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Sifiso Mzobe's *Young Blood*: Spaces of getting and becoming in post-apartheid Durban

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Abstract

Sifiso Mzobe's *Young blood* (2010) generates much of its energy, this article will argue, through its representation of social and physical mobility and its articulation of space with modes of consumption in post-apartheid South Africa. The novel is set chiefly in the township of Umlazi, the city of Durban and some of its middle-class suburbs. The chief protagonist, a young car thief, moves between township, city and suburb with ease in stolen cars. The open space of the highway separates township and suburb, but also connects them. The novel shows how the spatial arrangements of power and control associated with apartheid are increasingly undermined and reconfigured by new practices of everyday life. *Young blood* suggests that a certain style of driving can offer new ways of inhabiting the South African city and of bringing its disparate parts together. The ability to move between places in the novel provides opportunities for upward mobility and also enables new forms of symbiosis, trade and consumption. Stealing and driving cars enable Sifiso and his friends to bridge the divide between township and suburb and turn the distance between the two places into a domain of attainment and performance. But the rapid upward social mobility that high-level criminal activity allows is exposed as uncertain and ephemeral by the end of the novel, and the slower route offered by education to self-improvement and class mobility is proffered in its place.

Space and place in fiction

Contemporary literature frequently explores the relationship of people to specific locales and their use of physical space, both through everyday practice and as the basis for imagining the world and the self. In a world characterised by constant movement, forced or desired, and the rapid transformation of physical environments, this is unsurprising. Space, as it appears in literature, is intricately mediated by class, gender and ethnicity and is produced through the transformation of the open, pre-cultural space of nature in a dynamic process that involves various kinds of cultural and psychological mapping as well as economic and social practices. Literature, notes Jesse Ferguson (2009: 36), is uniquely able to explore "the subjective experience of a given location, those qualities that we project onto undifferentiated space". The experience and imagining of space is both mediated by and deeply constitutive of forms of individual and social consciousness.

The nature of the relationship of space to place and the dynamics of the multiple ways in which people belong to a place or are alienated from it are extremely complex, a complexity that provides fertile ground for authors and teasing questions for critics; not only does every work of literature deal differently with space and place, but these concepts themselves are elusive. Bill Ashcroft (2001: 124) begins his consideration of the concept of place in colonial and post-colonial writing with the observation that:

The issues surrounding the concept of place – how it is conceived, how it differs from ‘space’ or ‘location’, how it enters into and produces cultural consciousness, how it becomes the horizon of identity – are some of the most difficult and debated in post-colonial experience.

One of the difficulties is that the concepts of “place” and “space” are defined differently by different theorists, and some do not distinguish between them at all. Postcolonial scholars, especially, find it useful to consider place as socially and historically mediated space. They distinguish between place and space in relation to the displacement that is central to the experience of colonial conquest, dispossession and settlement. “In many cases,” note Ashcroft *et al* (1998: 177), “‘place’ does not become an issue in a society’s cultural discourse until colonial intervention radically disrupts the primary modes of its representation by separating ‘space’ from ‘place’.” In conditions of inequality, land and resource appropriation and different codes of ownership, most sharply in the context of settler colonialism, the power to inhabit space and transform it into place is contested.¹ The same space can define different places for different people and groups of people. Settler unease, violence and arrogance combine with indigenous resentment and resistance to radically complicate questions of entitlement to land, identity and belonging.

Henri Lefebvre’s (1991) core insight that space is socially produced has been seminal to thinking about space and its formation. Crucially, Lefebvre (1991: 26) points out that “in addition to being a means of production [space] is also a means of control, and hence of domination”. The racialised spatial planning of the South African city provides an excellent example. But controlled and panoptical spaces are also open to various kinds of resistance and reconfiguration (1991: 26). The practices of everyday life seldom conform to the intentions of planners. Lefebvre’s theory does not hinge on a difference between place and space, as such, but his distinction between “natural”, “abstract” and “absolute” space (1991: 48-49) carries some of the same analytical purchase as the distinction between place and space does for Ashcroft. The space in which humans live and interact is always socially produced, either in order to facilitate domination and control through the production of abstract space, or through the everyday life and usage that creates absolute space. Lefebvre establishes a “sort of master distinction ... between those who produce a space for domination versus those who produce space as an appropriation to serve human need” (Molotch 1993: 889). Space, Lefebvre’s work insists, is not a container for social life but is, itself, a social product, part of the “practico-sensory realm” (Lefebvre 1991: 16) of

¹ For a succinct discussion of this point, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, “Place”, in *Key concepts in post-colonial studies* (1998: 177-83).

human experience and interaction. Space, it is important to remember, “is a project shaped by interests of classes, experts, the grassroots, and other contending forces” (Molotch 1993: 887), rather than by a single set of actors. The fact that space is produced means also that it can be “read or decoded” (Lefebvre 1991: 17).

