africa” (Veser 39), are also strongly evocative of the older, often micro-spatially contained, attitudes of struggle and resistance that I have considered so far. Most fresh, perhaps, is my last chapter’s sense of Jeremy Cronin’s “liberated zone” and its dependence on a peculiar mutual generativity of sound and space.

What is especially interesting about the collaged shack, with this in mind, is that its imaginative dimensions are dialogically constructed. At the beginning of their ‘play’,⁷ Toloki

needs to be prompted by Noria to sit down on the imaginary king-size bed in the mansion's master bedroom. This action unfurls a sequence of other bed-related activities like pillow fighting and bed jumping. Later, Toloki verbally cues a new phase of exploration:

‘You don’t think the cakes in the oven are ready, Toloki?’

‘They are not ready, Noria. Don’t worry, a timer will call us when they are. Let’s just relax and admire our beautiful home.’ (112)

And again, this time signalling a move from the sofas, stereos, and televisions of the living room into the garden:

‘You know, I am an outdoors type. Let’s take a walk in our garden, Noria.’

‘Yes, Toloki, let’s go and admire our beautiful garden. You have put so much work into making it the best garden in all the land.’ (112)

These exchanges call to mind Courau and Murray’s apposite application of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s (1987) sense of ‘territorialisation’ to the way in which the naming of objects in Mda’s novel leads to a marking out of “both actual and psychic locations within the urban expanse” (96).⁸ This act of ‘marking out’, of allocating “periodic, recognizable signs” to “place”, when repeated, constitutes multiple resurgent redefinitions of apartheid spatiality. It also, crucially, establishes “ownership of ‘place’” (96; my emphasis).

Indeed, in addition to the aesthetic judgements that Toloki and Noria pass on the imaginary world around them (an example of their sustained re-appropriation of apartheid’s categories of ‘beautiful’ and ‘ugly’, as Barnard argues), they also repeatedly speak about their possession of its objects. Toloki refers to “*our* beautiful home” and Noria, soon after, to “*our* beautiful garden”. To my reading, it is difficult in this sense to separate the shack’s phonically-generated imaginary space (the garden and home materialise around Toloki and Noria as they produce the signifiers that denote it) from South Africa’s enduring politics of ownership – a politics that stretches back at the very least to the 1913 Natives Land Act. In Plaatje’s hands, as we have seen, the home space bears special significance to this context: as a vacated micro-space antithesized by the cold, peopled wilderness ‘kept out’ by its doors.⁹

That Toloki and Noria's reclamation of middle-class 'home' (their coming 'back in', so to speak) more than eighty years on should be an imagined one, then, suggests anything but a 'transcendence' of history. Haarhoff champions this argument. For her, it is with "bitter irony" that Toloki pastes the magazine cutouts onto the walls of the shack and with striking tragedy that he is returned, at the end of the 'play' sequence, to the "unescapable reality" (203) of its unfurnished mud floor. The world dialogically constructed and imaginatively occupied is one firmly "beyond the racialized reach" (201) of Mda's protagonists. It is nothing more than a "tragic delusion" (203) that serves as a reminder of the urgent need for a "material transformation" (202) that the figurines outside and the pages of *Garden & Home* can only gesture towards. Under this conception, the shack is not an image that emphasizes post-apartheid potential but apartheid violence.

According to my reading, however, the *enunciation* of Toloki and Noria's alternate world – whether delusional or not – is evocative not only of apartheid failure but of a particular kind of anti-apartheid literary agency. There is an argument to be made that Toloki's mourning, not unlike the poetry of Serote, is a prosodic performance that incrementally designates a new subject position for its utterer. It begins, we read, as loosely mimetic of "chants that youths utter during political rallies" (108) and accrues other, non-lingual additions with time. As Toloki sways from side to side, "whines", "moans" and gurgles, he produces vocalisations that have the simultaneous quality of "[sharing] his sorrow with the world" and producing affect in his listeners (16). It is possible, then, to read these utterances as Cronin reads Serote's affinity towards interjections in poems like "Black Bells".¹⁰

In Kristevan terms, Toloki's mourning belongs to a prelingual, 'semiotic' layer of expression that, during moments of performance, actively contests 'symbolic' (formal, established) human discourse – traditional funeral oration, for example, or the labels assigned to Toloki's profession by his homeboys and homegirls (that he is a "beggar in the city" (54)). In place of these rigid symbolic forms are new conceptions: of 'professional mourners' and alternative legitimized funeral practices (Toloki receives compliments and even formal payment¹¹ for his services). Like Serote's semiotic-leaning interjections, then, which demonstrate the real-time breaking up of the English language into unrecognizable components that are then recompiled into

new forms of speaking and writing, Mda's professional mourner creates a 'speaking position' for himself from within the many funeral grounds of his milieu.

