New Spaces, New Identities: The City in Post-Apartheid South African Fiction

Helen Abramson
Student number: 5903122
helen.abramson@gmail.com
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Supervisor: Prof. Dr. Christoph Lindner

With special thanks:
To Pete and Rachel, for giving up your time for me and understanding me most in the world.
To Christoph, for pushing me.
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Introduction

On 9th May 2009, Jacob Zuma was elected fourth president of South Africa since the end of the ruling apartheid era in 1994. In the fifteen years of prevailing democracy, liberal policies of government have dramatically changed the face of the nation. Yet South Africa is still struggling to move away from the corruption and racial hatred etched into society during its colonisation and subsequent apartheid regime. The transition to democracy has been problematic. It is marked by stories of disappointment and loss as a utopia of racial equality never materialised. Land reform and redistribution was a priority for the African National Congress (ANC, South Africa’s ruling party since 1994), and the dispute over land, particularly over urban spaces, is a continuing point of contestation across South Africa today.

In their introduction to *Voices of the Transition*, Edgar Pieterse and Frank Meintjies observe that “South Africa has irredeemably become urban during the transition, a pattern that will continue into the future, despite the overwhelming rural bias that continues to dominate much of the political sentiment amongst the political elite” (9). The Native (Urban Areas) Act of 1923 which banned black males from living in cities was repealed in 1986 with the Abolition of Influx Control Act (Wentzel & Tlabela 84-5, 90). No longer did black males have to carry permits (“passes”) while moving through cities. No longer were cities – officially, at least – racially exclusive. The open borders of South African urban spaces brought millions of black people to work and live in cities. This dramatically redefined city spaces in the 1990s and the new millennium. However, migratory movements became problematic due to the overwhelming difficulties caused by the deepening AIDS crisis, high crime rates, poverty, corruption, a lack of effective ANC leadership, and a resurgence of racial uneasiness in both rural and urban communities. The national statistics are astonishing: from 1991 to 2002, unemployment for
black South Africans rose from 23 to 48 percent – more than double the initial figure. By 2006, 1.8 million homes had been built by the government, but 2 million people lost their homes and one in four South Africans lived in shacks in informal settlements. The demographic distribution of wealth shows little change since the end of apartheid, with South Africa now surpassing Brazil as the most economically unequal society in the world (Klein 198, 215).

These figures are so overwhelming that they seem to speak of unimaginable devastation that we cannot fully comprehend. However, as Jennifer Robinson notes, the city in South Africa comes to signify not just the drawbacks of the nation, but also its underlying unity. She argues that on the one hand, cities represent “some of the worst excess of apartheid rule – its divisions, exclusions and inequalities” (“Communities” 272); on the other hand, “Cities have also played a powerful role in symbolising the achievements of the nation, both during and after apartheid” (“Communities” 272). Although the city portrays images of dire living conditions for countless citizens, “the city also underpins our imagination of being one nation” (“Communities” 272). Much of contemporary South African fiction that focuses on urban life has the power to transport the shocking statistics from the unthinkable to the real. The authors I discuss in this thesis have at the heart of their novels a focus on the individual’s search for a new identity in the context of conflicted urban spaces.

The novels of Zakes Mda, K. Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe tell the underside of apartheid history by focusing on the refashioning of identities and the differences within society – differences that are not exclusively racial, but also of wealth, beliefs, places of origin, gender, age, and many more. For communities to gain a sense of unity, such differences must be acknowledged and understood; in this way a future can be imagined in which social equality and economic prosperity are realities. I chose these authors because together they successfully portray the extraordinarily varied urban landscapes of South Africa. Though they explore the
lives of characters in predominantly black communities, they are representative of communities that make up the majority of the population: the township, the illegal squats, the run down inner-city area, the rural village, the tourist haven.

Part I of this thesis examines Mda’s *Ways of Dying* (1995) and *The Heart of Redness* (2000). The focus is on the message of hope presented through these novels for a better quality of life for marginalized communities in South Africa’s illegal settlements and small peripheral towns. In *Ways of Dying* I explore how the characters’ movements recreate urban space, demonstrating the new spatial freedoms that have emerged in the post-apartheid era for South Africa’s poor, black communities existing on the fringes of the nation’s cities. The characters learn to cope with the constant fear of violent attacks on their homes in squats and settlements through standing together to form a united community identity. The strength inherent in these community forces is exemplified in the residents’ spatial mobility, and in their connection from the settlement to the city centre. The chapter on *The Heart of Redness* addresses the notion of identity in relation to place and tradition. I examine the history and nature of the Xhosa people and in what ways their contemporary communities resist pressure from external influences in favour of bringing about progress and development through their own version of modernity.\(^1\) The argument follows that social cohesion is brought about through focusing on the current issues of the community and allowing innovative ideas to be implemented without ignoring the impact of ancient traditions.

Part II looks at the youth of South Africa struggling to survive in poor inner-city neighbourhoods, and the ways in which the city impacts on its more vulnerable citizens who must learn to adjust and form new identities in order to survive. Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000)

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\(^1\) The Xhosa people are an ethnic group of African origin, mostly living in the Eastern Cape and Western Cape areas of South Africa. They refer to themselves as the amaXhosa, and their language and culture as isiXhosa. *The Heart of Redness* is set in Qolorha, a remote Eastern Cape village.
offers an insight into the life of street children in Cape Town. In this chapter I explore the way in which the protagonist navigates the city to produce a new narrative map of urban space. This allows him to exceed certain physical and social limits inflicted on him by the city’s powerful gang leaders as well as by society itself. The final chapter of this thesis reflects on the forming of identities in Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001). At the core of Mpe’s novel is the importance of dispelling myths in relation to the conceptual divide between rural and urban communities in South Africa. Communities already torn apart by the AIDs epidemic become further divided by prejudice and xenophobia. I pursue the idea that Mpe advocates new identities based on united urban communities as a result of re-education and understanding of other cultures and peoples.

Overall this thesis discusses the personal and institutional changes in contemporary urban South Africa as depicted in the work of these three authors. I argue that changes to the individual’s physical and social environment inescapably lead to changes to his or her identity. The works of fiction I examine grant access to the nature of the contradictions and complexities of South African urban life, as the authors critique aspects of the structure of the post-apartheid nation which hinder social improvements. The main insights of this thesis are the ways in which these fictions articulate the individual’s struggle to form an identity for him- or herself in a society still grappling with the transition to social and racial equality on the increasingly long path to democracy.
Part I: Zakes Mda’s Communities.

Introduction

The change since the end of apartheid in urban migration laws led to shifting horizons of cultural production and consumption in post-apartheid South Africa. I argue that in *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness*, Zakes Mda imaginatively recreates the worlds of past and present communities in South Africa, using these illustrative stories to stimulate the creation of better, more informed futures. Andre Brink suggests that South African fiction after 1994 should not be a *direct* representation of the real, but a *creative* one. He argues for “an imagined rewriting of history or, more precisely, of the role of the imagination in the dialectic between past and present, individual and society” (37). Brink goes on to advocate imaginative fictions, claiming that “the best we can do is fabricate metaphors – that is, tell stories – in which, not history, but imaginings of history are reinvented” (42).

Mda’s two novels hinge on past and present lives; submerged in the imaginative creativity of urban contexts, they create a space for the shaping of new identities. These identities are negotiated against a backdrop of ambivalence posited towards the future of the commodity-driven South African city. Mda’s focus in *Ways of Dying* is on power in the freedom of movement in and access to urban spaces. In *The Heart of Redness* he explores the ways in which consumerism affects the nature of urban living and the battle between modernism and cultural heritage. I argue that Mda’s work shows how migrant wanderings remake social identities in the urban communities of contemporary South Africa. I contend that through the imaginative creativity of these novels we gain an understanding of the importance of recognising and accepting history without the allowing the past to overwhelm current concerns of the
community. From the conflicted urban spaces of Mda’s novels emerges the need for communities to collectively manage current social, political and racial concerns. Ineffectually dealt with, the very real problems that Mda’s fictional communities face lead to exacerbated social inequalities, the loss of cultural heritage and yet more lives unnecessarily cut short.
Chapter 1: Ways of Dying

1.1 “Ordinary characters’ extraordinary lives”

Set in the complicated transitory period of South Africa in the early 1990s, Ways of Dying explores the creativity of the artistic imagination set against a backdrop of modern city life juxtaposed with traditional village existence. The novel follows the life of the eccentric homeless migrant Toloki, living on the dock fronts of a fictional port city as he makes a living out of mourning at funerals.\(^2\) Reconnecting with his old childhood friend Noria brings back memories of life growing up together in their village. Mda connects Toloki and Noria’s past and present existences throughout the novel. As their love develops, they build a home together in an informal settlement. Through learning about Noria’s haunting past, Toloki is exposed to a new kind of living as they begin to share their experiences together.

My focus is on the process of urban development as a result of the journeys and wanderings of “ordinary” characters. Unusually, Mda chose not to focus his exploration of black urban space through grim descriptions of squalid ghetto life and in so doing has invited heavy criticism of his works. He has been accused of evading the urgent political questions of the nation, most notably race and HIV. Reviewers such as Grant Farred claim that his retreat from partisanry sacrifices “the encompassing vision” and limits the political aspects of the novel to being “only locally resonant” (Farred 195). Indeed, the author’s focus is specifically on characters’ movement through urban spaces. Thus the novel documents the changes in urban living through movement itself, rather than depending on portrayals of decrepit or grotesque urban landscapes. Contrary to Farred’s insistence, I argue that this does not detract from the

\(^2\) Although Mda does not name the areas he describes, Toloki’s port home is most likely based on the Cape Flats, and the illegal settlements are likened to those around the Cape Town area such as Crossroads and Guguletu (Woods “Reading” 106).
primary issues at stake in South Africa in the early 1990s. Furthermore, as Richard Samin suggests, Mda’s focus on “ordinary” characters’ extraordinary lives, “generates a social knowledge that is richer, more varied and more contradictory than the spectacular writing which ‘protest writing’ delivered” (“Marginality” 192). The novel contextualises the starting point for South Africa’s urban development in the post-apartheid years to come by looking at Toloki’s and Noria’s past while simultaneously making sense of their present. Furthermore, in spanning three decades the novel records the dominant changes in urbanisation from the 1960s to the end of the apartheid era.