Michel de Certeau (1984: 124) reserves the term “space” for a kind of freedom, often fleeting, won from the tyranny of “place” (1984: 124). Space represents the triumph of the possibilities of ordinary life and everyday practice over the hegemonic systems of control that constitute place: “space is a practiced place”. Hegemonic institutions employ spatial strategies in order to control the use and representation of place, but these are undermined by the ways in which people use streets, buildings and other cultural products, appropriating, adapting and reworking them for their own ends. This process is particularly evident in colonial contexts, and De Certeau (1988: xiii) provides an example of this from the Spanish colonisation of South America:

Submissive, and even consenting to their subjection, the Indians nevertheless often made of the rituals, representations, and laws imposed on them something quite different from what their conquerors had in mind; they subverted them not by rejecting or altering them, but by using them with respect to ends and references foreign to the system they had no choice but to accept. They were other within the very colonization that outwardly assimilated them; their use of the dominant social order deflected its power, which they lacked the means to challenge; they escaped it without leaving it.

De Certeau considers the use and consumption of space as productive. The production of users is invisible “because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order” (1998: xii-xiii). This insight is important when considering both the use of cars and the roads in Mzobe’s novel and also the novel’s representation of different kinds of conspicuous consumption and display.

This article will use the term “space” in the more general sense that Lefebvre uses it. The term “place” will be used as a neutral term, as sense and grammar dictate. Most often it will be used to refer to actual geographical locations, such as Kloof or Durban, without the negative connotations that attend the term for De Certeau or the more positive ones with which postcolonial theorists have invested it. Nevertheless, the article will frequently draw inspiration from De Certeau as it charts the ways in which space in *Young blood* becomes a zone of creative or transgressive possibility, however tenuous and insecure, by virtue of the ways in which it is used and inhabited.

Questions of space have particular trenchancy in South Africa, with its history of dispossession, colonisation, resettlement, migratory labour and varying conceptions of private and communal land ownership and tenure. People have been confined to or excluded from areas by heavily enforced regulations and also, in the case of many whites, by the fear of racial difference. The ability to move across the country from place to place was

denied to the majority of the population for long periods of South Africa's history. The space between places represented danger, as it does for illegal immigrants today; space constituted a barrier. Today, poverty continues to limit movement and access to space. Paradoxically, at the same time, many people are forced to move as they are displaced by evictions, retrenchments and other material pressures.

Jennifer Benningfield (2006) charts the history and contestation of place in South Africa in relation to both rural and urban spaces, employing, for the most part, the term "landscape" to signify the way in which space is mediated by human history, culture and modes of representation. She tracks the ways in which landscape has been central to racial separation and to "the development of the politics of division." Land was used deliberately as "a strategic tool in the separation of people according to race" (2006: 208). The township enabled the cities to remain white while supplying the black labour on which their development was dependent (2006: 229-230). Benningfield (2006: 217) notes that the townships not only removed the black presence from white areas but "contained the threat of violence within a policable area." *Young blood* shows how this system of containment has broken down in present day Durban. Violence and crime spread beyond the bounds of the township, with the police as complicit beneficiaries of this development.

South Africa's history of spatial production has today produced "an unsettled and ambiguous landscape" (Benningfield 2006: 190). The contemporary South African city is "dominated by the debris of modernity and complicated by the strategies of spatial planning" (2006: 209). On a more sanguine note, Benningfield (2006: 2) argues that an understanding that landscape in South Africa "has always been inseparable from uncertainty and contradictory meanings ... can contribute to the reimagination and remaking of the land in the post-apartheid period" in ways that are potentially liberating and beneficial. Part of this process, will entail "reclaiming ambiguity, hybridity and flux" (2006: 271).

