

New South African Writing: A Special Cluster

“Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction”: The City and Its Discontents in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* Gugu Hlongwane

The delicate line between fact and fiction in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is suggested in one of the novel’s epigraphs attributed to W.E. B. Du Bois: “Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction.” That Mpe evokes a strategy of address employed by African-American scholars and slave-narrative writers such as Harriet Jacobs who spoke directly to their readers insisting on the authenticity of their traumatic experiences in racist America, speaks volumes about South Africa’s fledgling independence.¹ In his damning indictment of a South Africa that retains the socio-economic markers of apartheid, Mpe focuses on drug- and prostitution-ridden areas of post-1994 Johannesburg that are predominantly black. There is, here, neither evidence of Nelson Mandela’s “rainbow nation at peace with itself and the world,” nor of a reconciled society. If relations with whites who occupy positions of power over blacks seem strained, they are even more so amongst urban blacks who form a very fragmented community. In fact, the once politically oppressed South African blacks are now portrayed as the new oppressors of Africans from outside the country, thus making the notion of a new and different South Africa a very premature one. But the novel does attempt to steer away from this toxic mood by adopting a moral didacticism designed to encourage social transformation.

In the recent Oscar-winning film, *Tsotsi*, directed by Gavin Hood and based on Athol Fugard’s novel of the same title, one gets a very real sense of the violence besetting South African townships and inner-cities like Hillbrow. Interestingly, in both *Tsotsi* and *Welcome to Our*

Hillbrow, this pervasive violence is not contextualized, possibly because of the target audience's assumed familiarity with the effects of South Africa's brutal system of legalized racism that officially ended in 1994. For the targets of this racism, the once invisible black, coloured and Indian masses—thus categorized by the Population Registration Act of 1950—the city was a place of deep anxiety, entrenched segregation and often certain death. The working masses who flocked to urban areas like Johannesburg, especially from the time of the nineteenth-century gold rush and onwards, returned home with virtually nothing to show. Instead, Johannesburg—which is known in isiZulu as *egoli* (place of gold)—enriched the Oppenheims, De Beers and others while the black homelands and townships remained the wretched spaces of abandoned people. Those who still do not have the “gold” often rely on violent means to attain not just economic justice but also a home of their own.

The concept of space and home has always been a charged one in South Africa. Dumped by the apartheid government in “native reserves” resembling those sprinkled all over Canada and the United States of America, millions of people of colour—especially blacks who occupied the bottom-most rung of apartheid's racialized ladder—were also subjected to forced removals. As Steven Robins explains, “by removing blacks and coloureds from multiracial working-class neighbourhoods such as District Six and Sophiatown in the 1960s, apartheid spatial planning created the racialized grids upon which the template of the ‘postmodern’, post-apartheid city could seamlessly settle” (411). These “racialized grids” have not only remained in post-apartheid South Africa but there is in fact a “garrison mentality” at work. Ubiquitous gated communities fortified with the latest alarm systems and electric fences create relative safety for the affluent. According to Robins, 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). In other words, the racial and economic cleavages that are the glaring features of cities like Los Angeles and Cape Town are difficult to ignore. What makes the situation in South Africa even more frustrating is that the country's millions of poor people—who

are mostly black—suffered terribly under apartheid rule. Today they are shut out and neglected once more, this time by a predominantly black government that has reneged on many of its election promises.

Such injustices in South Africa have always met with effective resistance. But the residents of a mixed-race Johannesburg neighbourhood were no match for the apartheid government's bulldozers that razed Sophiatown in order to make room for a white neighbourhood called *Triomf*—which means triumph in Afrikaans—in the 1950s and 1960s. Despite the overtly racist urban policies legally sanctioned by statutes such as the Urban Areas Act (1923) and the Group Areas Act (1950)—which attempted to prevent the urbanization of people of colour, especially black people—in the mid-1970s informal or so-called illegal “squatter” settlements like Crossroads developed in Cape Town as well as in other South African cities. In Hillbrow, for example, coloureds, Indians and blacks contravened apartheid's urban policies.