Read in a similar way, the collaged shack becomes uncannily resemblant to Cronin's liberated zone. Like moments of call-and-response protest, *toyitoyis*, or public poetry readings, the shack forges an evanescent pocket of exception to apartheid hegemony through the collective vocalization of its "creators"¹² – who, as I have mentioned, construct imaginative geography through their dialogue with each other. In the above excerpt, for example, the 'cakes in the oven', 'the timer', and 'our beautiful garden' are objects whose existence is suggested by the first speaker and confirmed by the second. Importantly, it is the latter step – the response ("They are not ready, Noria", or "Yes, Toloki") – that designates the agreed-upon vision by which reclaimed markers of wealth (kitchens, sofas, gardens) come to exist and, more importantly, come to be owned. The imaginative geography of the shack, then, might be described as something like a 'sound-space' – an instance in which "utterance", as Cronin says of poetry in a different context, "is constitutive of the reality itself" (Interview with van der Vlies 523).

It seems appropriate, then, that the structure – a composite weaved together from discordant pieces of plastic and canvas – is repeatedly described in the same terms that might be applicable to the characteristic elusiveness, the rhythmic appeal to sub-semantic 'meaning', of a piece of poetry:

When the neighbours wake up that morning, they all come to witness the wonder that grew in the night. They marvel at the workmanship, and at how the plastic and canvas of different colours have been woven together to form patterns that seem to say something to the viewer. No one can really say what their message is, except to observe that it is a very profound one. (68)

As we saw in the previous chapter, Cronin's view of his own verse is that it also resembles a kind of bricolage – an assemblage pulled together, as in "Poem Shrike", from the available detritus of prison life or, as in "A Tale of why Tortoise carries a Hut upon his back", discordant fragments of meaning shored together against apartheid decimation. Recall, as well, that Barnard applies this mechanism more widely, to metonymize a "language of resistance" – one:

[Envisaged] not as ‘coherent’, but as fractured, multiple, in the process of being pieced together from scraps of random, irreverent words – some of which will bear the mark of a hybrid colonial history. (167)

Importantly, both Barnard’s reading of a ‘language of resistance’ and Cronin’s ‘liberated zone’ are fundamentally anticipatory, counter-hegemonic conceptualizations. That is: not only do they rely on an oppositional relationship to the established, dominant, oppressive circulations of language and commodity that they contest, but the (often micro-spatial) gaps prised open by these contestations, while professing to provide glimpses of that which comes *after*, can only exist (by definition) in a present moment that is *before*. That Toloki and Noria’s shack – both by virtue of the physical appearance of its shell and the lingual ‘realities’ that it contains – should come to evoke this mode of expression has important implications for the ways in which it has been read by the scholars I have cited. Namely, it suggests the rather uncomfortable possibility that instead of being orientated towards some point in the post-apartheid future (as Veser and others have suggested), the novel recalls an anticipatory moment that happened over a decade before its publication. Indeed, while the ‘smell of tyres’ at the end of *Ways of Dying* is separated from the burning flesh of the past, it is also cut off from what threatens to be a resemblant future. Perhaps this explains why “the end” must be a moment of anticipation rather than actualization.

V. Endings and directions for further study

The action of this project, if it were to be summarized in a few words, has been to try to make a case for a powerful and enduring relationship between micro-space and forms of resistance – political, human, artistic – in the twentieth-century, and especially ‘interregnal’, South African texts that I have had time to consider. This relationship is all the more noteworthy, I have argued, because small space was arguably the primary target of petty apartheid legislation – the stage for its terrible violation of people and the personal.