One of the ways in which South African writing has traditionally approached questions of space has been to contrast two spaces that appear to be so different that that they constitute a binary. South African fiction has a long history of exploring, establishing and exploiting the differences between the spaces of the village and the city, the farm and the city or the township and the white town. Benningfield (2006: 9) notes that "the image of the fertile Boer farm was also used as part of a dual myth that split the landscape into a productive abundant nature, occupied by the white farmer, and the impoverished, overstocked land occupied by Black South Africans." Black South African writing has frequently depicted the rural village as an idyll of communal living and the repository of time-honoured African tradition, as Michael Titlestad (2012: 676-96), among others, has noted. The city, by contrast, has been represented as a space in which innocence is lost and bitter experience gained. Another strand of black South African writing, though, represented most typically perhaps by the writers associated with *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, embraces the modernity of the city and the existential possibilities it offers. Some *Drum* writing even suggests that the urban life of the predominantly black or mixed areas, such as District Six in Cape Town or Johannesburg's Sophiatown, was more splendid, and more

modern, than “anything white Johannesburg could offer” (Benningfield 2006: 177). This celebration of African urban life and modernity was central to the rejection of “racial classifications of Africans as essentially tribal peoples from distant reserves” (Chapman 2003: 238).

Post-apartheid fiction also exploits spatial difference in order to explore a range of political, social and cultural questions. The ways in which it does this are endlessly varied, as one would expect, given the fluidity and unevenness of economic, political and social transformation in the country, as well as the different repertoires and traditions of representation that are available to South African writers. Space can be the subject of the utopian or dystopian imagination or of social or magical realism. It can represent opportunity and potential or entrapment. It is as central to the concerns of an ecocritical poet as it is to those of a crime fiction writer.

This article will discuss the ways in which spatial binaries are represented, explored and unsettled in one post-apartheid text, Sifiso Mzobe’s *Young blood*. The novel, published in 2010, sixteen years after the formal end of the old order, suggests that the physical and symbolic spaces between places that were integral to apartheid’s spatial geography are being reconfigured in unexpected ways through particular everyday practices; in this case, these include car theft, drug dealing and conspicuous consumption and display. The novel moves swiftly between Durban’s satellite black townships and its once exclusively white suburbs. While Mzobe carefully names, describes and situates actual places, the main characters exist in a fluid, mobile space, constantly in motion in fast cars on the city’s highways.

Space in *Young Blood*

Young blood exploits the literary possibilities of spatial binaries, as the action moves between the township of Umlazi, home of the novel’s seventeen-year-old chief protagonist and first person narrator, Sipho, and the formerly white suburbs of Durban. These places have traditionally been separated, although they have always been entangled in complex ways. Sarah Nuttall (2009: 1) characterises entanglement “as a condition of being twisted together or entwined, involved with; it speaks of an intimacy gained, even if it was resisted, or ignored or uninvited”. While traditional South African modes of entanglement still persist at the time of the events that are described in the book, the novel itself scarcely alludes to them. It does not mention, for example, the fact that people still travel from the township to work as domestics and gardeners in homes in the suburbs or that people from disparate worlds cannot help but encounter each other in a range of everyday situations in the spaces of the city. While the novel does not directly investigate these entanglements, it could nevertheless be argued that the encounter between criminals and suburban victims, which it does describe, constitutes a relationship of entanglement: crime results in situations of physical and emotional proximity and, at a further remove, through a chain of complex entangled histories, originates, in part at least, from the exploitation of the body and mind of the colonised subject as labour and, paradoxically, also in the subsequent rejection, in the neoliberal era of mass retrenchments, of the subject’s opportunity to be exploited as labour;