The novel illustrates the failure of the apartheid government’s attempt to control black movement to, from and within cities. It describes the growth of an unofficial urban economic sector, changes in residents’ commutes, a new access to wealth for black residents, and the ongoing violent battles between township residents and hostel dwellers. These transitions are depicted through the lens of flow and mobility; thus my focus in this chapter on urban development as a result of journeys and wanderings.

1.2 Community forces

Rita Barnard observes that there has been a shift in South African urban studies “from a nearly exclusive concern with the location of physical structures and the visible aspects of urban organisation to a concern with the city as a dynamic entity” (152). Barnard connects this to Mda’s shift away from relying on evoking the “ghetto atmosphere” through the use of dark descriptions of physical environments. The city as a “dynamic entity” is illustrated in the author’s exploration of Noria’s settlement. For instance, Toloki’s observations on the hard working women of the settlement highlight the sense of responsibility evident in the way they never stop moving: “They are always on the move. They are always on the go” (Mda, WD 175).
In this way, argues Barnard, the activities of the city can be shown to shape the city, as much as they are shaped by it.

I would add further dimensions to the significance of the women’s activity in the novel. Toloki is enormously impressed by the women, telling Noria, “I believe the salvation of the settlement lies in the hands of women. When we were growing up, women had no names […] but here women are leaders of the people” (WD 176). The comparison to the women of Toloki and Noria’s childhood suggests a temporal shift to a more progressive way of thinking in which gender equality, if not yet achieved, is at least in motion. Toloki’s observation also reveals a direct disparity between rural and urban, or this particular kind of urban living. In the settlement, standing together as a community is paramount to progress, as well as to retaining any level of control over the residents’ own space. Ted Baumann et al. observe that by 2004 there were approximately 15 million people squatting in shacks in the towns and cities in South Africa. They assert that change in these communities through the work of external agencies employed by city officials does not succeed (207-8). Their argument follows that change must come through negotiations from within communities themselves, just as the women in Noria’s settlement strive to achieve: “To achieve lasting poverty reduction, poor people must be organized, confident and determined” (Baumann et al. 212). The spatial practices of the women in the settlement demonstrate that they are acting in precisely this manner. Toloki notices at the community meeting that “the people who are most active in the affairs of the settlement are the women. Not only do they do all the work, but they play leadership roles” (WD 172). Their everyday movements reflect a certain confidence:

Toloki notices that in every shack they visit, the women are never still … They are at the tap drawing water. They are washing clothes. They are sweeping the floor in their shacks,

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3 Naomi Klein notes that in the first decade after democracy in South Africa, almost a million citizens were evicted from farms, causing the number of shack dwellers to rise by 50 per cent. By 2006, more than one in four South Africans lived in shacks located in informal shantytowns (215).
and the ground outside. They are closing holes in their shacks with cardboard and plastic. They are loudly joking with their neighbours while they hang washing on the line. Or they are fighting with the neighbours about children who have beaten up their own children. They are preparing to go to the taxi rank to catch taxis to the city, where they will work in the kitchens of their madams.” (WD 175)

In comparison, the men “sit all day and dispense wide-ranging philosophies on how things should be” (WD 175). The key, then, is in movement. Movement overrides the men’s “empty theories” (WD 176), signifying the women’s resolve to advancement. In this way, Mda adds a level of hope to the narrative, suggesting that the environment in which these women live may not always be in the alarming state that it is in the novel. Their positive mobility alludes to a future in which they may have running water, electricity, houses made from proper building materials, and safety from the threat of their neighbouring hostel dwellers.

1.3 Linking the “local” and “global”

In the early 1990s communities of illegal squatters such as Noria’s were already rapidly expanding. Residents’ movements to, from and within urban areas changed dramatically. Under the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act, the movement of black males between rural and urban areas was severely restricted, and towns became almost exclusively white as a result. Ownership of land for black people was illegal in the cities during apartheid (Wentzel & Tlabela 84-5). As Robinson notes, “Planners worked for decades to eliminate difference and diversity from the country’s urban spaces, to create single-use and single-race neighbourhoods, to keep apart rather than bring together, to separate out the colourful mix that more cosmopolitan urban traditions celebrate and advocate” (“(Im)mobilizing” 189). In Ways of Dying Mda highlights the importance of the individual’s power over space, and gaining freedom through making that space conspicuous in the emerging democratic era. This is exemplified in the daily commute of
residents from the settlement going to work in the city while Toloki bathes outside Noria’s shack:

As he washed himself, people were passing on all sides of the shack: domestic workers rushing to catch taxis that would take them to the kitchens of their madams in the suburbs, factory workers going to the industrial areas, and pickpockets and muggers going to ply their trade in the central business district. (WD 155)

Mda celebrates the freedom of motion between the settlement and other urban areas, regardless of the type of work the citizens are going to do. The fact that they are able to move without restriction between and through urban areas is something to be valued, and accordingly power is expressed in this freedom. Moreover, although the settlement is illegal, it becomes linked to the city in a way that makes it invaluable to the city’s economic survival. The settlement’s inclusiveness in the creative city links the “local” (settlement) to the “global” (city) in the novel.

This “local-global” connection can be further explained through the story of Toloki’s long deceased father Jwara and his figurines. At the end of the novel, the figurines that Jwara made in his lifetime are delivered to Toloki and Noria’s shack after being valued by two men from the city. The city art dealer says that the figurines “looked quite kitschy, but added that kitsch was the ‘in’ thing for collectors with taste this season” (WD 209), while the director of a museum disagrees, calling them “folksy” (WD 209). However, both men concede that the figurines will be popular and profitable in the art world. Mda seems to mock these city men whose opinions are valued over all others, but who are so easily swayed by current trends and cannot agree on their assessments of the art. The men are a product of global networks and consumer culture. Toloki and Noria do not dismiss the notion of selling the figurines, and by so
doing they leave open the possibility of building a connection between this “global” society and their “local” heritage.

Jwara was reliant upon Noria’s singing for his artistry, as – we later discover – is Toloki for his drawings. Although he escaped from his village and journeyed to the city and the settlement, Toloki cannot ignore his rural past. In order for him to move forward from the difficult relationship he had with Jwara, he must accept the bond between him and his father in their need for Noria’s song. The figurines, once thought of as ugly and branded “worthless iron monsters” (WD 208) by Jwara’s wife, now have new life breathed into them in light of their arrival in an urban context. In the same way, Toloki, frequently called ugly as a child by his father, finds a new way of living with Noria in the settlement. Almost left to oblivion since Jwara’s death, the figurines’ revival in the context of the city implies that it is possible for the cultural heritage of South Africa, or the “local”, to be incorporated into its network of cities, or the “global”. Furthermore, as Toloki is forced to address his “local” past alongside his “global” present, Mda seems to suggest not only the possibility of the incorporation of “local” into “global” in South Africa, but its necessity as well.

Thus Mda links the rural to the urban through artistic production and consumption, as well as through the commutes between the settlement and the city. For the commuter, the space is physically occupied and borders are crossed which were forbidden during apartheid. For the artist, cultural borders are crossed in which artistic heritage is introduced to places where previously such aesthetics were ignored. In both cases, movement between these spaces links “local” and “global”. Thus Mda eliminates the sense of detachment from a broader national and international community from which black South Africans were excluded during the apartheid years.
1.4 Innovative careers

Where there is power in freedom of spatial practices (by which I mean in movements by black South Africans between and through urban spaces), there is also power in gaining control over that space. AbdulMaliq Simone considers the position of the urban citizens on the periphery, the marginalized residents whose survival depends on creating a position of control in the space in which they work.

But it is important that we take seriously what is accomplished, even in the most deprived neighbourhoods or cities, by those who spend their entire working lives in one place – the tea-seller, the newspaper vendor – or those who are always on the move, delivering things to different offices and homes each day. (“Globalization” 186)

For a short while, Toloki earns money in the city by selling pap and steak cooked on a trolley, and makes a profitable income from it until the trolley is taken from him. “His was the first business of that type, and he had no competition” (WD 122). Toloki’s trade was so satisfying to him not only because he owned his business and was a pioneer of his trade, but also as a result of being allowed to feel that he owned a space in the city. His later job as a professional mourner is again something he believes nobody has done before him, and he takes great pride in it.

Rather than draw on his own cultural heritage, he borrows from other cultures, chanting strange rhythms and making loud wailing moans, unfamiliar to the mourning crowds. As Sam Durrant notes, through avoiding any cultural specificity, Toloki creates a neutral space and thus avoids adding to the ethnic conflict rife across the country. His improvisations, combined with his mediating role in the frequent squabbles which emerge from rival funeral parties, argues Durrant, “suggests that his improvisations are designed to recover a space for grieving that has too often been usurped by political exigencies, violent protests and yet more death” (443). Toloki’s ability to successfully attract customers to his food stall and to make a living from his
bizarre mourning rites implies that he has a deeply perceptive appreciation of the mobility and flow of those specific localities.

The nature of Toloki’s mourning career, according to Farred, shows that he is removed from the real concerns of the community: “It is the ‘I,’ the artist and creator of appropriate tragic behaviour, who takes narrative precedence over the larger social (and personal) losses incurred by the other mourners” (189). Durrant challenges this reading of Toloki by defending the need for artistic practice and political detachment in post-apartheid mourning, precisely because of the politisation of funerals during apartheid (443). I would add to this the significance of the in-between urban figure such as Toloki, who brings previously ignored urban spatialities to the attention of the communities and makes new ones. In this way, not only does Toloki bring artistry to previously politically charged environments, but in doing so also unites forces that were otherwise divided.