One of the most populous areas of Johannesburg, Hillbrow is no longer the racially mixed neighbourhood it once was. As is the case with many of South Africa's post-apartheid cities, many whites have either fled the country altogether or retreated to the outskirts of the cities, taking their businesses with them—a point illustrated at the beginning of Mpe's novel: “. . . Hillbrow was a menacing monster, so threatening to its neighbours like Berea and downtown Johannesburg, that big, forward-looking companies were beginning to desert the inner city, heading for the northern suburbs such as Sandton” (3). To further situate the reader in this “monstrous” Hillbrow and its surroundings, the novel's unnamed narrator introduces a “locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official records; and according to its inhabitants, at least twice as big and teeming with countless people” (1). It is in Hillbrow's congested high-rise apartment complexes that residents recklessly celebrate their sports victories by “hurl[ing] bottles of all sorts from their flat balconies” (1). Sadly, it is here that, at the novel's outset, life ends abruptly for a seven-year old, a victim of a hit-and-run accident.

The accident sets a tone of violence for many of the novel's characters die young. For instance, Refentše, the first of the novel's two addressees who leaves the impoverished rural area of Tiragalong for

Hillbrow to pursue a post-secondary education at the University of the Witwatersrand, is one of the first characters to die tragically. Employed as a lecturer at his alma mater upon completing his studies, Refentše's life, however, unravels the day he witnesses his girl-friend's infidelity with a mutual friend named Sammy. So traumatized is Refentše by Lerato's betrayal that he jumps from the twentieth floor of his Hillbrow apartment. Lerato, who is implicated in the suicide and subsequently suffers relentless verbal abuse, decides to ingest pills that, as I will illustrate, end her young life as well.²

Before the unfortunate events that lead to the deaths of Refentše and his girl-friend Lerato, we are given further insight into a Hillbrow "beast" that eventually claims many of its inhabitants. On his first night in Hillbrow Refentše, who is afraid of the prospect of robbers breaking into the apartment, is awoken by the "screams of human voices and police sirens" (10). So seemingly characteristic is this commotion that it is not even investigated. What Refentše "realised a few minutes later, from the fading sounds, [was] that they [the police] were going to rescue someone else, elsewhere, and not the nearby screaming soul whose voice continued to ring relentlessly" (9). As the narrator elaborates, Refentše "never expected any quietness in our Hillbrow" (7). This, after all, is a place "with its cash machines flashing 'Temporarily Out of Service', on Sundays and public holidays, as well as on weekdays after eight in the evening" (7). And yet, compared to the poverty-stricken rural areas from where Refentše hails, Hillbrow seems more like the promised land of splendour and sunrays. Unlike the rural areas where "the water taps were often as dry as a desert" (10), Hillbrow offers an otherwise rare opportunity to have a hot bath. The "glamour" of Hillbrow quickly wears off, however, as Refentše notices the prevalence of car-jackings, rapes, drug-dealings, prostitution and glue-sniffing street kids.

It is not only the reader who has to take in the desperate sights and sounds of a Hillbrow where "a terribly noisy shebeen [bar] . . . competed . . . with its neighbour, the Universal Kingdom of God" (8). When Refentše "hit[s] the pavements of the Hillbrow streets" (10) with his cousin in an effort to familiarize himself with his new surroundings, we, the readers, also take that walk with him. It is on these walks that

we come to a better understanding of the people who live here—who quench their thirst at a liquor store called *Sweet Caroline*. It is also these same people who are resourceful enough to resist the big business of grocery stores like Spar, Checkers and OK by supporting the informal sector represented by the sellers of fruits and vegetables who conduct their business from Hillbrow's pavements (8). There is no mistaking the tradition of struggle here, especially in the figures of Hillbrow's beggars and "semi-naked soul[s]" (11) encountered by Refentše. Desperation is also apparent in the dagga-smoking young man who crawls out of "what looks like a rather big dog kennel" (11–12). When Cousin chatises Refentše for greeting a man who smells strongly of methylated spirits, a man whose "trousers are inclined to intimate that urine has gone through them quite a number of times" (12), the newcomer quickly learns that different rules apply in the city. Although these mostly black and dejected characters remain in Mpe's fictional realm, there is actually very little that is fictional about them in a country where the poor live in desperate poverty.