the economic privilege of the suburbanite, embodied in the possession of the luxury vehicle, is fatally entangled with the lack of economic privilege in the township and the tactics employed to counter this lack, both economic and psychological. It is important to note, though, that Sipho himself desires the material rewards of crime but does not lack the basic necessities of life; his father makes a modest living as a self-employed mechanic. At the beginning of the novel, Sipho works with his father. He is not unemployed. He chooses a life of crime, revelling in the social and physical mobility that car theft offers and the freedom and possibilities that new ways of linking the fragmented spaces of the city can offer. Of course, this choice is not an unusual one in the township. Sipho's father had been jailed for theft earlier in his life and one of Sipho's uncles is a gang boss in Pietermaritzburg. Crime is part of the practice of everyday life for many people of Sipho's background; it is a common economic and lifestyle option. Sipho is drawn into stealing cars by his friend Musa almost naturally, in the normal course of events, after he demonstrates his driving skills while spinning a car in a township street spectacle. The relationship between township and suburb, as represented in Mzobe's novel, has changed from the apartheid and colonial eras, creating new modes of entanglement and also new patterns of association between people from township and suburb that go beyond the logic of entanglement. The novel explores new ways of using the space of both township and suburb and the roads that connect them. The relationships between the car thieves and the bosses who live in the suburbs are not contingent or purely transactional; they are built on old neighbourhood associations and the loyalties of the criminal economy. The township-based criminals, in this novel at least, do not merely labour for their rich superiors, but are also their protégés. They are entertained in their homes as guests. The fixed racial barriers that once prevented people moving from the townships and residing in the suburbs have gone. Severe economic obstacles persist but these are not insurmountable. A successful criminal career makes the passage possible, but so do more formal means of ascent into the ranks of the middle class, such as a higher education. It is possible for black people to appear to belong to the suburb even if they live in a township. Vusi, Sipho's partner in crime, tells Sipho to "relax, walk like you are a local boy. A lot of black people live here now". He dispenses this advice while they are stealing a car in the suburb of Umhlanga Rocks. Ironically, where once black South Africans were practically invisible in the white suburbs because "their presence in urban life was partial" (Benningfield 2006: 209), their invisibility today depends on their ability to project a sense of belonging in these areas. The space between suburb and township represents new opportunities, not just of upward mobility but of symbiosis and trade; an ability to move easily between the two worlds is part of the skill-set of a successful car thief.

While the novel establishes links between disparate spaces, it also exploits and reaffirms spatial hierarchies, which, ultimately, have their origins in the racialised history of class in South Africa: "[f]or every suburb there is a township, so for each section in the township a shantytown – add a ghetto to a ghetto" (Mzobe 2010: 14). There are shantytowns, such as Power, from which the main protagonist's upwardly mobile friend and mentor in crime, Musa, hails. The shantytown is already a step up from the grim rural areas, though: "Musa was born in Nongoma, true dustlands where the tropical flavour of coastal KwaZulu-Natal is just a figment of the imagination" (Mzobe 2010: 33). Superior to the shantytowns are the

established townships, which today have their own upmarket areas. Siphó's girlfriend, Nana, lives "in a mansion at leafy High Ridge in N section, which was practically a suburb within the township" (Mzobe 2010: 44). The different townships are carefully distinguished from one another, often, as we shall see, by the type of criminal activity for which they are best known. Siphó himself is "a second-generation township" dweller (Mzobe 2010: 54). While the "dusty rural villages" still represent home for his father, "Umlazi – a township" signifies home for Siphó. But this does not lead to a lasting loyalty to the township. Siphó has aspirations and wishes, literally, to move on. Unlike the older "generation who lived in the same place for their whole lives", Siphó vows "not to die in a township, let alone in my father's house".

Townships are much more than geographical locations. The adjective "township" is used to denote a distinctive, and not uncelebrated, sensibility, signifying identity and style – "[h]is gestures and posture screamed township" (Mzobe 2010: 52). What Can Themba said of Sophiatown, according to Lewis Nkosi, is true of the Durban townships Mzobe describes today: "Sophiatown is a state of mind ... no longer a segregated ghetto ... the Sophiatown I know has become an important attitude. An attitude of resilience, stubbornness and unpredictability" (cited in Benningfield 2006: 257). The segregated and controlled spaces of the townships have been subverted and liberated by the ways in which people have inhabited and used them. There is a dark side to this too, though. The space of the township can be dangerous, violent and crime-ridden. "Township" describes, therefore, not only a style and an attitude but also a harsh mode of experience and a bitter type of knowing:

I am a township child; I knew what Musa and the Cold Heart were on about. I knew what I had just witnessed was the law of the number of convicts, as laid out only briefly in number lore. I knew what the stars tattooed on my father's shoulders stood for. (Mzobe 2010: 32)

