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RE-ASSESSING THE INNER CITY OF JOHANNESBURG:

**AN EXPLORATION INTO EMERGING AFRICAN URBANISM AND THE DISCOVERY OF
BLACK AGENCY IN PHASWANE MPE'S *WELCOME TO OUR HILLBROW* AND KGBETLI
MOELE'S *ROOM 207*.**

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**A minor dissertation submitted in *partial fulfilment* of the requirements for the award of the
Degree of Masters of English in Literature and Modernity**

Under the supervision of DR. HARRY GARUBA

Faculty of the Humanities

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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

At present, we are witnessing an exciting moment in African urban discourse, one that sees writers and theorists engaging with new avenues in which the African city can be configured and read. The discourse reflects and focuses on the myriad, creative ways in which African urbanites capitalise on their environments, exploring the kinds of challenges and freedoms generated by a life in the African city. Underlying this exploration is the notion that through the development of creative tactics, African urbanites can lay claim to agency amidst difficult conditions and can also shape their urban environments into flexible and enabling spaces. This approach challenges the idea that African cities are simply 'dysfunctional' or 'chaotic'. Simultaneously, this allows the stigma attached to the entire 'sign' of Africa to be challenged. The following study uses this basis of African urban discourse and applies it to a South African context. Indeed, one local urban centre that has always garnered a wealth of interest is the inner city of Johannesburg. Recent theory and research around African cities allows me to delve deeper into the intricacies of its social and geo-political landscape. The purpose of this is ultimately to shape a literary study. The discourse will aid me as I analyse two novels set in the inner city, namely Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*. The theoretical framework creates a context in which I explore the impact of these two, post-apartheid novels. The texts also provide a crossover point that enables me to explore the ideas propagated by emerging African urban theory in depth. Both novels are realistic and semi- autobiographical accounts of life in the inner city. In a sense, the novels provide a semi-fictionalised 'ethnographic' frame for my research. This is not to imply that literature can challenge social theory or that the two naturally should correspond. What this approach does allow for is for me to show how valuable the writer is in this kind of environment, as well as how the city generates a particular kind of story and storytelling. Furthermore, it gives me a space in which the central tenets of African urban thought can be explored and applied in detail. For these reasons, the following research is multidisciplinary, using a range of social, urban theory to understand two creative, urban texts. The contribution it aims to make is to both to the field of literature and to the study of (South) African city spaces.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

EMERGING AFRICAN URBANISM

Introduction

This mini-dissertation was prompted by my interest in an unprecedented moment in world history, one in which the urban environment is fast becoming the destination of choice amongst many of the world's peoples.¹ It was also prompted by what is an exciting moment in urban thought and theory. At present, there is a new kind of urban discourse emerging, one that challenges the way that cities in Africa, and other so-called developing countries, are configured or read. Nowadays, dominant urban discourse, having emerged from the West, is revealing itself to be increasingly limited. What this means is that the models used for historical assessments of the urban space are in the process of being re-assessed. Traditional urban discourse, in foregrounding developmentalism and modernization, reinforced historical binaries that typecast African cities– and Africa in general– as deficient or problematic.

African urban discourse seeks to transcend these dichotomies by emphasising agency and a dynamic way of viewing the urban space. New and exciting scholarship on the African city tends to emphasise forms of agency amongst African actors in the urban space, prioritising their capacity respond to the urban environment in productive and creative ways, despite limited choices or access basic services, jobs, education and so on. Many urban scholars are focusing on the avenues through which the city dweller in Africa is able to create significant and meaningful lives in this environment, despite obviously difficult conditions. In addition, these 'difficult' urban conditions are in the process of being re-assessed so that instead of being seen as problematic, they are rather seen as 'different'. By emphasising the ways in which the individual in the African city exercises flexibility, autonomy and resilience in response to the overarching power structure of the urban environment, the very 'sign' of the city in Africa is challenged, from the bottom up. Individual performances are seen to have the capacity to re-shape the urban space,

¹ See Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums*. London, New York: Verso, 2006. He states that: 'Cities, indeed, have absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950, and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week. The world's urban labor force has more than doubled since 1980, and the present urban population–3.2 billion– is larger than the total population of the world when John F Kennedy was inaugurated. The global countryside, meanwhile, has reached its maximum population and will begin to shrink after 2020. As a result, cities will account for virtually all future world population growth, which is expected to peak at about 10 billion in 2050.' Pp. 1-2

making it dynamic, flexible and enabling. This aspect of forging or establishing autonomy and making creative life choices in the face of potentially limiting urban conditions, informs the use of the term 'agency' in this dissertation. If agency refers to the power in a human person to enact choice and act freely within society, then within the city, this notion will be applied to the particular conditions of the urban space. In particular, within the space of the South African city, Johannesburg, the term 'black agency' invokes the black individual's capacity to make choices and act in an autonomous way in a democratic socio-political context. However, as we shall see in the dissertation, this is problematic since for so many black people in South Africa, the capacity to act freely is still not possible, considering that the remnants of apartheid's socio-economic strategy are yet to be completely dismantled. Furthermore, even in situations where they have, as in Black Economic Empowerment strategies, for instance, the poor are still marginalised. However, what is interesting about this notion of black agency is that in South Africa today, the fact that access to the city and to an urban persona and lifestyle is legitimate means that a whole new generation of black urbanites are emerging within the space of the city. This dissertation will consider whether or not having legitimate access to the city and a freedom to walk and work within it counters some of the constraints facing the young black individual. As we shall see in the following two chapters, the premise of African urban discourse is that the nature of the city and legitimate access to what it embodies allows for a potentially powerful sense of self. Also, the space of the African city generates within its residents, the need to act in alternative and interesting ways that in themselves challenge overarching power structures. In this way, the African urban discourse addresses the notion of black agency as well as giving us the tools to consider it in a local context.

Through this emerging discourse, I aim to explore the problematic of black agency within the African urban context in relation to my own, local context. In South Africa today we see the urban space gaining increasing attention amongst scholars and writers as they seek out new ways of understanding and defining our social and political landscape. Abdoumalig Simone, Sarah Nuttall and Achilles Mbembe are but a few of the growing number of urban theorists exploring Johannesburg's role and place in the contemporary

socio-political landscape. The work of theorists such as these contributes greatly to the advancements in and potency of the ideas propagated by African urban discourse.

While many parts of Johannesburg city—from Midrand to Sandton— form the sites of scholarly explorations, it is the inner city that is one of the most challenging and potent arenas. For any South African wanting to study the ideas at the foundation of African urban discourse, as well as how these can be used in the local terrain, the inner city is a valuable starting point. In general, the city of Johannesburg is the chosen destination for large numbers of immigrants and *immigrants*, for various reasons such as employment, education or even political asylum. The flow of new arrivals, coupled with the existing population makes it not only dense but also a diverse urban centre.² Such diversity, one would imagine, adds considerably to the ‘openness’ of the city but combined with Johannesburg and South Africa’s complex and turbulent history, whatever benefits this diversity may hold for the individual are countered by poverty, over-crowding and xenophobia, amongst other things. Furthermore, many studies reveal that the density and heterogeneity makes this inner city a site where the competition for the right to belong here is that much more fierce. For instance, Tomlinson *et al* in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*, observe that, from the perspective of immigrant groups from other African states, ‘the city’s hospitality leaves much to be desired.’³

Inversely, for the local black population, the ‘influx of blacks from other African countries who moved aggressively into street trading and illegal activities [means that] black South Africans have been forced to re-imagine Johannesburg not as belonging to all South Africans alone but shared with others...’⁴ Ethnographic studies like Alan

² This point is stressed by Enzwezor *et al* in the introduction to *Under Siege: Four African Cities—Freetown, Johannesburg, Kinshasa, Lagos*. Documenta 11_Platform 4. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002. They also make the point however that nowadays, it is not just cities in Africa that are experiencing radical influxes of immigrants, but that this is becoming a feature of cities all around the world. That being said, Johannesburg, after 1994, experienced an unprecedented rush of foreigners and locals seeking a life within it. See for instance, Alan Morris’ *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999.

³ Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X. ‘Introduction’ in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid City*. Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X (eds) London, New York: Routledge, 2003: p. xiii

⁴ *ibid.*, p. xiii

Morris', *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg* (1999) reveal that the inner city is overcrowded, many buildings are derelict and ignored by landlords, crime is high and it is often difficult for newcomers to fit in. The centre of Johannesburg can be hostile and virtually impassable to outsiders. The stigma attached to the inner city adds to the difficulty of its residents feeling like they belong or have the right to belong to and act within the city as a whole. The city is often figured as a lawless place of drugs, prostitution and crime. Abdoumalik Simone asserts that '[a]lthough one of Africa's most urbanized settings [Johannesburg is] seen as a place of ruins— of ruined urbanization.'⁵ Tomlinson *et al* note that for the majority of South Africa's white population, downtown Johannesburg is seen as 'having gone from the citadel of white dominance to the declining city of grime and crime.'⁶

These tensions have evoked much attention to the inner city. And, what is interesting is that as theoretical work gains in momentum, so too does the number of creative writers representing and reflecting on life in the inner city. Historically in South Africa, one finds ample evidence of a literary fascination with this city. The classic 'Jim goes to Jo'burg' theme, for instance is well known, with literary figures like Alan Paton and Zakes Mda being just two writers who have responded to what the city symbolised for countless men and women since its rapid growth in the early 1800's.⁷ Yet, in post-apartheid South

⁵ Simone, AbdouMaliq. 'People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg' in *Journal of Public Culture*. 2004, Vol 16, 3: p. 407.

⁶ Tomlinson *et al*, 2003: p. xiii

⁷ The 'Jim goes to Joburg' theme refers to the story of the black migrant worker, a motif that became popular during the earlier part of this century. However, as Chapter Two will explore further, the Jim goes to Joburg theme embodies the contradictions in what Johannesburg represented to these men and women. On the one hand, as we know, the black labour force was the economic driving force of the apartheid state. The black population had very little choice too when it came to the conditions of how they could work and support themselves. The conditions of the mines, for instance, were abysmal. Verging on forced labour, black mine workers were housed in squalid, single sex dormitories, away from their families and almost cut off from the rest of the world. The money they earned was pittance. Any black person during the majority of the twentieth century (and ironically, still today) working in the city had to comply with the harsh regulations imposed by the state, whether a domestic worker, gardener, or mine-worker. This meant that the city embodied, both physically and symbolically, the lack of basic human rights of the black worker. At the same time, urbanity and capital, as opposed to the 'Bantu' identity, spelled a certain freedom to the black individual. Thus, as the poem in chapter two, *City Johannesburg* suggests, the city was an ambiguous space, a dystopic place but one bound also to a release from the state's strategies of retribalization, that were ultimately intended to be completely disempowering. This ambiguity was interpreted into the 'Jim' trope, where his encounters with the city embody this ambivalence.

Africa, this urban terrain holds different possibilities for the black men and women who, during most of the twentieth century, were marginalised from the freedoms usually associated with the city space. In response, we see a growing number of writers who seek to represent and document this experience.

Therefore, the synchronicities between African urban discourse, local research on Johannesburg and an important trend in South African literature provides the site and context of this dissertation. With African urban discourse and current research, we can begin to understand the impact of two particular novels that focus on the post-1994 inner city. These novels are Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*. Mpe and Moele are both young, black men who write about the experience of a young black generation as they move into the city. Published within the space of the last decade, both novels present black, South African protagonists and their encounter with the contemporary urban environment. The novels tackle some of the more difficult questions around black agency in the inner city of Johannesburg. While common associations with and stigmas towards the inner city are conjured up in the novels, the authors also explore the question of whether these associations can be viewed in an alternative light. Both novels confront common perceptions of Johannesburg by presenting protagonists who rely on creative ways of reading and acting within a challenging urban system. In this, the reader is encouraged to assess and re-assess what the meaning of the space of the inner city.

Thus, it becomes clear that emerging African urbanism provides a strong framework for understanding the impact of these novels on perceptions and the realities of the inner city today. And, inversely, these novels provide a space in which we can evaluate the basis of African urban theory. Both novels are realistic and semi- autobiographical accounts of life in the inner city. The novels provide a crossover point whereby we can 'test' the ideas propagated by emerging African urban theory. In a sense, the novels provide a semi-fictionalised 'ethnographic' frame. This is not to imply that literature can challenge social theory or that the two naturally should correspond. What it does allow for though is for us to see show how valuable the writer is in this kind of environment as well as in the

act of bearing witness and representing the nuances of this African city space, beyond the theory. Lastly, and importantly it also allows for us to consider any oversights that may exist within the theory.

Thus, this mini-dissertation is a literary study as well as an urban study. As a gateway to the literary analyses, the rest of this chapter will provide some of the main aspects of emerging urban theory in the 'periphery.' This will form a theoretical framework for the rest of the dissertation. In order to understand the basis of this urban theory, certain important concepts about space, in general, and also urban space will be explained. Chapter Two will then proceed with a more in-depth account of how Johannesburg has been conceived as well as *perceived* since its inception. In Chapters Three and Four, respectively, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Room 207* will be discussed. Both novels will be explored through an assessment of main thematic ideas, overarching style as well as in dialogue with relevant, local, urban theory. Lastly, the conclusion to this dissertation will provide a space to make the links between texts and the theory. This will enable us to see the implications of the relationship between the text and theory and foresee areas important for future study.

Emerging African Urbanism

Traditionally, urban theory and the way we understand cities has been organised around valorised Western norms of urban stability, sustainability and productivity. Or, as Achilles Mbembe writes,

The Western imagination defines the metropolis as the general form assumed under the rationalization of relations of production (the increasing prevalence of the commodity system) and the rationalization of the social sphere (human relations) that follows it.⁸

Through the gaze of historically dominant urban theory 'modern' cities in post-colonial Africa have usually been portrayed as 'chaotic and disorderly.'⁹ The contributors of *Under Siege: Four African Cities*, explain this:

⁸ Mbembe, Achille. 'Aesthetics of Superfluity' in *Journal of Public Culture*: 2004, Vol 16, 3. 373- 405: p.373

...with decolonization and globalization, the discourse of African urban systems has... been expressed through the paradigms of development and modernization. The development argument pushes African urban systems to reform themselves into new vectors of political and mercantile liberalism, while the modernization argument stresses the importance of retooling outdated and neglected infrastructure and policy sectors in order to make urban economies more efficient and conducive to the generation of wealth and social dividends. *However, deeply embedded in these discourses– between postcolonial citizenship and modernity, chaos and disorder, development and modernisation– is the clear recognition that postcolonial African cities have long been understood only in relation to a spectre of binary oppositions and spatial and temporal distortions.*¹⁰

What is evident is that Western urban theory historically has ordered all the world's cities in one, totalising system, where cities are measured according to a notion that there is such a thing as a typical urban space. Perceptions and conceptions of the urban space have been informed and constructed within this theoretical paradigm. Thus, dominant urban theory, produced within the discourse of the West, has played a central role in asserting the kinds of stigmas attached to African cities. Associations of 'backward-ness' or a lack of sophistication merely emphasise the kinds of dichotomies typical of the Western gaze. Ironically, as Jane Jacobs reminds us, in Africa, the process of 'colonialism did not simply involve the transfer of metropolitan processes of urbanisation to the colonies; there was a reverse movement as well.' In other words:

"urbanism and urbanisation in the metropole cannot be understood separately from the development in the colonial periphery." (King, 1990:7). This involves more than the process that brought exoticised fads to the architecture of imperial cities or saw monuments made to the triumph of empire. The use of peripheral territories for primary production and resource extraction facilitated, indeed necessitated, the growth of industrialised and commercialised urban centres in the imperial core.¹¹

Be that as it may, the African urban space, like many cities in developing countries,¹² has been and usually is framed as dysfunctional. This is often based on economic principles. To illustrate this, I would like to draw attention to one such example: the world-city

⁹ Enwezor *et al*, 2002:13

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 13, emphasis added

¹¹ Jacobs, Jane in *Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography*. Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (eds) Oxford & Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002: p.195

¹² See Davis, Mike. 2006: p. 3

hypothesis. Initiated by urban theorist John Friedman¹³, the hypothesis creates a frame for urban analysts to measure how individual cities operate in relation to others. What the hypothesis actually does, as Jennifer Robinson informs us, is simply place the cities of the world into a ranking system that prioritises a very small portion of a city's financial sector and how this sector functions globally.¹⁴ In essence, the hypothesis postulates that the city that has strong participation in global and not just their local economy achieve a primary standing as a 'world-city.' A city with a less prominent role in global economics is allocated a position as a secondary-city, although implicit in this categorisation is that these cities have the potential to change their status. In other words, they could at some point 'catch up' with the primary world-class cities.

As one can imagine, this hypothesis is incredibly problematic, for a number of reasons. Firstly, as mentioned above, 'although the status within the world city hierarchy is based on a range of criteria, including national standing, location of state and interstate agencies, and cultural functions, the primary determination of status is economic.'¹⁵ The hypothesis asserts a hierarchical system that draws from 'a quintessentially neo-imperialist and global-sopic perspective...located in the centres of power and privilege that valorise and prioritize the activities of the most powerful in a few (old and new) imperial centres.'¹⁶ Secondly, as Robinson again clearly argues, it assumes that all nations and cities have the same ambition— to become a city that ranks in the higher echelons of the world-city hierarchy, to become a city that fits the normative model of what an ideal city might be— in this case, economically efficient. John Friedman, when confronted by the popularity of the world-city theory, suggests that 'we look to capitalism...for the frequently destructive strivings for increasing status among cities.'¹⁷

¹³ See Robinson, Jennifer. 'Johannesburg's Futures: between developmentalism and global success' in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid city*. Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X (eds). 2002.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 260.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 262.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 263

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 258

Yet, as mentioned above, the world-city hypothesis simply replays the kinds of divisions seen in previous generations, such as those produced by the binary oppositions typical of colonialism and imperialism. It comes as no surprise then that the cities that rank high up on the world-city scale are those that have historically benefited from these kinds of divisions. The additional damaging effect of the world city hypothesis is that because it prioritises economic systems over other criteria, urban centres that are large in size but are not economically competitive on a global level fall outside of its system. Indeed, the world-city hypothesis' primary and secondary ranking system does not accommodate for these 'mega-cities' that deviate too far from the criteria of norms set up by the theory. The sprawling, densely populated cities that are characteristic of most so-called developing countries are either ignored or stigmatised.

What the world-city hypothesis overlooks is that the urban trend in these so-called developing cities, one of 'urbanization without growth' is the product of 'a global political conjuncture— the worldwide debt crisis of the late 1970's and the subsequent IMF-led restructuring of Third World economies in the 1980's.'¹⁸ Again, such dominant forms of urban theory overlook the crucial fact that ideas like the world-city hypothesis only serve to prolong the kinds of divisions set up by Western ideas of modernity and development, as Enwezor *et al* reminded us earlier. Johannesburg, according to the hypothesis, is allocated a position somewhere between a secondary and a mega-city.¹⁹

The prevalence of the world-city hypothesis and the fact that 'ways of seeing and reading contemporary African cities are *still* dominated by the meta-narrative of urbanization, modernization and crisis,'²⁰ means that these challenges to urban theory are only beginning to take shape. But, as Robinson asserts,

[a]lthough urban theory is located in western imaginations, urban managers and thinkers around the world are confronted with the diverse realities in their own contexts. A more cosmopolitan urban theory, consciously locating itself in places other than the west or the all-knowing global observer might... enable us to think about cities differently.²¹

¹⁸ Davis, Mike. 2006:14

¹⁹ Robinson, Jennifer. 2002: p. 259

²⁰ Mbembe, Achille; Nuttall, Sarah. 'Writing the World from an African Metropolis' in *Public Culture*, 2004, Vol. 16 Issue 3, p347-371: p.353

²¹ Robinson, Jennifer. 2002: p. 268.

The turn towards alternative modes of engaging with the urban spatiality means that whatever conclusions we reach about this inner city and its effect on the black, South African individual must not subscribe to the dominant meta-narrative that Johannesburg is ultimately aberrant and dysfunctional. We need to be able to read the city in an alternative manner. What African urban scholars are suggesting is that ‘the postcolonial city...harbors the cultural and social apparatus that engineers the many forms of local responses from the periphery.’²² In other words, the site of the African city not only insists that a new way of theorising the urban space is developed, but also provides the site that makes the development of these new approaches possible. Or, As Antoine Bouillon observes,

By more than a few accounts, the African city is the site for the challenge to the political and at the same time the location for the negotiations and agreements where new organizations and services, freedoms and autonomous spaces are emerging.²³

When ‘the contemporary African city’ is dismissed as ‘chaotic and disorderly’²⁴ or a place of crisis, we overlook the alternative kinds of socio-economic order found in African cities, the creative ways in which African urbanites respond to these complex spaces and how this actually changes the space, from the inside, from the bottom up. Before we judge the effects of inner city Johannesburg on its inhabitants, we need to make sure we do not do the same thing. Of course, not all African cities are identical, and this dissertation does not intend to typecast all African cities as the same. However, what we are witnessing currently is the contestation of a dominant way of reading cities— one that relies on the image of *all* African cities as chaotic and disorderly. This typecasting of the African city is symptomatic, as Mbembe reminds us, of the fact that ‘Africa [itself] so often ends up epitomizing the intractable, the mute, the abject and the other-worldly.’²⁵

Thus, African urban discourse emphasises the myriad, invisible ways in which its inhabitants manage the larger urban system. While we can agree that it is imperative that

²² Okwui Enwezor *et al*, 2002: p. 320

²³ Bouillon, Antoine. ‘ Between Euphemism and Informalism: Inventing the City’ in *Under Siege: Four African Cities*. Okwui Enwezor *et al* (eds) Documenta 11_Platform 4. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002: p 19

²⁴ Enwezor *et al*, 2006:13

²⁵ Mbembe, Achille. 2004: p. 348

the 'sign' of the African city is challenged, what does this actually mean for the black, South African resident of inner city Johannesburg? How is it possible for her or him to transform not only his or her own life in the face of very real, systemic constraints, but also the way that the city is actually understood?

Exploring the foundations of a reflexive, 'postmodern' approach to space and human geography can provide us with the conceptual tools to answer this question. Onookome Okome, in an essay about Lagos describes the reciprocal dynamic between agent and environment:

The city is everything to us— it consumes us, and for that reason we glorify it. We like it or hate it, but we must live in it. Sometimes we defeat the city and reshape it to suit our whims and caprices. We invent the city and it reinvents us.²⁶

There exists a certain tension between us— the human agents— and the hard, busy landscape of the concrete cityscape. Okome suggests that city is something organic, alive. In this way, the city can also be a menace to the individuals living within it in that it has the ability to 'consume' us. And yet, Okome points out our own capacity to imprint ourselves on to it, to 'shape' it with our own 'whims and caprices.' The notion of 'invention', central to African urban discourse, implies an urbanity that is more of a *dynamic*. Urbanity becomes more of a reflexive performance between the city's inhabitants and the city space. This describes how it may be possible for the actors living within the city to develop agency, despite the kinds of restrictions the social and institutional structure of the city may pose.

Furthermore, African urbanism configures space and human geography around notions of *difference* and multiplicity. This idea has been developing amongst social and historical theorists for some time. Michel Foucault, of instance, suggested that new ways of reading space— politically, socially and geographically— have been facilitated by a world characterised increasingly by its 'diversity and difference.'²⁷

²⁶ Okome, Onookome. 'Writing the Anxious City; Images of Lagos in Nigerian Home Video Films' in *Under Siege: Four African Cities*. Okwui Enwezor *et al* (eds). Documenta 11_Platform 4. Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2002: p. 316

²⁷ Foucault, Michel. 'Of Other Spaces' in *Visual Culture Reader*. Mirzoeff, N. (ed), London, Routledge, 2002: p. 238.

He writes:

[t]he present epoch will perhaps be above all an epoch of space. We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of near and far of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and interstices with its own skein. One could perhaps say that ideological conflicts animating present-day polemics oppose the pious descendents of time and the determined inhabitants of space.²⁸

As Foucault suggests above, space is defined as something indeterminate. Certainly in the postcolonial environment the emphasis has been on difference and alterity—as a way of ‘answering back’ to the legacies of hegemonic regimes of power, racism, and other forms of control that were prioritised around binary oppositions. Homi Bhabha and his notion of third space is one such example.²⁹ African urbanism propagates a notion of space that sees it as something comprised of those moving and living within it. Or, as philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty suggests³⁰ ‘[s]pace is not the setting (real or logical) in which things are arranged, but the means whereby the positing of things becomes possible’ Again, the emphasis is on the agent, the individual. French theorist, Michel De Certeau insists that,

...a space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities and time variables. Thus space is composed of intersections between mobile elements, It is in a sense actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it. Space occurs as the effect produced by the operations that orient it, situate it, temporalize it, and make it function in a polyvent of conflictual programs or contractual proximities.³¹

Understanding this idea that space is ‘actuated by the ensemble of movements within it’ is key for understanding the approach of African urbanism.

He also sees this shift motivated by the anxiety of not knowing whether ‘there will be enough space for men in the world.’

²⁸ Foucault, Michel. 2002: p. 238

²⁹ See Bhabha. Homi. ‘The Third Space’ in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*. J Rutherford (ed), 207-21, 1990

³⁰ Merleau Ponty, Marcel. (1962) in Gibson, Nigel. C ‘Mapping Africa’s Presences: Merleau-Ponty, Mannoni, and the Malagasy Massacre of 1947 in Franz Fanon’s *Black Skin: White Masks*’ in *Contested Terrains and Constructed Categories*. George Clement & Nigel. C. Gibson (eds) United States of America: Westview Press, 2002: p. 243.

³¹ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 1984: p. 117

Consequently, if space can be conceived as something *performed* as practice, then the heterogeneous city automatically takes on an intensity second to none. In a world becoming more and more decentred and skein-like, as Foucault asserts, the city epitomises this pattern. The urban space in general, as more people seek it out, has begun to embody the socio-political, cultural and socio-economic concerns of a fast increasing network of peoples. Indeed, the urban centre is a site in which multiple nationalities, linguistic groups, ethnicities, social practices and so on are converging and overlapping. And, if we consider that in twenty years³² the planet itself will begin to resemble a massive urban network, one can recognise the importance of understanding space and the city in this way. As Dear and Flusty write:

At the same time as multiple worlds, and the world itself in general, is presenting itself in the city, the city is linking itself ever more tightly to others around the world. Disparate and distant places are presenting themselves within one another as cities continually swap pieces of themselves...³³

This brings to mind geographer, Jonathan Raban's hard city/ soft city notion. He writes that, the city, at first hard and unknown, when met by the individual,

...goes soft as it awaits the imprint of identity. For better or for worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. You, too. Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form around you. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be revealed.³⁴

The city is thus a space that has the potential to always become comprised of 'soft' enclaves of meaning devised by the experiences and lives of any number of individuals. Any urban space takes on the pattern of an intersecting network of subjective associations. Arjun Appadurai sees the city as a conglomerate of imagined worlds, which

³² Davis, Mike. 2006: pp. 1-2. Mike Davis in *Planet of Slums* is emphatic about the mass urbanisation of the planet and his work is key to understanding the world's urban question. He asserts that, Cities, indeed, have absorbed nearly two-thirds of the global population explosion since 1950, and are currently growing by a million babies and migrants each week. The world's urban labor force has more than doubled since 1980...[t]he global countryside, meanwhile, has reached its maximum population and will begin to shrink after 2020. As a result, cities will account for virtually all future world population growth. (pp.1-2)

³³ Dear, Michael and Flusty, Steven. 2004: p.364

³⁴ Raban, Jonathan in Dear, Michael and Flusty, Steven. 2002: p. 216

‘run up against each other, and in the process have the power to subvert the actual world they overlay.’³⁵

Sociologist Robert Park asserts this subjective value of the city when he writes that,

[t]he city is ... a state of mind, a body of customs and traditions, and of organized attitudes and sentiments that inhere in these customs and are transmitted with this tradition. The city is not, in other words, merely a physical mechanism and an artificial construction. It is involved in the vital processes of the people who made it.³⁶

The city is a terrain in which each individual operating and acting within it shapes it with the performance of the everyday. And, since so many diverse individuals are enacting their lives in any given space at any one time, the city is imbued with millions of intersecting strands of meaning and action, each of which are viable components. Furthermore, by sheer size and heterogeneity, the city offers the individual more choices than any other context. The city itself must then be seen as a radically open site in which the individual has the potential to shape it, utilise it, create meaningful narratives and, in theory empower him or her self through choice and action. What emerges from this view of space and the city is that the urban individual has the potential to achieve a sense of personal power and identity through his or her interaction with, and influence on, the urban landscape.