Mpe makes it apparent in his novel that the "new" South Africa smells of decay, a point driven home by Refentše who "take[s] only minimal interest" (11) in the Hillbrow Police Station. But there is some cause for optimism in the fact that Refentše can walk so freely from Hillbrow to nearby Braamfontein, the location of Wits University where he later lectures. This mobility is symbolic of new changes in a country where the presence of blacks in cities that used to be for "whites only" no longer has to be justified through the dreaded pass system (see Davies 171) which resulted in daily incarcerations for the "trespasser" who did not have this document on his or her person.³ And, in this "new" South Africa, pavements are no longer the sole preserve of whites as they once were in cities like Pretoria not too long ago. The simple act of walking the city, then, becomes extremely significant even though the prevalence of English and Afrikaans street names which virtually mark the whole of South Africa suggest not a new post-colonial South Africa but a neo-colonial one.

The limitations of the "new" South Africa unfortunately seem to outweigh the achievements as the violence that is common-place in

Hillbrow inevitably spills over to predominantly rich white areas like Sandton, where Refentše narrowly escapes the knife of a car-jacker. There are also stories of “white madams raped and gagged by their [black] South African garden boys” and “white men found hanging like washing waiting to dry, because they refused their so-called boys and girls permission to go home to bury a close relative” (23). Far from glorifying the behaviour of robbers who take it upon themselves to redistribute wealth by targeting the wealthy as well as by randomly killing whites “simply because they were white” (23), Mpe, however, does not dwell enough on the underlying causes of this violence. Aside from a reference to these vicious crimes as “an embodiment of racial segregation and black impoverishment” (23), what one reads between the lines is that decolonization, as Frantz Fanon reminds us, “is always a violent phenomenon” (35). The colonized man who lives in a “hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light,” not only envies the settler’s “strongly built [white] town, all made of stone and steel” but desires “to sit at the settler’s table, to sleep in the settler’s bed, with his wife if possible” (Fanon 39).

The racial tensions that are part of the fabric of the “new” South Africa not only linger in Mpe’s novel, but also in post-apartheid texts like *Country of My Skull* and *Disgrace*. In the latter novel Lucy, a white victim of a gang rape, offers the following rationalization:

What if . . . what if *that* is the price one has to pay for staying on? Perhaps that is how they look at it; perhaps that is how I should look at it too. They [the black rapists] see me as owing something. They see themselves as debt collectors, tax collectors. Why should I be allowed to live here without paying? (Coetzee 158)

Novels like *Disgrace* problematically suggest a one-sided violence of black men, South Africa’s primary villains, when in fact violence is committed by all segments of South Africa’s diverse population. A case in point is the January 2004 death of black farm worker, Nelson Chisale, at the hands of his white employer, Mark Scott-Crossley, who fed him to the lions in an area to the north of Johannesburg.

The question of race that continues to be such a sore point in today's South Africa may not seem to be very salient in a novel where whites are largely marginal to the plot. Laurice Taitz argues, for example, that Mpe's novel "shows the complexity of blackness in a context in which race is no longer a defining factor and even ethnicity has been overtaken by the large movement of non-South Africans into Hillbrow. . . ." While it is true that Mpe focuses on a range of challenges facing the residents of Hillbrow, to conclude that "race is no longer a defining factor" is erroneous. There is a reason why Sandton is rich and Hillbrow is not. Not only are those whites who sell "liquor and glue to street children" part of the problem, but we learn that the owners of liquor and other stores in Hillbrow are "largely white" (103). The racial and economic disparities of the past, then, are part and parcel of the "new" dispensation.

It is this pervasive culture of violence that Mpe effectively exposes in his novel. His concern is both with the violent tensions between blacks and whites and with black-on-black violence which smacks of self-hatred. In rural Tiragalong, for example, Refentse's mother who accidentally falls into her son's grave on the day of his funeral is branded a witch and then subsequently "necklaced" by the comrades of the village: "They put large tyres round her neck and poured generous quantities of petrol onto them and onto her whole body. Then someone gingerly lit a cigarette before throwing the match into her hut, in which she awaited the Second Coming of our Lord" (43). As in Mda's *The Heart of Redness*, rural folk are not idealized; they are portrayed as people who live in the shadow of the nightmare of colonialism and apartheid which encouraged the making of terrible tools to fight equally terrible wars.

