

**Reading the City: analysing literary space in selected
postapartheid urban narratives**

by

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ABSTRACT

Reading the City – analysing literary space in selected postapartheid urban narratives.

Space can be read through text. Space is also constructed through text. Literary and critical theory has, however, emphasised time over space. However, space, place and location are crucial determining factors in any literary study. Through reference to theories of construction of place as well as writings on spatial history and the city I will discuss how place is created through text and how the urban environment affects literary production. Using the work of Michel Foucault (1986, 2002) on space and power, Michel de Certeau's approach to cities (2002) and Walter Benjamin's (2002) theories on space, time and the city, as well as South African theoretical approaches to space and the city, I will attempt an analysis of place in chosen pieces of literature set in the post-apartheid city by selected writers.

I have chosen to focus on the cities of Durban and Johannesburg, and in particular the innercities, because it is here that major transformation in the use and representation of space has occurred. By looking at selected apartheid and postapartheid texts I will be able to analyse how the representation of literary space has altered with political and socio-economic changes. The time period I will look at primarily will be the postapartheid period. The interdisciplinary nature of this project means I will draw from literary criticism, critical theory, geography, sociology and economic history as well as elements of postcolonial and postmodern theory.

The South African city today is a post-city; postcolonial and postapartheid. So too, the texts I have selected are post-texts, postmodern and post-struggle and I will conduct my analysis with this in mind. The concept of ‘city’ in literature is much more than just buildings and streets. It exists also in social relationships and links between people, both in the city and places outside of the city. The city is a set of social, political and cultural conditions that manifests itself in space and it is this aspect of ‘city’ which is represented in these texts that I will investigate.

Through focusing on the autobiography *Man Bitch* (2001) by Johan van Wyk together with *Never Been At Home* (2001) by Zazah P. Khuzwayo and *No Way Out* (2001) by Zinhle Carol Mdakane all set in Durban, and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe and the short story “Autopsy” (1996) by Ivan Vladislavic set in Johannesburg, I will investigate the representation of urban space in these texts of postapartheid literature. By way of introduction, I will examine relevant selected apartheid texts that deal with the cities of Durban (Lewis Nkosi’s novel *Mating Birds* (1987)) and Johannesburg (selected poems of Mongane Wally Serote) and I will attempt to construct a literary image of the space of these cities under apartheid. A close reading of the texts selected will construct a clear picture of the current (and past) urban space through the medium of literature. It will be seen that major issues affecting South Africa’s city inhabitants emerge as themes: AIDS, crime, migration and architectural degradation drive these narratives as does access to once restricted space.

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Introduction

Place is the “focus of human experience, memory, desire and identity” (Barker 2000:291). Place is a social construct, can be read through text and is also constructed through text. Increasingly, in postcolonial theories of literature, space / place is seen as important. I would argue, following this, that space and place are crucial determining factors in any literary study. Through reference to theories of construction of place as well as writings on spatial history and the city, I will show how place is created through text and how the urban environment impacts on literary production. Through an examination of the work of Michel Foucault (1986, 2002) on space and power, Michel de Certeau’s approach to cities (2002) and Walter Benjamin’s (2002) theories on space and time I will attempt an analysis of place in chosen pieces of literature set in the postapartheid city by selected writers. I will also be looking at South African approaches to space and the city and will draw upon the work collected in *Blank - Architecture, Apartheid and After* (Vladislavic and Judin 1998), *Senses of Culture: South African culture studies* (Nuttall and Michael 2000), as well as an issue of the journal *Public Culture* (2004) which deals with Johannesburg.

By analysing literary space, a spatial history of a place can be established. Spatial histories allow us to read social, economic and material factors that influence cultural and literary construction. Thus, space can be used as a tool of analysis. By reading the spatial histories of urban narratives, I will track the transformation of two South African cities post-1994 and their representation in selected texts. I have chosen to focus on the cities of Durban and Johannesburg, and in particular the inner-cities, because it is here, in my opinion, that major transformation in the use and representation of space has occurred. By looking at postapartheid texts I will be able to analyse how the representation of literary space has altered with political and socio-economic changes. The time period I will look at is the postapartheid period of the late 1990’s and early 2000’s. The interdisciplinary nature of this project means I will draw from various disciplines such as literary theory, cultural geography, sociology and history.

Through the selected texts I will attempt to investigate the representation of urban space in postapartheid South African literature. A close reading of the texts highlights some of the issues affecting South Africa's inner-cities and constructs a clear picture of a current (and past) urban space. Major issues affecting South Africa's city inhabitants emerge as themes: AIDS, crime, migration and architectural degradation drive these narratives, but so too does access to once restricted space. A comparison between the texts becomes a comparison between two cities, Johannesburg and Durban, and their fictionalised constructions by the selected writers.

Texts chosen to represent the postapartheid Durban inner-city are *Man Bitch* (2001) by Johan van Wyk together with *Never Been At Home* (2001) by Zazah P. Khuzwayo and *No Way Out* (2001) by Zinhle Carol Mdakane. These texts have been chosen because of their interconnectedness – these writers formed a group living and working in a specific area of inner-Durban in the later 1990's. Their texts thus speak to each other and points of comparison can be fruitfully drawn. To discuss postapartheid Johannesburg, I have chosen to look at *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe and the short story "Autopsy" (1996) by Ivan Vladislavic. These texts provide an interesting 'echo' of each others' concerns while simultaneously allowing us room for comparison between the white and black experiences of the city Johannesburg. A close reading of all these texts reveals a 'new' South Africa far from the ideal portrayed by politicians.

Writers and place are inextricably connected and I am interested in the movement between the two. Through this thesis, I will explore how the city can be read as text as well as being a factor in the production of the selected texts. I am particularly interested in the experience of African, urban space and how it is represented in literature. The transformative nature of the city allows us to view how the social project of a new South Africa is connected to the reality of life on the streets. In fact, South Africa is a very interesting site for a study of this kind due to the intense spatial regulations under the apartheid government and the access to space that followed its collapse. South African cities have, since 1948, been contested sites of struggle. In the apartheid years they

represented white control and influence over Africa and Africans. In recent years the city has come to represent something else to South Africans. The city landscape (political, economic, and architectural) has changed and the 'struggle' is now concerned with issues of identity, migration and AIDS. Nearly half of South Africa's population comprises urban dwellers; research on cultural representations of the city is thus timeous.

I will begin by investigating the connection between the concept of 'city' and modern literature. I will look at the way the city is created in literature using the works of James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as classic examples, and the way a city can be read through the reading of texts about it. I will also investigate the manner in which the urban is imagined, the relationship between culture and the city, and the concept of the postcolonial and postapartheid city. Place and ownership are important themes in postcolonial studies and I feel it is necessary to explore these issues in a postapartheid context. The concept of space (contested, claimed) is also one of the central themes of postcolonial theory. South Africa exists as a postcolonial and postapartheid landscape where space is intensely contested.

The city, and in particular the inner-city, has moved in the popular consciousness from a modernist vision of man's progress to a site of degradation and crime. The selected texts examine this but also engage with the very real human dramas that occur in these circumstances. They also deal with two of the defining characteristics of the modern South African city; that of migration and AIDS. I will explore how the reality of city life is interpreted by the postmodern style adopted by particularly Van Wyk, Vladislavic and Mpe, writers featured in this dissertation. I will also examine the way in which the cities of Durban and Johannesburg are constructed through these texts. By conducting a literary analysis through the filter of 'place' I hope to discover how various components of the texts are influenced through the city the writer is writing in and about.

Chapter 1

In this chapter I will introduce some of the broad theoretical issues surrounding space and its study in the humanities. First, I will define the two separate terms that I will be using in this thesis, that of ‘space’ and ‘place’. Often, these words are used interchangeably but there is a difference between the two which is important to distinguish when critiquing literature. Next, I will establish a connection between place and literature, showing that the two can have an interdependent relationship. The specific kind of place that I will focus on in this thesis is the city. The city and modern literature can be closely linked and I will illustrate this by drawing briefly on their history and referencing two important writers who have dealt with the city extensively in their work – Virginia Woolf and James Joyce – by way of example. I will then explore the city as construct (political, social and imaginative), look at the ways in which the city can be read as text and the way that the city is itself a discourse. In concluding this chapter, I will focus on the postapartheid South African city, the chosen place of my study, and contemporary theorists’ approaches to the city. By this stage, I will have a solid theoretical base from which to analyse the construction of postapartheid Durban and Johannesburg in the selected texts.

Space and Place

Recent thinking in cultural and literary theory has seen a rise in interest in space and place. Previously, theory had focused more on time as a medium of study, yet increasingly time is being seen as inseparable from space. There has been a retreat from the Kantian perception of space toward an idea of “space as process and space in process” (Thrift and Crang 2003:3), with the concept of time-geography describing movement through space and time. Time and space constitute each other and it would be more correct to speak of time-space. French theorist, Michel Foucault, a deeply spatial thinker, writes that:

a whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – both these terms in the plural – from the great strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat (1980:149).

He argues that time has been conceptualised in different ways throughout history and that the traditional linear view of time can be challenged. This spatial turn in social and cultural theory involved:

a growing recognition of the usefulness of space as an organizing category, and of the concept of “spatialization” as a term of analysis and description of the modern and ... postmodern society and culture (Shiel 2001:5).

Geographer Edward W. Soja writes in his book *Postmodern Geographies* that this spatialisation of theory has helped us understand “how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (1989:6). The socio-cultural world is “spatially organised into a range of places in which different kinds of social activity occur – places of work, places of leisure, places of sleep” and it is a requirement of all of us to traverse these spaces and places (Barker 2000:291). In their introduction to *Thinking Space* (2003), Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift write that the author does not stand outside time and space, but rather that space is an implicit operator in texts. Space is not a neutral medium but has a history, with literature existing within a geographical and historical framework. Following this, we can see that issues of power and histories are spatially inscribed into texts. Darian-Smith et al validate this in *Text, Theory, Space: Land, Literature and History in South Africa and Australia* (1996) when they write that space has been linked to concepts of power, as in the writing of Foucault, and that “there is a growing body of historical and literary criticism which deals with the peculiarities of colonial space and its relationship to, and representation through, the eye – and the pen – of the imperial beholder” (Darian-Smith et al 1996:2). This has implications for the South African situation and I will elaborate on this later in the chapter. Space is thus seen “as a multidimensional entity with social and cultural as well as territorial dimensions” (Darian-Smith et al 1996:2).

