

Plural Ghetto. Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001), Neill Bloemkamp's *District 9* (2009) and the crisis in the representation of spaces in post-apartheid South Africa

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The apartheid regime was based quite simply on the idea of racial separation, which was working both at an international¹ and an infra-national² level. As a consequence, the official demise of the regime, which began in 1990, aimed at the elimination of spatial segregation: social, economic and juridical justice for the black and *coloured* South African population³ was accompanied by the extension of freedom of movement to all South African citizens, as it is explicitly reported in the 1994 democratic Constitution (Bill of Rights, Chapter 2, Section 21).

This legislative innovation was propelled by a new multicultural debate which challenged the racist ideology of apartheid. This debate was intended to transform South Africa into the so-called 'Rainbow Nation'. However, the obvious failure in the carrying out of this political agenda has led several post-apartheid intellectuals – including Phaswane Mpe, the writer whose work will be treated here – to stigmatize the “democratic rainbowism” (Mpe 26) as a hypocritical detachment from the actual reality of society in South Africa.

At the basis of this criticism, there is a generally held acknowledgment of widespread unemployment, poverty, and increased crime rates as the main problems of present-day South Africa. These issues are often lumped together, in order to provide a social and political explanation of the disruption of the so-called “South African Dream”⁴. However, this account often risks being populist (Hart 32), while other arguments are equally, if not more, relevant to the debate on the difficulties of the post-

apartheid 'nation-(re)building'⁵ process. The recent massacre of the 16th of August 2012, which occurred during a miners' strike in Marikana, near Rustenburg, has finally shown⁶ that the political and military apparatus of the post-apartheid state is still supporting large transnational companies, by 'militarizing' the national/transnational economy and the state, as also happened during the apartheid era (Marais 42).

This structural monopoly is having a profound effect on South African contemporary society, which is also affected by other phenomena, such as the increasing migration on the part of other African countries towards South Africa with a concomitant rise in xenophobia and an inevitable failure to redistribute land and wealth. At stake there is not only the limited capacity of the South African government to handle mass inter-African migration nor the clash between the multicultural ideology of the "Rainbow Nation" and mounting xenophobia. These arguments also deal with the specific spatial reconfiguration of post-apartheid society, leading the Zimbabwean scholar and writer Melissa Tandiwe Myambo to summarize the two crucial issues – the fragility of post-apartheid society and its complex spatiality – in one poignant question: "I am ultimately trying to ask, what kind of spatial configuration is a rainbow?" (94).

Though grounded on a solid critical and theoretical basis, Myambo's response is, to some extent, unsatisfactory. She asserts that the deconstruction of post-apartheid new spatiality is a crucial task for post-apartheid literature, being much more relevant than the 'introspective turn' emphasized by other literary critics (Irlam 698). In this sense, Myambo is undoubtedly right when she maintains that the 'introspective turn' is not enough to describe the core of post-apartheid literature:

[...] when post-apartheid literature is read through the lens of changing spatial configuration, it becomes clear that a number of seemingly "introspective" texts [...] are in fact positing a new theory of collective, multicultural nationhood (99).

More controversial, on the other hand, is her attitude towards one of the most common trends in post-apartheid literature, privileging urban settings on the depiction of the rural landscape. From a statistical point of view, this is quite convincing in that it concerns both white and black writers, plus a well-assessed trend in literary criticism (Nuttall 731). Rural landscapes are still waiting for a deconstructive/reconstructive turn in their representation; besides, South African post-apartheid literature has-

n't tackled yet one of the most relevant issues in the democratic transformation of the country, that is, the redistribution of wealth and *land*⁷. However, Myambo's contention that "the only significant and widely read novel that deals with the question of rural land is *Disgrace*" (97)⁸ by John Maxwell Coetzee is both incomplete and misleading.

The incompleteness of this argument is due to the existence, however statistically minor, of a series of post-apartheid novels which both portray and deconstruct the rural landscape – one of the most notable examples might be Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* itself⁹.

What is more, Myambo's hypothesis seems to be constructed on a fragile binarism, since urban spaces are conceived as thoroughly metaphorical places, reproducing on a smaller level "a nation conceived as ultimate abstraction" (95) – while rural spaces appear to be a kind of 'concrete' and 'opaque' reality which is still to be discovered and critically analyzed. By conceiving the space of the post-apartheid nation as pure abstraction, Myambo gives a consequential answer to her initial question, since the "spatial configuration of a rainbow" is a definition which exposes from the very beginning its metaphorical nature.

The enforcement of this logical consequentiality, however, leads her to state that the *whole* body of post-apartheid literature is trapped within abstraction. Thus, "the discourse of the Rainbow Nation", as Myambo puts it, seems to be completely pervasive, as it is put forth even when a strong social and political criticism is enacted (Myambo 94-95, 116). On the other hand, post-apartheid literature shows many reasons for a description of the "discourse of the Rainbow Nation" as an ideology in deep crisis. Besides, the politics of place which some texts enact goes beyond the limits of the urban/rural – and also of the national/foreign – dichotomy, deconstructing it.