It is important to note here that this gruesome violence is by no means condoned by Mpe's narrator who observes that, "despite the so-called new dispensation, nothing had really changed" (57). The references here are both physical acts of violence and less obvious linguistic violence evident in the tastes of publishers who shun any work written in African languages. While it can be argued that this type of violence pales in comparison to the violence described in Mpe's novel, of "necklacing" or of "the grisly details, draped in tears, from the testimonies of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings, of South African policemen

enjoying their beer and braai while black dissenters roasted alongside their roasted meat in the heat of a summer day . . ." (19), it does nonetheless expose South Africa's Eurocentrism. Refentše's short story written in English, for example, is published while the protagonist of his fiction, an HIV-positive woman from rural Tiragalong, is unable to publish her book written in Sepedi. As the narrator explains with alarm, "The woman of your fiction, Refentše, was writing in 1995, one year after the much acclaimed 1994 democratic elections; one year after the overthrow of the political and cultural censorship . . ." (57). As far as the narrator is concerned, because this story written in an African language is rejected, "the story of Hillbrow and xenophobia and AIDS and the nightmares of rural lives remained buried in the heroine's files" (58).

Njabulo Ndebele understands these cleavages, between blacks and whites, as symptomatic of "South Africans [who] don't know one another as a people" (336). In his reading of the "new" South Africa, as long as whites hold the [economic] keys, there will continue to be "a stand-off that offers no certitude" (337). While Ndebele is unquestionably correct in his assessment, after reading Mpe's novel, it would also be quite right to assert that Africans do not seem to know one another as a people. Fuelling tensions, in a direction different from that suggested by Ndebele, are immigrants from Nigeria, Angola and other parts of the African continent who choose South Africa "because political refugee status here enables mobility and the freedom to seek employment and live anywhere" (Simone 430). But in a country where the black majority is severely poor and where unemployment rates are high, the welcome that these outsider Africans receive is a very cold one. This xenophobia, which has many possible causes aside from the economic ones I have just mentioned, is undoubtedly tied to apartheid's racial hierarchies that subscribed to a civilized white South Africa amidst a largely "wild" and "untamed" Africa. The "divide and rule" agendas of the apartheid government, then, which perceived South Africa's people of colour as better than the "barbarian" Africans "out there," but still far beneath white South Africans—a view shared by Refentše's white superintendent who is convinced that "Hillbrow had been just fine until those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing" (17)—created superiors and

inferiors. It seems that some South Africans have inherited this harmful apartheid mentality. Referred to in a derogatory way as *makwerekweres*, “a word derived from *kwere kwere*, a sound that their unintelligible foreign languages were supposed to make, according to the locals” (20), African immigrants, although badly treated, are far from being victims of this xenophobia. We learn in the novel that “the *Makwerekwere* had also learned a trick or two of their own. Get a member of the police, or a sympathetic South African companion, to help you organise a false identity document—for a nominal fee. Or, set up a love relationship of sorts with someone from the city” (21). City-living, then, evidently calls for desperate measures, especially for some of South Africa’s recent immigrants.

It is these kinds of strategies of survival employed by some African immigrants which fuel some South Africans’ xenophobia—although there is an element of scape-goating here, given that most of the heinous crimes mentioned in the novel are attributed to South Africans. Refentše’s cousin nonetheless feels that these foreign Africans, especially Nigerians, are not only responsible for the city’s “crime and grime” (17), but are allegedly the transporters of AIDS (20). The relative ease with which Refentše walks the streets of Hillbrow, then, is a luxury that many African immigrants do not experience. As Abdoumaliq Simone observes,

What foreign Africans note the most about urban South Africa is the degree to which one person is scrutinised in public space—how one looks, how one is walking, what one is wearing—not to assess conformity to some consensually determined urban norm, but to assess weakness, either in the person scrutinised or, implicitly in oneself in terms of “what do I lack?” (442)