Toloki’s father’s old friend from the village, Nefolovhodwe, also earns a living out of the “ways of dying”, by starting his own coffin making business. He moves to the city suburbs because “unlike the village, death was plentiful in the city” (WD 125). He buys a large house that people “of his complexion” (WD 125) are not allowed to buy, so he puts it in the name of a white man. Nefolovhodwe’s corruption and dislikeable nature are not just symptomatic of his new wealth, but also, crucially, his detachment from his origins. This is exemplified in the intense security around his home. Mike Davis states that “the quest for security and social insulation are obsessive and universal”, calling it a “culture of the absurd” (116-7). It signals an abandoning of what lies outside these secure areas – the rest of society – to its underprivileged and risky existence. Nefolovhodwe’s home is not part of a gated community, but is representative of the practice in affluent and predominantly white South African neighbourhoods either to construct
gated communities, or to heavily invest in immense private security. Davis cites Andre Czegledy, describing the Johannesburg suburbs almost a decade after the end of apartheid rule:

The high perimeter walls are often topped by metal spikes, razor wire, and more recently, electrified wiring connected to emergency alarms. In conjunction with portable ‘panic button’ devices, the house alarms are electronically connected to ‘armed response’ security companies. The surreal nature of such implicit violence was highlighted in my mind one day when walking with a colleague in Westdene, one of the more middle-class neighborhoods of the Northern suburbs. On the streets was parked a minivan from a local security company that boasted in large letters on the vehicle’s side panel that they respond with ‘firearms and explosives’. Explosives?” (Czegledy, cited in Davis 117)

Mda critiques this national obsession with excessive defence measures through Toloki’s innocent approach on his arrival at Nefolovhodwe’s guarded home: “He stood there for a while, not knowing what to do” (WD 127). In this instance, the owner of the tightly secured house is black, but typically these paranoid security measures are characteristic of white homes. Rowland Atkinson observes how this phenomenon serves to further divide communities, not only in the “containment of the poor”, but “also a growing readiness of higher income households to seek an escape from the social distress and visible signs of danger that they find in cities” (47). In the case of South Africa the added elements of deep racial divides and the growth of violent crime have caused the mushrooming of this phenomenon since the 1990s. Atkinson argues that the spatial and social disconnection between rich and poor (and in this case, also black and white) serves to “diminish the possibility of a social politics capable of challenging the spatial and social inequalities around us” (48).

Nefolovhodwe’s position in Ways of Dying serves to highlight the negative impact of dividing space so rigorously. This stands in stark contrast to the spatial unity that Toloki’s funeral work offers to communities, and reminds us of the power inherent in land ownership.
Nefolovhodwe refuses to incorporate past, present and future into his life, conveniently “forgetting” the people from his village such as Toloki and Jwara. He structurally divorces himself from his past by extending the physical boundaries of his home to affect his whole life.

1.5 Imaginative creativity in spatial practices

Studies in the urban changes of developing countries are beginning to describe the phenomenon of burgeoning informal settlements in terms of charting flux and flow into, out of and through the city. Simone highlights the importance of refocusing on the spatial associations of movements and crossings in African cities, drawing attention to their original functions “as points and organizers of entry and exit, as ports, railheads and crossroads” (“Globalization” 186). “Mda’s Toloki”, Barnard observes, “is nothing if not a figure of crossings and transitions” (154). She notes that his home on the docks is a point of arrival and departure for ships, and in watching them Toloki’s imagination is stimulated and memories of the village of his childhood are recalled (Barnard 154). Mda uses the transitional landscape of the port to propel Toloki forward into his artistic imagination. I propose it is this imaginative creativity which serves as the crucial medium through which Toloki moves to reinvent space.

This artistic use of space is most keenly noticeable when Toloki brings magazine cuttings to Noria’s shack. Together they cover the walls in the pictures and imagine themselves in the lavish homes that the images portray. “By the time he is finished, every inch of the walls is covered with bright pictures – a wallpaper of sheer luxury” (WD 111). The characters’ inventive creativity demonstrates the capacity of the imagination to recreate space. Even in shacks made from materials taken from the trash of wealthier folk and built in neglected neighbourhoods, Toloki and Noria exert individual power over their area. The scene induces an effect Shaun Irlam calls “eerie” (718 n.45), and it is one which is designed to highlight the uneasy consumerism
embedded in the modern, Western furnishings the characters emulate in their poverty-stricken
eighbourhood. The Western reader is inevitably drawn into this unsettling imbalance of
domestic consumption, and it is particularly powerful in light of the horrifying circumstances
which lead to the rebuilding of Noria’s home. Her five-year-old son is “necklaced” – a rubber
tire is put over his chest and set alight with gasoline – by Young Tigers from her own
community, before they raze her hut to the ground.4

More often than not, Toloki’s perpetual wanderings between and across different urban
landscapes are brought about by social, economic and political changes out of his control.
Conversely, however, at times his movements echo that of the Baudelairean flâneur – an
observing city gentleman, wandering the streets in search of philosophical enquiry. Walter
Benjamin uses the concept of Charles Baudelaire’s figure of the flâneur to highlight and explore
the forces of the urban commodity capitalism that emerged in Paris in the mid-nineteenth
century:

Baudelaire’s genius, which drew its nourishment from melancholy, was an allegorical
one. With Baudelaire, Paris for the first time became the subject of lyrical poetry. This
poetry is no local folklore; the allegorist’s gaze which falls upon the city is rather the
gaze of alienated man. It is the gaze of the flâneur, whose way of living still played over
the growing destitution of men in the great city with a conciliatory gleam. The flâneur
still stood at the margins, of the great city as of the bourgeois class. Neither of them had
yet overwhelmed him. In neither of them was he at home. (Benjamin 169-70)

Benjamin expands on this idea and invites a reading of the city from its implications at street
level, linking space, language and subjectivity in such a way as to raise questions about the
relationship between the aesthetic experience of the city’s spaces and the potential that these

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4 This is not to say that the novel is aimed at a western audience. Indeed, Mda claims to write for a South African
audience and insists his novels are published there first. Furthermore, his reproof of the appalling way in which
Noria’s son dies is not a criticism of the entire liberation movement in South Africa during the early 1990s, as Mda
has strong family connections with leaders of the ANC (Van der Vlies 156). What he critiques here is the corruption
and the black-on-black violence rife in the townships, advocating a unified revolutionary force over a divided one.
spaces hold for the urban citizen. In *Ways of Dying*, Toloki embodies the “alienated man”. He has always remained on the periphery of society, from his childhood when he was ostracised in his own village, to the city where he isolates himself from South Africa’s “bourgeois class” (and to a much lesser degree from lower levels of society) with his strange mourning rituals and bizarre attire. He is constantly observing cultures around him in a way in which his fellow citizens are unable to, because he has been isolated from intimate relationships with others for so long, and “he therefore sees things with a fresh eye” (*WD* 176). The following passage from the novel illustrates the way in which his walking transforms the space around him, and vice versa.

In the afternoon Toloki walks to the taxi rank, which is on the other side of the downtown area, or what is called the central business district. The streets are empty, as all the stores are closed. He struts like a king, for today the whole city belongs to him. He owns the wide tarmac roads, the skyscrapers, the traffic lights, and the flowers on the sidewalks. (*WD* 45).

The streets are conspicuously empty on this day, Boxing Day, and Toloki is granted a rare experience in the city he loves: that of ownership. This *flâneurie*, ordinarily understood as the position of the leisurely bourgeois, allows Toloki to experience the city as his own space, part and product of the streets around him, while simultaneously commanding it. I would argue that this passage encapsulates Mda’s understanding of spatial significance in *Ways of Dying*. Toloki, the foul-smelling migrant who even the street children mock, is able to enjoy the aesthetics of the city. As such, he demonstrates the potential in transitioning South Africa for people to cross borders, to use space differently, to create worlds out of artistic inspiration, and to form new identities through spatial freedoms.
Chapter 2: *The Heart of Redness*

2.1 Xhosa cattle killings

Pieterse and Meintjies outline the seemingly overwhelming problems facing post-apartheid South Africa, listing “unemployment, HIV/AIDS, endemic violence intertwined with patriarchy, poverty, segregation and racism”, and with the addition of “the juggernaut of American-led globalisation”, the likelihood of a successful transition is “arguably a veritable abyss” (2). Mda’s third novel, *The Heart of Redness*, focuses on this last aspect, again ducking any direct address of the dominant political and social national concerns. Instead Mda draws on the immediate and very real dangers that confront South African towns with the onset of globalisation. The novel highlights the risks posed to local residents’ economic and social empowerment.

As in *Ways of Dying*, Mda juxtaposes past and present lives. He draws parallels with the community of the Xhosa coastal village of Qolorha in the nineteenth century and their descendents in modern-day South Africa. In 1857 the young prophetess Nongqawuse foretold that with the destruction of all crops and cattle the Xhosa ancestors would return from the dead and drive the colonists into the sea. Thousands of people died of starvation and disease in the famine that plagued the land in the wake of these prophesies, dividing the community into “Believers” and “Unbelievers”. The contemporary plot follows Camagu, returning to South Africa after years of exile. He sets up home in this amaXhosa community and becomes entangled in the continuing dispute between Believers and Unbelievers as it translates at the turn of the twenty-first century. Now the descendents are divided not only on the subject of who was to blame for the past famine, but on every issue in the community. The dominating controversy is over whether to proceed with plans to build a casino in Qolorha to attract business from
tourists. The novel probes into the deep-rooted traditions of the amaXhosa people, examining the question of place and identity while stressing the value of community empowerment over the seductive capacities of Western consumerism and its effect on urban living.

2.2 “Redness”, and deconstructing terminologies

The “redness” of the novel’s title refers to the red ochre of the traditional Xhosa costume. Those who smear their bodies and clothes in the red ochre are the traditionalist, conservative Xhosa who stand by the pagan rituals and beliefs of their people and resist the enticement of Western cultural influences (Mayer 174). As such, “redness” is putatively an ideal entrenched in past ethics, in the rural over the urban, in the periphery over the centre, and in stability and continuity over progress (Barnard 161). Those who support the casino are against “redness”, as Bhonco, the leader of the Unbelievers asserts: “We want developers to come and build the gambling city that will bring money to this community. That will bring modernity to our lives, and will rid us of our redness” (Mda, HR 105). However, Camagu’s journey through the novel sees the destabilising effect of labelling terms such as “redness”, “modernity”, “development” and “civilisation”, throwing the whole concept of “old” versus “new” into question.

This is exemplified in the course of the relationship Camagu forms with two women of Qolorha, Xoliswa Ximiya of the Unbelievers and Qukezwa of the Believers. Camagu’s decision to marry Qukezwa, an ardent supporter of ecological sustainability and empowered by a unique and wild feminism, reveals Mda’s endorsement of the Believers and his contempt for the commercialisation and Westernisation of South African towns and cities. Camagu, educated in

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5 The connection between Mda’s novel and Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness is not necessarily only titular. It has been argued that both texts offer a subversion of colonial figurations of subjectivity, from a post-colonial and post-apartheid perspective. Mda deconstructs Western colonialism more overtly than Conrad, but both authors present a contradictory ideological stance. For further discussion on this comparison, see Harry Sewlall’s 2003 essay, “Deconstructing Empire in Joseph Conrad and Zakes Mda”.
America and brought up in a different region of South Africa, is the (initially) detached subject through which Mda positions his ethical and political views. At first Camagu empathises with the Unbelievers and befriends Ximiya, the beautiful school headmistress, who refuses to wear “red” clothes, and sees reason and logical progression in the way of the Unbelievers. She makes the assumption that the Western reader is also likely to make, that “redness” is synonymous with backwardness and progress is its antithesis. However, Camagu soon realises that the casino investors are not interested in benefiting Qolorha’s residents, and the town could profit through other means such as the co-operative seafood and tailoring companies he starts with some of the local women.