In this sense, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) could be read as a paradigmatic novel, since the textual strategies that emerge from the text both deconstruct the post-apartheid new spatiality and criticize that 'democratic rainbowism' which has become a hegemonic discourse in post-apartheid society.

The analysis of the setting of the novel highlights, from the very beginning, a relevant shift in the representation of post-apartheid spatiality. The title, in fact, might suggest that the main location of the novel will be Hillbrow, an inner city residential neighborhood of Johannesburg. Due to a constant media coverage (Nyamnjoh, 68-73), Hillbrow has become

one of the most renowned places of inter-African migration to South Africa in the post-apartheid period¹⁰. *Makwerekwere* is a derogatory term, of uncertain origin¹¹, which has been coined in post-apartheid South Africa to define the whole category of inter-African ‘migrants’, and, as it is reported in Mpe’s novel, “Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked” (4).

Therefore, recent mass migration to South Africa constitutes one of the main themes of the novel. However, Hillbrow is no Bakhtinian chronotope, within *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*: although it often links setting, genre, plot and temporality together, Hillbrow is not the only, nor the most important, place in the text. The plurality of places which are represented in the novel – ranging from Hillbrow to the rural village of Tiragalong, in the Northern Province, and Oxford, United Kingdom – causes an unremitting spatial dislocation. This process deconstructs the presumed essential identity of each single place and, more in general, of the typically South African “sense of place” – a particular case for *genius loci* whose origins might be traced, once again, in the rigidly separated apartheid landscape¹³. As Rita Barnard has argued for J. M. Coetzee’s work, also in Phaswane Mpe’s novel

at stake [...] is not place as an empirical and inert object of mimesis, but rather the discursive, generic, and ultimately political codes that inform our understanding, knowledge, and representations of place (22).

The process of spatial dislocation is achieved primarily, but not exclusively, by means of plot. The tragic love story between Refentše – a young man born and raised in Tiragalong – and Lerato – a woman born in the township of Alexandra, Johannesburg – begins when they happen to meet in Hillbrow. Refentše is studying and, later, teaching at the University of Witwatersrand; his secret dream is to write a “Hillbrow fiction” (Mpe 29), redoubling, thus, within the text Phaswane Mpe’s own ambition with *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

Lerato betrays Refentše with Sammy: she loves Refentše, but she feels hopeless, deceived and angry because his partner is not able to persuade his mother, who lives in Tiragalong, that, though living in the city, she, Lerato, is neither a prostitute nor a witch. When Refentše discovers Lerato’s betrayal, he becomes depressed and commits suicide; some time afterwards, Lerato (whom Refentše, meanwhile, had also betrayed, with Sammy’s girlfriend, Bohlale) kills herself too.

In the meantime, Refentše's former girlfriend, Refilwe, who had fed the gossip about Lerato in Tiragalong, withdraws her reports in an effort to redeem herself. She goes to Oxford to pursue her academic career; there, she learns that she has been HIV-positive for a long time, and that she probably had contracted the disease in South Africa. At that point, she decides to go back to Tiragalong and die there, subject to the same kind of malicious gossip she had spread about Lerato.

Apparently, Hillbrow is the main setting of the story, while Tiragalong and Oxford seem to be marginal locations: Refentše and Lerato meet in Hillbrow, Refentše studies at the University of Witswatersrand, which is located close by, and both Refentše and Lerato die there. However, Hillbrow is not an "inert object of mimesis", nor does it simply serve the purposes of the plot: the "discursive, generic and ultimately political codes" (Barnard 22) that inform the representation of this place turns out to be even more relevant than its merely referential and narrative exploitation.

As a matter of fact, the meta-fictional attempt of Refentše to write a "Hillbrow fiction" is not the only an example of discursive and literary codes informing the representation of place. Equally important is the reference to the "centre of action" of Hillbrow (Mpe 4), which Refentše is said to miss in his first experience of the city. The theatrical and cinematographic reference which is contained in the phrase "center of action" underlines the fact that the supposed "action" taking place in Hillbrow – drug-trafficking, prostitution, or petty crime – is a concrete issue, which insistent media coverage has nevertheless transformed into a kind of show piece or movie.

Here, in other words, Mpe's novel succeeds in deconstructing the xenophobic identification of crime and inter-African migration, by showing the dynamics of the social construction of this stereotype. In fact, the quotation cited above – "Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked" (Mpe 4) – is not imputable to the second-person narrator of the novel¹⁴ – which would be the most authoritative voice of the text – but it is what the "informal migrant grapevine" (Mpe 4) of Tiragalong says about Hillbrow.