At the top of the scale are the formerly white-only suburbs, now also home to the black elite, including the criminal syndicate leaders, who inhabit mansions in the wealthiest and most established suburbs, up the coast with sea-views or in the cooler suburbs on the inland hills. The suburbs are not only places in which to steal cars, or, for lesser criminals, to break into houses for drug money (Mzobe 2010: 70). They are also places in which to relax in the houses of the criminal bosses and indulge in the consumption of drugs, alcohol, and sex. Siphó's boss, Sibani, lives in the upmarket suburb of Kloof "in a symmetrical, white-pillared hideaway that resembled a corporate office" (Mzobe 2010: 73). The visits to the elite criminals' homes constitute an important part of Siphó's informal education. It is chiefly in these homes that he is initiated into the codes of a different, more glamorous, mode of living. The suburbs offer opportunities for a new kind of subjectivity:

The air you breathe changes in the suburbs. There are more trees than houses, more space than you can imagine. The silence is healthy, the peace of mind a priceless asset. It is the kind of place you should be in if you want to be the fastest forward. (Mzobe 2010: 46)

The suburban space makes a different sort of consciousness possible. This both echoes and inverts Steve Biko's comparison of black and white areas:

The homes are different, the streets are different, the lighting is different, so you begin to feel that there is something incomplete in your humanity, and that completeness goes with whiteness. (Biko 101, cited in Benningfield 2006: 215)

Sipho could be said to aspire to whiteness and the completeness it represents when he celebrates the suburb. But his celebration of the suburbs is really a celebration of the appropriation of the space of whiteness, rather than an integration into the practices of whiteness and a submission to its codes. The lifestyle that Sipho witnesses in the homes he visits in the suburbs is not a mimicry of whiteness; it is a lifestyle derived from the township, but elaborated and refined in the suburb. Nor does the novel simply privilege rich over poor areas. While the suburb is the desired space, the narrator's sense of belonging is strongly linked to Umlazi and to his family. His home in the township is affectionately described, even though the outside wall is "roughly painted" and the house itself is "slanted" (Mzobe 2010: 9-10). The family home is a sanctuary to which the protagonist retreats to rest and recover from his exhausting adventures in the wider world, sometimes "falling asleep fully dressed" (Mzobe 2010: 82). Home is a place of healing and replenishment: "I took a bath, dressed the wound on my wrist, counted all my blessings and slept" (Mzobe 2010: 213). Conveniently situated next to Sipho's home is a different sort of sanctuary, Mama Mkhize's tavern, described as an "oasis" and "a refuge" (Mzobe 2010: 10).

While apartheid planning tried to produce homogenous spaces, everyday practice quickly converted these into spaces with distinctive characteristics and individual attributes. The different townships are carefully distinguished in *Young blood*, chiefly by their criminal specialities: stolen goods (Mzobe 2010: 96), car theft (Mzobe 2010: 205), house-breaking and drugs. "Each township", the narrator informs us, "has its own type of hustle" (Mzobe 2010: 55). Sipho's career as a car thief is partly ordained by the place from which he comes: "[i]n my township, Umlazi, we steal cars at such a rate that the flying squad – fly as they do – can never keep up" (Mzobe 2010: 55). KwaMashu, situated north of Durban while Umlazi lies to the south of the city, enjoys a special place in the young man's imagination:

My feelings about KwaMashu lie in a place that is not quite indifference and not exactly fear ... the township of KwaMashu was, and maybe still is, a faster criminal nation. What we did in other townships, they did faster and harder. (Mzobe 2010: 96)

Together the townships form an underground economy consisting of a web of symbiotic relationships that Sipho has to negotiate. This is not without its dangers. Policing the spatial divisions are gangs, denoted by numbers (Mzobe 2010: 31), and a police force that is itself enmeshed in the criminal economy.

Another way in which the anonymity of black life associated with apartheid urban and rural planning and racial classification is contested is the attribution of different characteristics

to people from different areas. This is most evident in the way that the novel categorises women. The sexually available young women with whom the criminals consort in their leisure time are described chiefly by their relationship to particular spaces: country girls, Varsity chicks (2010: 149), mall chicks, township girls (2010: 59; 103), suburban chicks (2010: 53), “out of town” girls (2010: 89), working chicks (2010: 161) and Durban girls (2010: 199). The narrator “can’t help” loving “upcountry girls, with their shy eyes and slangless speech” (2010: 72). A group of twelve Tongaat women with whom Musa and Siphso hang out are described as “like the women in renaissance paintings, only black” (2010: 162). The spatial categories linked to women have as much importance as markers of consumption as the branding of whiskies (usually Johnnie Walker Black) or cars. At one point, the young men decide whether to spend their time with the drinking girls of Musgrave centre mall or with the stoned and drunk Durban University of Technology girls (2010: 70); the two places are literally a block apart. The linking of women to location signals sexual opportunity, mystique and the joy of variety.