Nonetheless, the tenets of this kind of reflexive human geography and the underlying assertions made by African urban theorists are not without criticism. One way of contesting the reflexive approach is the notion that while the city may appear to offer more choices and potential for agency to those who live within it, the available options for its inhabitants are not necessarily unlimited. Appiah asserts this when he writes ‘we do make choices, but we do not determine the options from which we choose.’³⁷ His argument would state that despite the reflexive relationship between an external environment and the people living within it we are always constrained by the institutions

³⁵ In Dear, Michael and Flusty, Steven. 2004: p. 364

³⁶ Park, Robert, 1964:1 in Langer, P. ‘Sociology— Four Images of Organized Diversity. Bazaar, Jungle, Organism, Machine’ in *Cities of the Mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*. Lloyd Rodwin and Robert M. Hollister (eds). New York: Plenum Press, 1984: p. 98

³⁷ Dear, Michael. and Flusty, Steven. 2003: p.305

and structures that the environment is comprised of. Like all human landscapes, the city is an intricate interplay between the human agents that do the enacting and living, the social structures that give this enactment a context of meaning and the institutions that provide the arena in which these things can happen. The human agent cannot simply be unaffected by aspects of the city that are shaped by systems and patterns out of his or her control, despite the idea that the city by nature can be read as a dynamic or enabling space, or that space can be perceived as performative or subjective. Indeed, the social sciences emphasise that human landscapes are not just,

... created by knowledgeable actors (or agents) [but those] operating within a specific social context (or structure) [and]... the linkage between the two, the structure–agency relationship, is conceived as being *mediated by a series of institutional arrangements, which both enable and constrain human action.*³⁸

Like any other space, then, the city has the potential to constrain or determine how the individual develops or lives. African scholars *Under Siege: Four African Cities* admit that,

[t]he relationship of the state and the city has come to define the range of experiences often attributed to modern life. The consequence of this has meant that for quite some time agglomerations of people, histories, languages, identities, religions, commodities, cultures in cities have generated increasing tensions and demands for more appropriate definitions of citizenship, for example, the attempts to define migrants and residents, or the distinction between settler and native, permanence and impermanence.³⁹

Furthermore, for most people, no matter how soft the city may become as it is invested with meaning and association, the city is still a hostile place. Broadly, this reflects a traditionally Marxian view of the city– the idea that the urban space is more like a fixed ‘machine,’⁴⁰ than a dynamic performance, where the ‘enslavement of the ordinary citizen in the metropolis...is the essence.’⁴¹ In one of the most recent works in the Marxian urban tradition,⁴² Harvey Molotch makes the point that the city must be read as ‘ a

³⁸ Dear, Michael and Flusty, Steven. 2002: p.2 We take structures to mean ‘the long term, deep-seated social practices that govern daily life, such as law, state, and family,’ institutions to imply ‘the phenomenal forms of structures, including (for example) the apparatus of government’ and agency to refer to ‘the voluntaristic actions of individuals and groups in determining the observable outcomes of social process.’

³⁹ Enwezor *et al*, 2002: p. 16

⁴⁰ Langer, Peter. 1984: p.101

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 112

⁴² As asserted by Langer. He refers to Molotch’s ‘The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place’ in *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, Sept. 1976: 309–332.

machine controlled by business, political and professional elites.’⁴³ Similarly, Paolo Ceccarelli in his essay, ‘Ex Unio Plures: A Walk through Marxist Urban Studies’⁴⁴ emphasises this mechanistic approach when he explains that the traditional Marxian theorist focuses on the city as a whole territory, where, like a machine, the components of that territory are ‘never regarded as individual and isolated elements’⁴⁵ The city is something devised and ‘controlled by its creators...designed to produce products that provide wealth for some people and not for others.’⁴⁶ In fact, the concern of the Marxist urban approach is that,

[t]here has been a continuing tendency to conceive of a place quite apart from a crucial dimension of social structure: power and social class hierarchy. Consequently, sociological research based on the traditional definitions of what an urban place is has had very little relevance to the actual day to day activities of those at the top of local power structure whose priorities set the limits within which decisions affecting land use, the public budget, and urban social life come to be made.⁴⁷

This approach would argue that the city must be read as a space defined and moulded by those in power that, as an entire territory, can only function as a space that serves the urban elite and not the rest of the people of the city.’⁴⁸ Of course, this view leaves very little available to the urban individual as he or she is limited by the structure around him or her. And, since most urban dwellers are not necessarily in the elite echelons of society, the city itself, as a whole, becomes a very limited and limiting place. Thus, no matter how many choices the individual thinks he is making, the city is still run according to strategies that ensure power and prosperity to an elite few. This approach would refute the possibility of the majority of the city dwellers ever being able to ‘defeat’ the city. The city dweller is merely a cog in a machine. In an African context, the legacy of history as well as corruption, lack of infrastructure and extremes like poverty surely make living in the city very difficult. As touched on earlier, a place like inner city Johannesburg is fraught with very real social and economic problems. This approach would ask us to distinguish between agency and ‘coping mechanisms.’

⁴³ Langer, 1984: p. 112

⁴⁴ Ceccarelli, Paolo. Ex Unio Plures: A Walk through Marxist Urban Studies’In *Cities of the mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*. 1984.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.315

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

⁴⁷ Molotch, Harvey in Langer, 1984: p.112

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.101.

However, even Marxist critics like Ceccarelli concede that the nature of the urban space 'also results from the resistance of individuals— minority groups and lower classes to the strategies of the classes in power.'⁴⁹ The city's inhabitants, in other words, have the capacity to develop ways in which the 'machine' can be broken down or disarmed. Within the urban space exists the potential for individuals to find or employ systems and methods of resistance that counter and inform the dominant system. Although a critic like Ceccarelli states that the city is determined by the day-to-day activities and priorities of those in power, he admits that the day-to-day actions of the ordinary man hold the potential to challenge the way the city is run and figured. What is suggested then is that the everyday actions amongst minority groups or individuals can act as vehicles for claiming and establishing agency within the space of the city, even if designed by others. Michel De Certeau emphasises this when he writes the following,

It is in any case impossible to reduce the functioning of a society to a dominant type of procedures... a society is composed of certain foregrounded practices organizing its normative institutions and of innumerable other practices that remains "minor," always there but not organizing discourses and preserving the beginnings or remains of different (institutional, scientific) hypotheses for that society or for others. It is in this multifarious and silent "reserve" of procedures that we should look for "consumer" practices having the double characteristic, pointed out by Foucault, of being able to organize both spaces and language whether on a minute or a vast scale.⁵⁰

Although one can focus on the city as a whole entity, the city is, as de Certeau informs us, a multifarious space. Therefore, the various 'soft' or "minor" social practices and structures existing within it, available to the individual, become what De Certeau refers to as "silent reserves." These innumerable strands do not necessarily create a composite, organizing procedure that defines the urban space, but rather become the sites in which the organizing discourse is challenged or avoided, in many different ways. Furthermore, these silent reserves may not be visible or discernable or even comprehensible to those who do not know where or how to look. The density of the city and the diversity of its inhabitants means that various systems are put into place that do not necessarily depend

⁴⁹ Ceccarelli, Paolo 1984: p. 315. By Ceccarelli's account this loophole demonstrates how thinkers like Henri Lefebvre, for instance, are able to relate to and use aspects of Marxist urbanism while still forging new ways in which we understand the ways in which the city operates.

⁵⁰ De Certeau, Michel. 1984: p. 49.

on the institutional parameters of the urban space in order to exist. Thus, it becomes possible that the choices in the urban terrain are not always confined to visible structures or institutional strategies. The capacity for invisible systems and alternative modes of urban living are granted by the very nature of the urban space itself, by the fact that it is a dynamic, variable, multifarious space. This is also particularly important for the advances being made by African urban discourse, since one of the key ways in which agency in the African city space is enacted is through ‘invisible practice.’⁵¹

We can now see how there do exist ways in which the conditions of the urban space need not necessarily reduce the man to merely a product of a machine. Rather, the city has the potential to be the space in which individual power and meaningful sense of identity and life can be claimed, on multiple levels. Since these small ‘tactics’⁵² can impact on the ‘vast’ ‘strategies’ of the city, turning to the everyday, lived experience of the actors in the city allows us to explore the city as ‘the space of all inclusive simultaneities, perils as well as possibilities: the space of radical openness, the space of social struggle.’⁵³ The practices and choices of the individuals who reside and live in the city, by the sheer number of them being enacted on a daily basis, make the city one of the more potent sites that enable this kind of resistance, a site in which the positing of many more ‘things’ becomes possible.

The parallels that run between African urban discourse, postcolonial thought and postmodern conceptions of space add to its relevance to an increasingly globalised world. Furthermore, through this kind of discourse, power structures and hegemonic ideologies

⁵¹ See for instance, Abdoumalig Simone’s ‘The Visible and Invisible: Remaking Cities in Africa’ in *Under Siege: Four African Cities*. Hatje Cantz Publishers: Germany. 2002. See also, Boeck, Filip and Plissart, Marie-Francoise. *Kinshasa: Tales of an Invisible City*. Ghent, Belgium: Ludion, 2004. See also Scott, James. C. *Resistance and the Arts of Domination. Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990.

⁵² See De Certeau, Michel. ‘Foucault and Bourdieu’ in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 1984. The notion of tactics, as opposed to strategy is foregrounded by Bourdieu. Tactics are the small, everyday responses and resistances that can challenge or counter the force of the institutional structures in a space. Strategies on the other hand are the methods used by the state or by these institutional structures to implement control within a particular environment. I will refer to both tactics and strategies throughout the rest of the thesis, using them in the same way that Bourdieu defines them.

⁵³ Soja, Edward *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford: Blackwell Press, 1996: p. 68

have the potential to be broken down. The site of the African city is seen as a particularly rich site for these mechanisms to be identified. The notion of agency however is very broad. As we have seen, this can include anything from legitimate citizenship, the freedom to create cohesive identities or something basic yet essential like access to education. In a South African context, for the black individual, agency in the urban space is closely tied to the basic freedom of simply being permitted to be in the city itself. Johannesburg's legacy and the inner city in particular is a complex one. The significance of the space on the local landscape is great. Before we are able to continue with an analysis of the novels, it is important that we understand a little more about the city as it is now, and as it was then.

What we can assert however, within the African urban approach, is an emphasis on the individual. As we see above, within the tenets of a postcolonial, postmodern approach to urban study, the role of individual in undermining the constraints of the an urban space is of particular importance. The following chapters will use the figure of the individual subject in their analysis of black agency in Johannesburg's inner city. As Okome writes, the city 'reinvents' us. This reinvention, although never totally divorced from the dynamic of community and collectivism, seems to prioritise the individual's capacity to act and choose and 'be' in the urban space. The onus to claim legitimate access and experience of the city, as Simmel and Enwezor *et al* suggest, lies within the individual's choice to act alone or with others. In Africa, what is also important to note, is that the push to the urban space is also responsible for construction of the individualised African subject. As Simone writes, 'cities became the means through which bodies were turned in to individuals.'⁵⁴ As we shall see in Chapter Four, Simone and Gotz, see two alternating forces operating in Johannesburg: the power to 'belong' to existing social groups, versus the power to become 'more' or something 'new.' It is the underlying suggestion of this dissertation that establishing agency in the city lies chiefly in the power of the individual to become something/someone new and different. Although the city has the power to constrain those seeking it out, it also holds the potential to offer more choices and

⁵⁴ Simone, Abdoumalik. *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004. p 144. I would like to thank Meg Samuelson for her advice regarding this citation.

personal power. It is at the juncture of these two forces that the theoretical analysis undertaken by this dissertation meets the two novels in question. It is also at the juncture of these two forces that our understanding of the African city can be shaped.

CHAPTER TWO

ENTERING THE CITY: JOHANNESBURG'S INNER DISTRICTS 'THEN' AND 'NOW'

We have seen that there are various approaches to the city, some which frame it as an enabling space and some that see it as constricting, even brutal. The African city is perhaps more brutal and constricting than some in the sense that most contemporary African cities have developed somewhat haphazardly in the face of the instability of postcolonial governance, vast surges in urban population that do not match urban economic growth, lack of infrastructure and so on. In addition, these cities bear the mark of a global stigma, enforced onto them through the lens of western urban discourse and its tendency to prioritise western models of urbanity. As we saw in the previous chapter, an emerging trend in African urban discourse is one that frames African cities as functional in ways not necessarily prioritised by the western urban gaze. What accompanies this approach to the city is a focus less on the dominant order of the urban space, and more on the lives of the people who live within it. What African urban discourse attempts to do is turn a lens onto the multiple ways in which ordinary man and woman survive and even thrive in the African urban space. African urban discourse thus attempts to develop frames for reading forms of agency in these urban spaces.

But, while this approach seeks out the invisible forms of agency and power that are performed or discovered by individuals in cities like many in Africa, a critique of this approach reminds us that ‘coping mechanisms’ are not necessarily forms of agency. In other words, broadly speaking, a ‘typical’ Marxist urban theorist may point out that African urban discourse is actually just glorifying the mechanisms that people living in difficult and harsh urban conditions are forced to use in order to survive. People are ingenious; most have the capacity to find alternative ways of living if other ways are barred to them. Yet, does this mean that those who suffer within difficult urban places and spaces would not choose an easier life if they had the chance? In response to this, African urban discourse, reflecting a post-modern, postcolonial sensibility, would suggest that the sheer number of people performing and creating alternative ways of living, in the face of hardship means that a new urban space is being created on an everyday level. African urban discourse does not try to reduce the reality of the suffering of people who try to survive amidst factors like poverty, crime, overcrowding, lack of formal education,

lack of jobs and basic services and so on. But, what it does suggest is a movement away from dismissing these 'coping mechanisms' as ineffectual. Furthermore, African urban discourse seeks a movement away from seeing these people as passive victims of the machine of the city, lacking in agency of any kind. In this, it seeks to ascribe a new face to the African city, one that is born out of people's ingenuity and skill. In many ways, this approach foregrounds the importance of reading a city as a product of two parts, as the intersection between the urban 'system' and its constituents, its people. Okome, as we have seen, like many 'human geographers' observes that a space and its inhabitants are involved in a reciprocal and reflexive dialogue, where agents or people shape a space while it simultaneously shapes them. African urban discourse draws on the same basic principle, by focusing on the urban minutiae and how these have the potential to (re) produce and shape the city.

This approach will assist us as we study the inner city of Johannesburg. We have already seen how in the western 'world-city' hypothesis, Johannesburg is categorised as somewhere between a 'secondary-' and 'mega-' city. Needless to say, the aim of this dissertation is to critique this kind of 'measuring system.' It is useful however in the sense that it allows us to identify the nature of a city's growth patterns. The inner city has ballooned in number and size without a parallel growth in formal infrastructure and economy. Other parts of the city, also increasing in number, have also become fairly competitive role in the global economy. The inner city thus reflects 'mega-city' characteristics. Again, while we are trying to deconstruct the associations that emerge with this kind of quantifiable system, what is indicated is that the inner city will most probably suffer from the kinds of problems that occur within these conditions.

The inner city is not necessarily the poorest area in greater Johannesburg but it is one of the most densely populated. The inner city, predominantly, has housed the dramatic surge in the last two decades of local and immigrant black people into Johannesburg. And, accompanying this trend has been a public framing of the inner city as an intractable space, with its high levels of crime, derelict buildings, maelstrom of legal and illegal activities. Furthermore, as mentioned in the previous chapter, this rapid 'africanisation' of

the inner city has led many of South Africa's white population to typecast it as a hostile, 'other' space. And, the large numbers of foreign Africans has led many local black South Africans to see the inner city as having been 'invaded.' These factors, combined with the harsh realities of its socio-political and economic landscape have made the inner city the object of much negative attention. The legacy of apartheid is bound to this social reality.

However, the inner city is also slowly beginning to receive a different kind of attention and is becoming recognised as something more than just a problem space. For instance, its regeneration is one of the chief agendas in the City of Johannesburg's 2010 urban renewal project. The project aims to develop existing frameworks within the inner city and establish better access to commercial, social and welfare services.⁵⁵ In addition to this, the project aims to upgrade or construct critical infrastructure, like taxi ranks and covered markets.⁵⁶ These injections of money and time into making it a better and safer place to live suggests that the inner city is not longer being ignored by or shielded from the image or system of greater Johannesburg. Instead of being dismissed as an impermanent problem space, a certain amount of energy is being invested into helping it develop, and remain, within the larger urban landscape. In many ways, too, it can be seen as symbolic of what needs to be recognised in order for this country to emerge from a fraught and violent history.

Rory Bester in his essay, 'A Moving City' in *Johannesburg Circa Now* (2005) writes that, 'Johannesburg—the battleground of modernity in apartheid South Africa—has emerged as one of the defining metaphors of post-apartheid South Africa.'⁵⁷ Like Michel De Certeau, Bester views the city's multifariousness as something empowering to its inhabitants. Owing to its heterogeneity, Bester stresses that the urban centre can enable the construction of an integrated social and political landscape, post 1994. For a country

⁵⁵ See Robinson, Jennifer. Johannesburg's Futures: between developmentalism and global success" in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid city*. Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X (eds). 2002.

⁵⁶ Simone, AbdouMaliq. 'On Belonging and Becoming in African Cities' in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid city*. London, New York: Routledge, 2003.

⁵⁷ Rory Bester, 'A Moving City' in *Johannesburg Circa Now: Photography and the City*. Terry Kurgan and Jo Ractliffe (eds and publishers). 2005: p.10.

with a history scarred by colonialism and apartheid⁵⁸, the kind of yoking together of differences that the contemporary Johannesburg offers is one of the ways in which previous patterns of socio-political, economic and spatial segregation and control can be rewritten. Bester emphasises this when he writes that,

Cities... act as filtering mechanisms for the kinds of possibilities never permitted by differences that remain apart. So it is particularly critical at this time in South Africa's history that cities are effective in negotiating difference. For most of South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, the city was used to manufacture and maintain difference. ...The fundamental challenge facing the city is developing the means to allow the spatial tactics of consumption effectively-- in the sense of building shared networks of meaning-- to negotiate difference.⁵⁹

The inner city of Johannesburg amplifies this possibility, not only because of the number of people living within it, but also because operates according to a unique urban script seen nowhere else in the city. It is emblematic of the contemporary Johannesburg. Its large, mixed African population means that the inner city is one of the only areas in Johannesburg that encapsulates the many different cultural strands of this continent. One cannot overlook, as Bester admits that the legacies of apartheid 'are still overwhelming, not only in its iterations of the same forms of racism, but also in the evolutions of new forms of racism and xenophobia.'⁶⁰ In many instances, the inner city is the site of these continuities. But, at the same time, the inner city demands that our vision is not simply marred by what we may read on its surface. With a constant flow of people from all over Africa and South Africa, the inner city continues to be a site of choice.

It is this choice that fascinates the authors, Mpe and Moele. Both engage with its duplicity by developing narratives that do not evade the social reality of places like Hillbrow, Yeoville, Berea and the former Central Business District. But, both novelists insist on reflecting aspects of life in the heart of the city that may contest basic misperceptions about the way it operates and what the promise it may hold to a number of people. Key to our understanding of this space is the fact that despite the often-condemning social realities, it has an allure that one cannot ignore. In post-apartheid South Africa it has come to represent the collective desires of a multitude of people.

⁵⁸ literally meaning 'apart-ness'

⁵⁹ Bester, Rory. 2005: p.15

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15

While the greater Johannesburg has come to symbolise wealth to many, the inner city is something of an entry point for those who are not able to afford the luxury of Sandton or accommodate the distance from Midrand to the thriving city centre. Johannesburg's reputation as an African city stems from this inner space, this urban centre-point. While many of the greater Johannesburg's inhabitants attempt to dislocate themselves from it, in both commerce and recreation, the inner city demands an audience and, despite the distance it has been kept at, it proves fascinating to writers, photographers and intellectuals. Guy Tillim's photographic images in 'Jo'burg' have drawn a grotesque yet fascinating picture of the inner city. At the same time, writers like Ian Vladislavic, Zakes Mda, and the two authors in question have depicted its contrasts and hardened beauty. Urban theorists and sociologists, as we have seen, have used the inner city to test and develop ideas surrounding the African urban question. What is evident is that the inner city, with its art deco buildings, wide, old avenues, high-rises and thriving, mixed populace, captures the imagination like no other place in Johannesburg. The history of Johannesburg sprung from this, its centre, its corpus, its core. Nowhere else in the reaches of the city can one witness the palimpsest of history, the layers and layers of meaning that define what Johannesburg represented to so many people during its heyday.

Of course, nowadays, greater Johannesburg is still a thriving city, spread out over kilometres and the home to over twenty million people. But, the inner city represents access into something of the forgotten landscape of what was South Africa. One can't help but want to delve into this past, to gauge a sense of how the city has changed, how the streets and buildings and the trace of history have transformed to become something different. Yet one also wants to read the patterns of this space and understand how they are contingent on this past. There is something of the tumult of the inner city that reminds us of the frenzy in which the city sprung up in the late 1800's. It is this dynamic that captures our gaze and compels us to look a little further into the heart of this space. In response to this, the following chapter will follow some of the key dynamics that have contributed to the inner city as it is now as well as what the inner city represents to the people who live and work within it.

In many ways, the inner city reflects what Johannesburg represented to those who sought it out first. John Matshikiza, in his reflective essay, 'Instant City' observes that,

Johannesburg is the African mecca of The Deal. And that started when the legend of gold—the legend that would make El Dorado sound like a hick town in comparison—stuck fast in the imaginations of the early mining magnates, from Europe, from America, from anywhere, it seems, but Africa. And so the rush began. And I regret to say that my ancestors, the lyrical peasants of the blasted hinterland, followed that rush and have stayed here ever since. Hoping, vaguely, somehow, to one day become part of The Deal. Nothing has changed. Pilgrims from the African Hinterland Gold turned Johannesburg into an African mecca. The heydays were the 1930s, the forties, and the fifties. People rushed in from all over the subregion—from neighboring countries like Portuguese East Africa, Angola, Namibia, the Rhodesias, and their poor baby sister, Nyasaland; but also from further afield, countries like Tanganyika and Congo and Kenya. Some came looking for El Dorado. Most came because they were coerced, with the connivance of their colonial governments, to supply the sweat of their labor in extracting the thin but lucrative seams of gold that seemed to go on forever underneath Johannesburg.⁶¹

Indeed, Johannesburg from its rapid inception was an urgent city, sprung up, as Matshikiza indicates, instantly. We talk about the rapid densification of the inner city now, but Johannesburg, from the early 1800's when the first gold was discovered on the reefs of the Witwatersrand,⁶² became densely populated almost overnight. The city was constructed out of a collective desire, out of the rush of fortune seekers to the region.

John Matshikiza, ruminates that,

[there] must have been something here, where Johannesburg stands, before the gold rush, but it was never recorded in history. So Johannesburg became and remained, by default, an instant city, periodically growing and being torn down as the gold seams shifted course in one direction or another and the needs of its fickle residents changed.⁶³

Johannesburg's reputation as a thriving industrial city came quickly and somewhat haphazardly. A stream of Afrikaners and British at the end of the Boer War accelerated its rapid growth in the waning years of the 1900's. Later, too, the city amassed more wealth, people and a Mecca-like reputation through global shifts like 'the abandonment of the gold standard in the 1930's depression.' The early years were so remarkable that the city became known in no time as the 'the only real industrial complex south of

⁶¹ Matshikiza, John. 'Instant City' in *Public Culture*, 2004, Vol. 16 Issue 3, 17: p. 483

⁶² Tomlinson *et al*, 'The Postapartheid struggle for an Integrated Johannesburg' in *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on a Post-Apartheid City*. Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X. (eds) . London, New York: Routledge, 2003: p. 3.

⁶³ Matshikiza, John. 2004: p. 481

Milan.”⁶⁴ Its residents were from all over the world, of various nationalities and for a time, the city of Johannesburg represented an open space, an alluring urban system that promised fortune to many different peoples.

However, this would not be for long. South Africa was, after all a colonised space. For a number of years, the local black population had been controlled by racist and imperialist systems of rule. The oppressiveness of the colonial regime of power was amplified after the Boer War, by the parliamentary union between the British and the Afrikaans. And Johannesburg, which had sprung up as South Africa’s largest and most diverse city, its first metropolis even, eventually came to embody the various mechanisms used to exploit and control this population. Richard Tomlinson *et al* state that,

Within ten years of its origins, Johannesburg was the biggest city in the country and by 1936 was recognized as the “largest and most densely populated *European* city in Africa” (cited in Chipkin, 1993:105)⁶⁵

Despite the fact that Johannesburg had arisen as a city of disparate peoples, from all corners of the world and from all over Africa, slowly but surely it became an emblem of white, ‘European’ supremacy. The city of Gold, or Egoli, began to be shaped into something controllable, surveillable, and the once indiscriminate urban landscape became remapped according to severely discriminatory and racist policies. These policies were no different to those in other urban spaces in the country. All of South Africa’s cities, in the first few decades of the twentieth century, became defined by separatist policies that began with the removal of non-whites from the city centres. But, what made Johannesburg, like all South African cities, is that the kind of spatial organisation imposed by first the British, then the Union and eventually by the Nationalist government, attempted to reconstruct what had been an extremely diverse and often ambivalent space into a strict and ordered terrain. Often the strategies enforced by the apartheid state are seen to be the most atrocious acts in South Africa’s racial history. But, it was the early 1900’s that signalled the passing of the first laws that began the relocation of all non-white labourers from the inner areas of the city. Tomlinson *et al* inform us that,

⁶⁴ Tomlinson *et al.*, 2003: p. 5. Originally cited in Chipkin, 1998:250

⁶⁵ Tomlinson *et al.*, 2003: p. 4, Emphasis added.

[b]y 1929, when the Native Urban Areas Act was passed, it was illegal for blacks to rent or purchase property in white designated areas. By 1933 the whole of the city of Johannesburg had been declared white and by 1938 much more of the black population had been moved...⁶⁶

The deep scars of the apartheid city were laid over a number of years. Jennifer Robinson, in her essay, 'Space, Power and the City' observes that,

... the motivations underlying these ambitions varied both in space and time and of course depended on who was conjuring up the vision. For example, in the early decades of the century a primary concern of many authorities was over the 'insanitary', 'overcrowded' and 'immoral' living conditions of the many people living in urban areas... a discourse concerned with intervention into the urban environment in pre-apartheid times... was bound up with a whole host of political, moral and social concerns.⁶⁷

Consistently though, Johannesburg's urban reconstruction was motivated by the notion that the black population had to 'develop' away from the white population. By the 1940's, the city of Johannesburg was subjected to a total apartheid strategy, one that unambiguously defined 'racially based administrative zones and enshrined separate development.'⁶⁸ Non-whites had been re-housed 'either in segregated compounds or location housing.'⁶⁹ This urban ghettoization reflected an 'acute awareness of the value of the organization and delimitation of space for administration and social control.'⁷⁰ But, while racist perceptions and so-called moral codes may have been used to justify or rationalise the government's actions, the apartheid system also had a primary economic rationale. Since the industrial hub of Johannesburg had grown on the backs of the large, black labour force, the continued economic success of the city and by extension, the state, relied on this black population.⁷¹ Moreover, as we have seen, the townships were devised as spaces with,

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6

⁶⁷ Robinson, J.. 'Power, Space and the City: Historical Reflections on Apartheid and Post-Apartheid Urban Orders' in *The Apartheid City and Beyond: Urbanisation and Social Change in South Africa*. D.M Smith (ed) London and New York: Routledge, 1992: p. 294-295.