The complete quotation reveals how Tiragalong people are ill-informed about Hillbrow, since they are manipulated by those villagers who moved to the city, that is, South African *internal* migrants. They consider *Makwerekwere* to be the most dangerous people on the earth, and the fear about widespread crime is 'sublimated' into the fear of HIV:

Migrants (who were Tiragalong's authoritative grapevine on all important issues) deduced from such media reports that AIDS's travel route into Johannesburg was through *Makwerekwere*; and Hillbrow was the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked. There were others who went even further, saying that AIDS was caused by the bizarre sexual behavior of the Hillbrowans (Mpe 4).

African continental migrants are singled out as a scapegoat for the diffusion of AIDS, which is, nonetheless, an endemic disease in the whole of Africa. The sexual 'fault' of migrants is, however, associated, as a result of homophobic prejudice, with homosexual intercourses:

How could any man have sex with another man? they demanded to know. Those who claimed to be informed – although none could admit to having seen or practised it personally – said such sex was done anally. They also explained how it was done – dog style – to the disgust of most of the people of Tiragalong, who insisted that filth and sex should be two separate things (Mpe 4).

A secondary cause for the diffusion of AIDS is individuated in street prostitution. Here, again, gender and ethnic prejudices are conflated in the representation of one single contaminating agent: city women, who are described mainly as *Makwerekwere* women, are considered to be very lascivious, indulging in formal or informal prostitution and contributing, thus, to the uncontrolled circulation of the disease.

This prejudice also affects Lerato's life: according to the rumors in Tiragalong (which are fuelled by Refilwe, who is jealous as regards Refentše), she is a woman living in the city, so she *must be* a prostitute and a witch. The whole narration is intended to deconstruct such a stereotype, showing Lerato as a sensitive woman and a tender lover, being frequently called "the Bone of my Heart" (Mpe 68) by her partner Refentše. However, the depiction of Lerato is ultimately achieved by negation, since she is presented through the deconstruction of gender stereotypes, which are, simultaneously conveyed and re-instated. As a result, the character of Lerato is dominated by ambiguity, oscillating between conventional and unconventional gender roles. This ambivalence is particularly evident in the analysis of the spatial location of the character.

Lerato, in fact, was born in the township of Alexandra but moved to live on her own in Hillbrow, thus demonstrating her independence by challenging the exclusive identification of urban spaces and "masculine spaces". This equation affects both colonial and postcolonial societies

(Budd-Gottdiener 81), as Meg Samuelson has convincingly synthesized: “Independent African city women ha[ve] one identity in the mind of European and African patriarchies: ‘prostitutes’” (254). If gender discrimination towards African city women is a colonial legacy (Simone 27), the prejudices and stereotypes affecting Lerato do not belong exclusively to South African rural culture. This is a significant point, in that it prevents depicting Mpe as a cultivated urban author, whose main aim is the criticism of rural beliefs and stereotypes – such a position would mean re-establishing the rural/urban binarism that Mpe’s novel, on the other hand, manages to overcome.

At the same time, however, the deconstruction of stereotypes concerning Lerato does not succeed in erasing all traces of the colonial and postcolonial patriarchal ideology. In fact, Lerato is mostly depicted indoors, according to the patriarchal definition of ‘feminine space’ as mostly domestic¹⁴. Besides, after Refentše’s death, Lerato is telephonically harassed by a womanizer, significantly nicknamed Terror: this enforces the stereotype of the woman’s fear in the city, which is “based on feelings of vulnerability to men” and can influence “how women perceive and use space in the city” (Tonkiss 103). In fact, as opposed to Refentše, who walks down Hillbrow as a postmodern/postcolonial *flâneur* in the first chapter, significantly titled “Hillbrow: The Map” (Mpe 1-27), Lerato has no opportunity to represent the city from her own point of view.

This ambiguity is further strengthened by the fact that people in Tiragalong have discovered that Lerato is the daughter of a *Lekwerekwere*, a migrant man; consequently, Lerato too is considered to be a migrant woman (Mpe 72-73). This mistake about the origin of Lerato, born in a township, not only shows the narrow-mindedness of people gossiping in Tiragalong; at a more elementary level, it also serves as a reminder of the fact that townships *still exist* in post-apartheid South Africa. After being the spatial centre of segregation within the apartheid system – separating blacks from the whites living in the properly ‘urban’ area – townships are still a potential site for discrimination in post-apartheid society. Therefore, the creation of a new ghetto within the city – such as the inner city residential area of Hillbrow – follows the same lines of separation which characterized the creation of townships: Hillbrow becomes a “sanctuary” for *Makwerekwere*, as Mpe reports.