Refentše, who sympathizes with the lot of these other Africans, is very quick to correct Cousin’s perception of them by drawing attention to the important contributions they make. He contends that these immigrants, the so-called *makwerekweres*, “are no different to us—sojourners, here in search of green pastures. They are lecturers and students of Wits, Rand Afrikaans University and Tecknikons around Jo’burg; profession-

als taking up posts that locals are hardly qualified to fill” (18). Refentše here simplifies matters by failing to consider yet another cause of the tensions between black South Africans and foreign Africans. Because of the inferior system of education designed by apartheid-architect H.F. Verwoerd in 1953 to prepare blacks only for manual labour, many black South Africans were educationally short-changed by the apartheid government while Africans from outside the country had better educational opportunities. Notwithstanding these devastating strategies of the apartheid regime, which the proponents of the “new” South Africa are apt to forget, the issue of the paucity of black intellectuals raised by Refentše is often used as an excuse to keep qualified black applicants out of South Africa’s white-dominated universities.

What Refentše does not over-simplify, though, is the corruption of black South African policemen like Cousin. The narrator explains that Refentše

could not forget all those black agents of the Apartheid State, playing their various roles with a mastery that confounded the minds of even the State itself. Black police officers contorting bribes from fellow blacks accused of political and other dissents. Black police and security forces hitting fellow blacks mercilessly for crimes that were often not committed . . . (19)

Cousin, who maintains his narrow-minded thinking, is not at all swayed by these perspectives. What do change, however, are the perceptions of outsider Africans as the carriers of AIDS which, “according to popular understanding, was caused by foreign germs that travelled down from the central and western parts of Africa” (3–4). This myth is turned on its head when Refentše’s South African ex-girl-friend, Refilwe—the novel’s second addressee—discovers that she has AIDS. Interestingly, what is implied in the novel is that women like Refilwe are not innocent victims of AIDS but more likely invite the virus through sexual promiscuity. Said to have had “at least four other love relationships” (31) while in a relationship with Refentše, Refilwe is compared unfavourably to Refentše who is guilty of only one sexual betrayal with Bohlale (Sammy’s girl-friend) while dating his girl-friend Lerato (37).

At first glance it might seem that Mpe's depiction of black women like Refilwe and Bohlale might be in line with the good-time girls or prostitutes of African literature penned by men. Refilwe is apparently so promiscuous that when Refentše writes the requested testimonial for her post at a local publishing house, he reasons sarcastically, "her sexual life would not hinder her from doing her work" (32). But it can be argued that even though these women are presented as sexual aggressors, the reality is that, generally speaking, in African cultures men hold positions of power over women in both public and private realms. This is not to suggest that women are always subjugated. Refilwe exercises a sexual agency that unfortunately leads to her death. Nonetheless, she is a complex character who is developed quite effectively. A young and ambitious career-oriented person from rural Tiragalong—much like Refentše—she heads to Oxford Brookes University in England to pursue a Master's Degree in Publishing and Media Studies. It is here that she falls in love with a Nigerian man—a *kwere-kwere* in Cousin's language—and learns that they have both been HIV positive for many years. In many ways, Refilwe begins to look very much like the "scarecrow" (59) protagonist of Refentše's short-story about an HIV-positive woman who is not only emaciated but is also "ostracized by her fellow villagers when they learnt about her health status" (54). Like Refentše's mother, who believed that "all Hillbrow women were prostitutes" (39), Refilwe is also initially quite a prejudiced person who wrongly assumes that Lerato is a "kwerekwere" and spreads the rumour that it was her "dangerous [kwerekwere] power" (44) which directly caused Refentše's suicide. Guilty "by association [of being] one of the hated *Makwerekwere*" (118), Refilwe decides to speak truthfully about a disease that "lent itself to lies" (121). This she does when she discloses, in writing, the nature of her illness to her family in an effort to combat "the ignorant talk of people who turned diseases into crimes" (116).

Social transformation, which is always a difficult project, is clearly the goal of Mpe's didacticism. One of the important lessons of the novel is that the sexual betrayals leading to suicides, fatal car accidents, insanity (in the case of Lerato's lover Sammy), and AIDS are not the transgressions of bad people considered "black in human skin colour, but also

black in morals” (103). Given the novel’s moral emphasis, it is fitting that someone like Refilwe who spreads hurtful gossip is given a chance to redeem herself. When she reaches her moment of recognition, she becomes neither villain nor victim, but a teacher who has a keen understanding of how crippling prejudice can be.