Robinson observes that the building of casinos in poor communities has become popular in urban development across South Africa. She goes on to highlight the problematic nature of private investment in a politically unstable nation:

If there is a truism we can take from the field of Urban Studies, it is that urban processes are complicated, conflict-ridden, and difficult to co-ordinate [...] South African authorities have had to manage the city in the face of powerful private interests, to negotiate complex political landscapes, and face up to the fact that locational choices for developments seldom please all interest groups [...] The urban terrain is always conflicted, and the spacialities of development only compound this. (“Communities” 274)

In this way it is clear to see that in Qolorha, where the community is already deeply conflicted, the problems dividing the community are aggravated by institutions keen to modernise areas without consulting residents. Mda is contemptuous of organisations with the power to improve living standards in towns and cities but which thwart such progress with corruption and discrimination:

These black empowerment movements do not create employment for the people. Instead, whenever these big companies are taken over by these groups, there follows what is
euphemistically called rightsizing in order to maximise profits. Thousands of workers are retrenched. (HR 274)

The banks, too are unprepared to support local businesses, for while Camagu’s co-operative society is “on the verge of success”, the banks are “determined that it should not succeed” (HR 206). The economic freedoms hoped for since the transition in South Africa never emerged, for as Klein notes, “As for the ‘banks, mines and monopoly industry’ that Mandela had pledged to nationalize, they remained firmly in the hands of the same four white-owned megaconglomerates that also control 80 percent of the Johannesburg Stock Exchange” (206). Disillusioned with these corporate and financial organisations, Camagu discovers that the concept of modernity is not intrinsically linked to progress, and fights against the casino to make the area a national heritage site instead. His relationship with Qukezwa opens his eyes to the importance of sustaining the natural landscape and the indigenous wildlife that will otherwise become extinct. The more he learns, the more he is able to dream of a future in which fusing cosmopolitanism with environmentalism is possible. As David Attwell asserts, “Camagu, and therefore the novel, offer a modernised Africanism as the inevitable path into the future” (199).

Indeed, the message Mda sends out is not anti-modernity or anti-globalisation per se, but, as Saliem Fakir argues, there is a certain type of globalisation that is dangerous to South Africa:

I am always reminded by Noam Chomsky’s remark that the left is not opposed to globalisation, and therefore not anti-globalist, but they are opposed to a form of globalisation that increases disparity, marginalizes citizens and abuses human and environmental rights. Globalisation can at best be interpreted as a more intensive integration of the global community where cultural affinities and national identity become subsumed in the yearning for global citizenry. (117)

Mda’s novel protests against the kind of globalisation that encourages inequalities and fails to adequately represent the subaltern. Concurrently, Mda encourages Fakir’s “best” interpretation of globalisation in showing how the preservation of culture and environment can work in favour
of communities. Furthermore, Mda shows how marginalized societies can be incorporated into the greater unit of the nation through projects such as the co-operative, whose members rely on connections with the city for the survival of their business.

2.3 Reinventing culture

Dalton, the sole white resident of Qolorha, suggests a cultural village as an alternative to the casino, in which women from a different town dress in traditional isiXhosa costumes and perform rituals in front of tourists. Camagu condemns the project as “just a museum that pretends that is how people live” (HR 285). Again through Camagu we hear Mda’s own support for vibrancy and a different kind of modernity in South African cultures: “I am interested in the culture of the amaXhosa as they live it today, not yesterday. The amaXhosa people are not a museum piece. Like all cultures their culture is dynamic” (HR 286). Mda acknowledges the value of upholding traditions, such as wearing the traditional isiXhosa costumes, but warns against a false revival of ritual pasts. In the context of post-colonial studies, Robinson observes, “Rituals and traditions […] are better understood as transformative, creative and constitutive forces in modern life” (OC 90). She argues that twentieth-century Western urbanism’s tendency to relate a static version of tradition with poor urban areas and their rural neighbours is simply a myth, and points to a great misunderstanding of the complex contemporary nature of modern African cities. In The Heart of Redness, Dalton takes on this fictive notion, stuck in the belief that new and innovative ideas belong to Western modernity, while developing nations are characterised by fixed traditional cultures.

In the cultural village, the women acting out the traditional isiXhosa roles are paid to exhibit a show. They are not local, and the rituals that they perform do not represent the true daily activities of amaXhosa women. The act is a spectacle, through which Mda exposes the
commoditisation of African culture, and the value of socio-cultural tourism over potentially exploitative or misleading tourism in which a distorted view of people’s lives are exhibited. Graham Huggan discusses the concept of “postcoloniality”, a condition closely tied to the global market, which manifests itself through the capitalisation of popular ideas about the cultural “other” with the aim of turning “culturally ‘othered’ artefacts and goods” into commodities to achieve commercial profit in the West” (28). In the context of the society of the spectacle, “postcolonial products function, at least in part, as cultural commodities that move back and forth within an economy regulated by largely Western metropolitan demand” (29-30). We are reminded that as readers of the novel we are also implicated in a kind of voyeurism, and the knowledge of the “other” that the Western reader may gain from the novel is always, inevitably, one of subjectivity.

Concurrently, however, through The Heart of Redness Mda presents the merit of gaining insight and knowledge into the “other”, for as Tim Woods observes, “Mda is concerned with the power of myth and the dangers of believing in it without reflection” (AP 228). Mda deconstructs the myths of the amaXhosa perpetuated by apartheid history books, in which the Nongqawuse episode is written down as the “National Suicide of the amaXhosa”. This terminology, as Wendy Woodward indicates, is “obviously derisory” (290). Following Camagu through the eternal debate between Believers and Unbelievers brings us to an understanding of the deep values and complex logic that sets the two groups apart, and that has held their faith across the generations.

The need for a historical voice for the amaXhosa is exemplified in the failure of Dalton’s water project, which does not include people from Qolorha in its operation. Camagu tells him, “That is the danger of doing things for the people instead of doing things with the people” (HR 207). Gayatri Spivak, in her 1988 essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, proposes that in colonised societies, the lower ranks of communities are virtually silenced, and are politically unable to
represent for themselves. “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow” (28). Through Camagu’s cooperative business, specifically for the women of Qolorha, Mda directly addresses this problem of the silencing of female citizens. In doing so he seems to suggest that the problem of expressing agency has continued into the postcolonial – and post-apartheid – era. Camagu’s (and so Mda’s) ideal is that of giving residents a voice through communities running their own businesses. This helps to avoid the corruption of the ruling party and of private investors whose interests do not lie in the benefit of those living in the towns they seek to develop.

2.4 City of signs

Camagu’s disillusionment with the South African government and authorities is triggered on his arrival to Johannesburg, where his American Ph.D. ironically serves as a hindrance to him. He is considered over-qualified and is unable to do the “freedom dance” (HR 31) due to his absence during the transitional phase of the nation. He quickly discovers that this is reason enough to prevent him from finding employment. He is on unfamiliar and unexpected territory, in a city where aesthetics preside over intellectual experience. “They preferred the inexperienced ones who were only too happy to be placed in some glass affirmative-action office where they were displayed as paragons of society” (HR 33). Johannesburg has become a city which has embraced an architecture of transparency, both of modernist and postmodernist logic. Principles of openness and spatial penetration, as Antony Vidler argues, were revived by modernist architects: “[Through] the myth of ‘transparency,’ both social and spatial, modernists evoked the picture of a glass city, its buildings invisible and society open. The resulting ‘space’ would be open, infinitely extended” (“Bodies” 48). However, Vidler reasons that in postmodern
architecture transparency “quickly turns into obscurity (its apparent opposite) and reflectivity (its reversal)” (“Architectural” 753).

In The Overexposed City, Paul Virilio comments on how in the metropolis, “walls made of light and transparent materials, such as glass or plastics, replace stone facades,” and as such, “The ancient private/public occultation […] are replaced by an overexposure”, in which spatial dimensions are overturned (441-2). He argues that glass buildings reflect light rather than absorbing it, offering obscurity over transparency, and luring the pedestrian to inspect the interior, while rejecting that very prospect. The office windows of Mda’s Johannesburg do not reflect light; indeed, it seems that the offices are specifically designed so the workers are “displayed”. Despite its physical transparency, the glass still creates opaqueness and spatial contradictions. For, although Camagu is literally able to see into the world of the bureaucrats, he is simultaneously barred from entering it. Furthermore, what is seen from the outside is not empowerment itself, but an act to give the impression of empowerment. The city has become one of meaningless signs which do not demonstrate any real social cohesion. All that is displayed are beautiful men and women who do not want to face people like Camagu, who pose “a threat to their luxury German sedans, housing allowances and expense accounts” (HR 33).

Camagu’s first scene in the novel is set in the Hillbrow area of Johannesburg, a place which “never sleeps”, where the streets “swarm with restless humanity” (HR 29). He attends the nightclub Giggles, where returned exiles, too cosmopolitan to be accepted in Johannesburg, are “moaning and whingeing” (HR 28) about exclusion from the country’s elite. The club is filled with people from all over the world, and signifies the propelling forward of Johannesburg as both an African city, and a city incorporated in a global network. While the “learned rejects” (HR 28) let off steam in Giggles, gathered on the rooftop of the same high-rise building rural migrants in mourning accuse the returned exiles of taking all the “fruits of the liberation” (HR
The contrast of these two groups, thrown together in a place where neither belongs, highlights the sense of transience and placelessness of the city. The effect is particularly acute due to the location of the scene; Hillbrow is a densely populated inner-city area of Johannesburg, notorious for its prevailing unemployment, crime, violence, xenophobia and poverty. At the heart of Hillbrow is the migrant, making it a city of travels and stories, and of people whose sense of home is thrown into confusion. Mda places these two disaffected groups together in a conspicuously modern building in Hillbrow to draw attention to the similarities between the exiles and mourners. Both feel marginalized and increasingly out of place in the new hegemonic narrative of corrupted democracy and national development, and are thrown together in a volatile and uneasy coalescence.