Very interestingly, besides, the concepts of isolation and purification which the word “sanctuary” refers to seem to be a clear reference to the

idea of “sanitary cordon” which belonged to the apartheid ideology (Lund 92). It helped to keep urban areas (mostly inhabited by the white population) and townships and *bantustans* (where black population was confined) separated – on an infra-national level – and to keep South Africa isolated from other African countries – on an international level – by exploiting the fear of racial contamination and miscegenation.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the fear of contagion is represented, once again, by the fear of the HIV virus, which might travel beyond social and political barriers, as in the case of Refilwe, who contracts the virus in England and then goes back to her small village in the Limpopo Province, Tiragalong. However, Mpe decides to stage this fear – “But what is the use of sanctity if it does not shield you from AIDS?” (Mpe 121) – and contrast, at the same time, its uncontrolled consequences, such as the appeal to the sanitization and isolation model, which goes back to the apartheid times. As happens in the case of the xenophobic fear of *Makwekwere* – triggering prejudices about concrete individuals, such as Lerato, or Refentše – Mpe chooses to fight wrong and harmful beliefs by giving bodies to an otherwise disembodied threat. Since Refilwe is the ultimate “incarnation of AIDS” (Mpe 121) in the novel, her eventual decision to go back to Tiragalong is going to contrast widespread insults and prejudices with her embodied presence. The novel ends before her return to the village, but the reader is encouraged to imagine her fighting over and over again the generic and generalized stereotypes about her disease. Stereotypes and prejudices, on the other hand, would have been reinforced by a disembodied threat, as Refilwe actually knows, having contributed, earlier in the novel, to Tiragalong rumors: “Just as you, Refilwe, tried to reconfigure the story of Refentše; just as Tiragalong now is going to do the same with you” (Mpe 124).

In any case, if migrations and viruses overcome the barriers of otherwise separated places, this does not guarantee any redeeming power to them: what can be easily argued about an infectious and lethal disease like AIDS is also true for migrations, for the bitterness of the ideological and material conflicts between internal and inter-African migrants which are reported in the novel. Only individual characters, embodying difference and fighting stereotypes about it, can move between separated places and overcome boundaries.

That’s what Refentše does at the very beginning of the novel, during his first exploration of Hillbrow. His topographical notes about Hillbrow

and the nearby reinstate the boundaries of this city area, but they also show how a simple walk – according to the De Certeau’s discussion of walking as a creative experience (De Certeau 126-133) – might suggest new itineraries:

There is Hillbrow *for you!* 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 Wolmarans and three rather obscure streets, Kapteijn, Ockerse and Pieterse, before you drive or walk past Esselen, Kotze and Pretoria Streets. Your next port of call is Caroline Street. [...] If you are not too lazy, you will ignore the lift and walk up the stairs to the fifth floor, where Cousin stays. [...] Caroline Street was not visible from this vantage point. Nor was it near Catherine Avenue, *the boundary of Hillbrow and Berea*, where Checkers competed for our financial attention (when we had any) [...] True, Quartz Street ran close to Vickers. Indeed, it was the very first street to the east of Vickers [...]. However, the fact of being *almost on the outskirts of the inner Hillbrow* appeared to have rendered *this part* of Quartz more harmless and pleasurable – to the extent that anything in Hillbrow could be either of those things – than *the section* deeper in the suburb. (Mpe 6-9, emphasis added).

If places are plural, movements between places can’t be univocal. Refentše, for instance, is not only an internal migrant, like the Tiragalong people who form the “informal migrant grapevine” of the village: his migration is a multiple and reversible process. As a matter of fact, the previous quotation is preceded by one of the most important statements, within the novel, about the enriching potentiality of movements: “Your first entry into Hillbrow, Refentše, was the culmination of many converging routes” (Mpe 2).

However, the process of identity construction and reconstruction is even more effective than movement in the creation of a new South African geography. In fact, it is by continuously dislocating the concept of ‘belonging’ that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* ultimately succeeds in deconstructing the dichotomies between ‘national’ and ‘foreign’ and between ‘urban’ and ‘rural’, which are commonly based on birthplace and life experience.

As Emma Hunt has pointed out,

[t]he repetition of the possessive “our” before nearly every place name in the text dispels prejudice by prohibiting an outsider’s viewpoint and demanding that the reader identify with a multitude of places and with the people they contain; it never suggests a purely South African identity (117).

The repetition begins from the very title – *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which ironically reworks a possible motto for the South African new multicultural approach: “Welcome to Our South Africa”. The metonymical shift emphasizes the necessity to judge the multicultural model out of the “democratic rainbowism” (Mpe 26), testing how it materially works in the problematic area of Hillbrow, Johannesburg.