⁶⁸ Otherwise known as 'grand apartheid.' *Ibid.*, 2003:4

⁶⁹ Susan Parnell. 'Race, Power and Urban Control: Johannesburg's Inner City Slum-yards. 1920-1923' in *Journal of South African Studies*, Volume 29, Number 3, September 2003: p. 616.

⁷⁰ Robinson, 1992: p. 298

⁷¹ Parnell gives striking statistics. Of 105 000 black workers in Johannesburg, roughly half were employed by the mines, 30, 000 worked as domestics in white suburbs and the remaining number formed the majority of the industrial labour force. 2003: p. 617

...no sustainable commercial or industrial base. Their extraordinarily inefficient layout was designed for security reasons to make internal circulation difficult. All major roads and rail, where they were available, led to unemployment centres and to the retail shops of the city centre.⁷²

In resituating the black population to the periphery of the urban centre, the heart of the city could be 'reserved' spatially for the country's white ruling elite. But, in reconstructing the city in this way, the state also geared this industrial machine to serve this elite. The relocations were not orchestrated to reduce the critical flow of the black labour force into the city. Rather, the black urbanite, while pushed to the margins of the South African urban system, was forced to rely on it, rendered incapable of removing himself from its hold. Therefore, not only did these segregationist strategies reflect warped moral, social or political values as a rationale for the white minority's hold on power, but these policies also ensured that that Johannesburg, like the rest of South Africa was tailored to benefit the white minority class. Johannesburg, a city that had sprung out of a collective desire for the reef's natural resources, became a space off-limits to some and completely available to others. By the mid twentieth century, Johannesburg embodied the denial of the right to move and to act freely.⁷³ The introduction of Pass laws in 1923⁷⁴ ensured the efficacy of this perverse system so that workers, who worked in the centre or needed access to it, were not there longer than necessary. During working hours, districts like the city centre were awash with a mixture of different peoples but, as soon as the workday was over, any lingering of non-whites became illegal activity. And for a time, the city concealed these systemic mechanisms.

The intense racial divisions and oppressive urban system were increasingly catching the attention of the rest of world. It was only when the oppressed South Africans started actively revolting that the methods of the apartheid government became exposed in a real way. From the early 1960's, the plight of millions of South Africans could no longer be ignored. Ironically, perhaps Johannesburg's image of a 'city with a golden heart' lasted as long as it did is because what the apartheid state enforced was an approach to urban

⁷² Tomlinson *et al*, 2003: p. 6

⁷³ Koloane, David in Bester, Rory. 2005:p. 10

⁷⁴ The New Fontana Dictionary of Modern Thought, 2000: p. 631

space borrowed from a much larger global framework. As we have already seen, the apartheid regime of power only added to what had already begun in the city under a colonial regime of power. One of the most lasting and lethal effects of the colonial venture on colonised terrains was its appropriation and regulation of space.⁷⁵ And, as Harry Garuba observes in 'Mapping the Land/Body/Subject: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies in African Narrative,' (2002) carving the colonial terrain into surveillable, divided regions simultaneously legitimised the methods of the colonial system. He explains that,

to capture the land, it first had to be explored and mapped, literally and figuratively... for the subject to be controlled, she first had to be contained, not only in terms of physical containment within subject territories... but also in 'tribes,' territorially demarcated, defined and culturally described Physical containment was necessary to circumscribe the natural mobility of the body (in space) and discursive containment served to define the limits of the cultural (identity) mobility available to the subject.⁷⁶

Thus, the philosophy behind the application of regulated, spatial and social control, onto an existing city like we see in Johannesburg is borrowed from a western Enlightenment logic.⁷⁷ James C Scott in 'Seeing Like a State' (1998) describes the Cartesian revolution in urban planning during the time of the Enlightenment to clarify this,

[whatever] the political and administrative conveniences of a geometric cityscape, the Enlightenment fostered a strong aesthetic that looked with enthusiasm on straight lines and visible order... Descartes's vision conjures up the urban equivalent of the scientific forest... the whole built according to a single, overarching plan. The elective affinity between a strong state and a uniformly laid out city is obvious.⁷⁸

The link between the state and the organisation of space is the essential point. The construction of the apartheid city became something of a science, a reconstruction of the urban space that filtered the apartheid ideology into the mechanism of the city. Its aim was to establish a 'surveillable' cityscape, a city that would come to manifest and be inscribed by its authority and reflect so-called 'natural' divisions between white and black people. The total strategy of apartheid was the implementation of a 'single,

⁷⁵ Garuba, Harry. 'Mapping the Land/Body/Subject: Colonial and Postcolonial Geographies in African Narrative'. In *Alternation*, 9, 2002: p. 87-116.

⁷⁵ Garuba, H. 2002:87

⁷⁶ James. C Scott. *Seeing like a State: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998: p.55

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 55

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 55

overarching plan’ – an endeavour that came to define the high modernist urban stance ⁷⁹ that is particular to the western world. Thus, the prevalence of this western urban model, (and attitude) to space may have obscured the violence and trauma of the state’s urban plan in South Africa from the rest of the world and certainly, as we have seen, created the ground work for its implementation.

Central to this recasting of the city was the state’s desire to dislocate the black population from any real or significant relationship with what it meant to be in or part of the city. By controlling the urban space and turning the centre of Johannesburg into a hostile or off-limits area, it was able to deny the black population access to an independent and potentially empowering urban identity. The townships were an extension of this. The inevitable internalisation of systemic exclusion from the city meant that the majority of the black population became inscribed by what the space of Johannesburg came to represent: white supremacy and limitation. Bester reminds us that ‘the struggle for the meaning of the city is not only defined through the production of space, but also through its re-production in the movements of the body in space.’⁸⁰ Carving up the urban terrain in the way that South Africa’s government did meant that relationships with the city were defined *on behalf of* the black population by those in power and that the black subject came to embody this. As movement was restricted, so was the formation of a meaningful narrative of the city that went beyond the experience of being restricted. This was one of the most insidious effects of the apartheid system, as it had been of the colonial system.

It would be an oversight to assume that the apartheid state succeeded in completely obliterating all forms of agency on the part of the black population within the city. But, in many ways, the apartheid city revealed itself to be a fragile space. The efforts of the apartheid government to maintain control and the radical nature of its discriminatory

⁷⁹ This stance feeds into most western urban models that we see today and is centred on the notion that the city’s overarching mechanism, if regulated, will regulate the people who live within it. This stance sees the relationship between agents and space as ultimately deterministic. As we have seen, nowadays, this type of relationship is considered problematic, not least of which because of the legacies of systems like colonialism and apartheid. Ironically, however, the western urban model which African urban discourse seeks to challenge is bound to this Cartesian logic.

⁸⁰ Bester, Rory 2005: p 10.

policies revealed an awareness of its weaknesses as well as the brittle absurdity of its basic ideology. The black population eclipsed the white population in number. Thus, the obvious dependence of the white government and population on the black labour force meant that this radical 'utopia' of racial purity was always on the brink of being threatened by the possibility of revolt or insurgency. Indeed, the level to which the urban terrain was carved up reveals the lengths to which the apartheid government felt it needed to go in order to maintain its power. Thus, while movement was controlled and while the heart of the city was virtually inaccessible, while the city was rewritten to serve an oppressive order, the black population did have some success in undermining this overarching geo-political order based on these weaknesses. For instance, although there was a deep ambivalence towards it— a product of the internalisation of this racial remapping—it was still in need of a constant flow of black labour. For this reason, despite its laws, it was a destination of choice for much of the black population. As mentioned earlier, the city was not an unambiguous space however. Various push factors, besides the promise of work, such as the Land Act and hut taxes, drew the black population into the city. However, pull factors, like the lack of rights afforded to the African population within the city, meant that the African population saw the city as a potentially imprisoning space.

The enactment of these dual forces is where one can detect the beginnings of a black resistance as well as the fallibility of the apartheid city. One cannot ignore that claiming the right to a black urban identity was key in the struggle against the oppressiveness of this regime of power. Access to the city represented access to 'urbanity, modernity and freedom...officially denied... through retribalization.'⁸¹ For this reason, the city still came to represent the aspirations and hopes of many of South Africa's black majority for a life other than one relegated to on the confines of the nation's socio-political system. The apartheid state's careful strategy of separate development mean that the constructed notion of a 'Bantu' identity was rejected by many who understood how the process of retribalization was merely an elaborate form of control. Although also an ambivalent

⁸¹ Kruger, Loren. 'The Drama of Country and City: Tribalization, Urbanization and Theatre under Apartheid' in *Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 23, No 4 (Dec, 1997), pp 565-584. p. 576

space, the city was associated with the kinds of freedoms for which it became known as it mushroomed out of nowhere only decades before. Although the city became a mechanism of state control, there was no way that the pre-apartheid and apartheid governments could defy or eliminate completely the heterogeneity and multiplicity that is endemic to the cityscape, a 'multifariousness' that had the potential to challenge, albeit in small or isolated ways, the status quo.

Indeed, Johannesburg revealed moments in its history that defied the order imposed upon it. For instance, 'despite segregatory clauses in land tenure and both national and municipal policies'⁸² pre-world war one, the Johannesburg inner city municipality had built a host of residential blocks to house non-white workers. The provision of this multiracial housing was to provide an easy flow of the critical workforce. Consequently, as Susan Parnell points out that,

[in] the 1900's and the 1910's, Johannesburg was characterised by increasing rather than declining levels of racial integration. The gold boom, rapid industrialisation and substantial growth in the size of the settlement of the city meant that many African people found work and housing in the urban core. New jobs were not only in the mining sector or domestic service, but also in the burgeoning manufacturing sector. The emerging industrial hub of sub-Saharan Africa was dependent on a racially diverse population, the poorest of whom were concentrated in the inner city, in apparent defiance of official policy.⁸³

Although the living conditions for the workers were far less than adequate⁸⁴ and the inner city housing was only ever to serve the exploitive demand of Johannesburg's economy, the slums provided the chance for the inner city to become a site of resistance. Parnell writes that '[i]t was from within the cosmopolitan spaces of Johannesburg's multi-ethnic inner city of the 1920's that Marabi music was forged, that the non-racial Communist party flourished, and the black urban elite would emerge.'⁸⁵ Despite the levelling of the slums⁸⁶, they came to symbolise a space where the black population had a relative

⁸² Parnell, 2003: p. 616

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 616

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 626.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 616

⁸⁶ The local white population, mostly those in close proximity to the slums, saw them as places of filth, prostitution and debauchery. Their objections to the slums were exacerbated by the belief that racially

autonomy within the city. Here was a part of the inner city where people of different ethnic backgrounds, with alternative ideologies and social systems, were able to mix and share ideas.

Many of Johannesburg's 'liberal' white population also explored its parts, visiting shebeens and taking part in informal gatherings. As Parnell states above, this became a site in which some of the first ripples of an organised urban African resistance to the overall political climate took place, but it also presented a way in which alternative experiences of living in South Africa and the city could be explored within one space. By living, by 'being' in the slum yards, the black worker could associate a sense of belonging to a city that had once offered itself to so many. Henri Lefebvre⁸⁷ observes that it is in everyday life, the small and sometimes inconsequential happenings and performances of people that have the potential to override the format of how a space has been conceived or planned. In the case of Johannesburg, and in this case, the inner city, the nature of this realm of lived and social space began to contest the status quo of South Africa's largest city. Moreover, given their location in the centre of Johannesburg, these heterogeneous and diverse housing compounds imbued upon the inner city a sample of everything the state sought to take away from the black population. The threat of these slums, although billed as 'unhygienic' or 'immoral' was the threat of an autonomous black urban experience to those in power.

A consequence of the stifling of this urban experience within the actual city meant that attempts to regain it sprung up in other areas around the centre. Despite the government's attempts to make them sterile zones,⁸⁸ the periphery of the city, the townships, in some ways, gave access to cohesive, black urban identity formation. In this way, amongst others, the site of the township enacted a resistance to state power and reflected the black population's persistent desire to create a powerful urban experience. Sophiatown is

integrated and densely packed areas would lead to political instability. Also, the presence of shebeens in the slum-yards was perceived to reduce labour-productivity. (Ibid., p. 626) They were eventually removed completely at the end of the 1930's.

⁸⁷ See Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell: Oxford, UK and Cambridge, 1991.

⁸⁸ Jennifer Robinson reminds us, '[u]rban black locations... were not simply 'housing schemes' but places of manipulation, domination and control.' 1992: p. 297

perhaps one of the most famous of these examples. Loren Kruger, in her essay, 'The Drama of Country and City: Tribalization, Urbanization and Theatre under Apartheid' describes the early days of this multi-racial⁸⁹ zone:

Part ghetto, part urban bazaar, a meeting place of black radicals, bohemians of all colours and organized and disorganised criminals, Sophiatown was an actual but thoroughly imagined place that came, despite the violence perpetuated by police and tsotsis, to symbolize a utopia of racial tolerance and cultural diversity, crushed by the apartheid juggernaut and later buried under the weight of more militant times.⁹⁰

What the city of Johannesburg was unable to give the black population, sites like Sophiatown, for a time, was. Emphasising this, Kruger states that 'Sophiatown formed a crucial part of African efforts to claim the city and with it, the attributes of urbanity, *civitas* and citizenship, from an apartheid state attempting to return them to rural idiocy.'⁹¹ Thus, not only was Sophiatown liberating in its diversity but it enabled the development of an urban experience in the face of the state's attempts to deny this. Although Sophiatown was relegated to the periphery of the city and its residents were still outside of the city itself, it became a vibrant urban space unto its own, where one could find work— formal or informal— be exposed to ideas and develop a sense of agency officially denied in Johannesburg. Sophiatown functioned using methods that were not dependent on the formal system of the whole city of Johannesburg and in this sense it was autonomous. When its residents were forcibly removed in the mid fifties, the intense sense of loss was for one of the first places that symbolised the re-assertion of an independent black urban voice in Johannesburg. This township, in a sense, was an attempt to replace what a part of a lost freedom in Johannesburg. It had become a city unto its own to replace the city that had been taken away. Its demolition was inevitable.

Although both the inner city slum yards and Sophiatown were destroyed, they represented another important moment in the struggle for liberation. Besides the symbolic value of their presence to the black population— one that would linger for many years— they fostered a strong, creative expression of the black experience of the city. Art, music

⁸⁹ Sophiatown, before it was demolished in 1955, had racially mixed residents.

⁹⁰ Kruger, Loren. 1997, p. 576

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 776

and theatre became the tools for devising and releasing the black urban experience. Indeed, one of the many ironies of the apartheid state was that as it attempted to corrode much of the lifeblood from the black population, it corroded its own too. The kind of creative potency that came out of spaces like the inner city and Sophiatown was one of the strongest ways of resisting this corrosiveness. But, as the state implemented more control, the increasing snuffing out of creativity and a legitimate black experience of the city, spelled exile. John Mitshikiza writes the following:

The 1960s saw a haemorrhaging of Johannesburg's black talent. Virtually all of the show-business world left for London with the jazz musical *King Kong*. From there many of them struck out for New York, the city in whose image black Johannesburg had always fashioned itself...But there was a haemorrhage of a different kind also taking place. Politics had come to a head with the Sharpeville shootings and the subsequent banning of all legitimate avenues of protest available to black people, whose leaders—figures like Walter Sisulu, Nelson Mandela, Dorothy Neymbe, Yusuf and Amina Cachalia, and many, many others—all gravitated toward Johannesburg from their respective places of birth. Johannesburg had always been hot. Now, with clampdowns by the newly empowered Afrikaner security apparatus, it became too hot to handle. Thousands of people drifted into exile.⁹²

Yet, Johannesburg, despite the fact that its relationship with the black population was fraught, still symbolised an essence of what it meant to be a black South African. As Matshikiza observe, while for some exile led to the 'discovery of a new world', for *most*, 'exile...was a prelude to a slow and calculated suicide, cut off from the very lifeblood of home.'⁹³ Nevertheless, for those who stayed, Johannesburg became an increasingly dry and ambivalent space and it was only much later that the city, through the liberation struggle, became alive again. The ambivalence that was at the foundation of the black experience of the city is famously reflected in Mongane Wally Serote's poem, 'City Johannesburg' (1972):

This way I salute you:
My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket
Or into my inner jacket pocket
For my pass, my life,
Jo'burg City.
My hand like a starved snake rears my pockets
For my thin, ever lean wallet,
While my stomach groans a friendly smile to hunger,
Jo'burg City.

⁹² Matshikiza, John. 1998, pp. 484-485

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 485

My stomach also devours coppers and papers
 Don't you know?
 Jo'burg City, I salute you;
 When I run out, or roar in a bus to you,
 I leave behind me, my love,
 My comic houses and people, my dongas and my ever whirling dust,
 My death
 That's so related to me as a wink to the eye.
 Jo'burg City
 I travel on your black and white and roboted roads
 Through your thick iron breath that you inhale
 At six in the morning and exhale from five noon.
 Jo'burg City
 That is the time when I come to you,
 When your neon flowers flaunt from your electrical wind,
 That is the time when I leave you,
 When your neon flowers flaunt their way through the falling darkness
 On your cement trees.
 And as I go back, to my love,
 My dongas, my dust, my people, my death,
 Where death lurks in the dark like a blade in the flesh,
 I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness
 In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood,
 And everything about you says it, That, that is all you need of me.
 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg,
 Listen when I tell you,
 There is no fun, nothing, in it,
 When you leave the women and men with such frozen expressions,
 Expressions that have tears like furrows of soil erosion,
 Jo'burg City, you are dry like death,
 Jo'burg City, Johannesburg, Jo'burg City.⁹⁴

Dry like death, to the writer Serote, Johannesburg is impenetrable. Yet, Serote, speaking on behalf of the majority of the black community, is clearly divided between his 'dongas,' his 'love' and other aspects of the rural and the 'roots' of the city that he feels pulling at him. We see in the poem the evocation of a certain, split subjectivity, where the poet, although claiming the township as his home and close to his heart, is compelled to write this ode to 'Jo'burg City' itself: the streets, the roads and the cement structure of the inner urban space. The overarching sense in Serote's words is that part of him is bound to the force of the city, his blood and mind infused with it, yet another part is always at the mercy of it, in need of defence. These internal divisions enforce the notion that the city

⁹⁴ Mongane Wally Serote, *City Johannesburg*, taken from the online site, <http://www.saep.org/Sinethemba/Poetry/studied/Serote/MonganeSerote.htm>

and the rural or township space can only exist antagonistically to one another. Indeed while Serote affirms his place within the communities outside of the 'cement trees' and 'roboted roads,' the urban image and the lure of an urban identity, as something other or more is very strong. Despite the state's attempts of 'retribalization' and the state's attempts at an erosion of a strong black urban identity, Johannesburg city still symbolised the possibility of agency and power to the black population. Even though the city became 'dry like death' it still promised something empowering and generative. Yet, the nature of this relationship is tenuous and the city is ambiguous and threatening at the same time.

However, Matshikiza states, that 'we liberated the city from its oppressive past.'⁹⁵ Implied here is that the city was somehow waiting to be reclaimed and freed by the people it had been forced to marginalise. Underlying Matshikiza's statement is the understanding that Johannesburg 'belonged' to everyone. While it had been re-crafted, so to speak, as a tool of colonial and apartheid regimes of power and had become ambiguous to the black population, the city was still somehow salvageable, it was seen to still bear the lifeblood of black modernity. Tomlinson *et al* emphasise a similar notion, that the Johannesburg created under white rule was untenable. And,

[by] the 1970's, especially after the Soweto uprising in 1976, the image... began to tarnish. Growing resistance to apartheid revealed the city's racial segregation and political divisions. Its decades of celebrating white dominance and brushing aside an alternative black experience of the city were no longer tolerable (C.Rogerson, 1996). By 1986, at the time of the city's centenary celebrations, black opposition... had reached its peak and the rendered the celebrations meaningless. The city's divisions had cracked wide open.⁹⁶

What begun actively in the 1970's was the reclamation of the city from the state. This signalled a process of spatial reinscription that would create a different Johannesburg, a culturally and ethnically diverse, heterogeneous city space, inscribed by a new politics. Johannesburg was, in a sense, being returned to what it had represented when it had sprung up: opportunity. But, the city was also being moved towards a completely new state, unseen even during its haphazard inception: a de-racialisation of the terrain, an African city— one in which the black individual could move and act in a way unseen

⁹⁵ Matshikiza, John.1998: p. 481

⁹⁶ Tomlinson *et al*, 2003: p. 5

during the colonial and apartheid period. In many ways, the process of liberating Johannesburg was honed onto its centre. The heart of the city, its businesses, streets, apartment blocks, its centrality and dynamism had always held the allure of a potentially open system and symbolised the ultimate prize in the assertion of a liberated black urban voice. The teeming, open urbanity of Johannesburg, seen for a tenuous moment in the city slum yards and transferred to places like Sophiatown, was epitomised by its city centre. Symbolically, then, reclaiming the city was the reclamation of basic freedom and access to agency, 'modernity' and an identity not relegated to the boundaries of the rural or the periphery. Through this, the cognitive map of the black subject became one in which she occupied a vital position, in the centre. For this reason, the centre symbolised agency and by extension, a remapping of history itself.

Therefore, when, during the early 1980's there was a gradual, yet massive influx of black people into the centre,⁹⁷ it was almost as if Johannesburg had been waiting. As mentioned earlier, the apartheid city was constructed according to a draconian system that ultimately was unsustainable— not only because its oppressive measures could only have incited revolt but also because it attempted to make the city into a perversion of what urban space actually is. This, as James C. Scott tells us, was also the downfall of the high modernist city. The kind of ordered utopia imposed upon Johannesburg created an illusory façade. As Foucault writes,

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces.⁹⁸

The social reality of the city space is that it cannot be sustained as a completely controlled space. Thus, the state's 'diminished capacity to enforce apartheid legislation' meant that the centre began to slip from its grasp. Coupled with 'escalating violence in the townships under a general State of Emergency'⁹⁹ Johannesburg's centre began a radical remapping. Other factors facilitated the transition. Alan Morris in his study of the inner

⁹⁷ '[b]y the late 1990's, only '5% of the inner city's residential population was white.' Crankshaw, 1997 in Tomlinson *et al*, 2003:13.

⁹⁸ Foucault, M. 'Of Other Spaces' in *Visual Culture Reader* Mirzoeff, N. (ed), 2002: p. 248

⁹⁹ Tomlinson *et al*, 2003:13.

city neighbourhood of Hillbrow observes that 'the racial exclusivity of Hillbrow's flat-dwellers started disintegrating [as early as] the 1970's, when people classified as coloured or Indian moved in to the neighbourhood.'¹⁰⁰

Thus, by the time of the mid 1990's, the extent of the black families and individuals moving into a city still controlled by apartheid law was concealed. Abdoumalig Simone and Graeme Gotz emphasise this and observe that because of with Johannesburg's economic recession, by the 1970's, many of the white families had already vacated and residential units were standing empty.¹⁰¹ Also, the centre of Johannesburg was closer to both the industrial and domestic work place, had a public transport infrastructure not found in the southern townships and the density of its residential units meant that more families could be accommodated. In a sense, Johannesburg's history can be told by the changes witnessed in the inner city. It is an extremely potent site, for reasons explained above. Its transformation from an exclusively 'European' space, into a decidedly 'non-European' one, symbolises what has been attained through the black population's struggle for liberation and agency in this country. At the heart of the largest urban space in South Africa, it represents a hyper-urbanity, which after years of denial legitimises the black urban experience like no other space. Through its reclamation, Johannesburg was recast. In a sense, nowadays, it is only the inner city that has kept an allure similar to that of Johannesburg in its rough, but exciting beginnings. Johannesburg as a whole is still the city of 'the deal,' but the inner city has a renegade quality to it that conjures up the city's original character. It is also one of the only spaces that reflects an 'African' urbanity.

Nonetheless, today the symbolic potency of the inner city is rivalled somewhat by the weight of undeniably harsh urban conditions. Although the local black population came seeking an experience of the city, on their own terms, a lack of infrastructure meant that they were often split between township and city centre, as before. Many children, for

¹⁰⁰ Morris, Alan. 'Bleakness and Light: the setting' in *Bleakness and Light: Inner City Transition in Hillbrow, Johannesburg*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press, 1999: p. 7

¹⁰¹ Gotz, G and Simone, A. On 'Belonging and Becoming in African Cities' in Tomlinson *et al*, 2003: p.128

instance, although living in the city still needed to commute to schools in the south.¹⁰²

Today, this lack of infrastructure is only marginally better. Gotz and Simone clarify this,

[s]ince black South Africans had almost no presence in the inner city prior to the early 1980's, the rapid influx of migrants far outpaces the development of local institutions. The demographic shift saw a vacating of critical social infrastructure... although there has been a proliferation of fly-by-night academies and the development of several effective community associations and a broad range of schools, social service organizations, churches, and cultural mechanisms through which traditional sense of belonging in urban areas is cultivated has been depleted... this is the same for foreign immigrants.¹⁰³

Moreover, factors like this are made worse by the crippling effect of the racial typecasting and prejudice that has trailed the rapid, racial remapping that began in the 1980's. As mentioned in the previous chapter, generally speaking, for the white population of Johannesburg and South Africa, the physical decline of the inner city has been associated with pervasive, negative connotations of 'blackness.' The reaction of many of the previous residents of the inner city neighbourhoods, and this later generation has been to stigmatise the city centre as dysfunctional and dirty because of its 'invasion' by the black population. In reality, of course, as Tomlinson *et al* inform us, the degradation of the inner city apartment blocks has been the result of factors like corrupt white 'landlords who saw the illegal status of black tenants in the 1980's as an opportunity for increasing profits through raising rents, overcrowding, and reducing building maintenance.'¹⁰⁴ But, for the 'outsider'—the rural black population as much as the local white—the inner city is perceived to be a hotspot of all sorts of unlawful and violent acts.

The transition from township to city was not an easy process, and still is not. The split between the rural enclaves outside the urban centre and the centre itself still exists and individuals who leave for the city are often considered 'lost' by their home community. Simone and Gotz (2003:131) assert the fact that inner city has always represented an escape from the 'implosive sociality of township life... arbitrarily configured to be apart and to embody the essence of cultures long uprooted.' Unlike the townships, the complex and layered space of the inner city has the potential to provide a space for independence,

¹⁰² Simone and Gotz, 2003: p.129

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.129

¹⁰⁴ Tomlinson *et al*, 2003:13

novelty and agency. However, the impasse that remains between peripheral rural or even township spaces and the city means that many who make the move are then rendered dislocated from their homes and home communities. This creates a sense of social alienation amongst many inner city residents and leads to the othering of the inner city by other black communities.

Another crucial aspect of the inner city is that it is the site of acute ethnic xenophobia. The 'acceleration of population turnover'¹⁰⁵ in the inner city created a cover for large numbers of foreign Africans who, during the mid 1990's, first came seeking refuge or work in South Africa. Social dynamics today remain tense between its large ethnic pool of residents, all of whom are trying to eke out a living in the city and simultaneously claim an authentic urban experience seen to be unique or emblematic of their own 'culture.' The tensions arising from these often-conflicting assertions of what the black urban identity constitutes are amplified by the fact that the inner city's surge in population has not been matched by stable economic growth.¹⁰⁶ Of course, informal trade has flourished but the inner city is an unstable market. Competition between its many inhabitants and traders is fierce as secure, regular income is scarce.¹⁰⁷ Besides heightening xenophobia, other effects occur, like for instance, strain on the family unit:

[i]f one interweaves the details of one's daily life too closely with those of family members, and if something goes wrong or a growing divide in economic capacity becomes apparent, one is then vulnerable to accusations of witchcraft or selfishly putting personal needs above those of the family.¹⁰⁸

Hillbrow also has a violent reputation and the fear felt towards it has only reinforced negative connotations, making its status as a dangerous, unknowable and 'other' space entrenched in public imagination. All of these factors contribute to a depreciation of the means by which its residents establish a sense of community or a sense of actually belonging to the city.

¹⁰⁵ Gotz, Graham and Simone, Abdoumalig. 2003:128

¹⁰⁶ Jennifer Robinson stresses this, as seen in the beginning of this chapter as well and the previous.