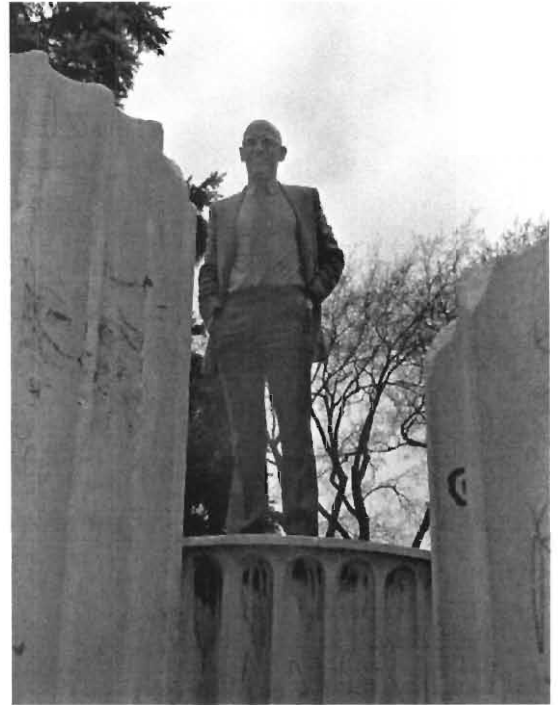


Figure 1: Michel Foucault

Michel de Certeau, one of the theorists drawn from in this thesis, influenced the development of a historiographical approach known as ‘spatial history’. As practised by cultural geographers, literary critics and others, spatial history focuses on different interpretations of authenticity in places of public assembly or as Foucault calls them “heterotopias”. Paul Carter also promotes the concept of a spatial history in his book *The Road to Botany Bay* (1987) “as an alternative to histories of imperialism ... [where] space is a text upon which histories and cultures are inscribed and interpreted” (cited in Darian-Smith et al 1996:5). By analysing literary space, a spatial history of a place can be established. Spatial histories allow us to read social, economic and material factors that influence cultural and literary construction. Thus, space can be used as a tool of analysis, and an analysis of space “reveals the presence of value systems and their transformatory impact” (Barker 2000:294).

Foucault also proposed that we can use the organisation of space to analyse power relationships. He investigated the underlying material and ideological aspects of space in order to understand how power is constituted and operated. This proposed line of thinking would use space not only as the object of investigation but as a tool for analysing political phenomena and cultural developments including, I would argue, literary works. In his theoretical work, Foucault regarded the literary text as part of a larger framework of texts, institutions, and practices and he was sensitive to both the space that the text was produced in, and the spaces produced by texts. He proposed a connection between space and power and, while his theory of space infused most of his work, it is central to the panopticon of “Discipline and punish: The Birth of the Prison” (2002) and the heterotopology of “Of other spaces” (1986). Foucault is someone for whom power influences the “time-space *geometry* of how institutions, settlements, and ... whole societies are arranged ‘on the ground’” (Philo 2003:208). One of Foucault’s central claims “is that societies are discursively constituted through a series of normalising judgements that are put into effect by a system of divisions, exclusions and oppositions” (Gregory 2003:314). Physical and psychological control over individuals can be achieved through controlling and manipulating spatial relations. Subsequently,

spatial relations play a role in creating and maintaining the workings of discourse and power. The social world is spatially constituted through “nodes and channels of power – fixed nodes where power is produced and crisscrossing channels along which power is diffused and collected” (Philo 2003:223). Edward Said, like Foucault, is interested in the politics of space and argues the construction of identity through space is a contest “that is inseparable from determinate modalities of power” (Gregory 2003:314). Said and Foucault’s imaginary geographies are connected with both describing “the discursive construction of exclusionary geographies” (Gregory 2003:314).

Foucault’s work has been used successfully in critiquing the spatial policy and urban design of apartheid South Africa, with the panopticon – constant surveillance as a means of control – being central to the apartheid government’s policies on controlling black South Africa¹. The panopticon is a “diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; it’s functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system” (Foucault 1980:201).

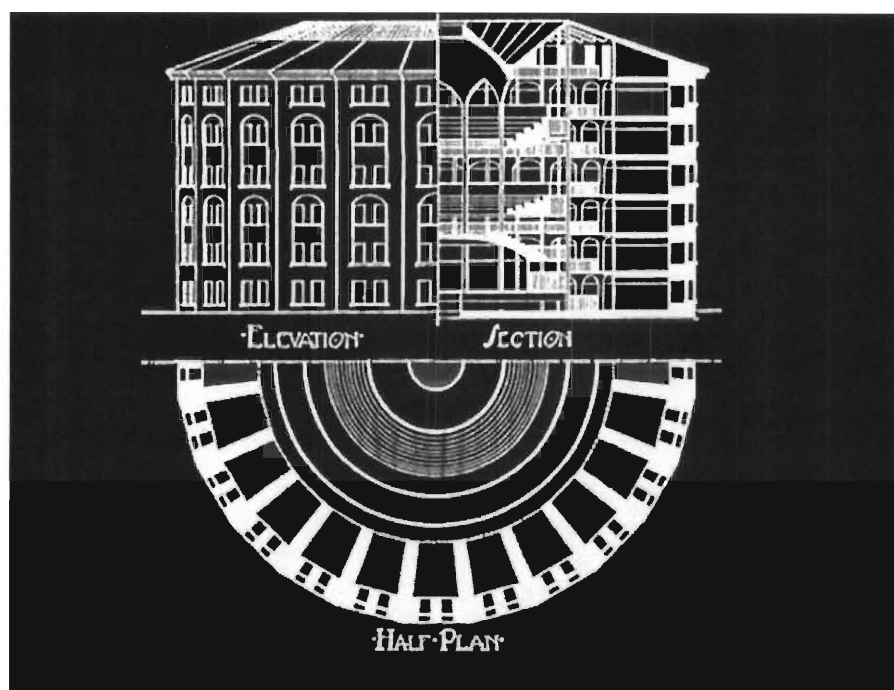


Figure 2: Diagram of a panopticon

Architectural structures and the design of urban spaces thus have power inscribed in them with “urban planning ... (utilising) the lines of the map as a technical means of politically

defining space” (Darian-Smith et al 1996:14). The creation of buffer zones around black settlements, the policy of forced removals and the Group Areas Acts were all visible signs of power being enacted through landscape in South Africa during the apartheid era. Townships were built in such a way that they could be constantly surveyed and physically contained if necessary. For Foucault, space is fundamental to any exercise of power with a change in space indicating political change. This is apparent when looking at the changes in use and construction of space that occurred in South Africa post-1994. The space of apartheid South Africa that was so heavily restricted and controlled now becomes a space that could be used by all with the means to do so. The history of South Africa is thus inscribed into the space of the country. For Foucault, space and place are intertwined with history. Chris Philo writes that Foucault’s attack on total history results in a situation where one can only see spaces of dispersions – “spaces where things proliferate in a jumbled up manner on the same ‘level’ as one another” (2003:207). Foucault is thus concerned with the way “spatial relations – the distribution and arrangement of people, activities, and buildings – are always deeply implicated in the historical process” (Philo 2003:221).

When looking at literature from a spatial perspective it is important to note the difference between space and place. Some of the theorists discussed in this thesis use the term ‘space’ when they are in fact writing about ‘place’ and it is important to be as clear as possible when defining these terms to avoid confusion. Chris Barker writes that ‘space’ “refers to an abstract idea, an empty or dead space which is filled with various concrete, specific and human places” (2000:292). Space is transformed into place through the interaction of man “related to his activities, emotions, needs and faculties and invested with form and meaning” (Wilkinson 1994: 97). Space becomes place:

by being named; as the flows of power and negotiation of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed (Erica Carter cited in Darian-Smith et al 1996:3).

Place is the focus of:

human experience, memory, desire and identity. That is, places are discursive constructions which are the target of emotional identification and investment (Barker 2000:291).

So, how then do we define place in a postcolonial and postapartheid context? Ashcroft et al provide us with the following definition:

By 'place' we do not simply mean 'landscape'. ... Rather, 'place' in post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. (1995:391).

Postcolonial theorists state that the dialectic of place and displacement is always a concern of the postcolonial and is common to all postcolonial literature (Ashcroft et al 1989:9), and that place is used as constant trope of difference in postcolonial writing (Ashcroft et al 1995:179). As the above quotations illustrate, place as a concept is difficult to define and open to interpretation, however, in common in the given definitions is the notion that place emerges from space once meaning has been ascribed to it. This is the definition of place which this thesis will follow.

Foucault problematises the issue further when he introduces a third term, the 'site', as he writes that "our epoch is one in which space takes the form of relations among sites" (1986:23). Contemporary space is characterised by what Foucault calls the site but what I would call, drawing on the above mentioned definitions, place. The site that Foucault writes of in his essay "Of Other Spaces" is a lived in and socially produced space, and this:

space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another (1986:23).

Foucault further delineates his concept of sites by dividing them into utopias and heterotopias. A utopia is a fundamentally unreal space, an imagined or dream place. He writes:

Utopias are sites with no real place. They are sites that have a general relation of direct or inverted analogy with the real space of Society. They present society itself in a perfected form, or else society turned upside down, but in any case these utopias are fundamentally unreal spaces (1986:23).

Heterotopias on the other hand are real places that do:

exist and that are formed in the very founding of society - which are something like counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality. Because these places are absolutely different from all the sites that they reflect and speak about, I shall call them, by way of contrast to utopias, heterotopias (1986:24).

Foucault proposes that heterotopias are the characteristic spaces of the modern world with all cultures having heterotopias, and this corresponds to Benjamin's construction of the city as the characteristic place of modern society. Foucault elaborates on heterotopias stating that the:

heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible . . . they have a function in relation to all the space that remains (1986:27).

I would argue that the city space, and in particular the postapartheid city space, fulfils the required principles laid out by Foucault and, in opposition to the panopticon of apartheid times and the utopia of post-1994, the city in South Africa exists today as a heterotopia. I will be drawing on these principles in later chapters to analyse the city in selected texts.

Place and Literature

One of the central concepts behind this thesis is the interconnectedness of literature and place. Place influences literary production. Likewise, literature constructs place and our perceptions of it. Mike Robinson writes in *Literature and Tourism* (2002) that a

multi-dimensional, multi-layered relationship exists between literature and place². He continues, stating that a tri-partite relationship exists between authors, their writings and the concept of place:

Works of literature are recognized as expressive of economic, cultural and political change, replete with intimate and revealing perspectives on the relationships between people and place at various space scales (Robinson and Anderson 2002:3).

Literary expressions of place can give insight into the social, economic and political order of the world, “together with an understanding of identities, the constructions of culture and the dynamics of landscape change” (2002:3). Writers define and redefine spaces through their work. James S. Duncan writes that place is a cultural construction and plays a role in the social process. Traditionally, place is seen as a reflection of culture, and only rarely recognised as “constituent elements in socio-political processes of cultural reproduction and change” (Duncan 1990:11). Descriptions, such as those located in fiction:

are of necessity constructed within the limits of language and the intellectual framework of those describing it. Such a language is not a set of words which have a one-to-one correspondence with reality “out there”. It is based on discourses which are shared meanings which are socially constituted ... Descriptions can have meaning only in such a context-bound sense (Duncan 1990:12).