Another locution which emphasizes a relationship of belonging, sometimes in combination with the possessive “our”, is “child of”. “If you were still alive, Refentše, child of Tiragalong...” (Mpe 1), for instance, is the beginning of the very first sentence of the novel. Refentše belongs to Tiragalong, since he was born there; throughout the novel, however, he acquires other relationships of belonging, both realistic and fantastic: “[...] Refentše, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow and Heaven...” (Mpe 85).

Tiragalong and Hillbrow, therefore, share the same value, in Refentše’s, or Lerato’s life experience¹⁵: they cannot exist without mutually evoking each other. In other words, according to Refentše’s or Lerato’s perspective, there’s no possible binarism between urban and rural dimensions of living. Even the “Hillbrow fiction” (Mpe 29) that Refentše attempts to write cannot exist without “the Tiragalong of your fiction” (Mpe 54). Once again, this choice redoubles the novel’s own structure and politics of place, where Tiragalong and Hillbrow are deeply interconnected.

On the other hand, the reference to Heaven – a place which evidently belongs to the realm of the fantastic – is due to the unrealistic location of the character when the novel begins: Refentše has already committed suicide and watches from Heaven the ensuing events. This spatial abstraction recalls the one that can be metaphorically attributed to the rainbow, that is, to the space of the post-apartheid nation (Myambo 94-95). Later, also the possessive “our” is also associated with Heaven: “our Heaven” is repeated twice (Mpe 113, 124), showing, thus, how the collectivity evoked by the possessive is bound to inhabit an abstract, posthumous place.

However, Refentše is said to be “child of Tiragalong *and* Hillbrow *and* Heaven” (Mpe 85, emphasis added): the use of the conjunction emphasizes the fact that abstract spaces are not the ultimate and exclusive essence of post-apartheid spatiality, since they have to be always put in connection with concrete places. In other words, the ideological nature of the post-apartheid multicultural debate must be always connected and put in a dialectical relationship with other levels of reality, where multicultural experiences, for instance, are actually lived – such as in the case of Hillbrow itself.

The multiple belonging and identity of Refentše – and the same could be said, for instance, of Lerato and Refilwe¹⁶ – might be considered as the necessary premise for the following step: the inter-connection between places in the fictional life experience of characters postulates a process of continuous superimposition of places. Tiragalong is *in* Hillbrow, and viceversa, as it is possible to infer from this quotation: “Welcome to our Hillbrow... [...] Welcome to our Tiragalong in Johannesburg...” (Mpe 79). The process of superimposition is nearly complete at the end of the novel, where it is possible to read and follow this sequence: “Hillbrow in Hillbrow. Hillbrow in Cape Town. Cape Town in Hillbrow. Oxford in both. Both in Oxford. Welcome to our All...” (Mpe 104).

The interconnection of realistic and fantastic places doesn't lead only to a simplistic conclusion, such as the sharing of a common status of fictionality for any place involved in the construction of literary spatiality. The spatial heterogeneity emphasized by the text is evident both at an ontological and at a narrative level, fulfilling, thus, a completely postmodern aesthetics (Westphal 37-75); it is created both by the confrontation between different places (which reinstates their separation, during the era of apartheid) and by the process of superimposition of one place over another.

This does not guarantee the overcoming of the former boundaries, as the post-apartheid hegemonic discourse would postulate: if Hillbrow, Alexandra and Tiragalong can be individuated within the same place, this is going to be a ‘plural ghetto’, synthesizing into one place the different boundaries which characterize an inner city residential area mostly inhabited by African migrants (Hillbrow), a township (Alexandra) and a rural village (Tiragalong). If boundaries are evident in the case of Hillbrow (sublimating into the ‘national’/‘foreign’ and ‘healthy’/‘unhealthy’ dichotomies other class, ethnic and national issues), borders within the township or within rural villages are only indirectly evoked by the text. The persistence of the township system – as has been mentioned before – might be read ‘between the lines’ within the inquiry into Lerato’s origins, while the conflicts dividing urban and rural communities are rooted in the persistence, since the era of apartheid period and even before, of internal migrations¹⁷, such as the one linking Tiragalong and Hillbrow through the “informal migrant grapevine” (Mpe 4). Internal migrants, besides, are bound to co-exist and fight for survival with inter-African migrations in the marginal areas of cities, but an exclusive emphasis of xenophobia might obscure the fact that internal migrations are mainly due to the fail-

ure of the post-apartheid political agenda in the redistribution of wealth and, above all, land.

This peculiar spatiality shows, as Emma Hunt correctly reports (114), how *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* does not provide readers with the repetition of the “Jim comes to Jo’burg” plot, which has become a *topos* in South African literature since Sol Plaatje’s *Mhudi* (1913). Mpe’s novel completely reverses this *topos*: the villagers who move to the city – in Mpe’s novel, Refentše, Lerato and Refilwe – discover that there is no real dichotomy between the “bad city” and the “wholesome village”; the existence of ideological and material boundaries and of a widespread violence marks both the city and the rural village (Hunt 114).