As my discussion closes, there of course remain many questions unanswered and micro-spaces unexplored. It seems clear, for example, that there are important small places – prevalent in the literature of the interregnum – that one would rightly hesitate to categorise as either ‘breached micro-space’ or ‘speaking place’. Though I touch briefly, in Chapter 2, on the potential for the prison cell and passageway to be temporarily reclaimed by song and poetry, what remains unturned to in these pages are a myriad of spaces designated by the apartheid government for the

express purpose of inflicting harm on its enemies. These are the soundproof “torture chamber[s]” (Coetzee “Into the Dark Chamber” 363) hidden in places like John Vorster Square, for example, or the armoured ‘Hippo’ and ‘Casspir’ vehicles used to suppress protest and ‘unrest’ towards the end of the regime. Also detectable as an overtone to this dissertation, perhaps, is a contemplation of non-physical micro-spaces – such as the world of small independent literary magazines in late-apartheid South Africa. I doubt it is coincidental that the key texts from each of my chapters appeared in such publications: Plaatje’s “One Night with the Fugitives” and Cronin’s essay on “Insurgent South African Poetry” were in the pages of *Staffrider* in 1982 and 1989 respectively, and an excerpt from *Ways of Dying* debuted in *New Contrast* before the novel’s publication.

In any case, my tracing of shifting micro-spatial resonances through the work of Vladislavić, Plaatje, Mphahlele, Nkosi, Serote, Cronin, and the many essays that this work has precipitated (essays that I have tried to treat, in many cases, as primary texts in themselves) has led to a reading of Mda’s *Ways of Dying* in this final chapter. The text and its secondary literature seem to suggest that a lasting attachment to exceptional, hopeful small space in South African writing might stunt attempts to represent the ‘post-apartheid’ in the proceeding years of democracy. Of course, whether or not this has been the case is a question that would require an analysis of micro-spatial representations since 1994 – and especially in the twenty-first century, where we often hear it said that the country’s great post-apartheid novel is still waiting to be written. Conceivably, one marker of such a text might be that its micro-spaces would no longer be needed to evoke the ‘post-apartheid’. Indeed, if the ‘post-apartheid’ were to become dominant reality, even in a fictional world, its gaps and crevices would be where ‘apartheid’ (or anti-post-apartheid) would have to fester – rather than out in the open.

None of this is to detract, however, from the repeatedly affirmed hypothesis that smallness, when it accumulates and pushes against, hints always at the hope of its eventual prevalence.

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Notes

Introduction

1. “The city”, writes Michael Power of Johannesburg in his novel *Shadow Game*, “had had no option but to build a fine paved road ...otherwise the workers would never have got to their jobs on time and what would have happened to the city in that case?” (121). And, in *Ways of Dying*, Mda points to the increased efficiency of travel from the ‘periphery’ into the ‘centre’ – Toloki’s village, initially a two-hour bus ride from the city, becomes “only one hour away” (76) with the introduction of mini-bus taxis.

2. Mda describes informal settlements, in *Ways of Dying*, as “mushrooming on the outskirts of the city” (120).

3. In *On Decoloniality*, Mignolo refers to a “modern/ colonial enunciation” (151) in which enlightenment epistemology is projected onto non-conforming environments in the ‘colonies’. “[Everything] goes back to knowledge,” he writes, “for it is through knowledge that the domains are instituted as *worlds* (ontologies) while the enunciation institutes itself as the *renderings* (description, explanation, representation, interpretation) of existing *worlds* and by so doing hides the fact that the worlds that the enunciation renders are not representations of existing worlds but instituted in and by the “doing” of the enunciation. (150)

4. Falkof cites Raewyn Connell’s (1995) famous definition of this form as hegemonic masculinity as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of the patriarchy” (77; as cited by Falkof).

5. Vladislavić himself, giving an interview for a French audience, explains that “South African texts were, in a way, constrained by social reality” (Interview with Barbancey; as cited by Thurman 55). “Fiction”, he continues, “had to carry what was, I think, a kind of burden; that is, to inform people about what was hidden” (55).

6. To garden, Katie Holmes writes of one Australian settler, was to “retreat from the unnaturalness of that barren land” and erect a monument to a “different world” (181; qtd. by Murray).

7. Chris Thurman, for example, offers a reading of the grandmother as the “gradually decomposing corpse of apartheid” (54) and Verna Brown reflects more broadly on the characters of *Missing Persons* as being part of a society “in extremis”, “haunted by a sense of time running down” (129)

8. Vladislavić himself confirms the Heaney parallel in an interview with Thurman and, in a more recent interview about his latest novel *The Distance*, quoting Graham Greene, refers to ‘forgetting’ as the “compost of the imagination”. “Without the freedom that a faulty, inventive memory brings, novelists would all be social historians”, he goes on (JRB Interview).