Historical context is important to studies of place and affects the construction of place in literature. The fictional texts under discussion in this thesis deal with the urban environment in a postapartheid context in a situation where certain political, economic and social factors influence the construction of place, and it will be necessary to read the texts under discussion contextually.

The City and Literature

The rise of modernist literature is closely connected with the rise of the city; the city being both product and symbol of modernity. Barker states that the rise of modernism as an aesthetic is “deeply associated with the spatial and social organisation of the city” (2000:294). In his book *The City and Literature*, Richard Lehan writes that

the city and literary production have been linked for the past 300 years. The rise of the modern city is an Enlightenment construct and the literary response to this construct was substantial. Numerous writers have tried to explain the city through their work and their responses are as diverse as T.S. Eliot's apocalyptic "Wasteland" (1922), Thomas Pynchon's paranoia-inducing city in *The Crying of Lot 49* (1965), and Joseph Conrad's early view of the modern city as whited sepulchre in *The Heart of Darkness* (1899). The imperial project of the nineteenth century meant that the idea of the modern city was exported throughout the colonised world, a fact that is important in this thesis which looks at the concept of the modern city transplanted onto African soil. Connected to the rise of the modern city was the development in literature of the Modernist movement; the city being one of the major themes of modernist literature. The Modernist movement in literature reworked traditional concepts of time and space: Modernist writers approached the city both spatially and chronologically. This approach will be evident in the analysis of texts later in this thesis.

The city is a central theme as well as a setting in modern literature. Lehan states that two kinds of urban reality emerged from literary modernism. The first saw the city as constituted by the artist whereby his inner feelings and impressions created an urban vision. The second saw the city as created by the crowd, with the crowd becoming a metonym for the city in Modernist discourse. Urban studies focused on the crowd as a separate entity from the individual, who is himself lost in the crowd, with the noise and movement of the city merging with that of the crowd. However, another way to deal with the crowd is to search for diversity in it, as Walter Benjamin's *flâneur* figure does. This necessitates a move from an objective to a subjective position. The *flâneur* figure observes the crowd and sees potential for experience in it. Likewise, de Certeau promotes a subjective, individualistic approach to experiencing the city through his essay "Walking in the City", which I will deal with in the next section of this chapter. I will link this *flâneur* or walking figure to the protagonist of Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and van Wyk's central 'I' of *Man Bitch* in later chapters.

In her essay “Literary Geographies: Joyce, Woolf and the City” (2002), Jeri Johnson discusses two modernist writers and compares their approaches to the construction of two different cities in their work. Both James Joyce and Virginia Woolf were concerned with questioning the effects of the urban on the individual, and featured the cities of Dublin and London in their respective work. At the start of her essay, Johnson quotes Woolf who writes:

A writer’s country is a territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar ... to insist that (a writer’s city) has any counterpart in the cities of the earth is to rob it of half its charm (2002:60)

By way of contrast, James Joyce describes his approach to writing the city as wanting “to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth it could be reconstructed out of my book” (cited by Johnson 2002:60). These two radically different approaches see the city as an imaginary construction in Woolf’s case or based on material reality in Joyce’s. For example, Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) portrays the city of Dublin realistically while the effect of the metropolis on the human psyche can be seen in Woolf’s *The Waves* (1937). In the work of these writers, the city represents something other than itself, or it represents itself. Literary critics and theorists favour the former approach, whereby the city can be used as a metaphor or tool for literary analysis. In fact, even when closely based on material reality, cities in literature can stand for something other than themselves. They represent a network of relationships over narrative time. While the two writers under Johnson’s investigation may have different approaches to writing the city, they do share some similarities. She explains:

Both Joyce and Woolf repeatedly and insistently returned to site their novels in the urban space of the Modern City. Both saw the city as significantly and profoundly embedded within specific, material, political histories. For both, the sedimented layers of history lay behind and beneath the surfaces of Dublin and London. For both, the meanings of the lives of those who lived therein were produced within and by means of those very material cities (2002:61).

For these two novelists, the city was crucial as subject matter and trope and both recognised the importance of the city for explorations of modernity. This brief reference

to these two important novelists who dealt with the city in their work lays the groundwork for analysis of how fiction can use and represent the city. It suggests a means to approach the texts under discussion in later chapters.

The city is integral to some great works of literature. Likewise, an understanding of the city is mediated through literature with the boundaries between the real and imagined city being ill-defined and constantly shifting. The effect of the city on the imagination “exists in a constant tension represented on the one hand as stimulating the imagination and enabling creativity and on the other as constraining it” (Watson and Bridge 2002:3). Urbanisation is a feature of capitalist industrialisation and the city can be seen as both a “sign of progress ... and as a site of poverty, indifference and squalor” (Barker 2000:295). The city is thus a site of duality, where binaries exist, with the city characterised by being urban and rural, wealthy and poor, white and black and able to exist and be imagined as either or both. Jennifer Robinson writes that:

The lines of the city are crossed, redrawn, reimagined; outside the conceiving spaces of planning visions. The city of everyday experience and imagination is already a different space, it is already a space of difference (1998:170).

For the most part, the city feeds our imaginations and in turn our imaginations create and sustain the image of a city. People invent and reinvent the city in literature and likewise the city influences and impacts on literary production. What this thesis is concerned with is the effect the city has on its inhabitants and how this finds representation in literature. Literary critic, Franco Moretti, had this to say on the place of the city in the novel:

The city as a physical place – and therefore as a support to descriptions and classifications – becomes the mere backdrop to the city as a network of developing social relationships – and hence as a prop to the narrative temporality. The novel reveals that the meaning of the city is not to be found in any particular place, but manifests itself only through a temporal trajectory ... the urban novel ... seeks to resolve the spatial in terms of the sequential (cited by Johnson, 2002:60)

The city is thus not only buildings and streets but a source of intellectual challenge, a network of relationships and a muse for literary inspiration. The city is also a state of mind and for these reasons it is interesting to examine the way the city is conceptualised

in literature. When looking at African literature, it is worth noting that the modern city was a colonial creation and “was always viewed as a debauched space where all traditional values of the society were lost” (Dube 2004:52).

The Construction of the City

Place is a social construct. Not only that, but place is a political construction which becomes apparent in the construction of places called cities, such as Johannesburg and Durban, which are the result of “the power of capitalism ... creating markets and controlling workforce” (Barker 2000:298), where the state has played a major role in the shaping of the environment. In his book, *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban points out that cities are socially constructed and always in the process of change: they are temporal and constantly being remade. The inner-city space under investigation in this thesis is a space in constant flux. The components of the built environment are not fixed but have meaning through interpretation relating to a specific context.

So can the city be described as space or as place, according to our earlier definitions, in the work of the writers under discussion? The construction of place needs emotional and symbolic attachment. Jane Wilkinson writes that urban mythology deals with “salient memories of the (city’s) past which become part of the collective urban memory and shape the perceptions of both town-dwellers and visitors” (1994:92). Race, as in most aspects of South African life, plays a part in the construction of place. Not having access to this collective urban memory that Wilkinson writes of because of apartheid South Africa’s fractured social relations meant that, for black South Africans, cities existed in a “historyless reality” (Wilkinson 1994:92). In looking at the five texts in this thesis, two by white South Africans and three by black South Africans, I will be aware of this distinction and will explore whether it still holds relevance in a postapartheid context.

The city as place is thus not one construction but rather numerous constructions existing side by side and one on top of the other. Race and class play a part in which

place in the city you inhabit. Ivan Vladislavic writes in his essay “Street addresses, Johannesburg” that:

the complexity of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint. It is literally impossible for certain of these paths to cross, which is why acquaintances may live in the same city, meeting by appointments as often as they choose, without ever running into one another in the daily round (1998:305).

A similar approach is taken by de Certeau in his essay “Walking in the City” (2002) which connects to Vladislavic’s concept of ‘movement fingerprints’. This work is instructive in the ways in which it connects with critiques on the panoptic disciplining of space and social theory as well as theories of consumption with walking becoming a general metaphor for reading. This essay has been influential in the rise of South African interest in theories of urban space. De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, in which “Walking in the City” originally appeared, focuses on how social stratifications determine the nature of social practice, and proposes the idea that space and spatial practices, and the notions of power and discipline entrenched in them, are important in understanding everyday life.



Figure 3: Michel de Certeau

Elaborating a theory of spatial stories that draws on the pedestrian walking in the city as a central metaphor, de Certeau analyses how space is used in everyday practices. De Certeau also examines power relations in terms of strategy and tactics, where strategy is the “imposition of power through the disciplining and organising of space” (Crang 2003:137). Crang writes that:

De Certeau saw texturology and reading the city as complicit in the strategies of power ... the city becomes an arena of stories – where narrative offers the presence but not absorption of alterity. A theory of narration is indissoluble from practices,

where narration proceeds by way of coups and detours by way of the past and quotation in the sudden opportunistic connections from memories (2003:149).

These spatial narratives occur as people traverse the city in an uninhibited and irregular manner. For de Certeau, there is a relationship existing between the spatial practice of walking and the act of narrative articulation. The city is not only a space that generates a text through the act of walking but one that is itself produced and created by other texts that construct cities of words that are layered upon each other in order to define the city as a determined space of memory. For de Certeau, “language is structured like a city” (Crang 2003:142). De Certeau calls walking an “act of enunciation” which articulates the discourse of the city as it “affirms, suspects, tries out, transgresses, respects etc., the trajectories it speaks” (2002:388). De Certeau defines the verb ‘to walk’ as an action of lacking place, and from lacking a place grows a resistance to representation and mapped space.

Walkers in the city experience the urban as a subjective, multi-dimensional text. Because of their position on the street, they are unable to see the complete picture of the city that they would view from the top of the World Trade Center in de Certeau’s day. The view from up top, the panorama-city, is “a ‘theoretical’



Figure4: Walking in the city

... simulacrum” (2002:384) and it is necessary to get down to street level in order to experience the city as it really is, to read the stories of the city. The apparently meaningless paths taken by pedestrians through the city are important. It is these walking people who transform space into places and anchor the city in time. The walkers follow “the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read” (2002:384). They write their own stories that “traverse and organize places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them. They are spatial trajectories” (1984:115). The spatial stories written by the pedestrians transform the city and they

mobilise “memories that profit from the order without creating their own; ... they bring invisible geographies into contact with the ordered realm of the rational” (Crang 2003:150). Numerous individuals write their own story with the ‘city’ being constructed from all these subjective positions. However, the space defined (or transformed into place) only remains that way for as long as the individual remains there. These definitions are thus fleeting and replaced by numerous individuals throughout time. Speaking of New York (but comparison can be made to any modern city), de Certeau writes that its “present invents itself, from hour to hour, in the act of throwing away its previous accomplishments and challenging the future” (2002:383). A practical knowledge of the city “transforms and crosses spaces, creates new links (metonymy rather than metaphor), comprising a mobile geography of looks and glances” (Crang 2003:150).