Therefore, Emma Hunt’s hypothesis about *Welcome to our Hillbrow* – the novel, according to her, “celebrates the city as the site of an ideal of cultural globalization” (Hunt 104) – seems to be utterly misleading, since the ideal according to which Mpe’s novel deconstructs xenophobic discourses and stereotypes is, rather, the one of “common humanity” – as Hunt herself states later, almost *en passant*, in her article (105). Hunt argues that “globalism is seen as entirely positive and is set up against the xenophobia and prejudice of Tiragalong” (117), but it is globalism itself which simultaneously conveys and reinstates xenophobia against migrants. This might be even clearer when *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is compared to Neill Bloemkamp’s blockbuster movie *District 9* (2009).

District 9 is an adaptation of Bloemkamp’s earlier short film *Alive in Jo’burg* (2005). Although *Alive in Jo’burg* is a *mockumentary* and *District 9* a hybrid movie – where, however, sci-fi and action movie elements do prevail – both films revolve around the same narrative core: extraterrestrial aliens – derogatorily referred to as “prawns”, for their horrific aspect, in the same way African migrants are derogatorily referred to as *Makwe-rekwere* – have been landing in Johannesburg, where they have started to ‘coexist’ with humans, actually by crowding some isolated slums. Aliens live in poor conditions, being hated by most of the humans, who do not want to mingle with them: this is a clear reminder of apartheid’s racism and post-apartheid’s xenophobia.

In *Alive in Jo’burg*, the metaphorical reference to blacks and migrants is emphasized by the fact that, as Meredith Woerner has noted, the short film contains some real interviews with people from Johannesburg, where most of the interviewees seem to be criticizing or displaying hatred against aliens. The interviewer’s questions are always cut off: otherwise,

the audience would know that people are actually talking about Nigerian and Zimbabwean minorities living in South Africa (D'Agostini 76).

The same happens in *District 9*, but the *mockumentary* style is abandoned, in favor of a hybrid cinematic genre constituted by some elements from sci-fi movies, action movies and videogame-style shooting. Also *District 9*'s plot is more complex than the one of the previous short film: aliens are confined in a barbed-wire fenced camp named District 9, but the South African government, together with the Multi-National United (MNU) corporation, intends to relocate them in another camp, District 10. References to the history of the apartheid regime are quite clear: as Giulia D'Agostini, among others, has noted, the name District 9 is "reminiscent of the historical District 6, the Cape Town Municipal District that in 1966 was declared a white-only zone by the apartheid government, with the consequent forced relocation of the blacks and coloureds who resided there" (75). Forced removals of black and *coloured* people were among the most diffuse techniques of segregation of the apartheid regime, enforcing this metaphorical reference.

Also the post-apartheid xenophobic discourse about migrants finds its metaphorical representation, with aliens living in slums without electricity, alongside gangs of Nigerian criminals. The joint reference to migrants and criminals turns out to be very ambiguous. On the one hand, Nigerians in the movie might not be Nigerians at all, since they are called by this generic national label, but they aren't recognizable as such – neither their language nor what they say or do is clearly marked as "Nigerian. Andries Du Toit, for instance, has argued that Bloemkamp is "not so much offering a racist caricature, as caricaturing racist stereotypes themselves" (Du Toit, quoted in D'Agostini 78). On the other hand, Ato Quayson has commented that their repeated representation as bloodthirsty primitive criminals is worthy of a Joseph Conrad (Quayson par. ii).

However, this allegorical reading can't be pursued throughout the whole movie, since "the film lapses rather shortly into the action idiom" (Clover 8). As a matter of fact, after a few scenes shot in a faux documentary style, the plot focuses exclusively on the main character, Wikus Van de Merwe, who is the MNU officer leading the removal operation in the District 9.

While working in the slum, Wikus is contaminated by alien effluvi-um and his body starts a metamorphosing process which ends up transforming him in a 'semi-alien' creature. Having crossed the border between

'human' and 'alien' – which is an evident translation of the 'national'/'foreign' boundary – Wikus does not know anymore which side he is supporting. He starts a private Rambo-like war against any possible enemy of the alien population, including the MNU, the South African government and the Nigerian criminals. Wikus is bound to lose his battle and die: the contamination suffered by him is very different from the HIV virus which eventually infects Refilwe, since, while Refilwe fights against both the disease and the prejudices it creates, Wikus is destroyed both by the physical damage caused by the metamorphosis and the armed battle against the institutions he was previously working with. This happens in the last scenes of the movie, while the alien spaceship is leaving the Earth – as the aliens were actually planning to do, even before the removal operation started. The analogy and contradiction with migrants who are stuck in the place of arrival, where they live in poor conditions and plan to escape somewhere else, without ever succeeding, is stunning.