Location is the chief factor that separates the young women of the novel. Even though Siphso himself contrasts the “openness” of the girls from the suburbs with the “discrimination of township girls, for whom reputations were paramount” (2010: 59), the women in the novel, whatever their provenance, seem equally drawn to confident, well-dressed young men in fancy cars, with no questions asked about where the cars come from. Like the other women in the novel – steady girlfriends, sisters and mothers – the young women the car thieves consort with exist largely in a female realm outside crime. Whether they are linked to the university, the township or the rural village, most of the car thieves’ female companions enjoy sex, drugs and whisky. What sets Nana (Siphso’s girlfriend) apart is the fact that she doesn’t drink alcohol or do drugs, and she needs proof of the seriousness of Siphso’s love before she will sleep with him. The rest of the young women are ephemeral, one-night phenomena.

Driving the city

“Walls and roads,” notes Harvey Molotch (1993: 888) in relation to Lefebvre’s work, “obviously privilege certain kinds of activities and inhibit others, support the projects of one type of actor and deter the goals of others.” In South Africa walls protect suburban houses from criminals and confine people to their “own” areas, while the roads allow labour and goods to flow and the elite to move easily from place to place. Space is produced so as to privilege those with their own cars and inhibit movement for the rest of the population. Steve Biko (1987: 101) describes how the use of the roads and railways for black people in the apartheid era represented hardship and danger, “precisely because townships are placed long distances away from the working areas where black people work, and the transport conditions are appalling, trains are overcrowded all the time, taxis that they use are overcrowded, the whole travelling situation is dangerous”.

Siphso and his friends are not deterred by the fact that walls and roads were not built to support their goals, projects and activities. They do not commute to work at regular hours. They “work” sporadically and at odd hours. They are not confined to the townships or

excluded from suburban homes. Most importantly, they have access to the roads on their own terms and for their own purposes. Through their appropriation of other people's cars, they also appropriate the road and the privileges which go with it and produce a new kind of space and a new mode of being as they drive the city and "weave places together" (De Certeau 1988: 97) – suburb, inner city, township, beach, highway. Siphó's activities illustrate quite literally De Certeau's observation that "Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others" (De Certeau 1988: xii).

As Megan Jones (2013: 219) notes, cars in the novel are spaces in themselves. Like the suburb, a luxury car "is the kind of place you should be in if you want to be the fastest forward" (Mzobe 2010: 46). For Siphó, the most desirable place to be is in a luxury vehicle, moving fast between township, city and suburb, along the highways on the way to a party in a suburban mansion, high on cannabis, with a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black at hand, accompanied by friends and desirable young women. This is "the freedom of the tarmac" (2010: 18-19). Cars are imbued with character and individuality. They are always referred to by their models rather than by make: a 325is, for example, features prominently throughout the novel, and Siphó is arrested driving a 328i. Siphó declares that driving an M5 "freed my heart" and "felt like raw sex" (Mzobe 2010: 75). Cars are frequently described in sexual terms; they have curves and are caressed and loved by their drivers. Cars seduce: "[t]he 325is was flirtatious under my palms" (Mzobe 2010: 17).

Space is linked to cars in multiple ways. The wealthy suburbs are places to "get" cars, the car thieves' euphemism for stealing. Then there are places, the townships, to which to take cars: to hide, re-spray and disguise them (2010: 85). The townships are also the places where one can most safely and conspicuously display a fancy car or one's skill at driving one. The city itself is entered chiefly in order to pick up particular kinds of girls or to do drug deals. Parts of the city, in any case, as the narrator rather proudly observes of Point Road, Durban's red-light district, have come to resemble the townships (2010: 197). The empty streets of the city at night also provide a unique form of pleasure for Siphó, the driver: the "robots are there to be raced" (2010: 51). Driving these deserted streets is an aesthetic experience: there is a pleasing contrast between the black sky and the orange streetlights while the "sound from the tailpipe reverberates off the buildings as if high-rises, banks and chain stores have their own engines".