As the subject moves through city space, so he or she defines it: there is no city space without him / her. A “*migrational*, or metaphorical city, thus slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (de Certeau 2002:384). Robinson agrees, stating that the subject or walker:

moves in space, experiencing and remaking the meaning of spaces initially constituted to speak of power. In their everyday activities, subjects are witness to the possibility of other forms of spatiality through their bodies and their movements, as well as in their imaginations, in the dynamism of their inner worlds which are both made through, and themselves remake, the external spaces of the environment (1999:166).

Pedestrian utterances speak the city: “through metonymic tricks such as synecdoche and asyndeton the space of the city expands and contracts. Through the way thinking one place brings in another, speaking the city can make wild temporal and spatial leaps – sudden connections and shifts” (Crang 2003:150). Furthermore, de Certeau’s work on the city proposes a:

piling up of heterogeneous places. Each one, like the deteriorating page of a book, refers to a different mode of territorial unity, of socioeconomic distribution, of political conflicts and of identifying symbolism ... The whole, made up of pieces that are not contemporary and still linked to totalities that fallen into ruins ... (as cited in Crang 2003:151)

The pedestrians on the streets read the city as a text, but, crucially, they also write it. This is similar in concept to the experience of the *flaneur* explored by Benjamin. The walker-in-the-street will be shown to be significant in the work of van Wyk and Mpe to be discussed in Chapters 2 and 3.

Walter Benjamin felt that the city needed to be approached subjectively, on foot, by the individual and encountered through the street or shop, not the map or guidebook. He was interested in the marginal characters, the ordinary inhabitants of the city, and it was through them that he hoped to uncover the revolutionary. Benjamin saw the city not as the habitat of the bourgeoisie but rather as the home of the marginal character – the gambler, *flaneur* and prostitute (see *The Arcades Project*, 2002). All these city types share one feature; they resist the notion of city as home to the burgher. The figure of the *flaneur*

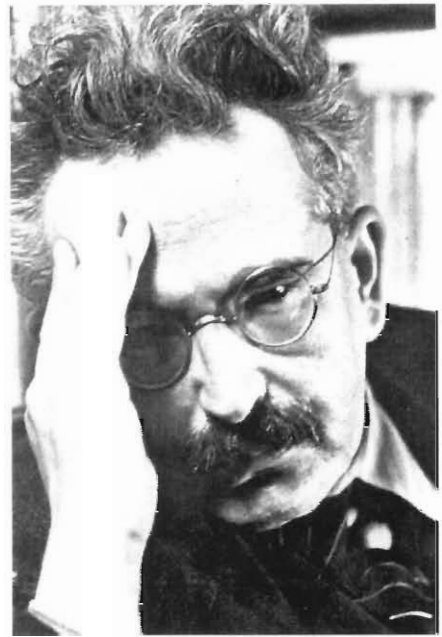


Figure 5: Walter Benjamin

will be the most relevant for this thesis. The crowd is the *flaneur's* element yet the *flaneur* is not a man of the crowd. The urban crowd is rather the medium through which the *flaneur* moves, and in Benjamin's view, the heroism of this figure resides in the fact that he refuses to become part of the crowd. The *flaneur* provides an alternative vision of the city with his aimless wanderings; a counterpoint to the speed and direction of modernity. The figure of the *flaneur* embraces the idea of getting lost. This is helpful when looking at 'city' literature as it allows us to take an approach that searches behind the textuality of the work to uncover the meaning and hidden histories inscribed in it. The *flaneur* does not represent a complete methodological stance but an attitude towards exploring the urban and an absence of constraint.

But does this trope hold any relevance today in a country such as South Africa? In her review of Rolf J. Goebel's *Benjamin Heute: Großstadtdiskurs, Postkolonialität*

und Flanerie zwischen den Kulturen (2001), Susannah Young-ah Gottlieb states that the metropolitan *flaneur* still holds relevance in contemporary thinking generally. Goebel, she writes, sees the *flaneur* as a “figure through whom the modernity of metropolitan life can be analyzed” (2005:97). Far from being restricted to the Western capitals, this trope can be used to analyse the cities that existed on the periphery of the imperial and colonial world. Novero states in a review of the same book mentioned above that the *flaneur* ties together Benjamin’s “analysis of modernity’s periphery (as manifested in Paris) and the contemporary, postcolonial urban centers at the periphery of the Western world” (2003:234). Benjamin’s *flaneur* therefore has resonance in these postcolonial and postmodern contexts. The postmodern *flaneur* can recognise “the real, as well as supposed, character of the city’s threats, intimidations, menaces or simply challenges to free access” (Jenks 1995:157). When transplanted to the South African context, this becomes important because the postapartheid city exists as a dangerous and bewildering place.

City life, no matter how unglamorous, “challenges us to incessant narrative, to chronicle the past of our environment in order to make sense of it in the present” (van Niekerk 1998:477). Likewise, the *flaneur*’s aimless wandering reveals hidden narratives and breaks down the traditional notions of time. By questioning the boundaries between past and present, the notion of linear historical time, which was sustained by narrative form, is displaced (Savage 2003:40). The *flaneur* turns the “boulevard into the interior” where the street “becomes a dwelling for the *flaneur*; he is at much at home among the facades of houses as the citizen is in his four walls. To him the shiny, enamelled signs of business are at least as good a wall ornament as an oil painting is to a bourgeois in his salon” (Benjamin as cited in Burgin 1998:59). The *flaneur* performs an act of transgression when he turns the outside into the inside, changing public space into private space.

The *flaneur* uses a common spatial reference such as a building or monument to bring things together in time. Just as the spaces of the apartheid city were divided so they generated crossings “as people moved and worked and lived in different places; crossings

as the memories and meanings of different places were carried with them” (Robinson 1999:165). The *flaneur* experiences the fragmented historical and spatial layers of the city and is able to see through the everyday to perceive the presence of the repressed and forgotten material. AbdouMaliq Simone writes that particular spaces “are linked to specific identities, functions, lifestyles, and properties so that the spaces of the city become legible for specific people at given places and times” (2004:409). The *flaneur* serves to disrupt meaning, uncover hidden histories and expose the power relations involved in the representation of place. The trope of the walker actualises possibilities and meaning. In the writings of de Certeau and Benjamin, we read the city from the street level in all its lived complexity, and these writings:

emphasize the spatial and temporal openness of the city as a place of manifold rhythms forged through daily encounters and multiple experiences of time and space; the city as a series of imprints from the past, the daily tracks of movement across, and links beyond, the city itself (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004:361).

These insights connect directly to the texts to be discussed in the following chapters, as will be demonstrated.

The hidden meanings and histories that the *flaneur* uncovers in his wanderings are centred on the concept of traces. Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project* that the trace is the “appearance of nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind might be” (2002:444), and he claimed that to live is to leave traces. John K. Noyes writes that spatial structures in South Africa possess a difficult

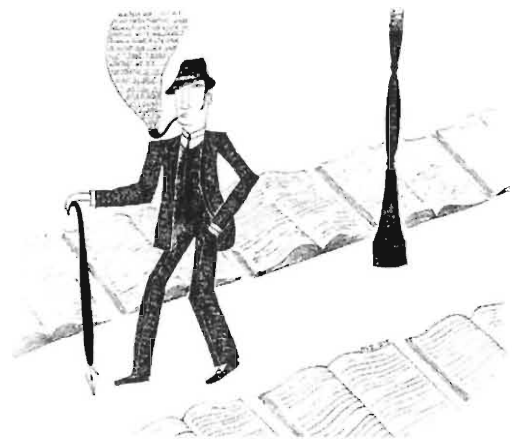


Figure 6: The *flaneur*

status due to the way they preserve the past while at the same time being used for new and sometimes vastly different functions (1998:461). However, they still possess traces of the past in them. These traces manifest themselves in buildings, monuments, texts and even people. Noyes continues, stating that “Apartheid’s physical space continues to play an important role in everyday life in post-Apartheid South Africa” (1998:461). These

ideas coincide with Benjamin's concept of 'traces' and Foucault's notion of different places existing simultaneously in one space.

For Benjamin, the city was "traversed in space but studied in time" (Patke 2000:4). Time, and in particular history, was connected to space with Benjamin arguing that space was haunted by its own history. Benjamin felt that the:

city is rune and ruin; aura and trace. It is never complete, but always already in debris. As an emblem in the allegory of modernity, the city stands for the failure of the Enlightenment project to realise Utopia, just as the postmodern ... is the willingness to live in the phantasmal after having consigned the project of Utopia to mythology (Patke 2000: 4-5).

The city was an archive of memory, with Benjamin as the collector. Where the past remains, it provides a link back to historical knowledge. Caygill writes that the "experience of a city is made up of a constant negotiation with the ghosts and residues of previous experience" (1998:119). In his work, Benjamin was not just interested in disrupting meaning but also in recovering it. His attempt at recovering it was concerned with memory. Benjamin's approach to memory "was related to his critique of conceptual, theoretical and narrative knowledge" (Savage 2003:42). His interest was in memory that was triggered by stimuli, as occurs through the wanderings of the *flâneur* who happens upon a place that is connected to a certain memory. This process breaks down the boundary between past and present as memories lodge in places where people have been. These "places continue to bear the traces of past experiences" (Savage 2003:42). By revisiting these places, the past is unlocked. Robinson writes that it is not just:

the flow and connection within cities that reflect and generate their dynamism, and might change their spatiality, but the way they are connected through a wide variety of linkages to other cities, other places, other times. Different parts of the city are connected differently: the linkages in and out of the inner-city, high-rise Hillbrow and suburban Sandton have always been different. Today, however, Hillbrow is not only connected to the townships in Johannesburg and other cities, rather than to the white suburbs and the white city centre as before, but the routes of many of its residents stretch the length of Africa (1998:170).

The concept of traces in the postapartheid city is extended spatially to include connections with places existing in other locations as well as times.

The City as Text

Place, and specifically in the case of this thesis, the city, is a text that:

is 'read' by the mutable 'interpretive communities', each with its distinct 'horizons of expectation'. Historical communities and individuals, intimately conditioned by social, economic and ideological forces, will project varied structures of attention onto external nature, thereby actualizing different configurations of feature and meaning (Fitter 1995:8-9).

Place as a text can be read and thus "acts as a communicative device reproducing the social order" (Duncan 1990:19), or challenging and resisting it, as the case may be. Both the city and literature share textuality. Accounts of the city have been "recast in the language of poststructuralism and its problematization of representation so that the city is read as text" (Barker 2000:5). Poststructuralist influence, associated with the work of Jacques Derrida, sees reading cultural artefacts as texts and the city is no exception to this. This argues for:

autonomy of the text from the processes and actors by which it was produced. Hence, there is no sense in seeking a valid, that is, true account of the text. The text stands unique for each reader (Byrne 2001:141).