Saskia Sassen argues that an inevitable product of the global city is a disconnection of identities from their traditional origins, but that the city provides no system of new identity formation to replace them *(Globalization xxxii)*. It is no wonder, then, that the clubbers in Giggles and the mourners on the rooftop are struggling to form new identities in Hillbrow. Camagu passes between the two groups, and hearing the beautiful NomaRussia sing at the rooftop funeral inspires him to go to her hometown of Qolorha to find her. Thus he begins a new chapter in his life and the forming of a new identity. This is what Barnard sees as at the core of Mda’s work, for the novel “seems poised between an acceptance of a kind of postmodern nomadism – of a world of exiles, tourists, and migrants – and a desire to recover a sense of local belonging and indigeneity in a way that is utterly characteristic of the postcolony in an age of globalization” (174). Indeed, Mda stresses the subjectivity of place, historical background and tradition in the forming of identities, judgements and opinions, but also accepts a new kind of migrant itinerary. He opens up the possibility of social cohesion and hybridity through Camagu’s

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6 For further discussion on Hillbrow’s socio-economic and political environment, and the effects of migrant itineraries on the city, see chapter 4.
ability to change, learn and adapt to what was once an unfamiliar culture, relocating his home and absorbing “redness”.
Part I: Conclusion

Mda’s work demonstrates the shift in South African communities’ attention from a common focus on apartheid to a return to discovering the paths of their own histories, together with the construction of their futures as connected units of a greater whole. Toloki’s migrant wanderings are shown to affect his environment, remaking meaning in the dynamic communities he encounters as he embraces his past to discover how to live in the present. Camagu’s journey to Qolorha takes him to a new world of self-discovery, and a true appreciation of the space in which he find himself is only possible through accepting the past without dwelling on it. Finding salvation through focusing on the present and recognising history, Camagu accurately reflects Mda’s attitude to the situation of South Africa since the end of apartheid: dwelling on the horrors of the past must not cloud the current issues at stake. In support of Andre Brink’s argument for the “imaginative rewriting of history”, I hope to have shown that the artistic creativity which Mda employs in *Ways of Dying* and *The Heart of Redness* serves to emphasise the problems and contradictions inherent in the space of South African urban areas. In spite of this, the narratives deliver a positive message. The novels draw on the benefits of innovatively using this space, emphasising the value of spatial freedoms and warning against the influence of external forces that risk the loss of individual and community identities.
Part II: The Urban Landscapes of K. Sello Duiker and Phaswane Mpe.

Introduction

Issues of race, xenophobia, AIDS, drug abuse, crime and poverty have increasingly pervaded the post-apartheid city space in South Africa during the last 15 years. Millions of young black people moved from rural villages to city centres. Some had lost family members and had nowhere else to go, others travelled in search of a better education and job opportunities. These new urban citizens, so often divided by circumstance, race, ethnicity, gender and age, are nonetheless united in their attempt to craft new identities in urban communities. In his 2002 essay, “African Modes of Self-Writing”, Achille Mbembe argues the need for post-apartheid South African writing to address the complexity of these identities. He expands this argument, asserting that to define identity in terms of a colonial and apartheid past, or what he refers to as a nativist and Marxian reaction to those structures of power, is to overlook the “practices of the self”. Indeed, he argues for a new and different subjectivity independent of the past:

Through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new – something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented. (Mbembe 269)

The characters in K. Sello Duiker’s Thirteen Cents and Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow seek to form new identities in conflicted, violent and alienating urban spaces. The novels take place in what Michel Foucault calls deviant heterotopias, “in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed” (“Spaces” 25). Heterotopias are places which “are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia”. In a heterotopia, “all the other real sites
that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (“Spaces” 24). Such places are brought about by the coming together of peoples from different places, but are different from any of the places or cultures they reflect. The urban communities depicted in these novels are unique – an agglomeration of marginalized peoples coming together to produce, far from utopias, places of oppression and fear. It is in such hostile environments that the protagonists push the limit of their own freedom to conceive new identities; to produce “something new” by crossing physical and social boundaries within the city, while experiencing abuse and constraints at the hands of those who retain power in the poorer neighbourhoods of South Africa’s cities.
Chapter 3: *Thirteen Cents*

3.1 Street children: living in the public gaze

Duiker’s semi-autobiographical novel provides an engaging account of Azure – a boy approaching his thirteenth birthday, orphaned and living on the streets of Cape Town. Through the boy’s narration, the author explores the unspoken side of the city, reflecting on society’s disadvantaged substratum, capturing the sense of dislocation and uncertainty the street children of South Africa live with every day. Azure negotiates brief moments of happiness amongst the more pronounced and prolonged experiences of fear, hunger and desperation, all of which pervade his vulnerable life as he is drawn into adulthood all too quickly.

Street children are a relatively recent development in South and Southern Africa, but their presence is a rapidly growing phenomenon which reflects the patterns of exploitation stemming from colonialism, and later apartheid (Lugalla and Kibassa 16). Rachel Bray observes that a number of research projects into this phenomenon have identified the “cognitive dissonance the concept of ‘street children’” (39) causes. Bound together with the notion of street children as victims is the idea that the streets are dangerous public spaces for children to grow up in, which has led to a general assumption that “the existence of ‘street children’ can only be problematic for children and for society” (39). Bray warns that such a notion suggests that the children’s vulnerability necessarily leads to crimes and other activities that pose a threat to society. In *Thirteen Cents*, Duiker seeks to extinguish such claims, as his protagonist battles for survival on the streets of Cape Town with no criminal intent, and without posing a distinct threat to anyone. Azure’s desperate existence, far from being a threat to society, is presented as a product of society. Duiker exposes society’s ignorance of the immense difficulties standing in the way of survival, and of happiness, for children such as Azure. The boy’s vulnerability is a
result of having been pushed to the fringes of society, and this is reflected in the way in which he navigates the city – a skill which he must learn in order to endure the life he has been thrown into. He uses city space tactfully: he makes a home for himself under a bridge and later moves to a safer location when it becomes threatening. He uses the toilets in public swimming baths to wash, and fills up water bottles from city fountains. He ventures to parks to find moments of peace, taking any time alone to reflect on his situation, and avoids certain areas of the beach at night to escape confrontations with pimps and gangsters.

The boundaries for Azure between public (that of the state, outside of the home) and private (that of the home and family) spheres are conflicted, for he has no space of his own, and no family with whom he would share such a space. As Meg Samuelson observes, for the homeless in South Africa’s cities there are “no borders marking their domestic presence in public space” (255). Don Mitchell explains the contradictory notion of public space for those who are forced to live outside the usual private sphere:

Although homeless people are nearly always in public, they are rarely counted as part of the public. Homeless people are in a double bind. For them, socially legitimated private space does not exist, and so they are denied access to public space and public activity by the laws of a capitalist society that is anchored in private property and privacy. (135, original emphasis)

Living on the streets of Cape Town, Azure’s whole life must be acted out in the public gaze. Despite his existence on the periphery of urban life and his hatred of the city, he uses the city’s public spaces to his advantage, intelligently picking out spots to find food, use the bathroom, and sleep. Sometimes he manages to find peace and comfort by venturing into the public gardens:

I drift around town going to the station, the library, even taking a nap in the Gardens. I think of nothing but just enjoy my high. Fat pigeons that might be thugs or dirty politicians fly above me as I lie on the grass. Clouds form different shapes and disappear
into the hot air. [...] I walk back to Sea Point, the air thick with the smell of seawater. (TC 19-20)

Azure does not consciously recall the past, nor does he mention apartheid. Even so, he pushes aside the borders of the old regime through the simple act of walking - for, as Samuelson points out, his walks “remind[s] us of the ways in which the city has been populated, perused and perambulated in more rigid times” (255). Whilst I agree that episodes such as Azure’s walk to the gardens show a celebration of new spatial mobility for blacks in South Africa’s cities, it is remarkable that such peaceful drifting is so rare. For a child whose urban existence was supposedly legitimised by the new order, there is harsh irony in the fact that his movements are restricted to the point where this brief experience of peace with his urban environment is considered such an achievement.

3.2 The responsive city

Azure’s marginalized condition is exacerbated by his blue eyes, which set him apart even from his peers. Black people only seem to notice the colour of his eyes, while white people judge him by the colour of his skin. David Callenberger argues that Azure’s eyes cause him to be unable to embrace any specific racial ties, and as such his already vulnerable and weak position in society is intensified (91). Lizzy Atree, on the other hand, sees Azure’s blue eyes as a positive sign of the “Afropolitan nature of the African city” (32), a reflection of the “complex composite identities” (32) intrinsic to modern city life in South Africa. These arguments are compatible; Azure is a product of the mixing of identities within an environment of people from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, yet conversely he is marginalized because he still does not belong to any one of these groups. As such, at times he is crushingly alone in the city:

I know what it means to hear your own heartbeat. It means you are on your own. The world is watching you but you can only hear the music. The mad music of bicycle spokes
and speeding cars. [...] I know fear. And I hate it. I live with it every day. The streets, they are not safe. They are roads to hell, made of tar. Black tar. (TC 66)

Azure projects his loneliness onto the image of the city and its streets, making the everyday sounds of moving vehicles seem “mad” and imagining roads that lead to “hell”. It is only in the city, in this city, that he has felt such isolation and abandonment, and as such he associates it with all that is unwelcoming and dangerous.