However, despite this final reprise of the allegorical theme, the most important consequence of the shift in the plot from *Alive in Jo'burg* to *District 9* seems to be precisely the loss of any allegorical reference to apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The war scenes which prevail in the second half of the longer movie, for instance, are shot in a videogame-style which recalls Paul Verhoeven's *Starship Troopers* (1997) or Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (2001): as Lorenzo Rinelli has argued, the specificity of the spatio-temporal setting is not relevant anymore, since the videogame-style usually implies an indefinite spatiality and a suspended temporality.

Joshua Clover's contention that "[n]one of this forecloses allegory. [...] The apartheid allegory never comes together [...]. It's not a film of institutional racism nor capitalist crisis. [...] It's driven [...] by a profound and remorseless contempt for present humanity" (8) seems to be too simplistic, too Nietzschean, and wrong in part, since it does not take into account the specific ideological and historical basis which the movie starts from. *District 9*, on the contrary, might be considered as a failed allegory of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. The loss of reference to any specific South African location in the second half of the movie fails to interrogate post-apartheid new spatiality and makes it a globalized good, which could be marketed anywhere in the world – as has, in fact, been done with the movie, which has become an international blockbuster. The dislocation of the 'national'/'foreign' opposition on a global scale – trans-

forming it into the 'human'/'alien' binarism – has conveyed, but also reinstated the force of the original dichotomy.

In the wake of this analysis, neither *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* can be said to celebrate globalism as a positive force. Rather, the power and the attractiveness of this text reside in the way it deconstructs post-apartheid new spatiality: the plurality of interconnected places which characterizes the novel coincides also with a plurality of boundaries, creating, thus, a concrete, heterogeneous spatiality which counters the notion of abstract space related to the idea of a 'Rainbow Nation'. Spaces are plural also *within* them, both for the process of superimposition of places and boundaries and for the power of the conflicts based on ethnic and national (as in the case of *Makwerekwere*) or gender (as has been underlined in the case of Lerato's character) issues.

Besides, the urban and rural dimensions of living are not opposed anymore: since they are imagined as superimposed, they both suffer from the existence of the same social, economic, political and cultural boundaries. Moreover, the economic and political power which imposes these boundaries is unaltered from the apartheid era, as *District 9* could have exhaustively shown, if it had insisted more on the corporate violence exploited by the Multi-National United company, instead of representing pure videogame-style violence.

In conclusion, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* offers a social and political criticism which both deconstructs the "democratic rainbowism" (Mpe 26) as a purely ideological discourse and criticizes the political and economic power which has remained unaltered after the demise of the apartheid. The enactment of this criticism passes through the deconstruction of post-apartheid spatiality, by showing how the abstract space of the post-apartheid nation is not the ultimate reason for its crisis, whereas the existence of plural social, political and economic ghettos – both in urban and rural areas – is still one of the most urgent issues to be dealt with.



- 1 On an international level, the South African regime of apartheid was not so much characterized by isolationism, than by exceptionalism, especially when comparing South Africa to the rest of the continent. Mahmood Mamdani has convincingly argued that South African exceptionalism was a mythical discourse, enforcing the colonial aspects of its ideology (in *Citizen and Subject: Contemporary Africa and Late Legacy of Late Colonialism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). More recently, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl Michael have suggested South African Cultural Studies as a good theoretical approach to deconstruct the myth of South African exceptionalism by analyzing South African cultural dynamics within the larger framework of African Cultural Studies (in *Senses of Culture: South African Culture Studies*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 2 The South African national territory was clearly divided in almost three major areas: urban and industrial areas (inhabited only by whites), *townships* (poor residential developments on the margins of the cities, where Blacks, *coloureds* and, more generally, “non-whites” were confined) and *racial homelands/Bantustans* (larger areas, mostly rural, where populations were confined according to their “ethnic classification”, attempting to create an impossible spatial division on the basis of ethnic homogeneity).
- 3 *Coloured* is a common definition, in southern Africa – despite the colonial and racist origin of the term and its use during apartheid – for people of mixed European, African and/or Asian ancestry. There are contrasting views on their social, economic and politic position in the post-apartheid society; according to Mohamed Adhikari, for instance, the rights and the living conditions of this heterogeneous social group have not really improved with the demise of the apartheid regime: as the title of his essay might suggest – *Not White Enough, Not Black Enough: Racial Identity in the South African Coloured Community* – *coloured* people have not been taken into account neither in the apartheid political agenda, nor in the post-apartheid one (Adhikari 2005).
- 4 The disruption of the “South African Dream” is particularly evident at the level of political institutions; Thabo Mbeki’s major biography, for instance, was written by Mark Gevisser, with the highly significant title of *Thabo*

Mbeki: The Dream Deferred. However, for theorists in fields – such as LGBT and Queer Studies – which didn't experience any liberation at all with the demise of the regime of apartheid, the emancipation project of post-apartheid is still a 'dream to come' (see, for instance, the title of the recent monographic work by Brenna Munro on queer narratives).