The postcolonial approach adapts this by stating that there are "different versions, different approaches, which represent cohesive and articulate theories, but which cannot be subordinated to an overweening meta-theory" (Byrne 2001:141). Representing the city involves the "techniques of writing – metaphor, metonym and other rhetorical devices – rather than a simple transparency from 'real' city to the 'represented city'" (Barker 2000:315). This will be evident in the reading of the texts from Durban and Johannesburg.

One of the central themes of urban culture studies is the description of the city as text. The way literature is read, in fact, is analogous to the way urban historians read the city and reading the texts about the city is one way of reading a city. Tagg writes that:

cities, like all environments, are texts in which are inscribed values, beliefs, and the exercise and struggle for power ... But if the city is a text, it is written as well as read, (re)constructed as well as (re)interpreted, and (re)produced as well as consumed (cited in Byrne 2001:34)

Benjamin too was fascinated with the way cities could be represented textually and used this to “examine the relationship between history, experience, memory, and the built environment” (Savage 2003:34). The metropolitan environment offers a “model of innovative textual practices, a radical, vital literary architectonics” (Gilloch 2002:97). Benjamin tested his theory of:

deciphering and readability not only on the ambiguous literary texts of modernity but extended it to other cultural ‘texts’: to the topography of the city, to architecture, interiors, objects, fashions, and so on. In comprehending these as dream-writing (Traumschrift) of the collective, he was concerned to decipher at origin the dream of a past epoch from the wish-symbols of the previous century which had been laid in ruins even before the monuments which represented them had crumbled (Weigel 1996:37).

Benjamin’s major work was *The Arcades Project*, a vast assemblage of quotation and commentary on Paris, Charles Baudelaire, architecture, Marx, and commodity culture of the nineteenth century. Gilloch writes that the:

everyday objects, edifices and experiences of nineteenth-century Paris were to be unveiled as phantasmagoria and chimeras, as modern mythological forms, as elements of a dreamworld. The explosive juxtaposition of artefacts and images culled from this fabulous realm was to transform the contemporary consciousness, and bring about an abrupt awakening from recent past (2002:114).

The Arcades Project saw Benjamin collecting textual details of the city and Paris in particular. By examining the Arcades or shopping streets of Paris and by focusing closely on these phenomena, he attempted to uncover a social and cultural logic. This work was not absorbed into a central theory or model but saw ideas constellated



Figure 7: Paris street

around motifs in which ordinary features acquired allegorical significance or notions such

as the dream or panorama had complex associations. As I have shown through the examination of the *flâneur* figure, Benjamin's evocation of the city "was not simply a textual device but also a practical one, which could be carried out by people in daily life" (Savage 2003:43). To experience a city:

requires and privileges a familiarity and reciprocity with its jostling crowds, a proximity to its profusion of objects, an expectancy and excitement in its encounters. This receptivity to, and appreciation of, public urban experiences may be seen as the antithesis of the attitude of the haughty, insular bourgeois subject, who, maintaining distance and shunning contact, hurries joylessly past to seek refuge in exclusive cultural spaces or private interiors (Gilloch 2002:95-96).

Benjamin's interest in cities was related to his critique of narrativity. Conventional narratives promote a linear account of historical progress and their disruption involves breaking these conventions (Savage 2003:40). Benjamin spatialised time, and by invoking the city he disconnects and subverts meaning. The basic criteria of the metropolitan experience do not change whether we are in Paris or Johannesburg. However, at the same time, looking at his writings on cities, it becomes clear that Benjamin also emphasised the particularity of the cities. He constructed them as distant objects with the ability to gaze at us in return. In fact, it is:

precisely this quality of cities to retain their specificity which Szondi (1988) emphasises as central to Benjamin's city portraits. Visiting strange cities disrupts one's established routines and habits, allows established conventions to be placed into question, and can restore the childhood experience of wonder, fear and hope (Savage 2003:45).

The Arcades Project is problematic as a form of discourse. It is a series of extracts with comment, a montage that works through showing instead of saying. It is uneven and fragmented but it can be argued that this method is similar to the object of study, the city. It was a new discourse at the time in the same way that the city was a new experience. In fact, I would argue that it is his complex and varied approach that makes Benjamin's work relevant in contemporary times. Savage states that Benjamin saw urban writing as "a critical device allowing established and conventional values to be put into question" (2003:40). Benjamin used urban phenomena "as devices for exploring the intellectual problems he had grappled with throughout his life" (Savage 2003:36). The set of

approaches Benjamin uncovered are still valid today because the project of modernity is still at work, particularly in postcolonial and developing countries with “the split image of modernity, modernity’s promises for social and individual emancipation, as well as modernity’s failures (Paetzold cited by Patke 2000:3). The postapartheid texts this thesis studies are riven by these split images of promise and failure.

The Postapartheid City

The symbolic and representational image of the city is dependent on who dominates the image of the city and this relates to real geographic strategies as different groups battle for access to the centre of the city and the symbolic representations in that centre. We need to be aware of the competing discourses affecting and reflected in cities and their representations in fiction. Duncan defines discourses as “the social framework of intelligibility within which all practices are communicated, negotiated, or challenged (1990:16). Ideologies are inscribed in discourses and so are power relations. By becoming part of the everyday environment, landscape masks its ideological function (Duncan 1990:19), but it does perform one. When Duncan speaks of ideology he references the Marxist term whereby cultures are structured in such a way that enables the group holding power to have maximum control with the minimum of conflict. For the purposes of this thesis, given the texts focused on, it is the apartheid ideology and its legacy in a postapartheid context that has been inscribed in landscape through the cultural process. This speaks to the texts under discussion. Foucault adapted Marx’s ideas on ideology and developed his own theory of discourse. He rejected the idea that only the ruling class could hold power and rather saw power as diffuse and able to run in different directions. His concept of discourse is more useful for our study of these postapartheid texts as they deal with lingering and new, fragmented power relations.

Colonialism in the twentieth century was a double-edged sword which resulted in the cultural and political subordination of groups of people but also offered the benefits of the ideals of modernity. The city was a construction of the industrial revolution in Europe and a move towards capitalism. However, this was not the case in Africa where the city was instead “a social construction of the modernist dreams of colonizers who

came to the continent to exploit it” (Okiome 2003:65). Benjamin took a dialectic approach to the city which he saw as the site of the new, and simultaneously, the antique. He proposed a dialectical mode of thought that can be extended to a variety of contexts “where the city figures centrally in the relation between nationalism (as the overlap of the colonial and postcolonial) and globalism (as the translation of the modern into the postmodern)” (Patke 2000:15). The postcolonial city thus exists as the threshold of experience between the local and the global. While Benjamin has been criticised for being Eurocentric, the cities he wrote about were “formative of a discourse that can be transposed to other cities whose patterns of urban development were shaped by forces analogous to those he studied in the period of their inception” (Patke 2000:3). The Third World city is the site for a partial overlap of the postmodern and the postcolonial. Both the postcolonial and the postmodern are each “a historical phase of world history, ... and an attitude or a state of mind” (Patke 200:4). Thus, the Paris of Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* can be connected to the postapartheid South African city by “a dialectical relation between the politics of economic growth and the economics of cultural formations” (Patke 2000:5). Benjamin offers us insight into the city and a means of analysis of the urban. His writings still hold relevance because he:

attributed the radical transformation of human experience in post-industrial societies to changes in the means of production and the practices of consumption. He urged artists not to forget the materiality of their art and its techniques. His writings demonstrate the role of the metropolitan in the ambivalent relation between societal and cultural modernity. He showed a way to the recognition that there are as many passages between modernity and the metropolitan as there are cities; and though they are neither uniform, nor parallel, nor well lit, they can be brought together in understanding without smoothing out their differences (Patke 2002:1).

The relationship between the South African city and Benjamin must be dialectical just as dialectical tension exists between South Africa and her writers. Under apartheid, black South Africans only worked in the city, they didn’t live in it. If, as Benjamin contends, memory exists in places and can be unlocked, what memories exist in apartheid cities?

In his book *Racist Culture* (1994), David Theo Goldberg explores apartheid cities and segregated spatial planning in South Africa. He states that “the construct of separate

(racial) group areas, in effect or design, has served to constrain, restrict, monitor, and regulate urban space and its experience". Furthermore, he writes that the inner-city racial space bears "uncomfortable affinities with urban space in apartheid and postapartheid South Africa" (1994:196). Likewise, Noyes, in his essay "Language, Violence and the Displaced Spatiality of the Human in Postapartheid South Africa" (1998), draws attention to the fact that four decades of apartheid urban planning have left an indelible imprint on the urban landscape and that the everyday experiences of South African citizens are still being shaped by this spatial legacy (1998:460). Space, and its control, was central to the project of apartheid and now access to space and its use becomes an important field for critical inquiry³. The South African city is historically divided but the postapartheid era has brought about what Jennifer Robinson calls a "mobility, interaction and dynamism of spaces" (1999:163). She proposes that the end of apartheid not only signified immense political and social change but also demanded a new way of relating to space. She writes that "our imaginations have lived for so long with the lines of apartheid city space, with blank spaces in between, the deadening images of power drawn on the ground" (1999:163). It can be argued that the texts studied in this thesis are part of the beginnings of trying to come to terms imaginatively with this new access to space.

The spaces of the cities have not only been changed by the rules and laws that governed them but also by the people who now inhabit and walk through these previously restricted sites. The modern city, set out in grids, is supposed to signify order, but in the selected texts it is a space of disorder. The Western model of a city, which was adopted by the apartheid government, sees the city as the powerhouse of business. Majestic skyscrapers soaring to the heavens signify progress. However, in recent decades, corporations have moved into the suburbs to escape high crime rates in the city. After the collapse of apartheid many black South Africans made the inner city their home. Today, the postapartheid city no longer has the feeling of a policed white capital that it once had. Durban and Johannesburg are clearly African cities. The postapartheid city thus stands as a powerful index of transformation and is a site for numerous transformative moments. The city, and in particular the inner-city, has moved in the popular consciousness from a modernist vision of man's progress to a site of degradation and crime. The texts under

discussion in the following chapters highlight this but also engage with the very real human dramas that occur in these circumstances. As will be shown, they also deal with two of the defining characteristics of the modern South African city; that of migration and AIDS. In the face of these odds, however, there is room for creativity. The next chapter will move to a discussion of these issues, and theoretical points raised in this chapter, in relation to the city of Durban and the work of van Wyk, Khuzwayo and Mdakane.