¹⁰⁷ Gotz, Graham and Simone, Abdoumalig, 2003: p.130.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 130

Despite factors such as these, the post-apartheid city embodies certain freedoms and opportunities—not least of which is the freedom from a past, oppressive regime. It has served as a vehicle for the formation of a black urban identity as well as serving as a symbolic and valid avenue for the reclamation of a geo-political position denied to black South Africans throughout most of the twentieth century. In comparison to the rest of Johannesburg, the inner city perhaps is one of the only places that caters to the always-marginalised working class, especially since the greater Johannesburg now is a highly corporate, consumptive and capitalistic urban system. And, the creative tactics explored by its residents and workers make the inner city one of the only sites that demonstrates the possibilities and existence of an alternative urban system. It embodies an experience and performance of the urban space that is decidedly non-western, in the sense that its urbanity defies western models of urban functionality.¹⁰⁹

For these reasons, the inner city cannot be simply dismissed as problematic. Of course, it remains an ambiguous space for it cannot be dislocated from the contradictions it embodied in the past, especially during apartheid. Nor can it be dislocated from the reality of current socio-economic and cultural and political conflicts that test and challenge its residents on an everyday level. But, its complexities invite one to re-assess how it is framed today and to look for other means of exploring its capabilities and promise to an ever-growing body of diverse African people.

¹⁰⁹ Please refer to Chapter One.

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NOVELS

Both Mphe and Moele respond to this moment in the local terrain and in African urban discourse. Their novels grapple with what it means for the black South African and African to live in this part of the city. Their novels revolve around issues like alienation, xenophobia, the rural versus city equation as well as the basic hardships of living in such as space. But, both *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Room 207* also ask us to assess a universal notion of the city. In this basic narrative gesture, we can enter a real dialogue with what is found in the texts and their representation of Johannesburg. The texts are not identical and neither do they seek to euphemise the experiences of their protagonists into some kind of romantic myth of urban life. Both texts are ambiguous at times. For this reason, the exchange between reader and text is not unilateral. The reader is asked to actively evaluate what it may mean for a black South African to live in this space, to 'know' this space. Thus, both texts acts as access points for emerging African urban discourse to be looked at with a little more detail. Equally, both texts provide the reader with some sort of record of whether or not the assumptions and ideas projected through African urban discourse are in fact valid. While the novels are fictional, they exist at the juncture between fiction and reality and respond therefore not only to 'real' life in the inner city but also to how the city is represented and framed symbolically.

Moreover, the detail with which both authors proceed to develop their stories and the ways in which they construct the inner space of Johannesburg as a character unto its own invite the reader to engage with the rapport with space of the city and the space of the text. This suggests that these novels actually have the potential to influence and shape perceptions of the inner city on a much broader scale. In their analysis, the following two chapters will explore how these novels reflect and represent the realities of this urban space. Through them we can begin to understand how the black individual may be able to develop a sense of agency and identity that points to a way forwards from the past.

CHAPTER THREE

THE POSSIBILITIES OF RESOLUTION AND SOLUTION: PHASWANE MPE'S 'WELCOME TO OUR HILLBROW'

Welcome to Our Hillbrow centers on the story of Refentse, a young man from Tiralong who comes to the inner city to study at The University of the Witwatersrand. His time in Hillbrow is characterised by a search for some kind of balance between the ties he has with his rural community and the life he has chosen in the city. In the novel, Refentse's life develops as a tragedy of 'Love. Betrayal. Seduction. Suicide.' (Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* 2001: p.38) Besides experiencing the hard daily grind of the inner city, he is also ostracised by his home community. Eventually, he takes his own life.

Refentse's death marks the beginning, and his life the crux, of this narrative. The entire story is narrated to him after he has died. Using Refentse's death (and life) as a metaphor (of ostensibly, life and death) the narrator develops something of a moral allegory. This, combined with the highly dramatised plot, makes the story stylistically spectacular. The trajectory to his death is, like much of the novel, highly dramatised, and almost farcical. His suicide, for instance, is the end result of a series of unfortunate, almost unbelievable scenarios. First, Refentse betrays Lerato. He sleeps with his best friend, Sammy's girlfriend, Bohlale— unbeknown to either Lerato or Sammy. Just after Bohlale insists on telling both Sammy and Lerato about their mutual infidelity, she steps out onto a street in Hillbrow and a passing car suddenly hits and kills her. Soon after this, Refentse discovers Sammy and Lerato in bed together. Wracked by guilt and sorrow, he decides to take his own life. In his wake, he leaves a distraught Lerato, who then also commits suicide. Refentse's mother, who had tried to order her son to end his relationship with his "Hillbrowean" girlfriend, is blamed for his death and necklaced by the Tiralong community. And, the guilty and malicious ex-girlfriend, Refilwe, responsible for spreading rumours about Refentse's mother's 'witchcraft', also dies at the end of the novel.

The presence of the spectacular in the novel is amplified by the fact that Mpe brings to light some of the more tragically real and urgent issues facing the black, rural individual as he or she tries to 'make it' in Johannesburg's inner city. Through Mpe's use of a spectacular mode of storytelling, we are forced to confront this reality as well as the energy of the inner city. We come to understand that many of these issues persist from

South Africa's difficult and traumatic history, informing the contemporary landscape. But, woven into this too, however, is the suggestion that somehow a new kind of 'enabled' society can be born out of this post-apartheid urban environment. The inner city is depicted as being the site in which a resolution of this past is possible, dynamic and flexible and potentially generative.

This chapter will explore the interaction of these two 'realities' in the novel. In so doing, we can approach the question of black agency in the inner city and how through this city space, the black individual may transcend certain boundaries as well as be constrained by them. This chapter will look at some of the problems facing the inner city urbanite, like gender issues, disease, institutional constraints as well as xenophobia and prejudice. While Hillbrow will be the main site of this exploration, the relationship between the rural and urban terrain will also provide us with a context in which to investigate this question of agency. To propel this, this chapter will isolate in particular the figure of the black migrant and his/her movements through both spaces, and in the city. Indeed, in the figure of the black migrant, Mpe has provided a valuable symbol through which we can address the ambiguities and promises surrounding the notion of 'freedom' in the urban space, and in South Africa. Ultimately, we will be able to approach and discuss Mpe's overarching narrative thread: that the inner city—and what it represents—holds the potential for a healing of the past through a creolization of difference and the enactment (and sharing) of a dynamic and productive black agency.

The first thing that catches us is the tone of the narrator. From the start, we are lead through the narrative by a benign, omniscient voice and its surreal, cyclical dialogue mainly with the character Refentse. The narrator's constant 'welcomes' to the spaces inside the novel compels us to immerse ourselves in the complexities of the world in the novel. With this rhythm, the story draws us into the space of the text and the space of the inner city. At the same time, parts of the novel are violent with highly dramatised descriptions of the hardships of everyday life in the inner city and in the lives of the central protagonists. These moments of violence and the depiction of extreme and hostile situations and people have an almost inverse effect on us to that of the cyclical rhythm of

the narrator's voice or the repetitive pace of the overarching storyline. With the harrowing depictions of life in the inner city, we may even resist immersing ourselves completely into the text. The experience can become almost painful. This can be seen in the very first pages of the novel:

You would remember the last occasion in 1995, when Bafana Bafana won against the Ivory Coast and in their jubilation, people in Hillbrow hurled bottles of all sorts from their flat balconies. A few bold souls, boasting a range of driving skills, swung and spun their cars in the streets, making U-turns and circles all over the road, You would recall the child, possibly seven years old or so, who got hit by a car. Her mid air screams still ring in your memory. When she hit the concrete pavement of Hillbrow, her screams died with her. A young man just behind you shouted

Kill the bastard!

But the driver was gone...

Most people after the momentary stunned silence of witnessing the sour fruits of soccer victory, resumed their singing. Shosholozza...sounded it melodies from Wolmarans Street, to the head of Claredon Place, at the boundary of the serene Parktown suburb.

*Shosholozza...*drowned the choking sobs of the deceased child's mother.

(2001: pp 1-2)

Despite being repelled somewhat from this scene, we feel as if the narrator is talking to us. The informal address of 'you' although aimed at Refentse, implicitly includes us. Furthermore, the memory of the event being evoked above draws on the collective, since what is being remembered is a public event. There seems to be a dual dynamic at play, where we are at once invited in and repelled simultaneously. The same duplicity is evident in the event itself. What follows after celebration is the tragic death of a child. A cause for merriment becomes a signal of death. And again, almost immediately, the child's death becomes subsumed within the noise and fanfare of the celebration. Thus, from the start, we are lead to understand that this dualism and ambiguity is the way of the inner city.¹¹⁰ But, what comes across more strongly is how the inner city is imbued with the dramatic, tragic. In this, Mpe delivers his often-spectacular 'message' about the inner city.

In the 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary,' (1986) Njabula Ndebele describes the typical spectacular narrative as having tight plots, shock endings, a lack in intricate descriptions of social processes, overly exaggerated dramatics, extremes and unambiguous

¹¹⁰ Please see Chapter Two.

causality¹¹¹. We certainly find a lot of this in the novel. As mentioned above, not only does the narrative revolve around the tragic deaths of almost all the key characters—most of them in a violent, gruesome way— but there are strangely causal ‘coincidences’ that connect these characters’ lives (and deaths). There are quite clear ‘lessons’ that each character learns about his or her mistakes after having ascended to heaven. The characters also seem to represent certain archetypes, such as the disillusioned writer or the mad, parochial rural mother figure. According to Ndebele’s definition, these are all typically spectacular elements. Although his essay criticises the literature emerging from black writers at the height of the Black Consciousness period in South Africa, Ndebele’s ideas are still useful as we try to understand Mpe’s style and intention in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

The reason being for this is one point that he makes about the spectacular mode, a point that resonates with Mpe’s novel. Under apartheid, the spectacular was seen to be product of the fact that everything in South Africa had been reduced to the dramatic—condensed via the apartheid environment to ‘the quintessence of obscene social exhibitionism.’¹¹² Even though calling for a movement away from the spectacular, Ndebele observes that these writers felt they had a duty to compete with this political climate and create a literature that was instructive to us, to match the absurdity and demonstrativeness of the apartheid era with their own stylistics. By invoking the violence and disarray of the inner city, Mpe is doing something similar. The traces of the city, and its particular history are cast in overt and identifiable light, making it clear to the reader the pervasiveness of the past regime of power on Johannesburg.¹¹³ By being forced to confront these jarring

¹¹¹ See Ndebele, Njabula. ‘The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa’ in *Journal of Southern African Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (Apr., 1986), pp. 143-156

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.143

¹¹³ One could also argue that by invoking a dramatic image and experience of the inner city, he matches the typecasting of the inner city in the present-day public imagination, mimicking or mirroring the stereotype and consequently, potentially undermining it. The notion that the act of mimicry has the potential to undermine what is being mimicked, can be read in Bhabha, H. 1984. *Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse*: Discipleship: A Special Issue on Psychoanalysis: 125-133. Although the context of Mpe’s novel is present-day Johannesburg, the act or performance of mimicry, as described in articles such as, Graham Huggan’s *Postcolonialism, Anthropology and the Magic of Mimesis* in *Cultural Critique*, No. 38. 1997/1998, p. 91-106, or seen in films such as Jean Rouche’s *Les Maitres Fous*, invokes the spectacular.

images, we start to be confronted with what may lie behind them, with the systems and structures they represent. Also, this spectacular mode acts as a vehicle for setting up identifiable situations or objects, and so on, that by being rendered identifiable show how their power may be overcome. For instance, Mpe writes about this when describing rap music in the novel:

That was why rap and kwaito sold so well, including the more vulgar forms of both genres, that kept the tongues of elders clicking with disgust at the immorality of the children of these days. It was the same receptivity that explained why a television drama like *Yizo Yizo*, which portrayed tsotsi children ever proving to be a menace to their teachers and fellow pupils, was so popular. Or notorious... People enjoyed works which shocked them. Which made them think and reminded them that the life was not a long night of cosiness. Works which were not simply pleasing arrangements of text or tune, but which commented on the hard realities of life, drawn from and finding support on personal and social experiences.

(2001, p. 95)

As Mpe says above, shocking works are the ones that comment on the realities of life. However, Mpe has selected the site of Hillbrow not only to depict the condition or experience of the inner city in contemporary Johannesburg. He has also chosen Hillbrow as a metaphor for the resolution of certain pressing socio-political issues that confront the individual in the city and in South Africa today. So, although the novel emerges as a series of dramatic events, framed within the inner city, Mpe also uses this as a way of communicating the ways in which the black South African are able to find agency and a meaningful subjective experience of this South African urban terrain. For many reasons, the site of the city is where many converging peoples, routes and cultures meet and is an ideal context in which to play out the author's central themes of reconciliation and tolerance within South African society. But, by rendering elements as overt, gruesome and spectacular, Mpe makes clear the traces of an oppressive South African history in this urban environment and the harsh realities of today. In doing so, we can gain a sense of how these realities may be overcome. Ndebele's criticism of the spectacular mode is a response to a general lack of depth in the letters coming out of a politically incendiary period. Mpe uses the spectacular in a way that avoids the blandness of which Ndebele speaks, drawing instead on its capacity to identify the atmosphere of this urban context. Furthermore, this allows us to recognise the achievement of the characters who succeed in forging a meaningful sense of who they are in the inner city.

Despite the tragic lives of the characters or this portrayal of a harsh and dramatic environment, the protagonists and their lives in the city are also depicted as a transient mixture of relatively unpredictable assemblages. Likewise the city. Meg Samuelson comments that '[the] teeming quality of Hillbrowian existence is captured in Mpe's prose, with its breathlessly long sentences that pile activity upon activity'¹¹⁴ Alongside the dramatic is a pace that matches the shifts and speed by which the inner city operates, as seen in the following excerpt:

...with spinning of cars the prostitution drug use and misuse the grime and crime the numerous bottles diving from flat balconies giving off sparks of red and yellow from mid-air reflections of street and flat neon lights only to crush on unfortunate souls' skulls the neon welcoming lights the peace of mind you could see in many Hillbrowans the liveliness of the place and places collapsing...changing offices moving out of this increasingly dilapidated and menacing Braamfontein...and the streets of Hillbrow and Berea and Braamfontein overflowing with *Makwerekwere* come to greener pastures after hearing that the new president Rolihlala Mandela welcomes guests and visitors unlike his predecessors...filling every corner of our city and turning each patch into a Hillbrow coming to take our jobs in the new democratic rainbowism of African Renaissance that threatened the future of the locals Bafana Bafana fans momentarily forgetting xenophobia and investing their hopes in the national team... also investing in the Moroccan Team the Nigerian Super Eagles and singing as least they are African...All these things you have heard seen heard about felt smelt believed disbelieved shirked embraced brewing in your consciousness would find chilling haunting echoes in the simple words...
Welcome to our Hillbrow.

(2001, p. 27)

From all directions, we are confronted with a range of different sensations and things, all firing off at once. Mpe's barrage of words matches the clamour of the various elements of the inner city. As we can see above, he omits any punctuation. Disparate things, feelings, sights flow together, helter-skelter, accelerated by the effect of the enjambment. The inner city is unpredictable and difficult, tragic even and yet, in its transience and shifts lie the potential for the individual to discover agency, despite the suffering. Carrol Clarkson writes that "Mpe's Hillbrow is always a site of transit and transience... the physical world is devoid of... a 'latency,' a 'depth.'" ¹¹⁵ Rather than impeding the narrative

¹¹⁴ Samuelson, Meg. 'The city beyond the border: the urban worlds of Duiker, Mpe and Vera' in *African Identities*, 5:2, 247 – 260. 2007; p. 251.

¹¹⁵ Clarkson, Carrol. 'Visible and Invisible: What Surfaces in Recent Johannesburg Novels?' in *Moving Worlds*, 5 (1) 2005. pp 84 -119.

though, this lack of depth amplifies the possibilities of finding a new relationship with a city— one that is released from the past and one that is based on movement and change.

This dual dynamic of harsh, identifiable elements and transient figures or scenarios is central to the novel. Mpe sets up two main sites in which these notions of suffering and transformation are enacted. The first is his depiction of the inner city and its direct relationship with or impact on the lives of the novel's protagonists, who, as stated earlier, are mainly migrants or newcomers to the city. This site allows us to follow a number of important characters as they make choices, discover the implications of those choices, encounter boundaries and find ways of transgressing those boundaries within this inner cityspace. Mpe's use of the migrant figure is the key here, since the presence of the black migrant directly confronts how the city was configured in the past and the imprint of apartheid on its configuration. Sarah Nuttall in 'City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa' makes several valuable observations in this regard. She writes,

It is the figure of the migrant which comes to overlay the earlier trope of race, and even dominates the always-moving dynamism of the urban spaces that the novel explores.¹¹⁶

And then later, she adds,

...the migrant is the figure who has learned of 'surprise,' the 'unexpected' and of 'chance' which comes with the transgressions of national space and identity, often under conditions of need, linked to survival itself... [Johannesburg] is made from links to other communities and constituencies other than the city itself, [Johannesburg is about itself] and about somewhere else, producing contingencies that make [it] fluid and to itself.¹¹⁷

Nuttall sees the migrant as embodying the process of discovering new spaces, often interstitial within the city, since the migrant brings with him—or her¹¹⁸— the traces of other spaces and overlays the overarching existing urban system with them. In this process,

¹¹⁶ Nuttall, Sarah. 'City Forms and Writing the 'now' in South Africa' found on wiserweb.wits.ac.za/PDF%20Files/wirs%20-%20nuttall.PDF. This article is also available in *The Journal of South African Studies*, Vol. 30, No 4, December 2004, p. 21.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 23-24.

¹¹⁸ Although Mpe is lauded with creating a strong presence for female characters in the novel, Meg Samuelson points out that the figure of the migrant is typically conceived and perceived as a male character. She writes: 'thus, while the figure of the migrant is usefully being foregrounded in studies of the post-apartheid city (see Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, p. 364), both Mpe and Vera remind us to consider how gender shapes experiences of the city. The migrant — in the social imagination, if not in fact — is, like the flâneur, a male category.' Samuelson, 2007: p.254.

new avenues, new modes of experiencing or ‘alternate itineraries’¹¹⁹ of the city are enabled. He or she embodies the process of discovery since he or she has to ‘learn’ the city. Nuttall expounds how this mobile figure has the capacity to begin a reworking of an existing structure. According to Nuttall, Mpe’s characters come into the inner city and begin finding routes through the city and attaching their own meaning to existing structures— roads and buildings but also behaviour— that do not reflect necessarily how these structures were configured in the past.

What is important to know, however, is that while Mpe’s novel evokes the dynamic of movement and change, through a migration into the city, the trope he uses, of the migrant worker, is a loaded one too. Nuttall’s analysis of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is one of the migrant worker figure and it would be pertinent to point out that not all of the characters who come into the inner city in this novel, in Moele’s text (and certainly in real life) are migrant workers. Some transnational immigrants, as we see with Refentse and Refilwe, are individuals who come to the city for higher education, drawn out of the rural space because Johannesburg houses the closest university— the University of the Witwatersrand. For other characters, such as those we see in Moele’s novel, the lure of education comes through various other established or semi-established places of learning. These characters, one must realise are lucky in the sense that their move into the city is one driven ostensibly by choice. Inversely, though, as we learn in Mpe’s novel as well as in Moele’s in the following chapter, these students face very real challenges in the inner city, like the inability to pay their fees. This contributes to the ambiguity of the city, as shall be discussed in the following chapter. Other transnational migrants, like poorer rural farmers, however, are driven to the city because their lives outside of it are becoming increasingly unsustainable. Furthermore, those who come desperately to the city are more susceptible to exploitation, which makes their positions unstable. As we have seen also, the history of the transnational migrant labourer in the city is mostly a tragic one, where their presence in the city was integral to apartheid capitalism. Other types of migrants, like the African immigrant, for instance, may come to the city to chiefly to look for work, but, as mentioned earlier, many of them are also escaping war

¹¹⁹ Nuttall, Sarah. 2004: p. 22

and violence in their own countries. The city represents escape and the possibilities of a new life but with the xenophobia and hostility encountered by these immigrants, the city often just represents new forms of violence or constraint. Ultimately though, and this is where the basic proposition of African urbanism is useful, with the migrant figure, whether local, foreign, students, man or woman, driven by choice or driven by need, the city becomes and represents a site of the convergence of difference. It is inevitable that all these individuals seeking out the space of the city, to make it their own in some way, begin changing the space according to what they know, what they are learning and what they are trying to become. In this way, the city bears the traces of re-inscription, even if tempered by real issues.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* we are introduced to many different forms of migrants but, in general, the narrator emphasises the action of the appropriation and reconstruction of space, suggesting that parallels that run across any newcomer's experience of the city:

If you are coming from the city centre, the best way to get to cousin's place is by driving or walking through Twist Street, a one-way takes you to the north of the city. You cross Wolmarans and three obscure streets, Kapteijn, Ockerse, Pieterse, and before you drive or walk past Esselen, Kotze and Pretoria Streets. You will then cross Van der Merwe and Goldreich Streets. Your next port of call is Caroline Street. Just cross to the other side of Caroline. On your left-hand side is Christ Church, the Bible Centred Church of Christ, as the big red letters announce to you. On your right hand side is a block of flats called Vickers Place. You turn to your right, because the entrance to Vickers is in Caroline Street, directly opposite another block, Da Gama Court. If you are not too lazy, you will walk up the stairs to the fifth floor, where Cousin stays.

(2001, p. 6)

This resonates with Raban's 'soft city: hard city' idea mentioned in Chapter One, or as Nuttall herself points out, De Certeau's notion of 'walking' the city¹²⁰ and Lefebvre's conception of 'representational' or lived space¹²¹. The act of walking, discovering and experiencing the city makes it a space of interwoven enclaves of meaning, based on individual acts of discovery. Moreover, through the relationship between the migrant figure and the inner city, Mpe is able to draw a new map of not only the inner city itself

¹²⁰ De Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press. 1984.

¹²¹ Nuttall, Sarah. 2004: pp 17-18

but perhaps more importantly, a new map of the relationship between South Africa's present and its past. Nuttall writes,

Mpe offers a revised inventory of the city, composing a path along its streets, both tracking and breaching historical constructions of city space. Built sites along the streets symbolize specific practices, demarcate racial identities in particular ways and in turn determine how one walks.¹²²

If we think about the fact that the apartheid machine installed and inscribed a system of control and regulation on South Africa's cities, setting out to deny the black populations access to and agency within it, then the role of the newcomer automatically disrupts those inscriptions, merely through the fact that he or she needs to discover the urban space and in doing so, undermines what has come before. De Certeau's notion of the multifariousness of the city space— the layers of experience and meaning brought about by the number of different people seeking it out and living in it— means that the potential of the subversion of the overarching power structures or constraints within it is amplified. Johannesburg, given the number of migrants— both local and from the rest of Africa— is a particularly rich site for the playing out of this kind of remapping of the inner city.

Moreover, as one can imagine, with so many newcomers and migrants performing and claiming their experience or practice within the city, these layers, as they overlap with what already exists, call for a certain amount of tolerance between those enacting them, or living in the city already. This is essential to the novel since Mpe's major theme is just this: tolerance of difference, of otherness. Nuttall write that,

[the] figure of the migrant emerges...as the quintessential 'always-moving' figure, across spaces marked by both xenophobia and intra-African Afropolitanism... the migrant becomes the embodiment of these processes not simply due to globalisation: the figure of the migrant is central to South African history, a deeply embedded topos, which now takes on new configurations because the country is more open, with fewer forbidden places: space has expanded.¹²³

Owing to this, the inner city embodies this expansion of space and is a fertile arena in which to expand on the possibilities of a reconciliation of differences— whether they be

¹²² *Ibid.*, p 20

¹²³ Nuttall, Sarah. 2004: p 28.

ethnic, gender-related or nationality and so on— in South Africa today. In this regard, Richard Samin finds that in the novel,

Hillbrow, beyond its notorious reputation, emerges as the metaphor of an open-minded and dynamic place where a living community, despite its differences, manages to survive against all odds and whose collective identity seems to have been welded by the people's stand against the prejudices with which they are confronted. Hillbrow is thus the crucible in which patterns of thought, behaviour and social differentiation inherited from various social backgrounds, are reconsidered and adapted to meet new requirements...Mpe's Hillbrow constitutes a metonymic part of contemporary South Africa...¹²⁴

Not only does Mpe invoke the migrant trope in his central protagonist, Refentse, but he also uses him to raise some very real issues that confront these newcomers to the city. Although the figure of the migrant brings with it certain promises of freedom and movement, we see in Refentse's life a battle with some of the constraints that face anyone in the inner city. For instance, like many of the younger generation, Refentse comes to Hillbrow when he embarks on his formal, tertiary study at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). The narrator explains this process to us:

This procedure is one that is to repeat itself many times for the rest of that year. Coming as you do from a poor family, you do not have enough money to pay the required deposit for student accommodation. Your applications for bursaries have not been successful, for although you passed Matric with the necessary exemption to be admitted to read for the degree of Bachelor of Arts, the organisers you applied to for financial assistance required that the applicants' Matric results should be more than sparkling. So it was that you had to stay with Cousin at Vickers Place for the whole of 1991, and subsequently.

(2001, p. 15)

Refentse's dream was to change his past by helping his family and himself and become something more than what or who he was in Tiralong:

... you did not have a car. That day, the fact of your family's poverty had stared you crudely in the face like a mesmerising snake. You had asked yourself painfully about the value of life and love... You had had your first thoughts about committing suicide then. It was Sammy who had set you straight... He talked at length about how your education would ensure in the future that you could not provide just for your own life, but for your mother's and your future family's... he went on to mention...the list of people who had managed to free themselves from the shackles of poverty through hard work and education... [all] of Tiralong knew you were already well on your way to achieving the

¹²⁴ Samin, Richard. 'Reappraising the myths of the New South Africa : Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to our Hillbrow.' Conference paper presented at Conference: Founding Myths in the New South Africa in 2003. Paper available on the following site: <http://www2.univ-reunion.fr/~ageof/text/74c21e88-610.html>: p.4

best in education...No! Sammy had said, one does not contemplate something as final as suicide when one's future is so bright.

(2001, p. 89)

Refentse's drive to attaining an education is bound to the notion of revising the past and is encapsulated by the lure of an urban modernity that was denied to the black population through the majority of the twenty first century. The urban space beckons the rural youth and promises the fulfilment of these dreams of transformation. Refentse is lucky in that, although he is initially met with various obstacles in his process of attaining his degree, he overcomes these. He does well enough over time to be awarded a scholarship. This allows him to pursue his studies and then later he is offered a post at the university. However, Refentse is an exception to the norm. Most young, rural black people seeking access to Wits are not as lucky. For the most part, even those who meet the required standards for acceptance to an institution like Wits find themselves unable to pay for their studies. Indeed, as the narrator reminds Refentse, ' [people] said you were extremely fortunate.' (2001, p.15) On the one hand, Refentse stands out as an encouraging example, an exception.

Through him we understand that although a slow process, there is the possibility of overcoming certain limitations. On the other, Refentse's exceptionality, although owing to his own capabilities, makes the failures of others all the more real. We understand that despite the socio-political reforms of South Africa's transition to a non-racial democracy, the routes needed to empower the previously oppressed have not really become available. The city, and all that associated with it, like the university, although it may beckon with the promise of a better life, does not always deliver on those promises. As explained in the beginning of this chapter, Refentse's life is played out amongst various other, important characters who also seek a new life in the city. Most of these characters are also migrants and with Refentse, form an overarching narrative frame that shows many sides to the experience of life in the inner city. Refilwe, Refentse's first love from Tiralong has a different experience of the urban system:

Refilwe appeared in your life. She came to Hillbrow at the dawn of 1996, having just completed her Bachelor of Arts in Sepedi and English...She came to Johannesburg to seek greener pastures for herself and those she loved...beside two testimonials from her

lecturers, she explained to you, her prospective employers required a third one from someone who knew her as a member of the same community.