9. In addition to the justifications that Thurman offers for this reading, my sense is that the mulch at the bottom of the compost hole – the bubbling remains of food and leaves and meat – uncannily calls to mind a section from J.M. Coetzee’s 1991 essay on the ‘madness’ of Geoffrey Cronjé, an influential Afrikaner Nationalist whose writings from the 1940s represent “a seminal [contribution] to the theory of apartheid” (1). A hallmark of Cronjé’s character, Coetzee shows, was an obsessive fixation with and debilitating fear of *gelykstelling* (racial equalization) and ‘blood-mixing’. For Cronjé, and for other members of the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk who

believed that the ‘mixing’ of racial groups constituted a hubristic reversal of Biblical creation (which, according to their reading, would have been a fundamentally divisive act) – a perverse reinstatement of formless chaos. Earlier in Coetzee’s essay comes a memorable image of such chaos. “A mishmash (*mengelmoes*) of races [is] something unnatural” (9), writes Cronjé (*Tuiste* 19; as cited by Coetzee):

Cronjé’s term *mengelmoes-samelewing* is worth pausing over. *Mengel* contains the *meng* of *rassevermenging* but in addition implies mixing *up*: it is a cognate of English *mangle*. *Moes*, cognate with English *mush*, is a term from cuisine. In everyday usage the term *mengelmoes* is always derogatory. It implies a mixture in which not only individual character but all original structure have been lost; what is left behind is shapeless, undifferentiated and pulpy – much like faeces, in fact. (11)

10. “Tsafendas’s Diary comes to me in my sleep,” he says, “word by word, drifting down from the dim ceiling of my head” (89)

11. Coetzee makes a similar point in “The mind of apartheid”. “White liberals who diagnosed apartheid as a form of hubris or madness, and by denouncing it as such sought to distance themselves from it,” he writes, “were ultimately, in terms of this reading, doing little more than distracting attention from their continuing material complicity in the exploitation of black labour” (1).

Chapter 1

1. I refer here to *Fragments d'une Poétique du Feu* (*Fragments of a Poetics of Fire*), which was published posthumously under the editorship of Suzanne Bachelard in 1988.

2. *Le Materialisme Rationnel* (1953), similarly, presents a separation between “rational life” (*la vie rationnelle*) and “oneiric life” (*la vie onirique*) (19).

3. Indeed, as Smith points out, Bachelard was also interested in the connections between these two sides of his study – which are frequently represented, perhaps slightly unfoundedly, as polar opposites.

4. For example: poet and biographer Molly Peacock, during an interview with Alisa Siegel for CBC earlier this year, recalls the profound ‘refuge’ that Bachelard’s book (her own copy, Siegel writes, has a red hardcover, yellowing pages, and abounding pencil markings in the margins) offered during her husband’s “final illness”. (See “Room with a view: 60 years on, Gaston Bachelard’s ideas still ignite our imagination”.)

5. Psychoanalysis is contrasted by Bachelard with “rhythmanalysis” – “a theory of childhood rediscovered, of childhood that remains a possibility for us always, always opening a limitless future to our dreams” (qtd. in Chimisso 184).

6. See Richard Kearney’s “Bachelard and the Epiphanic Instant”.

7. Three days earlier, of course, on the 23rd of June, executives from the ANC and various other political organisations had met in Tongaat and compiled the Freedom Charter – the document that would serve as a guiding light of the struggle for years to come.

8. McDonald makes the important point here that Mphahlele's speech is "telling" in the context of his developing sense of Afrikan humanism. The story itself – by drawing semantically from "traditional African orature" and yet being expressed in English – demonstrates the "transcendent possibilities of culture" (243) as a kind of amalgam of lingual practices.

9. "The nest of *Mmamasiloanoka* is allegorized as a place of joy or hospitality because it is big, spacious, and strong", writes D.S. Matjila. In one particular folktale, a heavy thunderstorm sends all of the animals searching for "a safe haven" (Mogapi; qtd. in Matjila 20). The birds, unable to follow the other animals into caves and under trees, fly around aimlessly until *Mmamasiloanoka* welcomes them into her nest.

10. In the "Exile, the Tyranny of Place and the literary compromise", Mphahlele recalls his time as a school teacher in Orlando. "I was constantly asking myself questions relating to the value of poetry for me and my students, and for the township culture we were sharing – a culture that was very much an assertion of the human spirit fighting for survival against forces that threatened to fragment or break it", he writes (279).