Endnotes

1. Relations of power don't just occur in space but articulate themselves through space and are fundamentally about space (Jacobs 1996:1). Power in postapartheid South Africa is diffuse but still exists under the influence of cultural, social and economic legacy of apartheid. Drawing on the work of Umberto Eco and Walter Benjamin, Wilkinson writes that "architecture is a form of mass communication, manipulating the reactions and behaviours of its users, 'whose reception is consummated ... in a state of distraction'" (1994:98).
2. Robinson in this book discusses an extension of the link between literature and place and, potentially, tourism. Literary tourism is tourism that is linked to places and events from fictional texts, as well as the lives of their authors. Literary tourists are specifically interested in how places have influenced writing and at the same time how writing has created place. For more on this subject visit www.literarytourism.co.za
3. Changes to city space result in protracted struggles, not just about the use and look of space but place-based struggles "are also arenas in which various coalitions express their sense of self and their desires for the spaces which constitute 'home'" (Jacobs 1996:2). Politics produced by space becoming new is a politics of identity. This is concerned with the city but also with larger historical and geographical concerns. Apartheid was a political and economic event but also operated through cultural processes. Under apartheid, negative constructions of the Other were instigated and this translated into the construction and use of urban space.

Chapter 2

In this chapter I will examine three postapartheid texts which explore the experience of living in the inner-city of Durban. My main focus will be the autobiography *Man Bitch* (2001) by Johan van Wyk, and supplementing this, *No Way Out* (2001) by Zinhle Carol Mdakane and *Never Been At Home* (2001) by Zazah P. Khuzwayo. These texts have been chosen because of their interconnectedness – these writers formed a group living and working in a specific area of inner-Durban in the late 1990's. Through them I will



investigate an example of the representation of urban space in postapartheid South African literature. As an introduction to these texts and some of the spatial issues under discussion in this chapter, a brief analysis of *Mating Birds* (1986) by Lewis Nkosi will be suggested. Nkosi knew this circle and lived in the same area for brief periods of time. *Mating Birds* covers some of the same ground and suggests some of the same racial, class and sexual tensions of Durban. For the purposes of this thesis, I will focus mainly on van Wyk's text which is, in a literary sense, more complex and offers more of a medium through which to analyse inner-city space in Durban than the more (narratively speaking) straightforward life-stories of Mdakane and Khuzwayo.

Van Wyk and, to a lesser extent, Mdakane and Khuzwayo construct the inner-city in their texts. This is done through reference to physical places locatable in the city, a mapping of space, and through relationships that come to represent the city. Some of the major issues affecting South Africa's city inhabitants emerge as themes: AIDS, crime, poverty, mental and sexual abuse and architectural degradation drive these narratives but so too does access to once restricted space. By looking at these postapartheid texts, an analysis of how the representation of literary space has altered with political and socio-economic changes can be made. A close reading of these texts reveals a city identity and urban space that corresponds to the idea of an integrated, 'new' South Africa yet is far from the ideal portrayed by politicians through the media. A brief history of Durban, highlighting important eras, will be given to contextualise the place under discussion in

these texts. I will then provide a short introduction to this group of writers and briefly summarise their works. This chapter will then proceed to outline how the inner-city is 'mapped' particularly through *Man Bitch*. This constructed city is read and written through the strategies of walking as proposed by Benjamin and de Certeau discussed in the previous chapter. Through these techniques, recurring themes are established which will be discussed. Home and belonging are central to all three texts with the narrators searching for 'home' in the city which is, to all intents and purposes, un-homelike. Power relations drive these narratives and draw from the legacy of apartheid in relation to race, and a more diffuse system of power in the postapartheid context as related to the sex / money exchanges. Lastly, AIDS redefines the urban space in *Man Bitch*, as well as the space of human relationships therein, and promises to be the driving force behind future South African city narratives as will be seen in the next chapter that deals with Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

Under apartheid, South African cities represented white control and influence over blacks. Power was inscribed into buildings and place, and the relationships people had with them, through legislation. In recent years the city landscape (political, economic, and architectural) has changed and these power relationships have now fragmented to include issues of identity, migration and AIDS. Through van Wyk's autobiography and the work of Mdakane and Khuzwayo, we can see how writers construct place – in this case the Point Road area – and how they are in turn influenced by place and the related socio-economic conditions. The texts under discussion in this chapter deal with the urban environment in Durban in a postapartheid context in a situation where certain political, economic and social factors influence the construction of place. These three texts illustrate how a postapartheid experience of place can be fictionalised in South African literature and, through a close examination of their work, the relevance of constructions of place in South African literature is revealed. The city, as argued in Chapter 1, can be read through texts about it and by reading these texts we can draw larger conclusions about what they say about Durban and postapartheid urban space in general.

1. Durban

1.1. Colonial Era

Vasco da Gama sailed past Durban Bay on Christmas of 1497, giving the coast its Portuguese name of *Natal* in honour of the birth of Christ. The city itself was founded some 200 years later by the Dutch, though it quickly came under the control of the British. The reason the place was attractive to early colonists was because of its natural harbour and, for many years, the harbour proved the focal point of Durban life. It was the reason the town existed, the entry and exit point from the colony and the connection with 'Home' (England). It also provided employment and sustenance with many people working in the docks and industries that serviced it. Up until recently, Durban had a commercial fishing fleet. Whales abounded just off the coast and at one stage Durban had the largest land-based whaling station in the world.

Durban, however, was not only 'discovered' by the Portuguese or 'settled' by the British. The area Durban exists in, and the surrounding province of Natal (now KwaZulu-Natal), were under the control of the Zulu Empire long before Europeans arrived in South Africa. The history of Durban is thus "totally intertwined with the shifting ... fortunes of the Zulu people" (van Niekerk 1979:8). Most of Durban's current black population would consider themselves part of the Zulu nation, particularly in the inner-city area under investigation in the texts below, and most of Johan van Wyk's girlfriends in *Man Bitch* are Zulu. It has been argued that Durban was "built on the sweat and toil of the Africans" and that it was "the Zulus who have kept the city's wheels turning and its fires burning" (van Niekerk 1979:19). However, under apartheid, they were treated as second-class citizens and restricted in their access and use of the city. Durban is also home to a large Indian population. The British administration in Durban in the 1860s was responsible for the introduction of the sugarcane industry and the accompanying indentured labourers brought by ship from India to service it. This legacy has meant that Durban of today is home to colonial descendants, black Africans and Indians.

Durban is a “waterfront city and its history and make-up and its very prosperity is steeped in its association with the sea” (van Niekerk 1979:120). As the city grew, so the beachfront became popular as a tourist destination with the collection of beaches from the harbour to the Umgeni River becoming known as the ‘Golden Mile’. Hotels sprang up along the waterfront and in the area now known as Gillespie Street, where much of the action in *Man Bitch* takes place. Foremost, however, Durban is a port city, and the harbour is the reason for its position and existence.

Durban’s history, given its multiple population groups, has like other South African cities under apartheid, been closely connected to the contestation of space. The city authorities:

consistently tried to control space in the service of the city’s predominantly white middle class. Residential space has been manipulated through various mechanisms with a view to banishing the black underclasses to the city’s periphery and so insulating and immunising whites from the supposed dangers that accompanied the black urban presence. The closing down of physical space for the underclasses also served to limit their access to other forms of space, economic, cultural and political. (Maylam in Maharaj 2002:171)

South Africa’s history, and thus Durban’s, is one of appropriation of land firstly through colonisation and then “the mass displacements of people in the failed apartheid project of social engineering” (Sienaert and Stiebel 1996:91).

1.2. Apartheid Era

Under apartheid legislation, and in particular the Group Areas Act (1950), two vast black dormitory suburbs – Umlazi in the south and Kwa-Mashu to the north – were developed on the outskirts of Durban which meant that the vast majority of Africans working in Durban lived outside the city. The inner-city was thus a site of exclusion for black South Africans. Access to land and space was legislated and clearly demarcated with the Group Areas Act restricting black South Africans to certain areas to live and work in, and the Separate Amenities Act (1953) limiting the interaction of white and black South Africans. AbdouMalik Simone writes of Johannesburg – and it can be argued the same holds true for Durban – that it “was designed as a cosmopolitan,

European city in Africa, but only for a small segment of its population. When this truncated cosmopolitanism could no longer be enforced by a white minority regime, whites fled ... leaving the inner city open to habitation of all kinds" (2004:411). As we will see later in this chapter, the inner-city of Durban has become a truly African city in its racial mix.

People of different races were socially and legally restricted from interacting and confined to certain places designated for their racial group, even though these race-restricted places sometimes bordered each other, as was the case in the areas of Overport and Westville where whites and Indians lived literally across the road from each other. Similarities can be drawn from this system of apartheid and Foucault's theory of the panopticon, discussed in the previous chapter, whereby physical and psychological control over individuals can be achieved through controlling and manipulating spatial relations. Spatial relations play a role in creating and maintaining the workings of discourse and power. This will be developed further in relation to the texts under discussion and the postapartheid context.

Though not a major focus of this chapter, Lewis Nkosi's novel *Mating Birds* offers an interesting early example of the implications of spatial ordering under apartheid in Durban. The novel deals with the separation of city space in Durban under apartheid. It also deals with power relations as they relate to sex and race in a specific setting, in particular the Durban beachfront area. These issues are repeated and complicated in van Wyk's later text. Set in South Africa in the 1960s, the question of space and land in the novel is a political one. *Mating Birds*' story follows a young, black man, Ndi Sibiya, who has been accused (perhaps wrongly?) of raping a white woman. He contends that the sex was consensual and that they had a relationship of sorts. This text has echoes of Frantz Fanon's work *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) where Fanon refers to myths about the sexual prowess of the black man who is the object of fantasy for the white woman, and envy and resentment for the white man. The inverse relationship is explored in *Man Bitch* where the protagonist is only attracted to black women.

In *Mating Birds*, a physical distance has been placed between the black man and the white woman through apartheid. The only place where they can legitimately meet is a commercial space, the shop, where they bump into each other. *Mating Birds* is thus “profoundly predicated on spaces regulated by the apartheid state” (Stiebel 2005:171). Space is also connected to identity formation so to “fight for a space is to fight for one’s very identity” (Stiebel 2005:171). The battle over space that takes place in Ndi’s head and later through his relationship with Veronica is thus also a battle for his identity. The physical space of the novel is “that of the beach, divided in two by the stream, the two sections separated by the ‘legendary’ signpost with the warning BATHING AREA – FOR WHITES ONLY” (Brink 1992:4). The sign makes Ndi furious as it is “at once an index of Ndi’s attempt to cross the barrier, and its prevention” (Ashcroft et al 1995:86). There is a clear demarcation between the white and black beaches and Ndi is restricted to the space of the black beach. The boundary zone that Veronica is sunbathing in “signifies the plane of meeting between two cultures” (Ashcroft et al 1995:86). By inhabiting this marginal place, she opens herself up to attention from Ndi who could claim some ownership over her – she is after all encroaching on his space.