(2001, p. 31)

Refilwe is successful in the city and is awarded the job she applies for. Although the migrant figure is typically male, in Refilwe, Mpe grapples with some of the issues surrounding gender. With Refilwe, Mpe depicts the capacity of women to share in the experience of the city and make it work for them somehow. Refilwe, in most respects is a success story. Her departure from the inner city is because she wins a place at Oxford Brooks University. Although she leaves the inner city to further her dreams, it is her time in the urban centre that gives her the leverage to apply. However, like Refentse, Refilwe's path is not uncomplicated by prejudices. These prejudices come from Tiralong. As with her choice to live in central Johannesburg, her aspirations are met with disdain by her home community. Although, for instance, her intentions to study include the intention to help her family financially, they do not support her:

When she told her mother of her determination to apply to Oxford Brookes University, the news was not welcomed. Her mother was quick to remind her of the need for her to be the financial support of the family... Besides, daughter, she said, how can you leave me in such a poor state of health?

(2001, p.96)

This amplifies the challenge to the youth as they seek out an urban life but also indicates some of the constraints placed upon the female characters in this society. But, as Refilwe pursues her dreams, in doing so she stands as an example of a re-negotiation of her potential as a woman in a patriarchal society and as a rural girl in the city.

Simultaneously, her success in Johannesburg before she leaves allows her to flout the prejudices of Tiralong's community, who would have been vindicated if she had failed.

However, while Mpe creates a strong and resilient figure in Refilwe, despite her moments of vindictiveness after Refentse's suicide, other female characters do not fare so well. One of the most striking is Refentse's fictional character in his published short story. The woman in the story becomes a metaphor for any rural black South African coming into the city and facing certain challenges:

...an HIV positive woman from Tiralong, who was ostracised by her fellow villagers when she learnt about her health status. The Tiralong of your fiction said she deserved

what she got... So in your story, as in real life, Tiralong danced because its xenophobia—its fear and hatred for both black non-South Africans and Johannesburgers— was vindicated.

(2001, p. 54)

As we see above, she is ostracised by her home community because of her HIV status and the fact that she has taken a 'foreign' African lover, a *makwerekwere*. As with Refentse's girlfriend, Lerato who hails from Hillbrow, Refilwe's Nigerian boyfriend that she meets at Oxford and all the 'foreign' Africans in the novel, this partner is perceived by Tiralong to be responsible for the character's demise. For Refentse, his demise is a mental one, for Refilwe and this woman theirs is a physical one— brought on by their illness. Like Refilwe, this woman becomes the object of malicious slander and dangerous stereotyping— about what the inner city represents, how it endangers those who seek it out and how people from the rest of Africa are responsible for spreading the HIV virus. But, while Refilwe's narrative is empowering and while her story is an allegory for some degree of resolution of these prejudices¹²⁵, for the woman in the story, she remains ostracised from her home community.

There is another way that Mpe emphasises her vulnerability to her environment. The woman in the story decides to write about her experiences. She chooses to write in Sepedi and finds that no one in Johannesburg is willing or able to actually publish her work. The narrator tells us why:

She did not know that writing in African language in South Africa could be such a curse...calling shit and genitalia by their correct names in Sepedi was apparently regarded as vulgar by these reviewers...Now, for fifty years, the system of Apartheid had been confusing writers in this way. Trying to make them believe that euphemisms equals good morals...The woman of your fiction, Refentse, was writing in 1995, one year after the much acclaimed 1994 democratic elections; one year after the overthrow of the

¹²⁵ In Oxford Brooks, Refilwe meets a Nigerian, with whom she falls in love. He is HIV positive and at the end the novel, Refilwe moves back to Tiralong after having contracted the virus. It was Refilwe who played such an active role in destroying Refentse and his mother's reputation (and her life) and she who called upon the stereotypes surrounding *makwerekwere* when Her return to Tiralong, is an active choice: 'She wanted to die here at home, to be buried in the sun-scorched lands of the Northern Province that was filled with dry grass and tree leaves turned white, like bleached bones. She wanted to be laid to rest in our Tiralong, even if it meant exiting this world amidst the ignorant talk of people who turned disease into crimes. She knew, as Lerato had known, that it was difficult for a woman to face her friends, colleagues, and the whole community, and say her name, when they all judged her to be a loose woman...' (p. 117) By returning to Tiralong, Refilwe not only resolves these issues for her own sake, but it prompts the rural village to do the same.

political and cultural censorship, and of the damaging and dishonest indoctrination system which had been aimed at forcing South African to believe that life's realities lay exclusively in euphemisms. These spaces called euphemisms, where arid Bantustans—into which hordes of South Africans were driven according to their language groups (real or imagined—by the agents of the Apartheid system— became homelands, where any criticism of Apartheid thinking became a threat to public morals; where love across racial boundaries became mental instability... In 1995, despite the so-called new dispensation, nothing had really changed.

(2001, p. 57)

This woman becomes censored because of the fact that certain institutional 'dispensations' have remained intact¹²⁶. Mpe points to the continuation of certain 'euphemisms' from the past, ones that marginalise those seeking new terrains or alternative modes of expression in art or literature. The woman, like Mpe has decided to draw, through language, the reality of feeling and sensation. Mpe, as we have seen, favours the spectacular and dramatic, in order to represent real suffering and real life. The fact that this woman's writing is rejected reflects the unwillingness of contemporary South Africa to engage with this reality. Still today, a kind of myopia persists within the public imagination and within South Africa's socio-political structures, a blindness that means that certain issues are unable to be addressed head-on. As we see in the novel, HIV and AIDS, poverty, displacement, discrimination, xenophobia, these are all part of the lives of the majority of the population and yet even those who seek to change their own fate, are usually unable to. The woman's condition, with the combination of local publishers' censorship and Tiralong's prejudices deteriorates:

They did know that they were the sources of her scarecrow state. They did not know that they, together with her moralistic guardians of change, were destroying that keen intellect that had worked in the kitchens, and that initially had hoped to make a difference to the cultural life of South Africans.

(2001, p. 59)

Ultimately, she is defeated: ignored by publishers, divorced from her community. Ironically, as we see with Refentse and Mpe, the very same systems that censor the woman, publish their work.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ Even though she is attending Wits, her efforts to change her life are thwarted.

¹²⁷ However, it is obvious that one of the reasons why the woman in the fiction fails is due to her gender. Perhaps if she had been a man, the 'vulgarity' of her writing would have been more acceptable or less shocking to those 'moralistic guardians of change' (p. 59) or the community of Tiralong. Refentse and Mpe succeed in their literary endeavours most probably because they are men. Mpe raises these gender issues

Through these figures, we are faced with certain inconsistencies in this urban terrain, and in South Africa. The space of the inner city is configured as both an enabling and a disabling site. We are encouraged to ponder the freedoms and the constraints of this environment. As with the interaction between the transient and spectacular elements spoken about earlier, one is confronted with a sense that the city is a dual space. Even Refentse, despite his literary achievement and material success, becomes trapped by the inner city. Not only is he influenced by his mother's (and Tiralong's) vitriol regarding his girlfriend— who hails from Hillbrow— but his own choices in the city slowly drive him to suicide. Despite whatever success he achieves, Refentse is not immune to the effects of his environment and the implications of the choices he makes within it. At the same time, though, through him, the novel also suggests what still needs to be resolved in this space. Refentse comes to terms with certain 'imponderables' as he suffers at the hand of them. And in this also, the narrator suggests that these imponderables can be reconfigured:

Euphemism. Xenophobia. Prejudice. AIDS... You became aware that no matter what other stories you might write, none of them would ever be sufficient to answer such imponderables. For those to have these answers was to know the secrets of life itself. There will always be another story of love, betrayal, friendship, joy and pain to add to your narrative granary. There will always be the need to revise, reinforce, contradict. For every new personal experience adds to our knowledge of life and living, death and dying. For every act of listening, seeing, smelling, feeling, tasting is a reconfiguration of the story of our lives.

(2001, p. 61)

This act of reconfiguration also comes through the presence of another central migrant figure: the *makwerekwere*. Xenophobia towards them by many of the South Africans is a theme that governs much of the narrative. We see this at various points throughout the novel. Most people in the narrative, from the residents of Tiralong, to the locals in Hillbrow strongly express or embody these prejudices:

Cousin would always take the opportunity...to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held foreigners responsible: not just for the physical decay of the place, but he moral decay. His words were echoed by many others...

(2001, pp. 16-17)

and although he may not tackle the implications directly, we are made aware of the kind of everyday censorship that faces women in this society today.

But, as Refentse argues,

Many of the Makwerekwere you accuse of this and that are no different to us— sojourners here in search of green pastures. They are lecturers and students...a number of them can be found selling fruit and vegetables in the streets, along with many locals— so how can they take our jobs? Of course there are some who do drug trafficking. But when the locals are prepared to lap at them like starved dogs, what do they expect the struggling immigrants to do?

(2001, p. 18)

The thread of the ‘foreign’ African immigrants to the overarching narrative structure is important for a number of reasons. On the one hand, and most obviously, it is used to question the emplacement of cultural barriers and the polarization of difference, whether they be ethnic, regional and so on. This, combined with the local migrant characters and the dialogue between rural and urban terrains makes *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* a novel that criticises ‘the pointlessness of cultural polarizations’¹²⁸ and projects a vision of a ‘global humanity’¹²⁹— one forged around the acknowledgment and acceptance of differences. Even if the prevalence of xenophobia itself is not completely resolved, Mpe’s novel offers some sort of hope for the future. We see this in the conclusion to Refilwe’s story as well as the resolutions that take place in Heaven. At the end of the novel, most of the characters have come to terms with the impact of their prejudices. With the trajectories of the central characters, the foreign African figures demonstrate the capacity for certain geo-political boundaries to be transgressed. Thus, along with the South African protagonists, the trope of the *makwerekwere* combines to evoke Mpe’s ideas about access to the urban space and about South Africa’s potential for reconciliation.

However, these foreign Africans also have another extremely important role in the novel, one that Mpe does not develop as much in his local characters. They demonstrate the capacity to develop alternative and creative modes of being in the city. In the above excerpt, the narrator points out their ability to turn an unfriendly urban environment into something that ‘works’ for them, whether this is drug trafficking or selling fruit and

¹²⁸ Dannenberg, Hilary. P. *Colonial Alterities and Global Hybridities in the Contemporary South Africa Novel: Zakes Mda’s ‘The Heart of Redness’ and Phaswane Mpe’s ‘Welcome to Our Hillbrow’*. p. 7 Unpublished paper presented at AUETSA, SAVAL and SAACLALS conference held in Durban at the University of KwaZulu Natal, July 2004. Available on-line at the following address: www.uwc.ac.za/arts/auetsa/hilaryPdannenberg.htm.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, 2004:p. 7

vegetables on the streets. Another example is given when the narrator is describing confrontations between the police force and the often-illegal immigrants:

When the poor souls pleaded, the uniformed men would ask if they could make their pleas more visible. They did. Cousin and his associates received oceans of Rands and cents from these unfortunates, who had found very little to motivate them to agree to be sent back home. Some of the womenfolk brought their temporary freedom to roam the Hillbrow streets by dispensing under waist bliss. They preferred to eke out a living here. They were ostracised, the agreed; but when the policemen left them in peace, they could gather a thing or two to send back to their families at home. The foreign exchange rate really did favour them. The Makwerekwere had also learned a trick or two of their own...

(2001, p. 21)

As we have seen, Nuttall points out that the performance of the migrant in the city and the ways in which he or she transgresses or transfers what is already in place through the act of discovering the urban terrain. While this performance may not alter the traces of history or the existing inequalities or harsh conditions in the inner city, what it does do is begin a dynamic process of reconfiguration of the space. Furthermore, as African urban theory also suggests, it is only through the individuals in the city that existing, often limiting spatial patterns or power structures can begin the change. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* the African immigrant as much as the local migrants are shown to be a vital component of this process.

While a critic like Appiah or a traditional Marxist critic may argue that these tactics or methods indicate a limitation of choice rather than a freedom, the city becomes defined by these responses, which has the potential to challenge the status quo, from the bottom up. Without legitimate citizenship in the city, these immigrants are often at the mercy of a corrupt system as well as social discrimination. In addition, their access to certain parts of the city is limited. However, as the narrator suggests, these individuals find a way to capitalise on their situations. In these characters, the author depicts a further reconfiguration of the urban hub and its potential to be remodelled or reshaped so as to challenge the overarching dynamics that have come to define it— like crime, overcrowding, poverty, lack of infrastructure, discrimination and so on. Understanding or identifying these alternative methods forms the basis of the drive of African urbanism to redefine the way we read a city space like Hillbrow. Even if one points out that these

methods are purely 'coping mechanisms' or if one questions the effect (social, psychological or spatial) of being forced to adapt to or manipulate an already corrupt system, these methods do alter the space. In this way, the urban terrain becomes defined by an active dynamic of responses and tactics.¹³⁰ The multitude of responses by these immigrants, in the attempt to make the city 'work' for them, creates fascinating and ingenious strands of urban life that intersect and compete even with the status quo. This in itself is surely empowering, as Mpe suggests here.¹³¹

Furthermore, the role of the African immigrant in the inner city, and novel, exposes more inconsistencies in South Africa's democratic transition period and after, as the following excerpt puts forward:

No one seemed to care that the treatment of Makwerekwere by the police, and the lack of sympathy from the influential Department of Home Affairs, ran contrary to the human rights clauses detailed in the new constitution of the country. Ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies...the stuff of our South African and Makwerekwere lives.

(2001, p. 23)

Despite this, the African immigrants and the locals, who also suffer at the hand of the 'system' seem to be drawn together, suggesting that in the face of persistent inequalities, mutual understanding about the effects of these inequalities may be the beginning of a new kind of inner city experience for everyone involved. This is not to say, as Richard Samin writes, that Mpe wishes to resort to some euphemistic rainbow nation myth. Rather, he draws out the many incongruencies and clashes and makes this the site for a communal experience:

... you seemed to see, simultaneously, the vibrating panorama of Hillbrow and all its multitudinous life stories, conducting themselves in the milk, honey and bile regions of your own expanding brain...you heard the echoes of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*...Your head spun at untold speed and you became intensely dizzy in these hot, whirling webs of sensory input, your memory picking out choice words here, scenes there... the infinite

¹³⁰ While one could question the value of drug trafficking, for instance, in creating a more cohesive or stable society in the inner city or in the city proper, it is evident that these kinds of activities are a response to the constraints of the environment and reveal the capacity for certain individuals in the face of these constraints to act and make money. How we choose to judge these tactics is another issue all together. For further reading, see Abdoumalig Simone's 'The Right to the City' in *interventions* Vol. 7(3). Pp. 321-325. First published in *The Wiser Review*, July 2004.

¹³¹ Again, Abdoumalig Simone's work on African immigrants in Johannesburg largely deals, in a rich and complex way, with this notion of 'working' the city.

fragments combining and recombining in the container in your head. Until the roaring pressure of your skull exploded:
Welcome to our Hillbrow... Welcome to our Alexandra... Welcome to our Tiralong in Johannesburg...

(2001, p. 80)

The trope of the migrant is a key device to considering how one would imagine a realistic and possible remapping of the inner city. The physical entry into the city of different people layers over one another different versions of the city as it is 'now', and as it was 'then.' This invokes a new-ness, transience and heterogeneity that, as we have seen, is not only produced by the urban terrain but also produces it. The migrant responds to the call of the city, but his or her presence constitutes the city as we have come to understand it, too. However, Mpe depicts that while a migrant may hold this potential, he or she is not without certain real challenges. We have seen how these challenges range from poverty, illness to the unequal dispensation of opportunity. However, one of the most difficult challenges to face, as discussed earlier, is the stigma and prejudice towards the inner city and its inhabitants.

While Mpe depicts an ethnic intolerance on the part of South Africans towards other Africans as part of this stigmatisation of the inner city, his main vehicle for portraying this is through the relationship between Johannesburg and Tiralong. Most of the central South African characters hail from this rural town. Mpe may shift the narrative into two other spaces, England and Heaven¹³², but it is through the tensions between Tiralong and Hillbrow, that we are able to locate the value, or the price, of coming trying to claim the city. We see, through the voice of the narrator, the various, negative associations attached to the inner city of Johannesburg by those looking *onto* the space of the inner city from the rural space. These associations range from seeing it as a space of moral decay, filth, danger, violence and social dislocation. Yet, the residents of Tiralong associate these aspects of the inner city with the number of other Africans moving into the city. For this

¹³² Heaven is important because it functions as a reflective space, one necessary for the characters to gain some objective distance in order to learn from their experiences on earth. Implicitly, the learning process is facilitated by the narrator, whose omniscience indicates that he must also be speaking from this vantage point. But, Heaven is also the 'physical' destination for the key characters, most of whom are killed or commit suicide in the novel. Thus, Heaven functions as a place from which each character can begin to assess their actions and choices. And, in many ways it is here that Mpe is able to resolve his ideas.

reason, characters like Refentse and Refilwe—in leaving Tiralong for the inner city—are to a certain degree rejected by their home communities. However, their lives are also measured according to the pre-conceived notions of what the inner city will do to a person.

What this dialogue also evokes quite strongly is the emphasis placed upon the geopolitical impasse between the rural and the urban under the apartheid system. As we have seen in Chapter Two, one of the most pervasive effects of this system was its emphasis on a 'Bantu' identity, founded on the notion that the black population should remain configured as rural, 'tribal,' without access to 'modernity.' The city became representative of this modernity and thus came to embody that which was off-limits but desirable. While it may have been seen as a place of desire, under apartheid the city was also feared since the black person, once in it, was under extreme, oppressive surveillance. The prejudices towards the inner city may be derived from the pervasiveness of this kind of conditioning. As the narrator informs us, 'the lure of the monster was, however, hard to resist: Hillbrow has swallowed a number of the children of Tiralong, who thought that the City of Gold was full of career opportunities for them.' (2001, p. 3) Of course, as we have seen, the lure of the city does not always deliver what it is believed to promise. However, the antagonism towards Johannesburg by those in Tiralong is not evoked merely through concern. Johannesburg becomes an outlet for the fear and apprehension of what is new or different. All women in Hillbrow are seen as whores, every problem in the city is seen to be limited to the city when, actually, as the narrator explicitly states, as much violence, illness and misfortune befalls the community of Tiralong. These misfortunes may be different, like the vigilante-style killings spurred on by superstition.

However, death, poverty and so on exist as easily in the rural terrain as it does in the city. This is something emphasised by the various characters in the book and by the narrator, suggesting the author's stance in relation to his narrative. Noko reminds Refentse and us that 'there are very few Hillbrowans, if you think about it, who were not originally wanderers from Tiralong and other rural villages' (2001, p. 18) When mentioning the perception that Hillbrow is a violent place, he stresses that 'while we are so busy blaming

[Hillbrowans] for all our sins, hadn't we better also admit that quite a large percentage of our home relatives who get killed in Hillbrow, are in fact killed by other relatives and friends—people who bring their home grudges with them to Jo'burg' (ibid). Furthermore, most of the central characters are allocated a dual identity, named as a child of *both* Tiralong and Hillbrow. This technique gains momentum until the narrator merges all the places in the novel. Eventually he writes, 'Welcome to our Hillbrow... Welcome to our Alexandra... Welcome to our Tiralong in Johannesburg...'

(2001, p. 80)

In the above quote we see some the irony in the statement 'Welcome to Our Tiralong in Hillbrow.' The movement of the rural figure into the urban space holds the possibility of change, and yet, as Mpe suggests also, the rural persona is not completely altered here, nor is the rural attitude. The strongest way in which we can read this is how prejudices towards the African immigrants are often those harboured by the rural population, or those who have come from a rural background. Again, this renders the space of the city ambiguous. Despite this, however, the city, as Mpe suggests, even if currently reflecting these antagonisms, has the potential to shape and change these perceptions in the individual. In the novel, Mpe begins the deconstruction of these perceived barriers, despite what is portrayed as an impenetrable psychosocial barrier between the inhabitants of Tiralong and Hillbrow. And, in the physical movement of the characters between them, Mpe suggests the pathways through which these prejudices can be overcome. The confrontation between these two spaces may be dramatic and violent at times, but through this confrontation, Mpe suggests a pathway to mutual tolerance and acceptance. Through the migrant figures and through the rural/ urban dialogue, the novel suggests that recipe for a country based on tolerance.

If we are able to accommodate all the differences existing in a space like Hillbrow, through an appreciation of the movement, arrival and mixing of more and more diverse peoples, the city can be and be seen as an enabling space. Equally, if we are able to break down the impasses between rural and urban terrains and what they are taken to mean, the same kind of thing can be achieved. This, for Mpe is construed as agency: the right to

live and claim a significant experience of the inner city and the freedom to live there without being typecast by outdated perceptions of what the city means. Sarah Nuttall asserts that the 'creolization'¹³³ that occurs in the highly differentiated space of city can be the catalyst for 'a different cartography' of the city and South African space. The city already, as Nuttall asserts, is the 'most conducive space to the remaking of culture' where 'difference, that is the juxtaposition of culture, multi-culture work to revise and reread the orthodox, any stable notion of who is who.'¹³⁴ These revisions would occur even if there were no tolerance. But, for Mpe, combined with tolerance, South Africa's troubled past can make way for a new kind of future.

The focus on the individual *in* the city combined with a focus on perceptions *of* the city recreates the conceptual domain that African urbanism deals with: the structure of the city and the entirety of the urban machine and its intersection with the, often invisible, human elements that constitute the actual space. These human elements have the potential to challenge, remap or recreate that structure. By following both the lives of the key characters in the city as well as the ways in which their lives are framed amidst perceptions of the city, we, like the characters, come face to face with the possibilities of seeing the inner city as something more than a degenerative space or one still constrained by the past.

It must be said that on reading the novel, one has to be able to also honestly question the extent to which tolerance of 'difference' or the heterogeneity of the city space automatically alters the inequalities forged throughout South Africa's history. Despite Mpe's idealism and sense of humour, Hillbrow is clearly a complex space. As mentioned earlier, Mpe leads us deep into the streets and patterns of Hillbrow, in all its ambiguities and duplicities— into the place of 'milk and honey and bile.'(2001, p.41) While Hillbrow on the one hand represents a place of converging socio-political routes and histories, which may provide avenues for the transgression of certain restrictions, it is still

¹³³ Nuttall, Sarah. 2004: pp. 3-9, 29. Nuttall's use of the concept of creolization is extremely useful and is the basis of her approach in 'City Forms and Writing the 'Now' in South Africa.' Creolization is described as the practice of 'cross-cultural interaction.' 2007. p. 9

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

configured as dangerous, violent and in disarray. While the narrative deals with moments of transformation and reconciliation, it also depicts the suffering, poverty and impossibilities faced by many who seek it out.

Owing to this, for instance, we are invited to understand a little more intimately the complexities of what it means for a figure like the black migrant to seek agency or legitimate access to contemporary Hillbrow. In many ways, the traces of the oppressive regime of power remain imprinted on this urban space. The novel also therefore asks us to confront what it means to develop a sense of agency here and questions whether the regenerative potential found in the urban centre can combat the effect of socio-economic hardship or can truly allow for feelings of legitimacy. Richard Samin asserts that,

Mpe's use of the urban myth is an attempt to dispel an illusory perception of South Africa... [it] is not a fable on the glorious transition to democracy—which now belongs to history— but on the urgency of coming to grips with complexity itself so as not to jeopardize a culture of human rights which South Africa's political transition has ushered in and entrenched in its institutions and its myth of reconciliation and renewal.¹³⁵

Indeed; but what this narrative also evokes is a critique of just how empowered Mpe's characters really are in this space. We see the interaction between the structure of the inner city and the agents within it, observing the reflexive relationship between them. We come to understand the complex dialogues between agent and urban environment. And., like those seeking out the inner city, we are at once lured and repelled by the space. As the narrator clearly states,

Your first entry into Hillbrow, Refentse, was the culmination of many converging routes. You do not remember where the route first began. But you know too well that the stories of migrants had a lot to do with its formation. By the time you left Tiralong High School to come to the University of the Witwatersrand, at the dawn of 1991, you already knew that Hillbrow was a menacing monster, so threatening to its neighbours like Berea and downtown Johannesburg... the lure of the monster, however, was hard to resist...

(2001, pp. 2-3 Emphasis added.)

As through the formal technique of the spectacular, this manifestation of repulsion and yearning is woven into the novel and through it we can begin to understand how Mpe's text is instrumental in representing the lives of its residents, whose relationship to the

¹³⁵ Samin, Richard. 2004: p.7

inner city is often ambivalent. In addition, by being coerced into the space of the text and of the inner city and simultaneously being forced to experience the harshness of it, we understand, like these inner city urbanites that the two go hand in hand here. In other words, like two sides of a coin, the inner city has the power to destroy and give birth to agency, individuality and so on. We have seen in Chapter One how this perception of the city is prevalent in how the urban space is theorised globally. In the particular context of Johannesburg, considering our particular history, the two sides of the coin are linked strongly to race and class. For the black individual, specifically the black, rural migrant, coming into the inner city means coming into a space whose inequalities have not yet been dealt with completely.¹³⁶

Thus, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a textual space not only encourages us to look for the promise of change, but it also forces us to see what living in the inner city may be like for the real-life people these characters represent. The following excerpt demonstrates this reality:

For formal news, there was Radio Lebowa– now Thobela FM– broadcasting snippets of car hijackings and robber’s shoot-outs with the Johannesburg Murder and Robbery Squad every news hour. Five men were found with their ribs ripped off by what appeared to have been a butcher’s knife... two women were raped and then killed in Quartz street... Three Nigerians who evaded arrest at Jan Smuts Airport were finally arrested in Pretoria Street for drug dealing...street kids, drunk with glue, brandy and wild visions of themselves as speeding Hollywood movie drivers, were racing their wire-made cars through red robots, thus increasingly becoming a menace to motorists driving through Hillbrow, especially in the vicinity of Blanket and Claim Streets...At least eight people dies and thirteen were seriously injured when the New Year’s Eve celebrations took the form of torrents of bottles gushing out of the brooding clouds that were flat balconies...Men going anywhere near the corner of Quartz and Smit Streets were advised to beware of the menace of increasingly aggressive prostitutes... a few men had been raped there recently... Welcome to Our Hillbrow.

(2001, p. 5)

This description sits somewhere between reality and fiction–in that we are almost incredulous that this could be real and yet Mpe assures us in the novel’s epigraph, ‘be assured, this narrative is no fiction.’ Emerging from this novel is a picture of Hillbrow

¹³⁶ As we see in Chapter Two, the inner city is still held at an arms length from the rest of Johannesburg, typecast as aberrant. And, as we see in the novel, access to formal education, basic services, employment is often as inaccessible in the inner city as it is outside Johannesburg proper.

and the people who live in it that is jarring yet necessary for the kinds of social realities that Mpe wants us to recognise and understand. If indeed, we can begin to look at what lies behind the drama and violence, then not only can we get an idea of what confronts these urban individuals but also what areas may be illuminated.

What is clear is that each character in the novel is an amalgam of not only the capacity to overcome the constraints of the inner city but also their basic susceptibility to them. For example, when Refentse refers to Hillbrow as the 'monster' we see how, once in Hillbrow, his apprehensions are both met and dispelled. The narrator reminds him that,

...you were stuck by the quietness of Vickers and its immediate surroundings, And, as you gradually fell back to sleep, it was the scream of human voices and police sirens that surged up from the depths of your sleep into the nightmares and dreams of your first night in Hillbrow.

(2001, p. 10)

The contrast between the silence of Vickers, at the heart of Hillbrow, and the urban noise that then emerges during the night reminds us of the duplicity of the space. Also, like the following excerpt, our's attention is bought to the fact that the urban centre operates differently to what is known or expected. For instance,

So far, you have not seen any car chases or witnessed a shoot-out. You did meet some semi-naked souls whom your guide, from the same village of Tiralong, called prostitutes. Otherwise, the thing that stands out in your memory is the extremely busy movement of people going in all directions of Hillbrow, seeming to enjoy the neon lights of the suburb, while others appeared to be in a hurry to get to work—or, yes, to *work*...it amazed you that there should be so many people jostling each other in the streets at nine in the evening...