In many ways the freeway is the most significant space in the novel (Jones 2013: 219). Siphó and his friends cross great swathes of space quickly on the freeways, as it is possible to do on the system of ring roads that encircles Durban. One of the chapters is aptly entitled "We moved with ease down the South Coast" (2010: 77). Siphó moves along the freeways continuously, usually in his friend's 325is but also in newly stolen cars. Sometimes these journeys have a goal, such as the theft or disposal of a car or the transportation of drugs, but often they are an end in themselves. Towards the end of the novel, Siphó plans to drive 200 km to Port Edward in his new car simply to buy a packet of cigarettes (2010: 193). He is arrested, though, on the evening before the planned excursion. The shiny red car he is driving, which he bought for R2000 (a rip-off according to a fellow thief), turns out to have

been stolen in a violent hijacking; Siphos is held for vehicle theft, attempted murder and the possession of drugs (2010: 205). The police find 2500 ecstasy pills in the spare tyre and a thousand mandrax tablets under the seat. Fortunately, they let him go once he gives them the cash from his crime proceeds; R20 000 is hidden under his mattress (2010: 208-10). Corruption is colour-blind. The police are a multiracial group of black, Indian and white cops. A few weeks later, Siphos sees one of the policemen driving the red car around Umlazi (2010: 227).

Consumption

At one point, Siphos describes the aesthetic of American hip-hop as “the excess, the gleaming gloating of the have-nots when they finally have” (2010: 175). This could also be a description of the novel’s prevailing tone and style. Page after page, for example, is devoted to a description of the spinning of a luxury car in the strange night light of the township, amidst the heady aroma of girls, marijuana and whisky (2010: 17- 25). The burning of a car in homage to Siphos’s brother in crime, Vusi, at his funeral is also rendered in lurid detail (2010: 158-59). Here the adoration of luxury cars is elevated to a religious ritual. Jones (2013: 209-10) discusses this incident in the context of an aesthetic of “conspicuous destruction” that pervades the novel and links it to the current township practice of *ikhothane* in which “designer clothes and shoes worth thousands of rand are set alight in a display that asserts wealth through indifference to the commodity”. Despite his grief at Vusi’s death, the protagonist is inspired by the spectacle of the burning car:

I looked back at the township as we joined the freeway to Westville. The great balls of black smoke from the cemetery looked minute in the distance, like a black string dangling from the heavens.

“Musa?” I said. “Yes, my brother.”

“Burn a white dolphin-shaped M5 for me when I die.”

The novel is full of loving depictions of luxury houses (2010: 73), cars, expensive clothes (2010: 89), upwardly mobile young women, and the lavish fittings in suburban homes. The narrator’s celebration of consumption is also present in the attention he gives to the detail of every fast food meal he eats and cigarette or joint he smokes at roadside garages, not to mention the weed, whisky and cocaine he consumes in suburban mansions. *Young blood* exemplifies Achille Mbembe’s point that The single most important transformation the end of white minority rule has brought is the turning of South Africa from a society of control to a society of consumption. This shift is happening in the absence of structures of mass production and in the context of an armed citizenry – the majority of whom is propertyless.²

Consumption has overtaken control as the primary South African social logic, but the two are not unrelated. As De Certeau suggests, the way that space is used or consumed

² See Jones (2013: 211-12) for a discussion of the didactic intent of the novel.

undermines its status as a system of control. As this article has shown, consumption in *Young blood* is an index of mobility, literally in the shape of fast luxury vehicles, and metaphorically in the form of social mobility represented by the ability to consume drugs, girls and food. Consumption operates in a context in which constraints on movement and the use of space are no longer imposed by external mechanisms of control to the extent that they were in the apartheid era, when the police were a determining force rather than a sort of rival gang. But consumption does not only symbolise status and access to material resources. It is important to remember De Certeau's (1988: xiii) contention that consumption is productive:

To a rationalized, expansionist and at the same time centralized, clamorous, and spectacular production corresponds another production, called "consumption." The latter is devious, it is dispersed, but it insinuates itself everywhere, silently and almost invisibly, because it does not manifest itself through its own products, but rather through its ways of using the products imposed by a dominant economic order.

Through their use of cars, roads and consumer items, Siphon and his friends participate in the reconfiguration and reinvention of space in South Africa.