For Ndi, the white woman’s body becomes a place to be inscribed with forbidden signs. This forms an interesting contrast to *Man Bitch* which deals with a series of sexual relationships between an older, white man and young, black women. The concept of a woman’s body as space (to be contested or controlled) will be helpful when looking at that text later in this chapter. In *Mating Birds*, the white woman is discovered on the boundary between the white and black beaches and Ndi immediately starts to associate her with the landscape. Her “high magnificent breasts ... heave and throb like the swell of a large ocean wave” (Nkosi 1986:116) and she has “animal grace” (144). Lovell writes that “landscapes are inscribed onto our bodies through the mutual positioning of humans with nature” (1998:6) and this is what Ndi is doing. Veronica’s “voluptuous body is itself a contested site of struggle” (Stiebel 2005:173), however, it is a space that can be appropriated unlike the other spaces of South Africa that are restricted and defended by the state. Her body becomes an “obvious metonym for white society and values” (Ashcroft et al 1995:86) and a space that can be colonised. Even in Ndi’s mind,

Veronica is reduced from person to symbol of “purity and light, of saintly flesh, raped, violated by the brutal force of a dark continent” (Nkosi 1986:35). Veronica Slater is “a space whose identity is longed for” (Stiebel 2005:172) and is to some extent arrogated through Ndi’s gaze. The first time he notices her, she is described as lying on an “empty stretch of Durban beach as though washed up by the tide after an all-night storm ... Her flesh was surrendered, as it were, to the hungry gaze of African youths” (Nkosi 1986:3). Ndi appropriates the restricted space of the white woman, a space from which he is legally barred, with his sight. The act of looking, in a situation where the gazer is powerless due to the political situation, is also a way to assert his presence, if not domination.

This is taken to the next level through the sexual encounter between Ndi and Veronica. Inter-racial sex can be read as a metaphor for transcending the apartheid barrier. The sexual union “with the tantalising but unattainable woman is the metaphoric equivalent of the Black child’s attempt to enter the world of white society (and therefore power)” (Ashcroft et al 1995:87), and is the means through which Ndi enters the restricted white space. The act of intercourse breaks down any physical barriers. Ndi stresses the whiteness of her skin repeatedly and her white body becomes a “symbol of colonial conquest and by a black man ... entering this space ... retribution could be sought” (Stiebel 2005:173). The ‘rape’ becomes an act of political retribution, an appropriation of white space with the narrator seeing his “sexual drive as a reaction to and attack on apartheid” (Brink 1992:8). Yet, when he achieves his goal of domination of the white woman, her screams attract passers by. He loses his position of power and space he has claimed. This scenario contrasts well with van Wyk’s text in which a white man appropriates the space of young, black female bodies, and while inter-racial sex is no longer the political statement it once was, it is still closely linked to claiming and owning the urban, black space these women come to represent.

1.3. Postapartheid Era

While South African ideas about racial segregation were “perfectly acceptable in the international context of the early twentieth century”, by the 1980s substantial pressure

was being applied on South Africa to change (Padayachee and Freund 2002:6). The 1994 elections saw a shift of power from the hands of the Afrikaner National Party to that of the struggle organisation, the African National Congress, which heads the government today. This political change also saw a move towards the postapartheid discourse that I deal with in this thesis.

In 2002, the Greater Durban Municipal Area had a population of about 3 million people “of whom about 900,000 lived in informal, or shanty settlements around the fringes of Durban. The population was 63% Black, 22% Asian, 11% White, 3% Coloured (of mixed race) and 1% unspecified” (Jackson 2003:73). Lewis Nkosi, mentioned in the last section, writes that while the indigenous population remains overwhelmingly Zulu, “since the collapse of apartheid there has been an infusion of new immigrants, not only from the neighbouring states of Mozambique and Swaziland but also from as far away as Central and West Africa” (nd:3). Durban is now defined by a development crisis that sees a “rapid population growth, a slow economic growth rate, housing backlogs, an increasing number of informal settlements, rising poverty, high unemployment rates and an inadequate supply of basic services to the majority of the population” (Maharaj 2002:172). The Durban inner-city today has seen a gradual movement by big business away from the city centre – one reason for this is to escape high crime rates prevalent in these parts.



Figure 8: Aerial view of Durban’s Point Area

However, the harbour and beachfront still remain a focal point for business in the city and visiting sailors flock to the Point Road area as has always been the case. Durban is the most active port city on the African continent. In fact, Durban's harbour "brings in revenues of R2-billion a year, is visited by 4000 ships and handles 31 million tonnes of cargo with a value of R100-billion annually" (Jackson 2003:53). Furthermore, Durban today still attracts numerous tourists to its beachfront and surrounding areas annually, just as in the days of high apartheid. However, with the changing of political systems in South Africa, so too has the ideological construction of Durban in marketing changed. The tourism agency in Durban no longer advertises itself to white, upcountry visitors as the place where "The Fun Never Sets" but rather situates itself as "The Gateway to the Zulu Kingdom" in an effort to appeal to black and white upcountry visitors; and also to an overseas contingent keen on an exotic African adventure.

Linking the tourist areas of the beachfront and the commercial harbour district is the inner-city suburb known as The Point, where *Man Bitch* is set. This is Durban's notorious red light district where any number of narcotic or sexual gratifications can be bought. It is the largest inner-city slum in Durban and home to a vast array of drug pushers, prostitutes, and illegal immigrants. However, this was not always the case. Barend van Niekerk laments the degradation of the Point area when he writes that it:

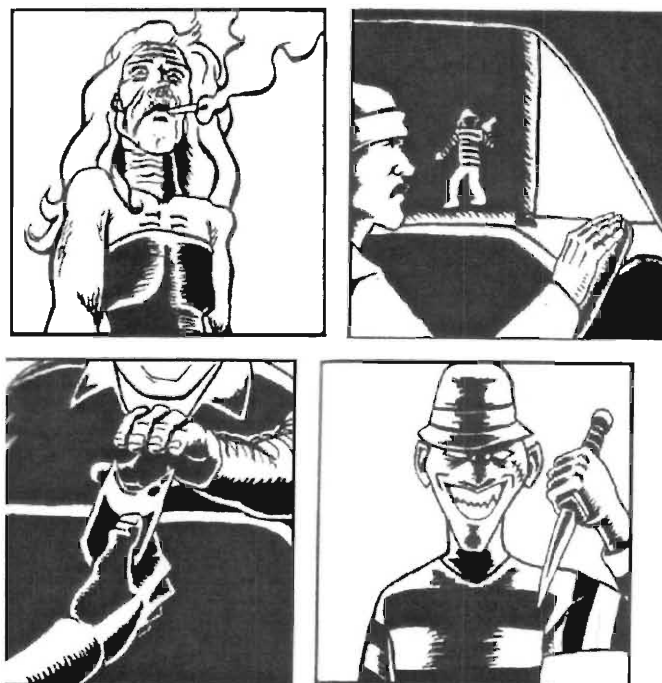
is but a pale and really miserable reflection of its heyday as entertainment and commercial focal point in the first three decades of [the 20th century]. One or two buildings still manage to show a titillating vestige of the glory of yesteryear when Point Road, as the arrival, departure and entertainment point of generations of seamen, was probably the best known and best loved street in all of Africa (van Niekerk 1979:48).

Point Road around the turn of the 19th century was Durban's most lively area, and as late as the 1930s it was Durban's version of Hamburg's *Reeperbahn*. The writer, Lawrence Green, constructs a romantic vision of the Point Road area as he knew it just after the First World War when he writes:

I shall return to Point Road one night and think of all the people I glimpsed there; natives and Indians in the Boating Company's compound, stevedores, water police,

ostrich feather sellers, Teifel the driver, the Chinese laundrymen ...Point Road had an aroma of its own; the harbour smells, salt and tar and carbolic; fried fish and coffee and the spicy Eastern odours; poverty and sweat and rickshaw boys; flowers and cane sugar, too, and something indefinable and glamorous that came with the darkness (in van Niekerk, 1979:117).

Since then, the area has steadily deteriorated until it is the unromantic ‘hell’ that van Wyk writes about in his autobiography. Point Road owed its original importance to its proximity to the focal point of the harbour and this is the reason why it is still significant. However, this proximity is no longer a positive influence and has brought with it easy access to smuggled drugs and an active clientele base for the thriving sex industry. In his graphic story “Point Odyssey” (2004) Thoba Bhengu recreates the area in a series of images that touch on the essence of life in The Point (see below).



In this pictorial narrative, the comic artist highlights the crime, prostitution and drugs that are synonymous with the place. Khuzwayo also elaborates on Point Road life when she describes the area in her book:

I was living by the beach. Everything was happening and life was in the fast lane. There were too many Nigerians selling drugs to people and making themselves rich, prostitutes, homosexuals, criminals and Party People (Khuzwayo 2001:73).

Like the *flaneur* and the prostitute, the Nigerian drug dealer becomes a city type in these texts, and highlights both the cosmopolitanism and xenophobia associated with the South African inner-city. Along with the *Makwerekwere* (foreigners), the other postapartheid city type is the rake-thin AIDS sufferer that haunts the pages of Mpe and van Wyk's texts.

The South African city is historically divided but the postapartheid era has brought about what Jennifer Robinson calls a "mobility, interaction and dynamism of spaces" (1999:163). After the collapse of apartheid many black South Africans made the inner city their home. Nkosi writes that the end of apartheid has meant a "release into urban living space of thousands of black South Africans who are now only too eager to escape from the social confinement of the shantytown" (nd:1). Durban is now clearly an African, postapartheid city which stands as a powerful index of transformation. However, this transformation has not resulted in the utopian place imagined post-1994. The city, and in particular the inner-city, has moved in the popular consciousness to a site of degradation and crime. Van Wyk highlights some of the conditions of this postapartheid city when he writes in the introduction to Mdakane's text that the:

post-apartheid apocalypse is different from the one which was so often predicted by the Apartheid Literary texts. The apocalypse then was in the future. The apocalypse of these texts is lived in the present and it seems as if there is *No Way Out*. The peculiar features of this apocalypse are: oedipal/domestic violence, living in the streets, cross-racial relationships, unwanted pregnancies, gender conflict, rape, crime, economic helplessness, but especially unfulfilled dreams and nightmares (2001:2).

This postapartheid apocalypse is the space from which these writers write and where their subject matter originates.