(2001, p. 7)

We see a combination of elements that suggest that the inner city has layers of systems in place: both chaotic and ordered. Refentse is surprised by the quiet of the street and yet, as night falls, it becomes a stage for drama and violence, indicated by the screams and the sirens. Certainly, one could argue that only at night does Hillbrow become the 'monster' it is made out to be. The fading light is perhaps the cover needed for illegal activity. But the quiet of Vickers Street during the day also indicates that this space has the capacity to be a place of quietude. If we have ever had the opportunity to walk through Hillbrow during the daytime, we would have seen the large trees hanging over most of the avenues

and perhaps sensed a gentle roll of time rather than the fervour that emerges at night. Hillbrow, as we learn through the novel has the capacity for both¹³⁷.

Of course, Refentse is shocked and scared by the noise in the evening, and this confirms his fears about the space. However, in the second excerpt, we see that even amidst the frenetic pace of the night, there is a purpose to the movement and flow of people. Most of them, notes Refentse, are going to work. Thus, Hillbrow seems to come alive at night and while this may be a dangerous time it is also a productive time for residents. These urbanites are operating in the city using schedules and mechanisms that an outsider may not understand or see. These residents, now including Refentse, are perhaps constantly on guard but they are also versatile and adaptable. This in turn makes the space of Hillbrow less of an impenetrable monster and more of a dynamic space of alternatives. If most of the people Refentse sees walking the city recreate the space in doing so, then every night, Hillbrow is reinscribed with new-ness and difference.

Welcome to Our Hillbrow thus presents us with almost spectacular picture of the inner city. Despite the traumas and the tragedies however, Mpe does emphasise reconciliation, change and resolution over stagnation or failure in this urban space. We are not encouraged to look past or ignore the constraints of the environment. In fact, by exposing a dramatic side to the inner city and to the prejudices that exist both towards this space and within the rural terrain, Mpe exposes the nature of the obstacles faced by many South Africans today. In choosing not to conceal them, and by making them distinct and identifiable through the use of the spectacular, Mpe makes it as clear as to what these obstacles are and how these obstacles can begun to be dealt with.

Moreover, by juxtaposing the difficulties of the urban space with figures or dialogues that symbolise transience and movement— as portrayed by the migrant figure or the blurring

¹³⁷ There is also something to be said about the architecture, although Mpe does not delve much into this. The apartment blocks that dominate the area are mostly large-balconied, art-deco edifices. As Alan Morris reminded us earlier, these buildings are usually in a state of disarray. But there is nothing that seems to hold time still more than the presence of an ageing structure in an environment different to the one it was originally conceived in. These buildings, even in the state they are in, are extremely beautiful and impressive, and, with the new environment of a different kind of Hillbrow to that in the mid 20th Century, they have become palimpsests of memory and meaning.

of the rural/ urban binary—Mpe suggests that there are still possibilities for the individual to lay claim to the city and find agency within it. In emphasising an atmosphere of tolerance along with this, Mpe speaks of accelerating these transformations in the city space and in South African society. In the city, intolerance is often fuelled— because of a conglomeration of different elements mixing and moving within it. But inversely, a space like Hillbrow provides the opportunity for this intolerance to be met with more flexibility and openness than that of the rural terrain. However, although the village of Tiralong is depicted as parochial, without its presence in the novel, the potential of the inner city would not be as pronounced. Furthermore, it is through identifying the presence of destructive and outmoded binaries that we can begin to unravel them.

For these reasons, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a novel that grants a projection of a South African city that holds within it the ingredients for some kind of change. Through it, a notorious suburb like Hillbrow, and its residents, or potential residents have the chance to be reconfigured in the public imagination. In addition to this, we are given the chance to witness real tactics and ‘modes of being’ employed by its residents. This demonstrates their capacity to challenge the overarching, negative sign ascribed to the space. Mpe conveys this in a complex and layered narrative, governed by an overarching metaphor that is the fluctuating urban space in which actors are able to perform the beginnings of an interrogation of the past.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE TENSIONS IN 'BECOMING': KGBETLI MOELE'S ROOM 207

Room 207 is a novel that draws considerably on the image of Johannesburg as the ‘dream city.’ Throughout the text and woven into the lives of each of the characters is an emphasis on the idea that Johannesburg’s inner city has the potential to allow a whole generation of young black men and women in post-apartheid South Africa the chance to realize certain aspirations and desires. As the narrator confides:

I like to call Hillbrow our little mother earth in Africa because here you will find all races and tribes of the world. Here you’ll find Europeans and Asians that by fate have become proud South Africans, taking maybe a long shot or even a short shot at a dream or dreams of their own.

(Moele, *Room 207*, 2006: p. 19)

The central narrative revolves around six male protagonists, each depicted as having come to Johannesburg in search of something that only the new post-apartheid urban space can offer. These six young men— like many in the novel and in reality— descend upon the city from peripheral areas, from rural villages or townships. Their dreams and aspirations are bound to what this urban space seems to be: a gateway to material success, self-empowerment, access to a capitalist, modern urban lifestyle, and generally a release from the shackles of the past.¹³⁸ The city symbolizes the site in which this life, or at least the beginning of it, is attainable. Their experiences can be seen to be representative of a current generation of black South African youths, to whom the allure of this urban terrain offers the chance of ‘reinvention.’ Inevitably however, the inner city bears the traces and continuations of the past inequalities and inconsistencies in such a way that the dreams and aspirations are often limited by the harsh reality of this urban environment. The Johannesburg that the ‘207’s’ come to is a constructed fiction, a mythical place of desire and dreams. But, in order to attain these dreams the ‘207’s,’ develop tactics that allow them to take as much as possible from the inner city, and from others, without necessarily ‘giving back.’

Thus, the city in *Room 207* embodies many of the contradictions and antagonisms that result from the collision of the past and the present, dreams and reality and the individual

¹³⁸ The city was controlled in various ways during apartheid, as we have seen. The novel suggests that the present may reveal new ways in which to change the imprint of strategies of oppression and marginalisation that affected the black population. Claiming an urban identity and realising certain aspirations in this space, denied through past political and social institutions, is a way in which these patterns can begin to be altered. We have seen this in the previous chapter.

and urban structure, in South Africa today. Moele explores agency in the urban terrain, translated through a narrative that explores the capacity of the individual to realize his or her dreams in the face of harsh conditions. While Mpe looks to notions of tolerance and movement as the means by which agency in the inner city can be found, Moele interrogates desire and whether or not dreams and aspirations are enough for the individual to transform his or her life. For this reason, Moele pays careful attention to the isolation and development of his main characters. While the inner city forms the arena in which he plays out his main themes and ideas, each character can be read as a way of accessing what the city space means in general. Emerging at the centre of Moele's novel is the tension between the individual and the 'group.' We see how each character draws on what he or she feels they belong to, whether it is the memory of a rural home community, some sort of shared ethnic background, or the intense communal relationship that emerges from living together in Room 207. Like Mpe, Moele focuses on the effect of inner city living on the black individual, generally male, and the chances he has to reconfigure the past through certain choices. But, unlike Mpe's characters, as each of the '207's' develops, we realise that they are generally motivated by intensely selfish drives, even while ensconced in their Room 207. It seems that at the core of their quest for success and fulfillment is the idea that certain affiliations, associations or group identities retard the quest for achievement.

By studying these individual characters, we can start to understand just how much capacity the young, black male figure has to reinvent himself, and, by extension, what the city means. The tension that these dual impulses evoke in the characters creates in turn a narrative tension that asks us to make observations about what kinds of choices are available to these characters, and what the nature or value of those choices may be. A fair amount of ambiguity emerges around the choices and 'modes of being' of each of the central protagonists and this facilitates an interrogation into the capacity of the inner city to generate meaningful notions of the self, realistic desires and a revision of the past. Moele chooses to structure the book as a character-by-character portrait and in doing so draws us into the dynamic of the individual versus the collective. By maintaining the protagonists as primarily separate entities, both on a structural and narrative level, Moele

suggests that it is through a preservation of the self, perhaps at the expense of the group, that one develops the means to 'make it' in the city. However, as we shall see, these boundaries are not rigidly in place. In each portrait, the voice of the narrator, Noko, isolates one of the characters, but the rest of the group—both the 207's and their various friends and girlfriends—feature strongly too in each, challenging the primacy given to the character in question. Furthermore, the book includes characters portraits of the women who are close to the '207's.' Again, although separate, the conversation between the various portraits suggests that some of the barriers erected by the young men towards these female characters are, in fact, transient. On a structural level, Moele evokes a tension within the space of the novel that mirrors the tensions described above. This tension also mirrors the way in which the city itself seems to pull the individual into different directions, We see in this chapter how their seems to be a pull to associate oneself with what one knows and with groups that one identifies with, for a sense of stability and normality. At the same time there seems to be a push from the city to draw solely upon one's own resources and one's capacity to 'make it'—alone. The city, as we have seen in previous chapters is ambiguous in this way. Moele's novel draws on this as we follow the lives of the '207''as a collective and the '207's' as individual units.

The following chapter will explore this tension described above, through an analysis of the individual '207's' and their relationships to each other, the women in their lives and to the city. Moele's stylistic narrative choices of 'immediate' storytelling will provide a frame for exploring these tensions further. The ambiguity that comes through the formal quality of the text shows itself as response to the interaction between the black individual and the inner city. As we track the characters' development we will come to understand some of the difficulties, glories and confusions emerging from trying to make life in Johannesburg's inner city. Drawing on the notion that individuals in this space have a choice about what to 'become,' this chapter will also interrogate whether the choices made and tactics developed by the 'hustler' characters actually grant them the freedoms they seek in the inner city. This will allow us to develop more of an understanding of what the possibilities are for finding a meaningful and productive life in this city. By extension, this will allow us to understand a little more the inner city and whether it too

can be a generative and enabling place.

Through each character portrait, we enter the city and engage with the relationship between agent and structure, which constructs, as the novel progresses, an idea of the landscape of the inner city. Hillbrow itself is presented as a product of the tenuous perceptions, expectations and relationships of the '207's'— these are inseparable, of course, from those of the generations of black South African men and women before them. We meet the inner city as the protagonists meet it. Slowly it spills itself out, through their encounters with its contradictions and ambiguities. As the '207's' embark on their separate, yet intertwined paths through the inner city, we learn, as they do, about the real potential of the city space in allowing them to realise the aspirations they arrived with and to forge the urban personas they sought there. Thus, the inner city materialises through the antics of each of the '207's.'

In many ways, like the characters, we are rendered observers, witnesses of the city. As each character 'learns' and maps his version of the space, so to do we. The effect of this in the novel is an immediacy of plot and prose that mirrors the impact of this exciting and potentially hostile space on the psyche of the individual. What this does is mar any attempt we may have to parcel the inner city into a neat or definable category of urbanity since we too experience the inner city without distance and objectivity, as the characters experience it. Consequently, this immediacy makes it almost impossible to decide whether or not characters like the '207's, fail or succeed in attaining agency or claiming the city in the way they feel they can or should.

When *Room 207* was published in 2006, it received a certain amount of criticism for its style and technique. Most notable in this regard is Michael Titlestad's article, 'The Pitfalls of Literary Debut.'¹³⁹ He writes of 'the novel:

It eschews the niceties of novelistic prose and the formal criteria of plot and characters development in favour of immediacy. Structurally it sprawls, comprising as it does seemingly random encounters and loosely related narrative lines.

¹³⁹ Titlestad, Michael. 'The Pitfalls of Literary Debut' in the Sunday Times, 25th March 2007.

And then later, he adds:

There is probably a good novel lurking somewhere in this rather shapeless textual pastiche... the text traffics rather tediously in the aura of authenticity as it meanders from one seemingly unmotivated encounter to the next. Its quite random revelations make voyeurs of its readers, and its poorly plotted sensationalism borders constantly on political sentimentality and interpersonal cliché.

Titlestad's comments evoked a slew of responses, one of which is Sam Radithlalo's 'Rehearsed Postures of Conviction.'¹⁴⁰ Radithlalo asks:

I mean, was Moele interested in writing about life in Hillbrow, or was he keen to reproduce, say, Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1981) in a local setting, or show Hillbrow as the place where, for some, dreams come to die and for some to flourish? Was he not interested in an exploration of communal bonds, showing in turn the evanescent nature of friendship in a neighbourhood where characters are on some hustle, hence the structuring of the text?

Michael Titlestad, as Radithlalo points out, seems to miss that Moele's characterisation and plot is produced by the dynamic of the city space itself. One is reminded of George Simmel's observations in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life'¹⁴¹ that the metropolitan individual is highly susceptible to the fragmentation and social alienation engendered in the metropolis. In order to survive, he must detach himself from others (and even himself at times) to cope with this aspect of the urban environment. This detachment can manifest as an urban psychology that seems desensitised or 'flat' – a response to the constant, unpredictable fluctuations of the social, political and physical terrain.

Likewise, in his essay, 'Postmodernism and Planning,'¹⁴² Michael Dear comments that the city pursues the logic of dislocation. He alludes to Frederic Jameson's notion that a space like the city is a 'pastiche' of intersecting 'unsynchronized' elements. The notion of pastiche describes a landscape of assembled, often disparate pieces that, by co-existing in one space, are often yoked together fairly randomly. 'Pastiche' – generally regarded as

¹⁴⁰ Radithlalo, R. 'Rehearsed Postures of Conviction.' Published on LitNet: http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&news_id=13424&cause_id=1270

¹⁴¹ See adaption by D. Weinstein from Kurt Wolff (Trans.) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*. New York: Free Press, 1950, pp.409-424.

¹⁴² In *The Spaces of Postmodernity: Readings in Human Geography*. Michael Dear and Steven Flusty (eds) Oxford & Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

postmodern term—has become a useful way of understanding the global contemporary urban space. Therefore, Moele's stylistics and characterisation, rather than limiting the text (or the reader, as Titlestad claims) invoke the nature of city life in a sensitive and dynamic way. His technique recreates the atmosphere and energy of the inner city, leaving us with a strong sense of what it must be like to live there. This aids us as we try to understand the choices of the protagonists as they move within it. It is ironic that Titlestad uses the term pastiche in a derogatory way to describe a novel about a city, since the term itself is drawn from this terrain. Moreover, Moele evokes the dynamic of pastiche through his portrait-style storytelling. The novel is dissected mostly into chapters allocated to each character, to the male protagonists as well as to the female. What this does is segment the text into definable character sketches. This positions each character at once separate and intertwined with the others, mirroring the contradictory drives of the collective self and the individualistic self described above. By constructing the novel in this way, Moele suggests that in fact these alternating drives are both incommensurable and merged within the urban space.

Themes of dislocation, the intermingling of disparate elements and social fragmentation brings to mind current developments in the work of Graeme Gotz and Abdoumalig Simone. Their work resonates strongly with the novel. In their paper, 'On Belonging and Becoming in African Cities'¹⁴³ the authors depict the site of Johannesburg as a space that inevitably evokes the alternating impulses or tensions discussed above. What these authors suggest is that any person coming to Johannesburg is compelled to seek out legitimate ways in which he or she can exist in the city and naturally affiliate themselves, to varying degrees, with existing groups with which they can associate—whether ethnic, cultural and so on.

However, the amount of different peoples seeking 'legitimate access'¹⁴⁴ to the city means that social collaborations are often 'fragmented and transitory'¹⁴⁵ As a response, these

¹⁴³ In *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid city*. Tomlinson et al (eds) London, New York: Routledge, 2003.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 127

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.127

urbanites are compelled to 'become' something other, or different. Both impulses are generated from the need to access what the city has to offer and yet, the two are often incommensurable with one another. Usually though, owing to the 'tentativeness of established modes of belonging'¹⁴⁶ in a space like the inner city, most actors in this urban terrain develop tactics that allow them to 'configure highly mobile social formations that focus on elaborating multiple possibilities'¹⁴⁷ As a result, what occurs is the development of modes of being, or 'becoming' in the city that 'involve the forging of invisible spaces in which creative new intersections of forces, peoples, economies.' These processes are both 'creative and productive,'¹⁴⁸ and necessary, it seems.

This does not mean that these tactics are necessarily admirable, or 'acceptable' to the observer. And, it also does not mean, as we see in the novel, that the choice between 'belonging' or 'becoming' is always clear. What the novel does suggest, in line with Simone and Gotz ideas above, is that the city somehow demands of the young black individual a foregoing of group affiliations, or an inclination to see them as disposable. In another paper, Simone expounds on this point:

As in much of Africa, the discernment between night and day, present and past, is minimal for many South African urban youth. Without any prospect of employment, there is no platform to signal progression from youth to adulthood, little likelihood of viable social reproduction –of family, cultural value, memory. Their lives are analogous to those of people who inhabit refugee camps– an endless present unavailable to politics, unavailable to the elaboration of institutions and ways of life capable of marking a passage of time of rendering what one does today in some larger framework of purpose and meaning. Yet they, too, have a right to the city. The right to the city is not in the end reduced to the right to be maintained in the city– that is, to be housed and serviced. It must include the selective right to use the city as an arena of mutable aspirations, to varying degrees of realization. Critical to this unfolding of different ways of limited using and being in the city is the divergent composition of the city itself– its movements toward decline and ascendancy, its varied juxtapositions of planning and improvisation, of business and residence, of security and insecurity. Viewing the right to the city as the right to pursue multiple aspirations ensures that no structure of governance can ever really manage the activation of this right.¹⁴⁹

Thus, the act of pursuing aspirations in the inner city often follows the lines of alternative

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.127

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.127

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.128

¹⁴⁹ Simone, Abdoumalig. 'The Right to the City' in *interventions* Vol. 7(3). Pp. 321–325 First published in *The Wiser Review*, July 2004. Pp 322-323.

methods. Sam Raditlhalo points out a similar phenomenon:

South African youth, stuck between an immediate past where, for many, very little meaningful education was possible, and a "transitional" present where the "fruits" of post-apartheid society seem a rumour by the upper classes, young blacks in the ghetto use the notion of hustling, "ukupanda", or to "make life" as their armour. For them this obsession with making it good involves, as for youth anywhere, a desire for recognition, legitimacy, status, wealth, and, ultimately, being allowed membership of mainstream society, and Johannesburg is as good a place as any for the hustlers.¹⁵⁰

As we have seen in Chapter Two, Johannesburg embodies the possibility of 'making a deal.' 'Making a deal' or hustling, as Raditlhalo refers to it, denotes individualistic tendencies and even suggests methods of acquiring status, wealth and so on at the expense of others. As Simone and Gotz suggest, the city is depicted as a potentially selfish space that facilitates the individual's desire for or necessity of tactics that enable him or her to capitalise on the space for his or her own personal gain. But, as suggested above, this is what makes the city unique, alive, dynamic and unlimited. With the African city, like Johannesburg, these dynamic are particularly characteristic¹⁵¹. And, as we can see, these methods or modes of being are often necessary and beneficial to those individual seeking a life in the inner city. But, as Simone also points out,

The pursuit of aspirations itself largely depends on what kinds of connections residents can put together between the diverse infrastructures, spaces, populations, institutions, and economic activities of the city... it remains the presence of urban residents themselves and their varied uses of each other as instruments to realize particular aspirations and imaginaries that constitute the most significant form of urban connectivity.¹⁵²

While these transitory dynamics are typical of this kind of urban space, the attainment of these urban personas and agency is impossible without relying on other agents. However, as Simone writes above, in the competitive environment of the African city, people can become configured purely as instruments in the quest for self-realization and the attainment of desires and dreams. It becomes clear that this phenomenon is not possible without some sort of 'urban connectivity' or a collective orientated environment. But even though this urban connectivity is necessary or in place, it may not be generating a sense of unity or accord amongst the urban dwellers.

¹⁵⁰ http://www.litnet.co.za/cgi-bin/giga.cgi?cmd=cause_dir_news_item&news_id=21262&cause_id=1270

¹⁵¹ See Simone, Adoumalig. 'Urban Social Fields in Africa' in *Social Text*, No 56 (Autumn, 1998), pp 71-89.

¹⁵² Simone, Adoumalig. 2004: p. 323

Generally in the novel, each character answers to the lure of wealth, fame (or notoriety) and on developing self-serving tactics as well as transient, shifting modes of being that allow them to gain what they perceive to be autonomy and power in the urban space. Interestingly, although they share a very intimate space for a sustained amount of time together in Hillbrow, the characters who 'succeed' in the end are the ones who are able to break easily from this group and move on¹⁵³. But, as Noko leads us into lives of the '207's,' we are able to see how the urban personas they construct for themselves are based on a simultaneous distancing and attachment to certain group affiliations.

One of the first arenas in which this can be seen is the symbolic value and physical description of *Room 207*. Noko tells us that '[this] room is our safe haven and the lighted dark night of dream city.' (2006, p.15) Although each of the '207's' is so intent on taking what he can from the city, the intimacy of the room reflects the need and the desire for the comfort and security of the group. The sanctified association of this private space does not come through material comfort. The narrator makes this clear to us, as we are led on a guided tour:

...[this] place is rotting. Some of the tiles have cracked and some have lost their grip entirely and fallen off. The cream-white paint is cracking, showing the old paint underneath and the bad paintwork done over the years. The air is humid and heavy because the small window is rarely opened...In front of you the toilet, missing only the toilet lid... Then there is the bath on your right. The ceramic coating is scratched and has, over the years, fallen victim to its own predators (whatever they are). If you had an appetite for a hot bath you'd lose it...the geyser, rusty, leaking, with exposed electrical cables... This is our home, as you can see for yourself. This, our cum everything room. (2006, p. 13)

Rather, it is the combination of lives within the room that make it a haven. Each of these characters returns to the room, after his days on the streets, in and around the inner city. It symbolises a retreat not only from Hillbrow itself but also from the 'hard' public personas that they present to the outside world. While the characters' attitudes often seem brutal and wholly individualistic, the intimate relationships and claustrophobic physicality here reflect the desire to belong to a unit of some sort. Through this room, we are able to access the intricacies of how the central characters develop, in relation to each

¹⁵³ The only one who 'fails' is Noko, the narrator and he, of all the '207's' is most vulnerable to city, perhaps because of his inability to 'hustle' it.

other and in response to the inner city. And, within it, emerges the first traces of the tensions between the character's projections of tough, sexist male personas in the hard, outside world and who they become when they return home to their a private space: a space that is comforting, knowable and sanctified.

Take for instance their 'wall of inspiration.' On the wall are stuck images of the characters' role models and heroes. These range from Che Guevara and Nelson Mandela to businessman, Herman Mashaba. 'These brothers' Noko writes, 'are there for their spiritual and soulful support only.' (2006, p.18) Alongside, however, is an image of sexy singing duo, Boom Shaka, about which the narrator warns, '[if] you had something cold in your hand, something cold that you were drinking when they got on stage, by the time these ladies get off-stage it will be very hot.' (2006, p.17) On the one hand, the juxtaposition of these personas demonstrates the multiple desires of the group, the combination of desires and impulses that make up the group's experience of the inner city. But, it also shows evidence of the dualistic nature of the each character. We see here the collective, compassionate self—symbolized by the spirit of revolutionary Guevara and 'freedom fighter' (2006, p.17) Mandela—and on the other, the more carnal, consumerist and individualistic desires, represented by Boom Shaka.

We begin to realize that these young men are not guided by any one impulse in Hillbrow, but embody converging needs: the lust for what Raditlhlo calls 'hustling' as well as a desire for intimacy and even life choices that can bring them some sort of personal, sustainable enrichment. The wall, like the space of the room depicts some of the ambiguities surrounding what may be necessary to survive in the inner city. Is there much opportunity for these characters to nurture aspirations like those associated with Guevara and Mandela, or is the reality of Hillbrow such that in order to 'make it,' one needs to rely more on selfish drives and needs? If we are concerned with agency and how this is claimed in this space nowadays, do we need to accept that the latter perhaps is the more

plausible choice for the black individual for finding legitimate access to the city and for developing the means to act and choose in South Africa today?¹⁵⁴

The description of the room is jarring, hyper-real and raw, yet it is also quite cinematic, rich in the visual. Exposed to the immediate sensory aspect of the room, we see it through the narrator's eyes. In some ways this makes the setting smaller, limited perhaps, to the confines of the four walls and the state of the space. Like the characters, our experience of the room is not something objective and distanced and we are left to judge the place without much narratorial mediation. This shortened perspective, as Titlestad suggests, makes us into voyeurs of a sort, but our position is aligned with the characters since they too are subjected to their own foreshortened vision of who they are in the room, as well as in the inner city.

This 'immediate' narrative style adds to the ambiguity of the experience of the inner city. While the narrator describes the intense and powerful drives of the characters, this sense of ambiguity suggests that the '207's are in fact vulnerable to the city. Hillbrow is allocated a power that at times seems stronger than that of the characters. Shaped by the demands of this urban terrain, the '207's and their friends and lovers respond through necessity to its pressures. We feel what it must be like to live in a space that has the capacity to break or shape the dreams of those who come seeking it out. As Noko says, 'it's a dream city and here dreams die every second, as each and every second dreams are born.' (2006, p.18) Although the characters may 'hustle' the city, the city in return has the ability to 'hustle' them. Thus, the modes of being that each character chooses are construed as a necessary response to this terrain. As we become familiar with the lives of the characters in this space and their vulnerabilities, we begin to ponder the relationship between the individual and an environment such as this and whether it is possible to

¹⁵⁴ It must be said that Moele focuses mainly on male characters and the processes they go through to develop an inner city persona. For this reason, we are mainly confronted with what it means to be a man in this urban space. Moele does include several female characters who shall be dealt with in this chapter. Because of the male-dominated narrative, it is of course difficult to really say that through this novel we understand how agency in general is enacted in the inner city. Room 207 does allow for the female characters to develop quite powerful and independent voices which are intertwined in the way the narrative and the lives of these male characters develop. But, generally, we see the inner city and read the narrative through the eyes of a male protagonist.

justify some of the actions of the '207's because of this relationship. If self-aggrandisement,¹⁵⁵ for instance appears to be a response to the urban landscape, then the novel asks that we address the origins of this response. As mentioned above, as we perceive how their tactics and modes of being are a result of pre-conceived ideas about how to 'make it' in the city, it is hard to simply judge these characters. While we may not always agree with how these characters act, they display a versatility to work within their environmental constraints.

After meeting the characters in the 'Refuge' of the room, the narrator then begins his portraits, under the section 'Mortals.' Again, this suggests that who we are about to meet are fallible men, vulnerable to the whims of the city. Perhaps the narrator is preparing us for what we are about to encounter, asking us to suspend our judgement.

Matome, introduced first, is a character that most fearlessly embodies the 'hustler' characteristics and perhaps this is why he is allocated the first portrait. While all of the '207's are 'hustlers' in the inner city, Matome, in action and philosophy, comes across as a man most adept and able in his ability to make the city work for him. As the narrator writes, 'People believed in things. Some people believed in God. Others believed in money. Matome was a person who believed in himself. It was like he gave birth to himself.' (2006, p. 25) Confident, lackadaisical, Matome comes across a man without much of a conscience, a trickster figure who spouts aphorisms and inspires the other '207's by challenging them to see life more as he does. For instance, when Noko, the narrator moves into Room 207, Matome takes him to the supermarket to 'buy' groceries. At the supermarket, Noko watches as Matome charms the security guards and walks out of the shop without paying a cent. Noko, angry, leaves. In response, Matome tells him:

¹⁵⁵ The author's main focus is his male characters. If we look back to the classic 'Jim goes to Joburg' motif as well as current novels that deal with the move into the inner city, like 'Room 207' and 'Welcome to Our Hillbrow' the focus is very much on the male figure. While Mpe's novel tries to give a stronger role to female personas in the city, neither he nor Moele are able to confront and answer some of the questions around female agency in this terrain. This chapter does deal with the way the women are constructed through the eyes of the '207's but further study is warranted here. Meg Samuelson mentions the prominence of the male gendering of the migrant figure in most of this literature. See the previous chapter and Samuelson, Meg. 'The city beyond the border: the urban worlds of Duiker, Mpe and Vera' in *African Identities*, 5:2, 2007. Pp 247 – 260. p 251.