When Azure’s environment becomes threatening, he becomes further isolated. His mentality adjusts accordingly, changing him from peaceful to aggressive, enthusiastic to gloomy. The way he chooses to move through the city either reflects these moods, or actively changes them, as he selects an environment that will help him to balance his emotions. In one instance he is offered the prospect of taking drugs with two white young tourists, one of whom thinks that Azure and his friend are “cool” (TC 22) because of their poverty. “Urban culture. Like urban living. You guys are living the concrete jungle, scavenging. [...] You guys are like cats, urban cats. Survivors, man” (TC 22). The tourists’ ignorance and voyeuristic interest in Azure angers him, and he walks off in disgust to find solace on the beach:

I walk towards the Broken Bath, my strops making flapping sounds that irritate me. I take them off and put them in my jacket pocket. I walk on the beach and feel broken shells under my feet. They make a crackling sound which makes me sad. I hate sadness because it means tears are not far off. And I can’t have that. Men don’t cry. (TC 23)

It is the tourists who have made Azure unhappy, but he only experiences this sadness through the things he encounters alone in his wanderings, which trigger the emotional response he had held back moments earlier. Although able to successfully mask his feelings during his daily interactions, he has little control over his inner emotions, which rage dramatically throughout the novel. In this particular moment of sadness the boy is able to prevent himself from crying, because he knows that it is a sign of weakness amongst those he fears. Worthy of note is his own
terminology, equating himself with “men”, though not yet even a teenager. Azure has had to leap into adulthood, abandon his schooling and find ways to earn some kind of a living. Pieterse and Meintjies call this “compressed” (5) growing up time. They highlight the vulnerability and confusion of identity that such a process inescapably leads to, because these children have “none of the social infrastructure […] that underpins their identity (5). An important part of this infrastructure is the presence of a role model, which Azure distinctly lacks. The only “respectable” adult he trusts, a middle-aged woman called Joyce, betrays him by stealing all his savings. This sends him into turmoil: “My heart races with confusion and anger. What’s wrong with this grown-up? Is she mad?” (TC 76). He is explosively angry, leaving him further frustrated and disillusioned with the adult world, of which he is supposedly now a part.

Azure has no voice with which to complain about his situation, for there are no social organisations that he is aware of which could help him. He has not been to school since his parents died three years previously, and he does not have a steady or properly paid job. Rather than make money like “pimps and gangsters” (TC 3), he earns a meagre income helping to park cars in the city. However, the money he makes from this is not enough to provide him with even basic commodities, such as shoes and clothes. As a result, he often ventures out at night to wait for “tricks” (TC 8), which we quickly and disturbingly learn involves prostituting himself to men. Not only has Azure skipped his childhood, but he experiences and sees things that few adults have or ever will, and that no person of any age could realistically expect to emerge from psychologically unscathed. Yet Azure is unaware of any psychological damage that he may have suffered, either as a result of his lifestyle, or from the death of his parents. “My friend Banafa can’t believe that I saw my dead parents and didn’t freak out. But I told him. I cried and then it was over” (TC 2). At this point he believes that he has dealt with having become an orphan, but as the novel progresses, the narrative changes tone and he repeatedly tells himself, “I’m getting
3.3  **Adapting to new environments**

Throughout the novel Azure grapples with his identity as an orphan, as a blue-eyed African, and as a “man”. Saying to himself that he is a man does not give him enough strength to alleviate his sadness, and this failure to properly vocalise his emotions results in their immediate internalisation: “I sit on the couch. I start to feel a little sad. No, I tell myself. I must be strong. I am strong” (*TC* 89). The habit of suppressing the natural flow of emotion is his survival tool, without which he would not last long on the streets of Cape Town. Paradoxically, however, it is also dangerous to Azure, for his inability to properly express himself forces him to adjust to living a tormented existence - trapped not only by the physical demands placed upon him by gang leaders such as Gerald, but also by his own emotions. He adapts, and does what he can to survive, even under Gerald’s violent rule. Simone comments on the difficulty that migrants in urban Africa have in settling into new environments:

> On the one hand, the ability to adapt to new social relationships, which stems from the greater ability to adjust, takes the form of new socio-spatial practices such as confinement to one’s privacy, even if the resultant isolation is unwelcome. In other words, being able to conform to new social rules also entails that one can adapt, that one can ‘rise to the occasion’, especially in public places. On the other hand, going from new rules to new behaviours has to do with assimilating (partially) a very authoritarian discourse which conveys and imposes its new rules, defines ‘suitable’ attitudes and determines ways of living ‘correctly’ in the new town. (*UA* 57)

Azure comes to Cape Town on foot with two friends, and simply says of it, “And now I’m here” (90). He appears to take the change of lifestyle in his stride, but he would have had to adapt

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[^7]: Also see *TC* 47, 49, 55, 67, 70, 71, 90, 99, 104, and 132.
dramatically upon reaching the city, in the ways which Simone outlines. The “social rules” of the underbelly of Cape Town are drastically different from the rules implemented by government, but they count for *everything* as far as Azure is concerned. He has no choice but to “rise to the occasion’, especially in public places”, for these are the only spaces he can occupy. His “suitable” attitudes must conform to whichever gang leader has control at that time. As his friend Vincent reminds him, if he fails to do so he will be killed, in part because he is “just” a child: “He’ll take you out. One time and no one will do anything about it. I mean fuck, you’re just another street kid” (*TC* 59). Azure is forced to accept his role as a commodity in the city, and to bear the harsh truth that to most of the people he meets, he will never be anything more than that.

Azure is acutely aware of his impact on the city and its residents. He is also conscious of how he is seen by those around him, and the effect his behaviour has on them. “In everyone I pass I can see a little of myself. I carry a little of everyone I know in me” (*TC* 102). At times, there is a sense that he has gained a strong familiarity with his surroundings, and has learnt how to walk through them in order to transgress boundaries and to survive. Yet, concurrently, he frequently feels lost in the city: “Fuck knows how many things I’ve lost along the way. The way in Cape Town, it’s a long road, winding. I’m always lost” (Duiker, *TC* 65). He never loses his bearings on the physical map, but the psychological impact of the loneliness he experiences in the city evokes a strong sense of displacement within him.

In terms of crossing boundaries, walking the streets may hold some significance for Azure. However, his salvation ultimately does not come from roaming the city, but in leaving Cape Town and watching the city’s phantasmagoric destruction from afar. This suggests that the attitude Duiker posits towards urban South Africa is one which far from celebrates the social and spatial developments of the post-apartheid nation. The novel enters the realm of the mystical, which Simone identifies as an attempt to make sense out of contemporary city space:
Possibilities of social reproduction are foreclosed for increasing numbers of youths…Without structured responsibilities and certainties, the places that young people inhabit and the movements they undertake become instances of disjointed geographies – that is, subsuming places into mystical, subterranean, or sorcerous orders, prophetic or eschatological universes, highly localized myths that capture the allegiances of large social bodies. (For the City, 7)

In light of Simone’s analysis of young people in urban Africa, the dream-like ending to the novel Duiker’s ending can be seen as a way of operating “in order to proffer some counterreality” to a life of “incessant misery” (Simone, For the City, 9). Azure transcends the real world and is brought to a point which allows him to regain his freedom and to form a new identity for himself. Duiker shows us that in its current form, the reality of urban life in South Africa cannot provide such a release.

3.4 Surveillance and the balance of power

The threat of powerful criminals pervades Azure’s existence, and his whereabouts are closely surveilled by those who want to exert power over him. When he inadvertently calls Gerald, who is Coloured, a “kaffir” (TC 19), Azure makes no attempt to hide, instead quickly turning himself over to the drug dealer. Bray notes that “street children are threatening because they thrive outside authority, in ways that contravene our understanding of ‘what children should or can do’” (39). Yet Duiker makes it clear that there is no glamour in the “freedom” of being a

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8 I have capitalised the first letter of the term “Coloured”, but note that it has been a controversial issue over the last few decades. The discussion is summarised by Mohamed Adhikari:

During the apartheid period and after, some scholars, myself included, refused to capitalize the first letter of the term Coloured in order to indicate both opposition to the enforced classification of people into racial and ethnic categories and distaste for ethnocentric values. The practice was further justified by the assertion that since the word was not derived from a proper noun, there was no need to capitalize it. (xv)

Nowadays Adhikari reports that it is much more common to capitalise it, for the following reasons:

This is partly a response to the gradual normalization of South African society in the postapartheid period and partly in recognition of a growing grass-roots sentiment neatly expressed by journalist Paul Stober: “As a distinct ethnic group with over three million members, we deserve a capital letter. (xv)
child living without the influence of parents or other traditional figures of authority. Instead, street children like Azure have dangerous, corrupt, power-hungry and devious authority figures, who scrutinize the children’s existences and allow them very little spatial and emotional freedom. Homes are set up communally and in public spaces, such as Azure’s dwelling under the bridge. Privacy is rare and coveted, as in the moments Azure spends alone in the gardens. The constant gaze of gang leaders, spurred on by the close proximity of Azure’s home to those of his peers, increases his habit of self-regulating. As Marie Smyth observes, in Azure’s world “There are no secrets” (20).

In line with Foucault’s theories on the regulatory modes of power and knowledge that exist in society, Azure’s environment is analogous to the life of a prisoner in Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon. Foucault argues that the panopticon is the visible instrument for power over the body, as the architectural design allows the guards to view prisoners at any given moment. The possibility of constant surveillance causes an internalised coercion for the prisoners, creating a control mechanism for the guards:

Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. (Foucault Discipline 201)

Azure acts in ways which reflect the power that the gang leaders and drug dealers have over him, aware that he might be under surveillance at any given time, becoming wary even of pigeons: “Pigeons fly everywhere in the Gardens. I’m suspicious of them” (TC 102). The fear of sexual abuse, from people such as Gerald but also from his white male “customers”, adds another layer of complexity to Azure’s existence. As Tom Odhiambo observes, “Both sexual violence and acquiescence are used as a form of establishing personal control over him, and his socio-
economic experiences are conditioned by the economic power and domination that these adults exercise or seek to exercise over him” (85). Hence the panoptic gaze, combined with the threat of sexual abuse, renders Azure powerless.

Azure is all too aware of his own persecution through surveillance, but is surprised to find that it is not only applicable to the homeless, young, black and poor in South Africa. On one of his “tricks”, Azure visits the home of a wealthy white man. Upon entering, he hears the doorman warning the owner to move his car inside, for “we’ve had some burglaries outside the building” (TC 82). Azure realises that he is being video taped by security cameras, and all the doors of the apartment are locked. He is shocked, telling himself, “I wouldn’t want all his money if it meant I had to live like that. To always have people watching you is a curse” (TC 89).

Callenberger observes that this heightened level of security, as we see in Mda’s Ways of Dying, has a negative impact on society as a whole. He argues that “The paranoid need for spatial control shows the sizable gap that still exists between the worlds of the privileged white minority and the oppressed, poverty stricken non-white majority” (93). In Mda’s work the home in question was that of a black man; here we see the paranoia from the perspective of the white elite, afraid of being robbed of their affluence and control.