- 5 The choice of this neologism is due to the peculiar history of South Africa: formally separated from the British Empire since 1910, South Africa began its own postcolonial nation-building process in those years. However, the subsequent implantation of the apartheid regime, clearly influenced by the colonial rule, called the post-apartheid nation to a process of re-building itself, in order to challenge the legacies both of colonialism and apartheid.
- 6 The miners' strike in Marikana, which started on the 10th of August 2012, was especially directed against the working and living conditions imposed by the British-based multinational platinum company Lonmin to its workers. The deployment of the South African Police Service during the strike resulted in many violent clashes, starting the 11th of August and reaching its apex on the 16th, when about 34 miners were killed and 78 were wounded (numbers vary according to the source). As it has been recalled by Richard Stupart, the action led by the police was strikingly similar to the massacre in the township of Sharpeville, in the Gauteng region, occurred on the 21th of March 1960.
- 7 While Rita Barnard's *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place* offers a deep literary analysis of the issue of the failed redistribution of land in post-apartheid literature, other critics, like Cheryl Walker, focus on a mostly sociological ground, in the attempt to frame the "'master narrative' of loss and restoration" (Walker 12) within a larger socio-cultural context.
- 8 It should be noticed that part of the novel's appeal, for the South African readership, does not reside in the question of rural land, but in the racism allegation made by some ANC politicians and intellectuals, leading to a legal proceeding at the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), in 2000, and to Coetzee's ultimate decision to move to Australia, in 2002.
- 9 Myambo, for instance, quotes Mandla Langa's *The Memory of Stones* (2000) and Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000), but also earlier novels like Damon Galgut's *The Beautiful Screaming of Pigs* (1991) and Elleke Boehmer's *An Immaculate Figure* (1993) are suitable to this category (116).
- 10 As Emma Hunt accurately reports, Hillbrow is a "dense area of Johannesburg that during apartheid was a haven for immigrants from Europe and today is the [...] destination of largely illegal immigrants from Lagos, Dakar, and Kinshasa" (113). This social, cultural and economic shift might be considered as one of the main ideological reasons for the targeting of Hillbrow as a degraded and dangerous place in post-apartheid Johannesburg – fulfill-

- ing, once again, the apartheid ideology with the preference for European immigration over inter-African migration.
- 11 Though still a word of uncertain origin, *makwerekwere* has been convincingly interpreted by John and Jean Comaroff as “a Sesotho word implying limited competence in the vernacular” (Comaroff-Comaroff 789-90), since the word can be effectively analyzed as a compound of the Proto-Bantu prefix *ma-* (with a pluralizing effect) and the Sesotho redoubled syntagm *kwere*, onomatopoeically indicating the difficulty to speak one language and be understood. The definition of the ‘migrants’ as the ‘ones who tatter’ in the language of the place of arrival can be traced back to one of its most famous antecedents: the Greek word βάρβαρος, or “barbarian”.
 - 12 The locution “sense of place” has been used by Stephen Gray in his 1983 influential essay “A Sense of Place in the New Literatures in English, Particularly South African”. Rita Barnard has convincingly argued that the “sense of place” fixed by Gray during the apartheid era has been significantly shifting during the post-apartheid period (Barnard, 19-21).
 - 13 The second-person narration is the narrative modality which prevails throughout the text: the stories of Refentše, Lerato and Refilwe are recounted by an omniscient narrator who interpellates each character and, indirectly, the whole “community of readers” (Clarkson 458). The creation of a “community of readers”, in particular, is meant to deconstruct the national and ethnic communities of post-apartheid multicultural South Africa, showing, according to Benedict Anderson’s analysis, their equally imaginative construction (Anderson).
 - 14 Post-apartheid fiction challenges, however timidly, the association of “feminine spaces”, within the city, with domestic spaces (Putter) and suburbs (Budd-Gottdiener 27). Lerato’s move from the township to the inner city area of Hillbrow is one example of these emancipated trajectories.
 - 15 Also Lerato’s character is often marked by multiple belonging, such as in this example: “Lerato, that loving child of Alexandra, Tiragalong, Durban and Hillbrow...” (Mpe 49)
 - 16 While Lerato, like Refentše, is said to be the “child of” multiple places, Refilwe’s multiple belonging is underlined by the use of another locution: “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” (Mpe 122-123).
 - 17 The dynamics of internal migrations were fueled, yet in the XIX century, by the system of mine migrancy (Crush-James 2-31); also the forced removals which characterized the apartheid policies caused a very significant migratory flow within the South African national territory.



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