“You want to pay for everything? If you have the money, pay, but I will take. I don’t like taking, but if you ask, you won’t have,” he said, looking at me with burning eyes, dead serious. “Sometimes you have to do things, bad things, in order to get a peaceful end.”
(2006, p. 25)

Matome is charming and women adore him, mainly because of his aloofness. However, he does not use his charm to gain more sexual favours, as do the other ‘207’s. Matome abstains mostly from sex with his girlfriends. He talks about sex as something that has the power to corrupt ‘love.’ In a sense, his philosophy about sex and love is one that sees them as being two separate acts or states and almost incompatible. He tells one of these innumerable ladies, “Sweetie, love is a process, sex is an act. Sex ends, but love doesn’t end.”(2006, p.28) This spiritual philosophy of abstention may seem at odds with his desire for other gratuitous, material things, like the wealth he acquires towards the end of the novel or his lust for alcohol and parties. His rejection of the sexual act is incompatible with his trickster persona since it suggests a respect for others, for finer sensibilities such as love, as well as for the self. This does not come through in most of his actions. Indeed, it does seem as if Matome has some kind of elevated engagement with his urban world, an ability to be simultaneously attached and detached. However, his love philosophy reveals itself to be flawed, as we read in the following:

“I can go out now and buy sex. What they are selling is an act that ends; even between two people, who love each other very much, it, sex, still remains an act: it ends. It is never love, as it has nothing to do with love,” Matome concluded.

(2006, p. 28)

The narrator confides in us when he says about Matome that ‘throughout his search for a companion, one who understood love at his level, he never found one.’ (2006, p.28) But, judging by his cleverness and guile most of the time, there is no reason to believe that his love philosophy is not another tactic for maintaining a certain detachment and independence from the world around him, thus adding to his personal power. Although Matome is also the most altruistic of all the friends, as we see in many examples (not least of which is his kindness to Justice, a homeless man) he has forged an urban persona that takes the most from the urban space. He is able to select at will. Ironically, this same quality enables him to know when it is time to leave. With the money he makes in his music production business, Matome, the ‘mother’ of ‘207’ moves out, marries Basedi (a girl that Molamo treats badly at one stage in the novel) buys a house in Midrand and

never looks back. One of the saddest parts of the books is the disintegration of his friendship with the narrator, Noko. This seems mainly to be because of the latter's self-confessed jealousy. It is up to us to decide whether Noko is jealous of Matome's material wealth and status, or whether in fact the narrator's feelings are a subconscious envy over the fact that Matome manages to dislocate himself from the inner city. Either way, just as easily as he operated in and hustled the inner city, Matome steps out, cutting ties with his friends with whom he had lived for thirteen years.

One of the effects of the narrator's style of storytelling is that the ambiguities in a relationship like his and Matome's are never cleared up. In a sense, this is frustrating and confusing, especially towards the end where Noko and Matome share an intimate kiss goodbye— a simple kiss on the lips but there is the suggestion that there were layers their friendship that are unresolved and concealed. However, it becomes increasingly evident that Noko also does not understand these layers. The immediacy of the style and the emphasis on dialogue that runs throughout the novel also indicates that not enough distance is gained by any of these characters to understand how they have been shaped and affected by their lives in the inner city, and consequently how this may have shaped their relationships (or lack of them). Matome remains an enigmatic character to us and we are not entirely sure what happens to his trickster persona when he leaves Hillbrow. Nor are we certain about how the transition is made from one space to the other and the effects this may have had on his personality or identity. What was the purpose of his urban persona in the inner city if it is simply discarded in the end?

The second character we are introduced to 'came to the city...as everybody who comes to dream city, hoping and dreaming...he came to the city to continue his education.' (2006, p.34) D'Nice is a genius, brilliantly clever and wins a scholarship to study at Wits. In many ways, he seems set to succeed. But, take for instance the narrator's referral to Johannesburg as 'dream city' with no definite article. This is indicative of the mythical status given to Johannesburg, where it ceases to become an object, but rather assumes a place in the imagination as a legend, as a powerful force. With this, we get the impression that somehow the city will consume D'Nice. The title, 'dream city' is not

evoked without irony, for, as we learn, it is his dreams and how he goes about attaining them— and the same goes for the rest of the ‘207’s— that, rather than freeing him, seem to consume him. He is head hunted by a large company before he leaves university.

However, ‘he worked there for two months then handed in his resignation... there was music in his head and he wanted to get it out.’ (2006, p.39) D’Nice for the duration of the novel follows this musical calling and meanwhile, along with the rest of the group, he seduces women, succumbs regularly to the ‘war with isando’ and lives a life of whim. At the end of the novel, he leaves Hillbrow after getting his first job back and moves in with his pregnant girlfriend, Lebogang. The inner city, or the types of personas or modes of being constructed by the ‘207’s’ in this space are construed as incommensurable with such responsibilities. It is also as if the types of desires or freedoms associated with or cultivated in the inner city have absolutely no place or use anywhere else. As D’Nice tells Molamo and Zulu-Boy on the day he leaves, “‘ A ghetto intellectual is a very unhappy man.’” (2006, p.203) The latter’s retort implies that the lives they lived are ultimately worthless in the inner city. He aims his comment at Motame but he includes all of the ‘207’s. D’Nice’s exit is perceived to be a movement towards something concrete and more beneficial than what they had in the inner city— an acknowledgment of perhaps how eventually, hustling the inner city amounts to nothing. The irony though is that what it takes to ‘become’ the man he aspires to be, D’Nice, like the others has to give up his dreams despite that inner city is originally configured as the space in which to make their dreams come true. Furthermore, we find out that he becomes violent with Lebogang. Eventually, ‘they can’t even stand to look at each other any more.’ (2006, p.204)

We wonder whether the inner city and the attitudes developed there impede him from being able to live a meaningful life outside its borders. Moreover, we wonder if the self-serving tactics that he develops in the inner city prevent him from having a healthy relationship or from belonging to someone or something other than just himself? D’Nice seems to keep parts of who he was in the inner city after he leaves. Does he then embody certain psychical contradictions that manifest from his separation from the person he ‘became’ in the inner city and the person he becomes towards the end of the novel? Where does he belong now?

The third '207' we meet, Molamo, more so than the others embodies the conflicting urges of the individualistic drive and the collective self. Noko describes him as 'the writer, the actor, the poet, the producer [and] was once a tipper truck driver for a construction company...' (2006, p.40) He is a showman, a self- confessed hustler, and the father of four children, with four different women. However, although in many ways he lives his life according to his own rules, seemingly unfettered by his commitments to others, there are moments where he slips into a different mode. His contact with his children is limited, but we also learn that the pictures of them on his wall 'would make him so sad sometimes that he'd suddenly take them off the wall. This always happens when he was lost to the war against the 'Isando god's disciples.'¹⁵⁶ When drunk, Molamo's hard façade drops and we see a vulnerability in him that is often disguised or ignored. This is evident in the following scene:

"I'm living here with the five of you in this one-room flat and what do I think they have eaten? What are they wearing? Do you think they are happy?
What was I to say? He looked at me as if he expected me to come up with a comforting something, but no, I just gave him back the very same injured look that he had on. Then the tears followed and I thanked myself for not having children.
It's not that I don't love my children. I love them as much as I love their mothers, but you know..."
He paused, looking at me, trying to fight the tears.
"You'll never understand."
Then as soon as he was sober, they'd be back on the wall.
"I have them in my heart. I'm living for them and them only."
He was lying to himself, not me, drowning deeper and deeper in the problems of being a grown-up.

(2006, p. 43)

¹⁵⁶ An important dynamic is evoked each time the narrator refers to drinking alcohol as the 'war with Isando,' or 'losing the war to Isando and his disciples.' This metaphor is used throughout the novel and it implies the characters have no control over their impulses or that there are forces controlling them. This makes them less culpable for their actions, or seems to, contributing to the overall impression that these young men are at the mercy of their environment, or that their impulses are simply a response to their surroundings. One wonders then how we are meant to construe the ways these men cultivate themselves in the inner city and whether or not the impression they have that they are the masters of their own destiny is simply a reflection of their egos. Simultaneously, this allows us to question the influence of the urban space on these individuals and the kinds of choices available to them, or seemingly available to them. What is even more interesting is that 'Isando' refers to the premises of SA Breweries, so when the narrator speaks of the war, the war is not with the company or the beer itself, it is with the location in which the beer is made. While this is perhaps just a nuance of the metaphor, it is indicative further of the causality placed upon location by the narrator and the author. This reinforces the primacy given to space and its influence over the individual, rather than the other way around. Furthermore, by using this kind of slang, the immediacy and 'rawness' of the city experience is conjured up. And, those readers who do know the origins of the expression must figure out what the '207's mean by observing their reactions and physical experiences. This too contributes to the novel's intense energy.

Despite these moments, Molamo is also the one who loves to tell stories about sex and womanising. The narrator's favourite to listen to is one about gaining 'citizenship' to the boys room in his township home, where within seven days anyone wanting to stay in the outside room with the boys had to 'poke one of the female species.' (2006, p.42) The contrast between Molamo's yearning for his children and the joy he takes from these kinds of stories, which revolve around the objectification of women, points to his duplicities. It is not that Molamo is necessarily torn or confused emotionally. More likely, he feels the need to adopt a certain external personality to attain a level of personal achievement in the city. Molamo's persona and aspirations are driven by what he feels reflect his power as a man. In many ways, he divorces himself from any relationships that may hamper this. We see this in the time it takes for him to eventually commit to the character, Tebogo and their son. However, he acknowledges the value of what Simone refers to as the 'interconnectivity' of the urban space. He tells the others, "[my] ladder to the top, every step that I have passed, has a face, that I have thanked, and those faces are holding me, this ladder, together.' (2006, p.44) Later, he says:

Excuse the cliché, but no man is an island...No one is a self-made something. People can help you to be a very big something. I'm still dreaming a dream because of these people and the very many things that they have done for me, all they have had from me is a 'thank-you.' If it wasn't for them, well I don't know. (2006, p.44)

For the most part, these 'faces' have become tools or aids in his drive for success and independence. As we saw with Simone, the heightened interconnectivity in the city does not necessarily mean that the connections between people are long lasting or particularly meaningful, on an emotional level. As we see with Molamo—and the rest of the '207's'—their affiliations with others while in the inner city are predominantly superficial. If Molamo had stayed in Hillbrow and married Tebogo, as he does finally, this would perhaps have indicated that he could have reconciled the drive for superficial connections with a need for something more meaningful, within this space. But, the fact that he leaves Hillbrow to start a life with his 'lawyer woman' suggests that this is impossible. It becomes clear that all the '207's' feel driven to develop a certain mode of being, thinking and acting in the inner city at the expense of other parts of themselves. It becomes increasingly clearer that these modes of being are directly linked to perceptions of what it

means to succeed. Ironically, even though the narrator is unsure at times about how the inner city and the '207's' relate to each other, there is a constant return to the myth of 'making it' in this terrain. Noko describes the day he arrives:

We had just passed Witbank, we were running on the N12 in an aging Japanese-made taxi. Without any music and with fifteen passengers it was tense and kind of hostile. Nobody was talking. Maybe everybody was thinking about this great city, planning what they were going to do there, do it better and in quarter of the time. I smiled...

(2006, p. 45)

Thus, it becomes clear to us that everything we read about the '207's' is closely linked to this idea.

The next character, Modishi is depicted as somewhat different to the other '207's. The narrator openly dislikes him and one is never quite sure as to why. Noko explains it as follows:

Sometimes I wish he had not come to live with us. He was one of those people that your heart, my heart, just disapproved of from the very moment I saw him. The bad part was he never did anything bad to me. My blood just hated his blood and, as the years went by, I never liked him much. This was a kind of relationship of disapprovals; my blood rejected his and maybe he rejected mine, but he never showed it. I didn't hate the man, I just didn't approve of him. I don't hate people.

(2006, p. 48)

The source of the bad blood between Noko and Modishi seems to be linked to the way Modishi treats women. The other '207's, while they are in the inner city, generally treat women as 'whores, gold-diggers and bitches.' (2006, p.59) But, Modishi does not seem to approach women in this same manner. For most of the novel, he is in a comfortable and long-term relationship with a young girl, Lerato. The way he chooses to engage with Lerato is in contrast to the others' behaviour. For instance, when Modishi and Lerato experience problems in their relationship, what brings about their reconciliation is Modishi's impression that she is truly irreplaceable. He says to Molamo, 'the character in Lerato is not worth losing because even if you live another lifetime, you'll never have one like her.' (2006, p.59)

This does not bode well with the others. Seen as not something of this 'this world, ' Modishi is pitied for his attitude to Lerato. After he and Lerato reconcile, Noko describes him as simplistic and naïve:

Modishi was the one upright and honest man that Solomon spoke of. I sometimes felt sorry for him, for what he stood for and believed in, because it wasn't something of this world. But most of the time, I envied him. He was three-and-a-half-year-old toddler in the body of a twenty-three-year-old man.

(2006, p.61)

This could reflect the narrator's shame at his own attitude, or a contempt for what is read as powerlessness. Either way, Modishi is viewed as an outcast of sorts.

Of course, there are distinct parallels between him and the rest of the '207's.' At this stage of the novel, we have been given enough material to start making these connections, even if at times, we are unsure as to what to make of them. Like all of the '207's', Modishi comes to the city to study. And like all of them, he is unable to finish his education. His story is that the college in which he registered was a 'fly-by-night' institution. After having paid for his course up front, he finds out the institution was not registered. As the narrator comments, this is just another one of these places that 'defraud the masses.' (2006, p. 51)¹⁵⁷ Coming to the city, Modishi gives up the option of living and working his family's land. He is lured by the 'need for the city, the love of the buzzing streets with neon lights.' (2006, p. 49) Unlike the others, he actually comes from a position of relative privilege. In fact it is from the sale of his father's house that he is able to pay for his studies (despite the fact that he is robbed by the institution).

Ironically, the narrator sees Modishi as having squandered his chance to be happy. Noko writes:

Modishi always said that if he could make enough, he would move back to the land and give it life once more and stop suffering here in the lighted streets. Then I would ask him, "How much is enough Modishi?" knowing that even if he made a million he'd never go back. If he had been serious about it he could have gone long before he came to 207 and started farming the land with the money he had made from the sale of his house, or even applied for a bank loan and grown from there. He was lying to himself, but that's dream city for you. It needs you and your Chinese thinking to keep you in it. It will city-ise you, hold you, lovingly caress you and orgasmify you and, by the time you wake up, it's too

¹⁵⁷ What is also interesting about this expression is that the narrator often insinuates that the 'masses' are at the mercy of the system— whether it is the urban or the general South African socio-political and economic system. Another phrase he uses throughout the novel is 'a sad black story.' As he says about all of the '207's': I once believed that we were going somewhere... to me it's another sad black story.' (p. 50) These kinds of expressions that punctuate the text reinforce the notion that these characters are helpless in some way. It also indicates that the choices they make are the only recourse they have to competing with these systems.

late: you're old, working as a barman, with four different children from four different mothers and a maintenance order around your neck.

(2006, p. 50)

This is hard for us to understand because the text is littered with constant references to the idea that the city is the gateway to real happiness and autonomy. Noko's comment above suggests the presence of a contradictory belief: that the city is not necessarily the place where dreams or aspirations can be sustained—no matter what tactics are employed. Phrases like 'orgasmify you' and city-ise' you also display this tension, for the words are seductive and sensual, literal. In the physicality that they conjure up, we get the impression that one cannot resist the city, even if it has tendency to be hostile or difficult. However, as we know, the city is also deceptive and what it may turn you into is not necessarily something desired, or recognizable.

What becomes clearer with each character is that none of the '207's' actually achieves much of what they aspired to at all. Rather than being freed from their environment it seems they are constrained somehow. Even Modishi, who seems to display the capacity for a meaningful relationship and who is critical of the other's treatment of women, one day beats Lerato so badly that she is hospitalized.¹⁵⁸ This aspect of Modishi's character, his violence and a frighteningly sociopathic display of unresolved anger, is another reason why the narrator is wary of him. However, in terms of what Modishi's actions indicate about inner city life, this is a little less clear. One could assume that Modishi's behaviour is typical of the chauvinistic, selfish attitudes adopted by the majority of male characters in the novel. He says, after he has beaten Lerato, 'she was wayward and I could not let her go astray anymore' (2006, p.206) Indeed, even though for most of the novel, Modishi is portrayed as a man who somehow challenges the sexist stereotype, he reveals himself to embody the same disturbing tendencies as most of the male characters in the novel.

¹⁵⁸ And, as with D'Nice, when Lerato and Modishi eventually marry and move out of Hillbrow, we learn that he beats her frequently.

We come to understand that these attitudes are aligned with what it means to 'make it' as a man in the city. This is communicated through a conversation between Noko and his father, where his father says:

The sole fact that you have not a girlfriend, but girlfriends makes you a complete man and that makes me very proud of you because, man, you went out and got yourself girls without soliciting anybody's help. Isn't that so? Isn't that so?

...So why can't you continue being on track? You are taking yourself off track. Be a man, not an image of one. A man stands on his own two feet and fights his own wars. And now you want to disappoint me. You are not a child anymore and I did what I could for you. If I failed you, well, you have you. You now have to make right the failures that I have made in your life, make them right because I can't, I did all that I can and now it's all on you. (2006, pp.74-76)

What Noko is suggesting is that everything these young men are doing is bringing them one step closer to 'making right' the past and forging a future that is autonomous. This resonates strongly with what Raditlhalo observes in the beginning of this chapter about 'hustling.' It also resonates with what the post-apartheid city is seen to represent to these characters: the chance to reclaim an autonomous sense of self and agency in the city and in South Africa. The fact is, whether something like the friends' views of women are associated with a more general trend of chauvinism in South Africa, we are lead to understand that these attitudes form part of an important repertoire of how to behave in the city. Treating women in this way seems to indicate self-sufficiency and personal power. This does jar however with the idea that the city is an open space, encouraging in its residents a move towards accepting 'otherness.' In the '207's, one of their lessons seems to be learning the value of the woman in society. This, however, is something that they learn, tentatively at that, only at certain intervals in the novel. The complicated nature of the gender question is raised, but not fully answered by Moele. This leads us to question whether or not a space like the inner city truly has the capacity to channel new lines of behaviour and identity, or whether it somehow reinforces old ones.

By watching the way the characters behave, we are lead to question whether the tactics or philosophies developed or sustained as part of the experience of this city are actually productive or beneficial to these actors. Furthermore, if we consider that living in the inner city is part of a dream that represents a way forward from the past, the fact that these young men sustain attitudes that seem to come from previous generations indicates

that the city itself does not challenge these young men to change at all. In other words, the '207's', come into contact with a different and supposedly more open social sphere to the ones they originally hail from. However, although living in what is a more flexible system, they show that they do not shift accordingly. These men, even when confronted with a different environment remain fixed in the attitudes brought with them from outside the city. This suggests that the urban space, despite its heterogeneity and flexibility may not necessarily induce a change of perception in the urban actors who seek it out.

In 'Belonging and Becoming in African Cities,' Gotz and Simone write about this paradoxical tendency in the city that often affects newcomers who are feeling forced to face the open and shifting urban system. Often, they will pull back into belief systems and modes of being that are familiar and stable. This phenomenon of 'belonging' does not counteract the response to 'become' more, mentioned earlier, but it does suggest that sometimes, although the city encourages movement and change, there can be an opposite response from the individual. For the '207's' who display this tendency, although simultaneously embracing a 'hustler' urban persona and trying to pursue their own dreams in the inner city, it means that their efforts to become new and autonomous are perhaps limited. What is indicated here is that mending the past is not an easy process. We inevitably begin to question whether the inner city is the place where the past can be mended. This is because of the fact that here, the '207's' easily maintain certain rigid belief systems, even while under the impression that they are becoming someone new. What we feel compelled to decipher is whether this can be seen as a failure in individuals to see the truth of their situations or that they are somehow blinded because of the nature of the system in which they find themselves. Throughout the novel we realise that in many ways, the narrator feels that each of the '207's' are at the mercy of the urban system and the social patterns typical of South Africa's legacy.

Indeed, with Zulu-Boy, the last of the '207's' to be introduced, we meet a young man fixated by and inscribed with certain prejudices. The narrator tells us that Zulu-Boy,

...loved the city and understood every soul in it. The only thing that he would have changed about it would have been to make everybody in it a Zulu. If he had the chance, he would have made everybody in Johannesburg a Zulu. Though he didn't like

makwerekwere, he hated the pedis even more. He associated every individual with their tribe or the land they were from. For him, the Zulus were the supreme race and after that everybody was subhuman, "lamaPedi".

Don't blame him, he inherited that from somewhere in our past. No matter what you were, if you were black, he liked to know what tribe you were from. To him, every man had the mentality of his tribe.

(2006, p. 65)

There is a certain satirical undertone to the description of this character, as there is with most of the '207's.' However, the emphasis on the past is important and has serious implications to this story, especially since we are considering that each of these individuals is trying to reinvent him or her self in some way. Zulu-Boy is seen to be the one character who really understands the city:

If there is anyone you know, always telling you that they have lived the ins and outs, days and nights of Hillbrow, they are lying. Most of them don't like it here; they hate the place. everybody is one their way out of Hillbrow. But there was one man, a Hillbrowean in true nature, who not only lived the good life of the place but felt its painful existence as well. He breathed it and so it breathed him, it embraced him and he embraced it, felt its pain and made it feel his pain.

(2006, p. 62)

He is described as violent as well as being a thief. He is also portrayed as vain. The narrator tells us that 'he would take his time looking in the mirror, making whatever it was sit on him like he had a PhD in fashion. You would have liked him and thought he was very expensive.' (2006, p. 63) Zulu-Boy is also a hustler, a player. Wise to the streets, he carries his ID book around with him in case he is mistaken for a foreigner—which happens often, ironically. Of all the '207's' he has lived for the longest in Hillbrow, from Ponte Tower in Braamfontein to Captain Street in Brenton Manor, to the infamous Mariston Hotel in Claim Street, 'pushing drugs.' (2006, p.64) Zulu-Boy is the ultimate shifting character, transitory, a chameleon of sorts, able to move and change to fit whatever circumstances he finds himself in. Like the others, Zulu-Boy came to the inner city to study, but after dropping out, has no choice but to remain there. For these reasons, the narrator sees him as the embodiment of Hillbrow.

Thus, Hillbrow becomes configured as shifting and transitory but also violent and harsh. Yet, as one sees in these portraits, becoming hustler is one way to match the trials and challenges of this space. Zulu-Boy is certainly dynamic and quick, finding clever ways to

capitalize on the way the inner city works, whether this is through crime or through his attitude. What is particularly interesting about his character though is that despite his inner city persona—or perhaps one should say because of this—he falls in love with another type who is seen to reflect the soul of Hillbrow: Ntombifuthi, the seventh daughter of a Swazi priest, who has turned to prostitution as a way of paying for her studies. The fact that she and Zulu-boy can experience what we are lead to understand as true love suggests that in the space of the inner city, certain differences and impasses can be overcome. If either character had been less ‘typically’ Hillbrowean, the symbolism of their love would perhaps not been as powerful. With these two characters, Moele paints a decidedly less ambiguous picture of the potential the inner city holds for meaningful interactions. While maintaining their inner city identities, they are able to act on and claim their feelings for one another, freely. This gives the inner city a more generous profile.

However, Zulu-Boy’s fate is that he dies of AIDS. Whether this is contracted from Ntombifuthi or whether he in fact infects her remains unknown to us, and possibly to the others. Ironically, while he lives a life according to his own terms, the very lifestyle he adopts in the inner city leads him to his death. Perhaps a figure like his had only one possible way of leaving Hillbrow since, unlike the others, he has no intention to move out. As the narrator says, ‘ [he] loved Hillbrow. We were all thinking about Khayalami, but here he was thinking, “I’m living the life.” He had reached his Khayalami.’ (2006, p.210.)

Despite this, we are left with the feeling that the space and life of the inner city got the better of him. Even as he is dying, he displays a sense of humour as well as the ease and fatalism that allowed him to be so independent and flexible within the inner city.¹⁵⁹ His death is certainly not dwelled upon as tragic. However, in the fact that Zulu-Boy, like all the characters in the novel are representative of certain archetypes, his death could signal a warning to those who would or do follow in his steps. HIV and AIDS are only touched on here and in the novel. But, as we know, this disease is not only a pandemic but in

¹⁵⁹ He invites all of his friends to his funeral, announcing his death as if it were a birthday.

South Africa, accessible and adequate public treatment is severely limited. How much does Zulu-Boy's death call attention to the lack of sustainable health care for this disease and others in this country? On the one hand, Zulu-Boy maintains a meaningful relationship to himself, the city and to his girlfriend. Unlike the others, he does not regret or try to distance himself from the choices he makes while living in Hillbrow. But his death tempers this, asking us to decide what the cost of this lifestyle is. Furthermore, the cause of his death reminds us of one of the harshest realities facing citizens and residents of South Africa. This issue is also one of the strongest links between the two novels. In Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, HIV and AIDS are used as a vehicle for the narrative's central themes of reconciliation and tolerance. Here, in *Room 207*, Moele only touches on the issue very lightly. What this does is bring to mind some of the jarring contradictions within the inner city, as well as Moele's own contradictions about his feelings towards the space. Again, this makes it quite hard for the reader to discern whether or not the characters conquer, or are conquered by the city. It does suggest quite strongly though an avoidance of some of the realities that the characters face. This avoidance, translated into the characters makes them ambivalent types and difficult to read, mirroring perhaps the ambiguity of the inner city itself. While this may lend itself to how we may understand the space, this avoidance also displays the author and narrator's inability to really grapple with what life in the inner city may mean. Unlike Mpe, who chooses to engage with these ambiguities rather than simply portraying them, Moele leaves us, and his protagonists, somewhat dislocated from understanding the realities of the space.

This is manifested strongly in the narrator, Noko, through whose eyes the story of each character is told. He is not an omniscient voice. Like the others, he is a mere 'mortal,' fallible, vulnerable and often judgmental. We learn about his choices and attitudes from the position he adopts towards the other '207's.' And, it is through his voice that Johannesburg starts to take shape:

I have been to Cape Town. I have been to Durban, Bloemfontein, Nelspruit and Polokwane. I have been to Grahamstown. I have never been to Lagos and that goes for New York and London too. But the best part of it is that I don't want to live in any of them. I don't even want to visit any of them. I have Johannesburg and I can't ask for more.

(2006, p. 69)

His attitude towards Johannesburg, despite the kinds of assertions he makes above, is often ambivalent. As we have seen above, he speaks of as a city that has the capacity to destroy dreams and consume its inhabitants. Simultaneously he conveys a strong sense of loyalty to this place. He is often evasive and ambiguous about what he sees, pushing us to make our own conclusions. At other times, he makes sweeping, confident statements that ask us to do the opposite. The combination of the two modes adds to our confusion but also exposes his own vulnerability and susceptibility to the city, as well as to his perceptions of it. He speaks constantly of the typical 'sad, black story' when he refers to the lives of the '207's' and most of the inhabitants of the city. And yet, he also makes comments like:

Johannesburg. It's a city founded by some people.
Who cares who founded it here? The British had their time and it passed. The Afrikaners had their time; they enjoyed it, and then it too passed by. Now Johannesburg is under control of the black man, his time is here and, by the looks of things, his time will never pass.

(2006, p. 69)

His tendency to valorise a new Johannesburg as well as seeing it as a dangerous or limited place reflects some of the realities of the space— where on the one hand, the black population now have a legitimate claim to the city, but on the other, there are persistent constraints and real hardships for those who seek it out. We see in Noko, more so than the other characters, an awareness of the duplicity, the volatility of the space. As he says: 'Johannesburg. This is the land where the weak, the poor, the rich and the powerful...mingle and mend, excuse the cliché.' (2006, p. 69) While Noko has similar aspirations to the rest of the '207's' it is his awareness of this volatility that separates him from the others. Ironically, too, it is this awareness that perhaps prevents him from being able to capitalise on it like the others do. When he leaves, he feels as if he has somehow failed.