11. Macaskill cites Herman Charles Bosman, Ruth First, Albie Sachs, Alex La Guma, Dennis Brutus, D.M. Zwelonke, Hugh Lewin, John Ya-Otto, Indres Naidoo, Molefe Pheto, and Breyten Breytenbach here.

12. This metaphor, Peter Anderson points out, was widely detectable in every day political speech-making. Upon his release from Sun City prison in 1989, for example, trade unionist leader Moses Mayekiso says, "[though] we are no longer in Sun City we are in a much bigger jail now" (Zondi 13; qtd. by Anderson 52).

13. Under section 16 (“Sexual offences between white persons and coloured persons”) of the Immorality Act (No. 23, 1957) and an aforementioned addition to section 20A made in 1969 respectively.

14. “If you leave your passbook in your jacket in the office and cross a street to buy a cold drink”, writes Nkosi, “you run the risk of being shanghaied to jail without any means of communicating with those outside” (38).

15. Brian Willan, Plaatje’s biographer, offers an excerpt from Plaatje’s unpublished notebook “With the children” that comes to mind here. It is worth quoting in full: “As she [Olive] passed on in years from 6 to 7 our work was increasing in leaps and bounds. I had not the same amount of time to devote to the children and Olive’s attentions became almost burdensome. She would walk in just when we could not afford to be interrupted and gently stroke us.”

[Plaatje:] ‘What can we do for you, dear?’

Olive: ‘Have a cup of tea.’

[Plaatje:] ‘No thanks, dearie, very busy just now.’

Olive: ‘But it is made by me, Pappa.’

[Plaatje:] ‘Well, let’s have a cup.’

16. So thinks Tim Couzens, who leaves his reader with this scene at the end of a 1971 essay on *Mhudi*. “The people who shared their hospitality and their land so freely”, he writes, “are reduced to lacking even six feet of their once abundant land” (203).

17. Then Prime Minister, General Botha received a copy of *Native Life in South Africa* from Georgiana Solomon – a friend of Plaatje’s in England. In a letter (dated 31 August 1916) back to Solomon, Botha clarifies that, though the book represents a “constitutionally expressed” opinion written by a “special pleader”, it would “certainly not in any way adversely influence my

Government in its dealing with the Natives of the Union". He writes of Plaatje that "consciously or unconsciously, in his book he has in my opinion been somewhat biased in his strictures on the Government in regard to the Natives' Land Act: he has exaggerated incidents which tell in his favour and suppressed facts that should be within his knowledge which would show the honest attempts made by the Government to avoid the infliction of hardship in carrying out a principle which, you must remember, was sanctioned by the Legislature" (Willan 199).

Chapter 2

1. That is, in the Bachelardian sense (see previous chapter).

2. Though my focus will be on Cronin's specific conception of the "liberated zone", his is not the only usage. Indeed, Lionel Abrahams writes about 'zones of imaginative possibility', and "liberated zones" appear in the work of Antonio Gramsci. They also spring up repeatedly in the discursive realm of mid-to-late 1980s South African literary criticism. Michael Chapman's "The Liberated Zone: The Possibilities of Imaginative Expression in a State of Emergency" (1988), which is the last essay in *Perspectives*, is perhaps one of the most recognizable here – as is Malvern Van Wyk's response to it in 1993 with "Which liberated zone would that be?".

3. "COSATU", Barnard writes, "was essentially built on commuter trains" (*Apartheid and Beyond* 7).

4. A fascinating observation made by Barnard here is that *Staffrider* – which she unreservedly calls "the most important literary magazine to emerge from the Black Consciousness era" (it is also, notably, where Vladislavić's "Tsafendas's Diary" appears for the first time) – gets its name from the word for illegal travellers who would launch themselves onto moving trains and hang "at a precarious angle from the handrail on the door" (*Apartheid and Beyond* 7).

5. This reading, affirmed, among other things, by Vladislavić's reference to Seamus Heaney's "Digging" at the end of "Tsafendas's Diary", is one that I explore in the first chapter.

6. Cronin refers here to an English taught at secondary schools that presents itself as being "part of the 'Great Tradition' (Wordsworth, Shakespeare etc.).". The result, he suggests, quoting L.W. Lanham, is that English spoken in South Africa "stands constantly in the shadow of English English and unless a writer or speaker knows that he controls the latter, any public display of African English is marked by hesitancy and selfconsciousness" (28).

7. I refer to Gwala's "Gumba, Gumba, Gumba", here – another poem from which Cronin quotes in "South African English Language Poetry Written by Africans in the 1970s" (28).