Richard Sennett argues that the speed of the connected global city, with its highways leading from gated communities directly to office blocks and shopping malls, has led to “the dilemma with which we now live, in which the freely moving individual body lacks physical awareness of other human beings” (23). He observes that life in American gated communities involves a constant effort to avoid conflict with other sectors of society (19). As in Ways of Dying, there is no gated community in Duiker’s novel. Despite this, there are glaring similarities between Sennett’s analysis of modern conditions in global cities and the voluntary isolation prevalent in white South African homes. Indeed, as anthropologist Steven Robins explains, this
“militarization of city life through an architectural semiotics of ‘defensible space’ is increasingly transforming Cape Town into a smaller version of [Mike Davis’s] ‘Fortress LA’” (413). The man who lives in this expensive apartment asks no personal questions about Azure, thus continuing to limit his awareness of the marginalized sectors of society, despite using their “services”. The legacy divisions of the apartheid era are manifested here, as under the 1923 Native (Urban Areas) Act the presence of black South Africans in cities was only tolerated as long as they were serving white needs (Wentzel & Tlabela 85). The act was repealed in 1986, though as David Simon argues, in practice problems still remain in the flow of urban populations, and influx control has been adjusted rather than annulled (57). Azure’s “tricks” allow him a brief insight into the workings of a sector of society far removed from his own, and remind us of the extent to which lives in contemporary South African cities are still so often fiercely segregated.

Stemming from the threat of gang leader surveillance, Azure’s lack of spatial freedom evokes sympathy in the reader. His confinement is understood to be symptomatic of the lack of social welfare available to him, as well as society’s tendency to ignore his plight. Yet, the white man with whom Azure stays is also trapped in a world of surveillance – one which nobody has imposed upon him, but which he creates out of his own free will (though no doubt influenced by pressure from the community). The juxtaposition of these two people from entirely different sectors of society exposes the sheer absurdity of the paranoia for security in contemporary South African cities. 9 The deprived spatial freedoms that this social condition produces become

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9 Jennifer Robinson observes the extent that social paranoia had reached in South Africa, only four years after the end of apartheid rule:

White South Africans have enormous resources of repression at their disposal. These are no longer the armoured vehicles, administrative sanctions and legal exclusions of apartheid. Rather they are the private security arrangements around every home, the constant search for exclusive, safe white neighborhoods, the retreat to the shopping mall with its security guards and sanitized aisles, the rising fear of driving around town, the no-go areas (downtown, townships, ‘white’ areas that have become ‘black’, roads past new shack settlements, certain freeways at certain times of day or night, the street outside after dark), the reluctance to walk anywhere at all, the anxious looking around as they get out of their cars. Keeping (black) danger out
unsettlingly apparent, and the importance of how people move through space in the city is brought into focus. Duiker highlights the way in which spatial practices can weave a narrative map of the city. In the process, he offers an insight into the imprisoned existence of the street child, attempting to construct a new urban identity by any means possible and against all odds.
Chapter 4: *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

4.1 Dispelling myths

The Hillbrow area of inner-city Johannesburg has been a contested and fast-changing place during the last century. The estimated population of Hillbrow was just 300 in 1896, but by 1993 it stood at roughly 30,000. By 2003 it had burgeoned to over 100,000 during the week, and possibly over 200,000 during weekends (Clarkson 452). In recent years, wealthier white residents have moved to more exclusive suburbs, and an influx of black residents has occurred. This has led to a population shift, from all white, to predominantly black (Woods “Reading” 107). Space is highly valued in Hillbrow, as the area officially covers under one square kilometre (Mpe, *WOH* 1), and is characterised by notoriously overcrowded high-rise apartment buildings often filled with illegal occupants. Crime rates are high, and there is an increasing degree of scapegoatism towards immigrants from other parts of Africa, who are blamed for the dilapidation of the area.

Hillbrow is the setting for Mpe’s short novel, which tracks the issues of xenophobia, AIDS, and immigrant movements through the lives of the university student Refentše and those with whom he forms relationships during his all too brief adulthood. Through shifting narrative viewpoints and stories within stories, Mpe deconstructs the imbalance between the beliefs commonly held by people in a city torn apart by xenophobia and the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The focus is on how racial and cultural identities are formed in relation to opinions about rural and urban, tradition and modernity.

Mpe questions the dialectic between the rural village and the city based on migrant movements between the two. Like Mda, he is concerned with exposing the problems that arise from a belief in myths and unfounded rumours. He seeks to quell the fabrications that are
propagated in rural areas, about the abominable activities of city dwellers and the damaging influence they have on people from the country. The novel shows how in the context of a new South Africa, such myths hinder the cultural development of communities, and only serve to divide societies and ruin lives. Mpe goes so far as to judge misinformed people of Tiragalong, Refentše’s home village, as parochial and dangerous, for their judgements and misunderstandings lead only to more suffering and death. As intimated before, the urban space of South Africa remains a place of great ambivalence and discordance. The artificial demarcations of apartheid left black South Africans as the urban labour force, while they remained rural subjects of the nation. Simone notes that the uneasy balance between concepts of urban and rural, and all that they imply in terms of tradition and modernity, have remained since the end of apartheid. “It is an ambivalence about where the urban and rural, the customary and civil, and the traditional and modern begin and end” (Simone, For the City 137). This ambivalence is prominent in Mpe’s novel, as he highlights the dangers of misinformation – myths, legends and rumours – which further imbalances the rural / urban divide.

Samin discusses Nelson Mandela’s symbolic representation of South Africa as a “rainbow nation” – a country of reconciliation and national rebirth. He claims that the concept of a “rainbow nation” is a construct which forms part of a wider myth, which has come to mean that the transition from apartheid to democracy is automatically and inherently validated by the form it has taken. This hides the true economic and social rights situation across the nation. “The major challenge South Africa is facing today is the discrepancy between the official attribution and recognition of theoretical rights (human, civil and social rights) and the actual unfair distribution of wealth, goods and services” (Samin, “Reappraising” 1). Samin goes on to argue that Mpe’s novel is an attempt to reassess these myths: I agree with this notion, specifically in relation to the rural / urban divide and in tackling the xenophobia of the city. In this way, the problems of urban South
Africa are emblematic of the problems of the nation as a whole, and dealing with the issues in an urban context paves the way for tackling the implementation of a balanced democracy nationwide.

4.2 Rural vs. urban

When Refentše arrives in Hillbrow in 1991 to study at the university, his first description of the city is negative, calling it “a menacing monster”. However, as Hunt notes, Refentše immediately distinguishes between what he has heard about the city, and what he sees on the streets (11). Hillbrow is “just over one square kilometre, according to official records; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people” (WOH 1). The official and unofficial maps of the city do not correlate, and the divide between what Refentše hears and what he experiences and sees for himself, is the first sign of Mpe’s attempt to dispel myths in favour of finding understanding through real experiences (Hunt 12). This re-mapping of the city space is sustained as he makes his way to his cousin’s home, redefining the city streets on his own terms and at street level: “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 street that takes you to the north of the city. You cross Walmarans and three rather obscure streets” (WOH 6). There follows a list of precise instructions as to how one should safely move about the city, setting out a map of the locations for events in the novel. Refentše only describes what is relevant to his story, reminding us that city space is always subjective, and such space can always be re-mapped and re-imagined.

Mpe continues to deconstruct the moral dichotomy of rural versus urban: “It was your opinion that the moral decay of Hillbrow, so often talked about, was in fact no worse than that of Tiragalong” (WOH 17). The problems inherent in the rural / urban divide are further emphasised
by the spiralling effects of false rumours in Tiragalong about people from the city, which lead to interconnected stories of woe. Following Refentše’s suicide, his mother is “necklaced” and killed after being accused of bewitching her son. Refentše’s girlfriend Lerato commits suicide in part because she feels responsible for Refentše’s death, but also because of false rumours spread by his first love, Refilwe. Finally, after being diagnosed with AIDS while living in England, Refilwe reforms her own ideas about the people of Johannesburg. However, returning to Tiragalong on the verge of death, she is isolated and stigmatised as she finds herself on the other side of the prejudices she once held herself, and must face the people in her community who “turned diseases into crimes” (WOH 116). The sufferings of these characters appear all the more acute because they are either caused or enhanced by ideas about them from people who are incapable of appreciating life outside their own knowledge of experience. As a result of this ignorance, judgements are made based on folk tale and rumour, which ultimately lead to these stories of sorrow and death.

4.3 Xenophobia and migrant movements

In addition to the rural / urban dialogue, Mpe warns against the negative impact of xenophobia on urban Africa, again on the basis that it stems from fabricated stories. This is most poignantly shown in Refilwe’s reform, as she learns to change her negative perspective on the foreign immigrants of Hillbrow. These immigrants are derisively called “Makwerekwere” by locals: “a word derived from kwere kwere, a sound that their unintelligible foreign languages were supposed to make” (WOH 20). John Matshikiza provides an affecting insight into the xenophobia of Johannesburg, arguing that it is an extension of the racial hatred of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past:
In South Africa, even as South Africans in exile, we carry ourselves with an arrogance
borne of coming from the City of Gold, from the powerhouse of the African economy.
Subtly, imperceptibly, we have bought into our own colonisation. We have come to agree
with our own oppressors that we are better than other Africans because we come, even if
it is merely as servants clinging to its outer garments, from the promised land given to the
White Man through a covenant with God himself. Or at least that’s what we’d been told.
And sneakingly, in the absence of other evidence to the contrary, and broken down by
four centuries of debilitating war, we started to believe the propaganda in spite of
ourselves. (180)

Xenophobia is thus both produced by the racial divisions of apartheid, and the cause of its
continuation. In Refilwe’s reform we come to understand that the myths about foreigners are
born not out of hatred, but from ignorance. After reading a story written by Refentše about a
woman who contracts AIDs, Refilwe realises that “Hillbrowans were not merely the tiny section
of the population who were born and grew up in our Hillbrow, but people from all over the
country, and other countries – people like herself, in fact – who entered our Hillbrow with all
sorts of good and evil intentions” (WOH 96).