Conclusion

Siphon's brush with the law occurs quite soon after the assassination of his accomplice, Vusi, by the Cold Hearts gang and hours before his closest friend, Musa, is fatally wounded in a revenge shootout with the same gang (2010: 216). The spaces the criminals carve out for themselves are also the spaces in which they fall. When Siphon's mother gives him a pamphlet detailing courses at a technical college (2010: 214), he decides to complete the *Bildungsroman* in a more conventional way, as Jones (2013: 211) points out. He has little choice: his comrades are dead and he is under police surveillance. In spatial terms, he will use education, a course in mechanics, to move from a life of crime that will end inevitably in prison or death to the promised land of life in a better suburb with Nana. There is a family precedent. His father, too, started out as a criminal before becoming a hard-working motor mechanic, albeit in the township. This is Siphon's plan, at any rate. Even if he is successful in improving his social and economic position by means of education and training, it will be a slow and gradual process, not the instant bridging of worlds that crime offers. The novel's ending comes perhaps as a disappointing resolution for a reader who has vicariously enjoyed the exciting world of the car thief. In part, this is because the novel displays the episodic structure and amoral verve of the picaresque, a genre which is notorious for anti-climactic endings. But we should remember that for a particular kind of reader, Siphon's peers in the townships, the novel might well read as an opportune cautionary tale. This seems to be Mzobe's intention, at least if his own statements about the novel are to be taken seriously.³ And it is surely significant when thinking of the readership the author envisages for his novel that the book is dedicated to "my township and yours" (Mzobe 2014: 5). It is notable, too, that the criminals are never judged as morally reprehensible or represented as socially

³ I owe this insight to a conversation with Iri Manase.

other. Nor does the protagonist altogether reject the values that drove him to crime when he opts to study instead. He is still heading for the life of beautiful cars and consumer objects. The final words of the novel portray Sipho's brief but incident-filled criminal career as a significant part of his formation as a person. It taught him a necessary lesson. Without this experience he would not have come to appreciate the value of studying and education: 'My mind never again drifted in class. They teach about things of interest to me, I told myself. But, in retrospect, I know that I concentrated in class because of everything I saw in the year that I turned seventeen' (2010: 228). *Young blood* does not mention apartheid, or politics for that matter, at all. In this sense it is truly a work of post-apartheid fiction. Part of its appeal, nevertheless, is related to a much older characteristic of black South African fiction, the verve, panache and ironic heroism of criminal protagonists, exemplified by the gangsters in Can Themba's short stories, for example, or by the figure of the staffrider who rides the trains illegally, risking life and limb but heroically exemplifying existential freedom during the most oppressive era of apartheid (Manase 2005: 61);² the staffrider's ability to move represented defiance of the constraints of influx control and the segregation of group areas. While *Young blood* describes access to material possibilities that were denied the staffrider, its characters echo the attitudes and style of this earlier figure. The novel thus merges an older tradition of literary representation with a newer stylistics of consumption, drawing on contemporary repertoires of self-staging and identity, which derive in part from the USA and the bling aesthetic but which are also distinctively South African.

The activities of the young criminals and their way of life are celebrated but ultimately they are found to be self-destructive. The temporary freedom that crime gives the narrator carries the risk of losing his freedom altogether. Violent death or imprisonment are constant threats, a fact that leads Sipho to reflect that when he chose crime, he "chose money over freedom" (2010: 108). The ambivalence that attends the representation of Sipho's criminal acts and the precarious sort of freedom it brings is paralleled by the ambivalence that surrounds the enactment of spectacular consumption in the novel. Spectacular consumption both affirms and satirises capitalism; it promotes materialism but separates consumption, to a large degree, from the processes of work and accumulation. It represents too, as I have argued, a resistant use of space. The Protestant work ethic is eschewed until the final pages of the novel in favour of instant accumulation by means of daring criminal acts followed by days of leisure that are devoted purely to consumption although the sober processes of saving, reinvestment and profit are ironically replicated in the accelerated processes of wealth accumulation involved in dealing drugs. Sipho reinvests some of the proceeds derived from stealing cars in drugs, after seeking advice from an uncle in Pietermaritzburg.

The final message of the novel is that the slower modes of accumulation and social mobility that result from study and industry are to be preferred to the glorious but literally dead-end trajectory of the criminal. In this way the novel truly represents a move to the suburbs, to the values of the older bourgeoisie, who until recently were the suburb's sole property owners. And ultimately, the class system itself is not questioned; on the contrary, *Young*

blood's symbolic structure, epitomised by the movement between places, depends on its maintenance, even as the spaces reserved for the old elites are invaded and reinvented.

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