Although the novel’s two addressees, Refentše and Refilwe, appear to lead somewhat similar lives in terms of their career trajectories—both are writers and both pursue graduate studies—it is Refentše who is concerned with the representation of Hillbrow in written literature. Before his suicide he asks: “How does it happen that Hillbrow is so popular, but writers ignore it?” (30). Zakes Mda’s *The Heart of Redness* does not ignore Hillbrow *per se*, but the portrayal of it is rather negative. One of the novel’s main characters, Camagu, is so disillusioned with the “new” South Africa and especially with Hillbrow, that he is determined to go back to America for a second exile:

He [Camagu] did not dare go onto the streets. Throughout the night they swarm with restless humanity. Hillbrow never sleeps. Yet he is dead scared of this town. It is four years since he came back from his American exile, but he still has not got used to the fact that every morning a number of dead bodies adorn the streets. (27)

Even worse, a woman at a wake attended by Camagu declaims “on how the wrath of God will send great flames to incinerate Hillbrow. The vigil responds with ‘amens’ and ‘hallelujahs’” (31).

Mpe, who lived and worked in Hillbrow, clearly had a vested interest in the preservation of this place. Refentše, too, shows his commitment to this inner-city by redressing the omission of Hillbrow in written literature by writing the previously mentioned short story which is accepted for publication. And, of course, Mpe goes a step further by publishing a whole novel about Hillbrow. Mpe also succeeds in pointing out that there are no cities or places of just milk and honey. All places have their bile. And since people occupy even the meanest of streets, respect is therefore due to those in ghettos around the world who, because of racial and economic reasons, become the face-less and name-less masses

of so-called bad neighbourhoods. It is unfortunate, though, that Mpe's characters come to an appreciation of Hillbrow only when their lives on earth are over. The deceased Refentše "knew, as he watched her [Refilwe] from his high vantage point, that God and the gods of our happiness were more likely to be found in Hillbrow and Oxford and Tiragalong—everywhere and anywhere except in the Heaven that we read about in the Big Book" (111). The lesson for the living, then, is to suspend judgment as much as possible and, as suggested in the words of Refentše's favourite song "See the World through the Eyes of a Child," by Stimela, the widely popular South African band.

More importantly, in a novel that troubles the line between fact and fiction—a point underscored by the character of Refilwe, one of Hillbrow's "chief embellishers" (31) whose "vengeful story" about Hillbrow women is said to have "very little regard for hard facts" (44)—we are encouraged to be suspicious of both fact and fiction. We are also encouraged to be mindful of the fact that "[the] stuff that would be called surrealism or magic realism or some other strange realism were it simply told or written as a piece of fiction" (19) may actually contain kernels of truth. A troubling word for some postmodernists, truth is what is needed in a "new" South Africa that would like to wish away the *reality* of Hillbrow's grimy streets located, lest we forget, in the city of gold.

Notes

- 1 Harriet Jacobs also makes such a claim in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. The insistence on truth is common among writers of slave narratives because they do not want their stories to be taken as exaggerations about slavery.
- 2 Like many of his characters who die young, Phaswane Mpe died on December 12, 2004 of an unknown illness. He was 34 years old.
- 3 Introduced as early as 1760 by European colonizers, the pass laws maintained cheap labour by restricting the freedom of movement of black people through employment contracts: "Through the Natives Laws Amendment Act of 1952 and the Natives (Urban Areas) Amendment Act of 1955, 'influx control' was applied to all urban areas and to African women as well as men. Under Section 10 of the 1955 Act, only Africans who had resided in a particular urban area since birth, or had worked continuously for one employer in the area for a minimum of ten years, or for more than one employer for a minimum of 15 years and still resided in the area were given automatic right to remain in the area. All others

needed a permit to stay longer than 72 hours . . . Local authorities were given powers to remove those Africans deemed ‘surplus to requirements or who were habitually unemployed or were leading idle or dissolute lives, or who had committed certain specified offences’” (Davies, O’Meara and Dlamini 171).

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