8. Barnard quotes from Jameson's *Brecht and method* (1998) here.

9. The first poem in the "Venture to the Interior" section of *Inside*.

10. This latter image is read by Pinnock as evocative of prison barbed wire fences.

11. It is worth noting that these territories are not, exactly, 'micro-spatial'. They range, Harris and Arnott (1988) maintain, from 10 000 to 130 000 square meters.

12. "Far from isolating him from his fellow South Africans," writes Barnard of Cronin, "his imprisonment placed him in what Jameson calls the "structural position of the dominated other." It enabled him to see in the loss of his mobility, in his enforced separation from his family, and in his intimate rediscovery of the incantatory and social dimension of language, the connection between the public and the private. His position emboldened him to defend the validity of such forms as the love lyric" (160).

13. According to the placard on its wall, Schreiner's apartment in Matjiesfontein is where she wrote large parts of *A Story of an African Farm* – next door was the post office, and further down the same road the Lord Milner Hotel.

14. So these poems were composed surreptitiously”, writes Cronin in the 1987 introduction to *Inside*, “and paced out in my tiny cell, one two three, and back” (Introduction 10).

15. Both Mahlangu and Moloise, Cronin mentions in “Insurgent South African Poetry”, write and “[send] out” (18) poems before they are executed by hanging at Pretoria Maximum Security Prison.

Chapter 3

1. In Mda's novel, the ‘Nurse’ at a funeral is the person who was the last to see the deceased alive. Their task is to orate the story of death.

2. This is a rough estimate made by Riedwaan Moosage in their Master's thesis: *The Impasse of Violence: Writing Necklacing into a History of Liberation Struggle in South Africa* (2010).

3. Nefolovhodwe returns the figurines under the compulsion of Jwara's spirit, who appears repeatedly in Nefolovhodwe's dreams.

4. Writers like Pauline Grzeda, Rogier Courau, and Sally-Ann Murray have pointed towards the ‘magical realist’ aspects of Mda's text – its divine conceptions, 15-month pregnancies, and imagined landscapes, for example. For the former, these are symptomatic of South Africa's interregal condition.

5. Part of the novel's mapping out "the location of culture in postapartheid South Africa", Barnard argues, is its "meditation on the transformation of the country's cultural geography from the old landscapes of oppression to the new mediascapes of leisure and tourism, which have often subsumed the old sites of deprivation in a new logic of display" (150). Township tours and struggle museums are quintessential markers of this new logic. "Shack chic" – a term from Craig Fraser's picture book of the same name – is a telling concept here, one that Barnard retrospectively attaches to Toloki's form of survival artistry. Fraser's book contests the thesis that 'shack' and 'chic' are "mutually exclusive terms" by pointing to the ways in which South Africans, by aestheticizing the shacks in which they live, "stand proud in the face" of poverty. Incidentally, many of the photographs in the book show advertising pages from newspapers and magazines pasted in patterns onto walls.

6. Barnard's response to Farred's labelling of *Ways of Dying*'s politics as "only locally resonant" hinges, in part, on the claim that spaces like Toloki's "quayside headquarters" represent "small glimmers of cosmopolitanism" (155)

7. 'Play' is a word used by Haarhoff in her description of Toloki and Noria's activities in their imagined world ("The characters abandon themselves to childlike play" (202), she writes). My feeling is that the term – particularly under D.W. Winnicott's usage, which has been applied by Kate Highman (2020) to the literature classroom – lends itself to a nuanced reading of Mda's text. Highman quotes Mary Jacobsen to elucidate the concept: "A reader inhabiting play space", Jacobsen writes, "suspends awareness of himself or herself as finder of a pre-existing world (or text), and enters into creative construction of, rather than perception of, the story world" (32; qtd. by Highman 275).

8. Courau and Murray refer here, for example, to Toloki's naming of his "quayside Headquarters", to his repurposing of beach showers for his ablutions, and to his reimagination of a hyperbolic caped outfit from a theatre costume shop as venerable mourning attire.

9. I am referring here to the discussion at the end of "Tales from the Nest".

10. See previous chapter.

11. At the beginning of the novel, for example, Toloki receives a "huge retainer" that constitutes "the highlight of a career that has spanned quite a few years" (17).

12. As Toloki and Noria are repeatedly called by the narrator during their building of the shack. At one stage, for example, "the two creators mix soil and water to make very soft mud" and, at another, "the creators are hungry" (69).

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