If one looks at the difference between him and the other '207's' he is the one who forms the deepest attachment to their haven, Room 207, to the solidity of the group as well as to the city. The others use the city to suit their whims and when the time comes, they depart, seemingly with no regrets. This is the reason why Matome and Noko's relationship

breaks down. While we remain doubtful as to the value of the urban personas the '207's adopt while in the inner city, it appears that Noko is constrained and caught by his inability to act in the same careless way as the others. Paradoxically, even though he displays a greater compassion and understanding of the complexities of the inner city, as well as of the implications of the actions and choices of his friends, this quality appears to be more of an impediment than an advantage.

In this, we are left to contemplate again what aspects of the self need to be nurtured in order to gain the most from the urban space. While we may question the tactics employed by the others as they mould themselves to 'hustle' and make the most of the inner city, Noko, who displays less of a tendency for this, seems to come out second best. What emerges from Noko's journey, in comparison to the other '207's' is that his 'failure' seems to come from his desire to marry both his individualistic and collective impulses. While the other characters display the same need for the comfort of the group, when the time comes, they dispose of this need when it no longer serves them. Noko seems unable to do this.

Moreover, Noko just 'sees' too much. We get this impression right from the start of the novel, when he describes the mirror in Room 207:

This is our mirror. I have seen things in this mirror; I have seen people lose themselves in front of it. I don't know if it's because it's a big mirror, but come here very early in the morning and you'll witness what the mirror on the wall is witness to and what it reflects
(2006, p. 19)

From Aristotle to Lacan, the surface of the mirror has come to represent self-recognition as well as a displacement of the self. As Noko suggests above, while the mirror can lead us to a synthesis with oneself, a sense of coming into oneself, it also shows how we may be split from ourselves, or from the way we see ourselves in our surrounding environments. The mirror also reflects how others may see us. The mirror allows each person to focus upon him or herself, but, on the other, it frames a different view of the person in the room, and also presents to that person an alternative vision of the room itself. The fact that these characters become 'lost' in the mirror's surface suggests that when confronted with the reflection of themselves, they are unable to recognise who they

have become. This lack of recognition is partly because in this space they are not always able to view themselves or be critical of their own processes. The inner city does not seem to allow much time for self-reflection as each character is constantly striving to attain his dreams. This blindness appears to be one of the qualities that enables most of the '207's' to attain some of their desires. Noko, on the other hand, bears witness always, watching the processes of each of his friends. In this he seems to be caught.¹⁶⁰

Besides Noko, one of the main lenses through which we are able question the ways in which the '207's' configure themselves in the city is through the female characters. Molamo for instance, while in Hillbrow is seen by Tebogo, his 'lawyer woman' as a dropout.¹⁶¹ Despite his feelings for her, Molamo frequently refers to Tebogo as a whore. Molamo changes his attitude¹⁶² towards Tebogo and shortly afterwards moves out of Hillbrow, becomes a real father to his son and lives, as far as we know, happily ever after. In Hillbrow, he is unable to find such happiness. If indeed we are to understand that his attitude is linked to what it means to 'make it' in the city, then it clearly does not seem to help him much at all while he is there. His transformation in many ways comes through the influence of Tebogo.

Although generally treated badly, these women are able to disarm their men. In some ways, this suggests that the individualistic impulses of the '207's' are displaced when they develop a true bond with a woman. Are we then to assume that the tactics developed by these male characters are not only unsustainable but are even somewhat irrelevant in the long run?¹⁶³ The female protagonists also bring to light an important consideration:

¹⁶⁰ A further irony is that he is unable to actually witness himself and his own mistakes.

¹⁶¹ Molamo is compared by Tebogo, to Khutso, 'what the masses call the black elite. Young, black, under thirty and successful in financial terms.' She uses him as an example to their son, also called Molamo, as what *not* be to. While Khutso is, in theory, everything that Molamo is not, his persona is obviously criticised by the '207's.' No doubt they see him as a snob or dislocated from the real world somehow. But, Moele also tells us that Khutso is a self-made young man and that nothing he has is because of handouts. Because of this, we cannot just simply dismiss him or what he represents, even though Noko seems to. This makes it even harder for us to discern how we are meant to read the '207's.'

¹⁶² Towards the end of the novel, Molamo decides to go and visit Tebogo in Khayalami. Just before he does, Noko says to him: '...she's a woman isn't she? A whore like all of them?' (p. 215)

¹⁶³ The dynamics and closeness in Room 207 suggest this too, although the atmosphere in there is often an amplification of the kinds of sexist attitudes that we witness throughout most of the novel.

that finding agency or meaning in the urban space is a different process for men and for women. For men, part of this process seems to be a shameless conceit and disregard for the opposite sex, bound to notions of what it means to be powerful and autonomous in the inner city. At the mercy of these men, some of the women indeed seem powerless, which leaves us wondering what kind of opportunities there are for young girls also looking for a significant or meaningful experience of the urban terrain. But, in the same way that the author complicates notions of agency and autonomy in his male characters, he does so also with his female ones.

One example is the character, Debra, whose sexual forwardness towards Motame rivals that of the male characters. When 'standing in front of her boyfriend, stroking him with her soft hands,' she says to Matome, 'out loud for everyone who could hear, "Since the day I first saw you I always wanted to fuck you."' (p.26) The narrator is using this example to illustrate the sex appeal of the character Matome—girls just cannot resist his 'charm.' (2006, p.126) At the same time, there is the suggestion that women can play the same game as the men in this room. In this moment, one realizes that the women in the story, despite being treated so badly by the men, have the power to cross certain boundaries. Furthermore, by using the same kind of language as the men, Deborah mimics the attitudes of the '207's', mocking it and even displacing it. One is, however, forced to question whether a woman like Debra in adopting such an attitude and voice is in fact limiting herself in the same way that the male characters seem to do.

Alternatively, Lerato and Basedi are portrayed as educated, intelligent and compassionate and two of the strongest characters in the novel. In their compassion and independence, they seem to expose the flaws of the male protagonists and even force them to take a second look at themselves. For instance, soon after Matome has broken off his affair with Basedi, after telling her that 'a hustler and a doctor can never be happy together,' (2006, p.134)

"Molamo, why did you let go of Basedi?"

"Stress"

"Aren't they all stress?"

Not all women. Basedi is big stress. She married herself. Why? Because she is super intelligent." He looks at D'nice. "Some people are too intelligent for their own good and become social misfits"

"Fuck you. Molamo, you're the socially handicapped misfit and you can't even see that." D'nice said.

(2006, p.140)

The structure of the novel also indicates the power of the key female characters in the novel. Tebogo, Basedi, Ntombifuthi and Lerato are introduced under the section 'Helen of Troy.' With Helen of Troy, one associates mesmerising beauty—the power of which incited men to go to war. Even though the '207's' are dismissive and chauvinistic towards these women, these women have the capacity to change their lives— which they eventually do—and draw them away from their individualistic, hustler personas. Perhaps it is the threat of this that causes the male protagonists to be wary of them.¹⁶⁴ The way that the narrator treats the prostitutes in the novel seems to reinforce this. The 'angels of the night'¹⁶⁵ are configured in a sympathetic way. Unlike the majority of the '207's' girlfriend, these girls are never referred to as 'gold-diggers, bitches or whores.' Rather, there is some sort of unspoken respect and friendship between the two parties.

Thanks to Matome, the others learn not to denigrate or dehumanise the prostitutes. They realise that their own struggle for survival, under difficult conditions, is quite similar to that of the prostitutes. There is a sense of shared experience, of shared hardship. There is no moral high ground being delivered. Rather there is a sense of respect and even pity for what these women have to endure in order to make a living. Noko confesses to the reader, '[they] too are people, the same as you and me, with hopeful dreams. I once hated them more than you do, but I came to see that they are human beings too...' While one could read this as evidence of compassion in the '207's'— and in many ways it does expose a certain capacity for empathy in them—what is more likely is that the prostitutes are not configured as the same kinds of women as the Lerato, Basedi and Tebogo characters. Unlike these, the 'angels of the night' are not a threat in the same way that the girlfriends are since they do not want to stop the '207's' from doing what they enjoy most.

¹⁶⁴ Needless to say, neither the author nor the narrator critiques this perception of the woman as temptress. This contributes to the opinion that the novel reinforces negative stereotypes about women.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p118

Furthermore, these prostitutes are seen to embody the mechanisms of the inner city, the invisible operations that comprise this space. For the '207's' therefore, the love of the prostitutes is surely a love of what they represent and what they ultimately mirror in themselves. Another important dynamic surrounds the relationship between the '207's' and the prostitutes. As mentioned above, the prostitutes seem to embody the energy of the city in an intensely visceral way. The male protagonists are drawn to them, tempted by their bodies, their sexiness and their independence. Also, these women are distinct from the '207's', ties more to the city than they are to the '207's'. In this way, we can understand that the prostitutes are adored because they embody the temptations of the urban context– the danger, the vulnerability and the power of the temptress.

Indeed, the '207's' treat the city in a visceral way. The prostitutes embody the intense physicality that Matome sees as necessary for an experience of Johannesburg. He says to Noko, after the latter has just been mugged:

“Welcome to Johannesburg. This time you really felt it, your blood has been spilt and mixed with its soil. You and the city are in perfect connection with each other. Your blood runs through its veins as it runs through your blood.”

(2006, p. 70)

The viscosity of the inner city is evoked throughout the novel. It comes across through the narrator's cinematic style of storytelling, the emphasis on physical experience- as we have seen in the intensely intimate space of Room 207, the behaviour of the protagonists, their emphasis on appearance, status, sex and conquest. This viscosity brings us to experience the city in a fairly ad-hoc way, immediate and intense, as it is for those who live in and pass through its terrain. When Noko leads us through the streets, in the chapter entitled, 'A Sad Tale,' he asks us to 'smell the contaminated Hillbrow air' (p 157), to 'turn right into Twist, walk with me here. Relax, you aren't in any kind of danger. Walk like a true Hillbrowean. Walk like it belongs to you, because, me and you, we have inherited this. It's ours now. Pass one street, pass another...' (p 158). We are induced into the city in this way, possessed by it. We are made to understand it as a space of motion, danger, decay and dynamism. This lends to the novel a truthfulness, a verisimilitude to what the author is trying to represent.

Furthermore, the emphasis on the physical experience of the city suggests the notion that through this experience comes an ability or even the right to claim to the city. As Noko indicates above, the city now belongs to those who occupy it, those who fill its corners, those who seek it out as an answer to their dreams. What is also conveyed through this is that because each physical experience of the city is different, each person, each individual has as much right to the city as another. Noko refers to Nigerians as ‘African brothers’ (p.160) and when he refers to their conversation he comments, ‘I think they were talking Ibo or Yoruba. Ah! Who cares? They were talking African...’ (2006, p. 162) He, as a South African, feels he has no greater claim to the inner city than others lured by it. Here is sense that Hillbrow is a community as well as an individual arena, drawing on Simone and Gotz idea that a space like the inner city evokes both collective and individualistic reactions. This notion of reaction, of response brings to mind how residents develop appropriate and flexible tactics in order to make the most of the space. This also allows us to consider the difference between perception and reality. Only by living in Hillbrow can one truly understand what it means to make a life there and the challenges faced by its residents, and so on. Noko understands this when he points out that:

[The] first time I came here, like so many of us I had heard stories about Hillbrow being the capital of sin.

‘Stay away from the ways of the city, my child; you are there to get an education and not to get the ways of the city. Don’t let the ways of the city get you,” my grandmother said when I was leaving home for the city.

But I came to understand the city ways, love them even, and Hillbrow isn’t the capital of sin, it’s a residential area, where people are living and trying to make a living. After slaving, after school, after the formal parts of our lives, we mingle and mend, use and abuse what we use and abuse while hoping to never get abused ourselves. Those are the ways of the city.

(2006, p.65)

Through this, Noko challenges the ‘sign’ of Hillbrow. We are encouraged to start looking beyond the overarching system or public perception of Hillbrow in order to understand it. We do see in his words an emphasis on the need for a kind of selfishness and the capacity to be versatile and flexible. By extension, instead of justifying the tactics developed by the ‘207’s,’ the narrator rather asks us to see Hillbrow as a space that demands of its residents to be changeable. This facilitates our engagement with all the contradictions in

the characters we have met, and encourages us to not simply dismiss the parts of them that we find unreasonable or difficult to digest.

The foregrounding of the experience of the *lived* space of Hillbrow is essential to the how we read the inner city through the novel. It acts also as the catalyst for the development of the '207's' political philosophies as well as the nature of how they frame themselves. In 'Weekending,' for instance, a debate ensues amongst the friends, beginning with Molamo's observation that, '[black] people, we are not a happy people.' (2006, p.88)

He explains:

I am not happy, Matome. I pretend to be a happy individual, but look at me, look at me carefully. Let me lay my life out for you: I have fathered four children but I am not a father; I use and abuse every female and leave them crying. How long has Tebogo mothered and wifed me? But I have always abused her. Worse, I even call her a whore and she is the mother to my first-born child... What we are deep inside reflects in us as a nation, as Africans. You all, like me, believe you are happy. What I have seen is that we have a personal, national hate. We don't like ourselves. In each and every one of us there is no love but hate and anger.

(2006, p.88)

When Zulu-boy argues, ' I love myself and I'm proud of myself, proud of my blackness,' (2006, p.89) Molamo cuts in:

[A] hateful love, a blind self-pride and artificial black proud-ness: that is what I am looking at in all my black brothers and sisters; exactly what I am looking at in you, Matome, in all of us. Look deep in your hearts, sisters and brothers, we are not happy people.

(2006, p.89)

This sentiment is not portrayed as being drawn from an intellectual stance, but rather the physical experience of the immediate environment:

...look at this rotting Hillbrow of ours. The first time I came here it was very beautiful and very clean. Then we moved in, black people moved in, and so the rotting came."

Matome cuts in, "That is a question of the economics of living– it doesn't have anything to do with black pride and love."

"Matome, let me put it to you this way. This very Hillbrow that you and I are living in was cleaned by blacks back in the days. Underline blacks. Blacks were cleaning it very well, excellently, actually, and the very same black people are still cleaning it to this day. Why are they not cleaning better today? Are you going to say it is a question of economics? Is cleaning a city a question of economy? ... the question on the table is not who owns the buildings of Hillbrow. It's cleaning the city that we are talking about here."

(2006, pp. 90-91)

The fact that these characters and the author are able to generate this debate suggests the possibility of change. Rory Bester, cited in Chapter Two and Sarah Nuttall, cited in the previous chapter, both point out that the site of the post-apartheid city is one that facilitates a negotiation of disparate elements and holds the potential for change. For instance, the mere coming together of these characters, facilitated by the lure of the inner city, is what brings this kind of discussion into the open. The fact that some of the key female characters are present and contributing to the conversation and energy in the room is equally important. While we see them as vulnerable to the pressures of the city in a different way to the men, their presence suggests that they also have the ability to engage with it in a real way and influence it. In this debate, we also get the chance to see how the characters' battles with themselves can possibly produce a movement forward, a movement out of stagnation—emotional, physical, mental and social. And, in the emphasis on 'the black people' is the suggestion that this movement forward could be generated by some kind of united front. Through an experience and witnessing of collective suffering and difficulty, the characters begin to associate themselves with the rest of Hillbrow's people. It is perhaps in this experience of suffering that the '207's are able to transcend their drive for self-satisfaction to encompass a notion of collectivity and community.

Yet, the rawness of this dialogue and the fact that their argument remains unresolved also suggests that this integration of the two is still tenuous. This dialogue reminds us of the difficulties faced by a new generation of black urban South Africans in attempting to let go of the past. It seems possible that a new generation of black urbanites have ushered in new traumas while attempting to resolve old ones. And, we gain a sense here that despite the tactics and tools these urbanites may have developed in order to survive in the inner city, these do not necessarily equip them emotionally for what they witness and experience here.

If we consider what it means to have agency in and a legitimate access to the city, if these characters reflect not only their own emotional stagnation but a disillusionment at others,' what questions does this raise around the issue of agency? Poverty, danger, ethnic

intolerance, lack of services and infrastructure and so on, these are all written into the fabric of a space like Hillbrow. The practical implication and emotional weight of such factors must be bound to how one develops a healthy sense of self and freedom, but to what extent? As Noko asks, 'Can you measure suffering? Can you measure joy?' (2006, p.19) And, if a space like the inner city demands an emotional suspension in order for the individual to actually 'make it,' what does this mean for the city itself? Furthermore, the debate shows the protagonists' contempt for their fellow black men and women. While Mpe has shown us that the fiction of a rainbow nation is fickle and unrealistic, how possible is it to transform a space and a socio-political situation if such contempt exists amongst those who are attempting to enact the transformation? This is a pressing issue since the inner city has in many respects been distanced and demonised from the rest of Johannesburg. In a manner of speaking, the onus lies on the residents to change the space from within.

The debate above is constructed in such a way that we read the flaws in the characters' capacities to see this. While they have the capacity to raise some important issues— about themselves and about the inner city, the personas these characters choose to adopt and the desires they seek to attain do not always reflect a movement towards reconciliation or resolution of the past. Let us now forget also that each of them moves out of the inner city, implying that the personas they adopt in the space are somehow untenable, or that the space itself is ultimately inhabitable. Indeed, the inner city becomes less of the destination or site of attainment and successes, and more of a fairly shallow conduit to something perceived to be bigger and better— on the outside. One could argue that this adds to the transience and open-ness of the urban terrain. But if such a generation of black South Africans sees it as disposable, can we begin to see it as a dynamic and enabling space?

Unlike Mpe, the author does not create an overarching narrative that offers some sort of resolution to these questions. As the characters make sense of their surroundings, so do we. Although the narrator's voice a times offers judgments or observations about himself and the others, as well as the inner city, he does not take enough distance to mete out his

responses into an narrative that offers any answers. Moele has been criticized for this, as we have seen with Titlestad, but it seems that this technique is closer to the experience of living in a place like Hillbrow than if it had been otherwise. We certainly are given the opportunity to deconstruct the perceptions surrounding the inner city, by entering the space in a sensual and immediate way, being left to make our own conclusions through out the novel. Also, we come face to face with the challenge of forming an urban persona that is independent and autonomous and start to consider what kind of person may or may not succeed in the inner city.

Although we may not understand all the actions or choices of the main characters dealt with here, a certain amount of judgment of them is suspended as we try to imagine how difficult it must be to be anything other than a 'hustler' here. How much potential is there for a shifting of the landscape though if each person is acting solely for themselves? What kinds of choices are there for the individuals coming into the city? Do what we in the novel constitute real choice? Hillbrow itself remains an enigma to us, raw and unpredictable. What is revealed through these portraits is a tension, one that each character faces in his environment as well as in himself. The author at once separates and intertwines each character's narrative, leaving us with the sense that the city evokes both, simultaneously. In this, the city retains its ambivalence and we too, remain relatively ambivalent about the potential of the inner city to act as a dynamic place of social and political transformation. The novel seems unfinished, and perhaps it is because the story of Hillbrow is also unfinished. And, while we may feel a sense of frustration in the end, the arena of the inner city has become more familiar, more accessible, and hopefully more open through Moele's narrative. Or, alternatively, have we just been hustled?

CONCLUSION

African urbanism promises an exciting way of re-evaluating the African city. By drawing on reflexive and performance-based notions of social space, this discourse has found a way to generate important challenges to traditional urban discourse. It does this, as we have seen, by examining the potential of the millions of African urbanites to turn their environments into something productive and desirable, despite harsh or difficult conditions. One of the underlying notions is that the kinds of tactics and 'modes of being' developed in these spaces are in fact *enabled* by these conditions. Another is that the very fabric of the city space – that is, heterogeneous and multifarious– almost automatically confronts the imposition of a fixed, constraining environment. The multiplicity of choice, action and performance being enacted by individuals at every moment in any city means that that this space, more so than any other, has the capacity to be (re) produced in an incredibly dynamic way by its inhabitants.

Henri Lefebvre talks of 'lived space' being the arena where the true arena of the any city develops. The notion of 'lived space' implies that despite whatever restrictions are emplaced through institution and structure, it is how the individual interacts with these that actually defines a geo-social social landscape. Indeed, in the Africa city, factors like migration, displacement, poverty, lack of infrastructure and so on, make it a tenuous and unpredictable place. But, in response to the transience of these spaces, inhabitants discover equally mobile and creative methods to make the city work for them. This then feeds into the form and fabric of the city, making it a versatile and creative urban space.

At times, these individual responses or tactics may be seen as 'lawless,' or there is an ethical consideration that needs to be addressed. Not all creative responses to a difficult terrain are beneficial to others, or even to the people who are responding. Critics of emerging African urban discourse point out is that something like prostitution or drug dealing should not necessarily be considered a viable 'choice' of living. However, not all creative responses can necessarily be legal. In fact, as we have seen, often these responses are 'invisible'—owing to the fact that do not operate according to transparent, 'acceptable' or identifiable systems or exchanges. Nonetheless, one could argue, coping with poverty, for example by resorting to dangerous work or activities often means that

more lives or livelihoods are at stake. Furthermore, if the people involved had a choice for a safer or more comfortable life, they would most probably want this. This cannot be denied. However, considering the state of so many of the so-called developing world's cities, the capacity of people to 'make a plan' means that cities that do suffer from harsh and often unmanageable conditions have the potential to be re-shaped and re-defined through the collective energies of creative and alternative methods of survival. What this means is that the traditional western gaze that typecasts these cities as aberrant can be contested. It also means that these cities become incredibly rich sites for studying alternative urban forms, shaped not by institutions, but by the people who live within them.

The inner city of Johannesburg provides a particularly interesting site for these ideas to be explored. It has always symbolised something of an 'instant city.' It sprung up through the arrival of hordes of people motivated by the desire to get rich quickly. The Witwatersrand is not a particularly welcoming terrain. And, the Colonialist and Apartheid regimes of power inscribed the space with legislations and mechanisms of control that made the city at once desirable and feared. The hundreds and thousand of black men and women whose movements and livelihoods were restricted under oppressive laws mostly felt this. Generally though, for all its inhabitants, their lives became inscribed by the disturbing systems put in place by white governments during the early to late 20th Century. Despite this, Johannesburg's centre quickly became one of the most vibrant and populated cities in the world, and still is. Also, as we have seen, the segregated and regulated space also generated forms of resistance that formed another layer to the city: one that challenged the overarching power structures.

When Apartheid ended, the inner city saw a surge of migrants rushing to capitalise on the newfound freedoms within South Africa and the city. In many ways though Johannesburg retained its aura of conflict and ambiguity that had come to define it. The inner city arguably retained the most. For many black South Africans and Africans, the inner city still symbolises the 'Place of Gold'— now for different reasons. For as many, the inner city symbolises danger, insecurity and poverty. The combination of the lure of the inner

city and its difficult socio-economic conditions also means that the people who seek it out want and need to find ways and tactics to capitalise on what they find there. This does not eradicate the risk, nor does it mean that life is not hard for these urbanites. What it does mean though is that, as a space, the inner city is a vibrant mix of individuals moving and exploring their terrain to make the most of it. For the black person, having access to Johannesburg's centre is already a dramatic shift from the past. This in itself induces a reconfiguration of the space. Additionally, the enactment of choice and the possibilities for personal reinvention are multiplied in the city. Places like Hillbrow, despite what they may look like from the outside, offer this possibility. And, these potentialities, while they exist already in the lay of the city space, are amplified in the haphazard and unruly terrain of the inner city, created as it is by the hundreds and thousands of people living, working, and 'making a deal' within it. Although difficult, the inner city offers certain kinds of valuable and exciting freedoms. In this, one can identify the capacity for a dynamic kind of agency.

Nevertheless, the tenets of these ideas around agency and the African city space are not always easy to defend in response to the testimonies of people who have suffered in the inner city. Not for one moment can one assume that such an approach to urban thought should evade such realities. The problem with a postmodernist approach to a space like Africa is that while theories that favour multiplicity and reflexivity are potentially enabling for the postcolonial terrain, they are not always able to answer the questions of those who traditionally favour a more 'Marxist' approach. Can one really claim that everyone has the same chance to claim their right to the city, to find agency, autonomy and a healthy identity in the city? Surely not, one must state. But one can also argue that new developments in African urban thought are responding not to a prescribed or pre-conceived set of rules about the urban space, but rather to the *evidence* and *display* of creative and versatile methods of living, seen in African cities. Ideally though, such approaches to the urban space must not avoid the urgency and relevance of the question above.

While the novels, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Room 207* are works of fiction they do grant us a space to explore the problematic of black agency in the inner city of Johannesburg as well as the question posed above. Indeed, as seen in the previous two chapters, both novels challenge to 'sign' of the inner city by exposing the lives of some of its inhabitants and their pursuit of agency in the inner city. However, what we can also see is that from the novels, not clear 'answer' can be obtained.

Mpe uses the inner city to depict the realities of the South African urban space and its relationship to other, peripheral places. While the atmosphere of the novel is at times urgent and dramatic, tragic even, Mpe is quite clear about how we wishes us to construe the suburb of Hillbrow. Despite its difficulties, it becomes a symbol of the way forward from the past, a space where the inscriptions of segregation and oppression can be rewritten, and where societal intolerances can be overcome. The inner city, because of its friction, is an ideal site for these developments. The newcomer to the city, although faced with obstacles, by inhabiting the city commences the act of transgressing them. Mpe projects a clear picture of how Hillbrow can and should be read by those who choose to live in it and in South Africa. He does not try to euphemise the space and although most of the central characters die in unfortunate ways, he confronts the stereotype of Hillbrow by not shying from the truth. We are able to recognise the potential of choosing a life in the city even while identifying the casualties. Geo-politically, the inner city is given a raw and versatile power that corresponds to this current moment in African urban thought.

Moele presents an equally jarring image of the inner city in *Room 207*. But this does not lend itself to the same kind of resolution as in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Although we see the characters making decisions and constructing urban personas that bring them more choice and freedom, we also witness how these decisions leave them emotionally impoverished and ultimately alone. The men they become are devoid of any real sense of commitment to their environment, to their friends and even to themselves. The lives they lead, while vibrant and colourful are shallow and fleeting. In witnessing their individual and collective trauma we are compelled to feel pity for the '207's. In watching their courage in the face of real adversity, we try to find a rationale for their behaviour. But

neither one is strong enough to counter the other. The inner city remains an enigma, to a degree. And, the important fact that none of the central characters remains in the inner city means that no matter what conclusions we may have drawn from the narrative in its portrayal of Hillbrow and its inhabitants, the sense of defeat at the end of the novel is disarming. What kind of legacy did the '207's leave in the inner city? We are not sure, but we are almost certain that the inner city in a sense evicted them, pushed them out. We see here a suggestion that hyper-individualistic drives may not benefit those who seek out the city space. Moele's Hillbrow remains impenetrable, unresolved, as do his characters and one is left wondering whether the 'modes of being' they feel compelled to create for themselves are somehow flawed.

Both authors reflect aspects of the inner city that would confront anyone studying or living within it. The fact that they can elicit such different images of the space implies that it is still an ambiguous terrain. Of course, in more ways than one, it is. Rather than isolating one novel from the other, we must look to both in order to appreciate what the inner city means today. At the same time it is possible that Mpe and Moele represent different views of the inner city because they perceive what they found there differently. Hillbrow will always be at the receiving end of both stigma and glorification or desire. What we can take from both novels is the demand for us to engage with the question of agency and to consider the enabling potentiality of this urban terrain, in today's political and social climate. The novels show that at any moment, one can be defeated and spurred on by such a space. Emerging African urbanism says something similar.

However, the differences in the novels suggest that one cannot simply subscribe to the allure of the ideas propagated by the theory without testing the implications and ethics of them. The time, it seems, is ripe for testing them. Despite the ambiguities though and despite the conflicting resolutions to the novels, with an understanding of contemporary African urban theory, we can now read these novels in a new way. We can explore ideas, like agency, with an innovative artillery of conceptual tools. This in itself means that spaces like the inner city of Johannesburg and the future novels emerging from African urban centres have the capacity to be understood for what they show in ways that were

not necessarily possible before. We, as readers have the capacity to challenge the stigma attached to Africa and to the African urban space, aiding the writer as he endeavours to change the way we construe the city, space and the world. In this, the text proves itself to be a tactical space that confronts, resists and alters existing perceptions of our society.

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