Refilwe’s illness is diagnosed a decade or so after contracting it, several years before she
entered into a relationship with a Nigerian man in Oxford. The Nigerians and other African
foreigners are blamed by angry Hillbrowans for the spread of the HIV/AIDs virus, which affects
30 million people in Africa (Woods, “Reading” 110). Since 1990, mostly as a result of the AIDs
epidemic, life expectancy for South Africans has dropped by a staggering thirteen years (Klein
206). In rural villages such as Tiragalong, the illness is rarely diagnosed, and people die of
“mysterious diseases” (WOH 45) attributed to witchcraft. As such, urban areas are viewed as the
focal point for the spread of the virus. Woods notes that the importation of the disease from
“outside” the fabric of society “redefines space both in human relationships and within the city,
particularly in relation to modernity and the corruption of the city” (Woods, “Reading” 110).
Indeed, the myths surrounding the disease thwart both rural and urban citizens from learning how to protect themselves against it. Furthermore, as we see for Refilwe, it causes loved ones to be abandoned in their most important time of need. She still returns to her family, however, accepting of her fate and in a state of total reform:

You do not blame them for the troubles in your life, as you once did. You have come to understand that you too are a Hillbrowan. An Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A Lekwerekwere, just like those you once held in such contempt. (WOH 122-3)

Refilwe must redefine her notion of what it means to be a citizen. She must also come to understand how urban corruption breeds through false truths, gossip and an ignorance of the “other”, rather than simply from the arrival of foreigners. Everywhere she travels she takes a piece of her old societies with her, necessarily changing her identity as she moves across borders.

As a newcomer to Hillbrow, Refentše is part of a successive wave of migrants from South Africa and beyond, who moved to this inner-city area to find employment and a better standard of living. As Robinson observes, such flow changes the nature of the city itself, reconstituting it into something new, but not necessarily breaking down the city’s boundaries:

These dynamic and changing flows have not only transformed the social and economic character of the city; they have also produced a new differentiation of urban space. Fragmentation in the city does not end when planners stop trying to impose it. While the dynamic connectedness of cities contributes to reshaping their internal forms, this could just as well lead to separation as to integration. Newly-arrived immigrant communities, for example, make their own spaces in the city. (Robinson, “(Im)mobilizing” 170)

In Hillbrow it is in the prejudice against the arrival of immigrants that the divides of the city remain. New arrivals “make their own spaces” out of necessity rather than choice. Refentše’s cousin blames foreigners “not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay” (WOH 17). The positive aspects associated with the opening up of urban spaces in the post-
apartheid era are overshadowed by this rebirth of partitions. Nonetheless, the mapping out of the city is tightly connected to the figures of migrant and immigrant, as Refentše’s addressee tells him in the opening pages of the novel: “Your first entry into Hillbrow was the culmination of many converging routes. You do not remember where the first route began. But you know all too well that the stories of migrants had a lot to do with its formation” (WOH 2). Emerging from such narratives of the city is a migrant itinerary of places which are always in motion. Sarah Nuttall observes that “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” (748). The migrant figure comes to dominate urban space in the novel, and the new mobility it brings to Johannesburg indicates that it has become a “global” city, at least in so far as it is connected by migrant movements to other parts of the country and the world.

4.4 Celebrating the “global”

Mpe directly contrasts the negativity of xenophobia with a celebration of the inclusive identity that globalisation can bring about. Refilwe arrives in London to see Africans from other nations being interrogated by airport security, while she passes through without question. Heathrow reminds her of Hillbrow in terms of its xenophobic attitude towards Africans, as “Nigerians and Algerians are treated like the pariahs of the twenty-first century” (WOH 101). She then sits down to an English breakfast, which “was so common in South Africa that Refilwe enjoyed it not because of any English novelty, but because its taste blended with the joy of reunion” (WOH 99). She eats it with the accompaniment of a South African beer: “Fortunately, global imperatives had encouraged the South African Breweries to bring to our Heathrow their own ale brand” (WOH 99). Throughout the novel Mpe sends out a message of global
inclusiveness, one which signifies the mixing of different cultures and the crossing of physical and social boundaries.

In this celebration of the global Mpe advocates an understanding and acceptance of different cultures and traditions. This encouragement of South Africa’s global incorporation is then also reflected in the rural / urban narrative tension, for here too is a plea for unity through the drawing of similarities with (and creating an understanding of) the “other”. It is also apparent in the narrative form – the tale unfolds in the form of a prosopopoeia where all the characters, dead or about to die, are addressed in the second person. This extends the global aspect of the novel, forming a link between this world and the next, where “Heaven is the world of our continuing existence” (WOH 124). Even further, the constant repetition of the word “our” before names of places evokes feelings of community, as well as an all-encompassing, global story.

However, as we have seen, Hillbrow is not represented as a place of belonging, but of non-belonging and disparity. Carrol Clarkson examines the use of the term “our” in relation to concepts of self and community, arguing that African languages and traditions have always considered the individual as responsible for not only themselves, but also for their family and community. “The ethical engagements that come with having a name extend beyond the notion of the self in a Western, atomistic sense: ‘I’ answers to his or her name as ‘we’. It is telling that in several African languages, polite exchanges are conducted in the plural form, ‘we’” (453). The self is thus represented as an intersection of social relations, and individual identity is understood as “intrinsically relational” (453, original emphasis).

This communitarian understanding of the self is often taken to be a defining characteristic of African thinking: it cuts through other ethnic and cultural differences, so that we find variations of the saying, ‘A person is a person through people’ across the continent. (Clarkson 453)
Thus, according to a traditional African worldview, the self is conceived as an agent of cultural continuity. I argue that this does not detract from Mpe’s acknowledgement of the benefits of community – it rather reinforces it. On the one hand, the problems in Hillbrow stem from individuals clinging on to a warped sense of responsibility towards their places of origin, and as such people from other places are judged as dangerous or morally corrupt. On the other hand, the solution to these issues lies not in breaking those ties, but in creating new ones with the community of the present – with Hillbrow itself – so that the peoples from all over the country and the continent are able to form a new “our”. As in Mda’s brief chapter in *The Heart of Redness* on the strange mixing of peoples within Hillbrow, Mpe’s criticism of the current degenerate state of the area is put down to the lack of any kind of infrastructure with which to build a new sense of identity. Conversely however, what he exposes in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, rather than the need for governmental assistance in providing such an infrastructure, is the desperate need for a sense of responsibility from the Hillbrowans themselves towards “their” own Hillbrow. In order to achieve this, the myths of xenophobia and between rural and urban South Africa must be dispelled. Allowing the city to emerge in the twenty-first century as a safe and socially vibrant area remains a crucial factor in the social progression of the country as a whole.
Part II: Conclusion

Through their vivid depictions of South African heterotopias, Duiker and Mpe answer Mbembe’s call for the need to form new identities in contemporary Africa. The city in both novels is treated as an always-changing space, in which borders are transgressed by its constantly moving citizens. Yet it also acts as a menace: in Duiker’s novel, Azure’s vulnerable position in society illustrates the current problems in urban South Africa that stem from the nation’s tendency to cling to the hierarchies of the past. Too young to remember much of the apartheid years, Azure lives in misery as a direct result of the failure of the nation to progress towards democracy without dragging hatred and social divides into the new establishment. Similarly, Mpe’s Hillbrow cannot function as a place of prosperity because its residents continue to be engulfed by racial prejudices. The partitions of apartheid are sustained by the continued mentality of superior and inferior, of power and submission, and of strength and weakness. In order to create new and different identities, these features of apartheid must first dissolve. As such, Duiker does not offer a solution for Azure that lies in real urban space. The boy is granted certain freedoms and private experiences within the city, but only finds his ultimate release in entering the realm of the “sorceral”. Likewise, the realisations and new identities that are formed in Mpe’s novel all take place just prior to or after the characters’ deaths. Thus both authors reveal a disillusionment with contemporary South African city space, and their characters must enter new worlds to find salvation.
Conclusion

Mda, Mpe and Duiker are united in a literary community of South African writers who relentlessly pursue the nature of individual human experiences in their novels. I have analysed these experiences in a specifically urban context because I consider South Africa’s population shift from rural to urban as one of the defining factors in the nation’s reconstruction over the last fifteen years. The failure of the post-apartheid government to implement successful land redistribution has hindered the progression towards racial and social equality. The corruption of the new ruling elite has engendered a rhetoric of exclusion which has inevitably had a negative impact on communities in towns and cities striving for unity and economic progression. The voluntary isolation of wealthier urban communities into fortress enclosures encourages the continuation of the inequalities of apartheid. Furthermore, it is evidence of the elite’s blatant neglect of the poorer sections of society.

These three authors do not propose to solve the immense problems of the government and nation. They depict the effect of the transition to democracy through an artistic re-imagining of urban life. We gain from this an understanding of what it means to carve an identity out of the conflicted urban spaces of contemporary South Africa. We learn how the characters’ environment affects them and in turn how they impact on it. Nobody is exempt – all characters in these novels play a part in contributing to the complexities of the transition. The message that carries through these novels is one of understanding: in *Ways of Dying*, Toloki comes to terms with a new way of living through learning about and experiencing different societies and cultures. In *The Heart of Redness*, Camagu finally settles in Qolorha only after he comes to truly understand the conflicted history of the community. In *Thirteen Cents*, Azure suffers because he *cannot* understand the world around him, and must see it destroyed to gain his freedom. Mpe’s
characters only cease their discrimination and judgements when it is too late, but in the world of
the narrator’s imagination, they achieve understanding in death.

Duiker committed suicide in January 2005, aged 30. In a moving eulogy to him, Mda wrote:

What a beautiful human being! What a great writer of the post-apartheid era! I cannot pretend that I am not angry as well. At what? At whom? I don’t know. I am just angry. Many critics said Sello was treading on my footsteps: but I say he was going to be much greater. (Mda, cited in Raditlhalo 102)

Just over a month earlier, Duiker read the eulogy at Mpe’s funeral. Mpe died of unknown causes (most likely AIDs), aged just 34. The message of hope that Mda pursues in his novels is not apparent in those of Duiker and Mpe. Accessing the worlds of fantasy and the afterlife in their novels as a means of escaping the horrors of the real world becomes ever more poignant in light of their deaths; indeed, the hardships that their characters experience in urban South Africa are all too real.

These novels are not just works of fiction. Duiker and Mpe’s deaths serve as a painful reminder that the prohibited freedoms their fictional characters battle against are neither imagined nor overstated. The rising AIDs epidemic, the continued racial segregation, the lack of community support and social infrastructure, the dangers of ill education and the vulnerability and extreme poverty of so many of South Africa’s citizens are not hypothetical concerns. The transition is so complex and fast-changing that it cannot be captured in a simple historical narrative, nor explained by any one social theory. The literary representations of South Africa’s urban environments offer an insight into these spaces, providing us with a multiplicity of understanding and a clearer sense of the elusive nature of the conflicted post-apartheid society.
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