2. Texts

2.1. Biographical Backgrounds

The three books under discussion come from what can be considered ‘peripheral’ literature. They were all originally self-published (though Khuzwayo’s book was reissued in 2004 by David Philip) with short print runs resulting in few people outside Durban reading them or producing any critical work about them. *Man Bitch* (2001) by Johan van Wyk, *No Way Out* (2001) by Zinhle Carol Mdakane and *Never Been At Home* (2001) by Zazah P. Khuzwayo speak to each other and points of comparison can be fruitfully drawn between the three. Van Wyk, then



Figure 9: Johan van Wyk

a professor in the Centre for the Study of Southern African Languages and Literature at the University of Durban-Westville (now part of the University of KwaZulu-Natal) and a published poet, encouraged the writings of Mdakane and Khuzwayo while also having sexual relationships with the two women in the Point Road milieu. Their texts provide a glimpse into a world that outsiders seldom hear about. The three books also provide a record of a moment that was fleeting; an intellectual experiment that is now over in a place that is soon to be transformed in a proposed redevelopment. Van Wyk, writing in the introduction to *No Way Out* states that “from my perspective these are of the very few convincing accounts of contemporary urban South Africa” (2001:1) and I would agree. These texts are a gritty, authentic representation of inner-city living.

All three texts can be termed life-writing or broadly autobiographical. While van Wyk bases his text on his experiences of living in the Point area, he has also marketed it at some stages as a novel. A line must thus be drawn between the narrator or character of van Wyk in *Man Bitch* and the writer van Wyk. Postapartheid South Africa has seen a flurry of autobiographical texts. In their essay “Autobiographical Acts”, Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael write that the:

autobiographical act in South Africa, more than a literary convention, has become a cultural activity. Memoir, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism, all different kinds of autobiographical or cultural occasions in

which narrators take up models of identity that have become widely available, have pervaded the culture of the 1990s and have spread into the new century. This flourishing of the autobiographical voice has emerged alongside the powerful informing context of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, but it is also a symptom of the decompression, relaxation, and cacophony of the postapartheid moment in general (2000: 298).

In his introduction to *No Way Out*, van Wyk also touches on the issue of autobiography in South African literature when he writes that there:

are many autobiographies in South Africa. Most of them are political and describe a struggle against the evil system of Apartheid. These two texts [*Never Been at Home* and *No Way Out*] are different in not being political at all, but as a subtext politics are (sic) present (2001:1)¹.

To extend this, I would argue that these texts, and in particular *Man Bitch*, while telling the life stories of their writers, also write the biography of the inner-city at a particular time. It is also interesting to note that, while these three texts have been written in an autobiographical form, at times they all approach fiction. In his dedication, van Wyk writes that *Man Bitch* "is more real than the truth as lies always are" (2001:1) giving us a clue that the work merges fact and fiction. In an interesting aside, Mpe begins his fictional novel with a quote from W E B du Bois "Reader, be assured this narrative is no fiction". Perhaps the inner-city is a place where fact and fiction merge and become indistinguishable from one another.

This merging of fact and fiction also becomes a means by which the reality of city life can be reconstituted. Jennifer Robinson argues that it is these "cultural resources and creative enterprises which transform city space, as much as – or perhaps even more than – political struggle and institutional reform" (1999:165) and in a way this is what *Never Been at Home* and *No Way Out* do. Like *Man Bitch*, these texts give us "the first truly 'post-apartheid' representation of life in South Africa" (Nkosi nd:3). In fact, in a conversation with Lewis Nkosi, van Wyk states rather arrogantly that "I don't think there is a post-apartheid writing before *Man Bitch*" (cited Nkosi nd:3).

For a supposed autobiography, we learn very little about Johan van Wyk, the man. We are told that he works as a professor at the University of Durban-Westville, lives in a

flat in Gillespie Street and has a fetish for young, black prostitutes. As opposed to Mdakane and Khuzwayo's texts which chart their lives from childhood until they arrive on the streets of Durban, *Man Bitch* begins with the narrator middle-aged and living in the inner-city. The text tells us very little about his life before he moved to the city or why he did in fact move. In his review of *Man Bitch*, Nkosi states that van Wyk's move to the inner-city of Durban has a deeper meaning than the sordid, sex-fuelled existence portrayed in his book:



Figure 10: Van Wyk

He hasn't just abandoned his family, reputation and home in a secure neighbourhood in search of sexual excitement. He is looking for meaning too. For wisdom, which he defines, with captivating eloquence, 'reason without institution' (nd:3).

We can draw comparison here between van Wyk and the French *Symboliste* poet Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867), whose influential collection *Les Fleur du Mal* (1857) embraced depravity and documented his relationships with Parisian prostitutes. It was through these relationships that Baudelaire searched for the true significance of life and argued that vice is the natural condition of man. What has shocked some readers of *Man Bitch* is that van Wyk "fully embraces this life-world and feels most at home in it" (Nkosi nd:3) which is fully in keeping with the *Symboliste* philosophy, as expounded by Baudelaire.

Van Wyk is an Afrikaner, a member of the race that dominated South Africa for over fifty years and instituted the system of apartheid. His parents, Afrikaners from Bloemfontein, feature in a few scenes in the novel but serve rather as symbols of the old South Africa and the relationship he has with them is tense at best. While not being an overly political work, there is a political subtext that runs through the text and this concerns both the legacy of apartheid and the means by which people are dealing with a postapartheid space. Van Wyk himself was an anti-apartheid activist and marched in

sympathy with black pupils in the 1976 Soweto riots, for which he was briefly detained. He was also:

the first white to refuse to go into the army for political reasons, which meant defending the apartheid regime in border wars against ANC guerrillas in Angola, Mozambique and Namibia (<http://literature.kzn.org.za/lit/>).

Discussing the cultural implications of death with an African *sangoma*, van Wyk's narrator positions himself as a member of the struggle, as a victim of apartheid, as he states that, "I told him I died when I went to prison for refusing to do military service, that it changed me for always" (2001:4).

By way of contrast, Mdakane and Khuzwayo were both township girls, who grew up in abusive and broken homes. Unwanted by their parents' new spouses, raped at a young age and both teenage mothers, the girls were forced onto the streets of Durban where they used their youth and beauty to survive. It was in the bars of Point Road that they both met van Wyk, who provided a measure of stability and financial security to the young women with whom he formed relationships. Mdakane sums up her life-story in the conclusion to her book when she writes:

I survived street life, I survived my mother's abuse as well as my stepmother's, I've gone through rape, I survived drugs, I spent days without food and I got over all the people I lost in my life. In fact I suffered all kinds of suffering. In spite of all that I'm still alive (2001:138).

2.5. Summary of Texts

In an effort to link the texts under discussion to the spaces which they describe, as suggested in Chapter 1, I will now turn to a closer analysis of van Wyk, Mdakane and Khuzwayo's work in situ. *Man Bitch* is closely tied to place and in particular the Point Road area. The place of the text is connected to the place of the inner-city and place has influenced literary production in this text in a very real way. Likewise, *Man Bitch* constructs place and our perceptions of it. The image that is created of the Point Road area by the text is one of degradation, a veritable den of iniquity, where drugs and girls are for sale on every street corner.

In *Man Bitch*, the story of a white, Afrikaans-speaking man's experience of the inner-city is told. However, other stories, the stories of the women he sleeps with, are also told and create a fuller construction of the city. These prostitutes also serve as props in van Wyk's story. The use of the prostitute in African fiction is addressed by Bevelyn Dube when she writes that writers:

who wanted to underline the extent to which traditional society had fallen, would throw in a prostitute or two as part of the scenery. This could explain why any description of the colonial city and its offshoots, the bar and nightclub, were considered incomplete without a prostitute's presence. These places were viewed by writers as sites of decadence characteristic of the colonial world. The prostitute was, therefore, put in the story as a necessary prop on the stage on which the main actor (very often a man) would play his part. Her humanity and the forces that had shaped her were completely ignored (2004:46).

While dealing with African fiction, this statement works just as well with *Man Bitch*. Van Wyk takes delight in living in an area dominated by prostitutes and in having relationships only with them. This will be expanded on later in the chapter. We learn about van Wyk's narrator through the relationships he has with the various prostitutes who form the core of the story, and through his relationship to the place called Point Road. In this sense, it is more a biography of a place and a time than a man. Following on from this, I would argue that *Man Bitch* is not only a story of a segment of the life of Johan van Wyk and the women he shared it with, but also a record of a place in time. Plans are now underway for a massive redevelopment of the Point area and the first to go will be the people and places that van Wyk writes about in this text. The place known as Point Road will change once more.

At the same time, the Point Road area, the core place of the text, is connected to other places: the unnamed township from which most of the women come to the city, the suburb of Westville where the narrator of *Man Bitch* goes to work every day, the streets of Johannesburg where Mdakane lived for a while; and the city of Maputo which Luisa calls home. *Man Bitch* is also closely tied to people and as I will show, the concept of people as place. The chapters are named after van Wyk's girlfriends, for example the first chapter is "Mbali". The only exception is the chapter "Europe", which forms a central break between the women of the book. The voice of the central 'I' in *Man Bitch*

is a voice of the city; he speaks the language of the city, and is, in essence, created by the city. Furthermore, the central 'I' is a city character or type, connected to the *flaneur* figure. The city creates him, and he creates the city through the text. The city also 'creates' the other characters who fall under the city type of 'prostitute'.

Nkosi writes that the banality of the prose style in *Man Bitch*:

is apparently intentional. The characters have no particular depth, almost no interior life. There are no elaborate descriptions of domestic interiors and family relations such as encumber the so-called bourgeois novel; above all, there are no descriptions of the work process (nd:2).

This extends to the content of the text which consists of monotonous and repetitive relationships with the prostitutes. While compared to the Baudelairean romantic vision of the artist living in, and being inspired by, the squalor of the city, van Wyk's postmodern rendering of this is simply banal. Van Wyk has a romantic, poet's vision of the world and love, yet this is combined with the stark reality of the degradation of the place he calls home and the sexual depravity in which he attempts to find meaning. By way of example, he often mentions "doves grazing on the promenade" (2001:27) – in fact, he means pigeons, the archetypal city bird. This works as a metaphor for how he dresses his relationships up as romantic love when in fact they seem to have little romance about them. Nkosi later compares van Wyk's work to that of Henry Miller, in style and content, and the Cuban 'cult' writer, Pedro Juan Gutierrez:

whose Dirty Havana Trilogy is also part confession and part invention and shares a similar conviction that frequent and better orgasm is the way that leads to earthly paradise, one of the ways by which to undo the dirty work of bureaucratic control and self-repression (nd:2).

The reality of city life is interpreted by the apocalyptic, postmodern style adopted by van Wyk, who constantly links the city and hell. In some ways, this style is similar in form to that of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in that it is a series of fragmented scenes, lacks a coherent plot, and has an indecipherable timeline. Van Wyk has borrowed, even if unconsciously, from this 'urban style'. Furthermore, looking at Benjamin's *flaneur* as

a narrative device which provides an alternative vision of the city, we can see that *Man Bitch* also embraces this form. I will expand on this later in the chapter.

Van Wyk dedicates his book to his parents who could never understand that ‘love’ across the colour bar is possible and beautiful, although he never quite manages to show this in his work. They represent the values and norms of the old South Africa and are stuck in the past. On introducing them to Luisa, his black girlfriend at the time, they respond with anger and confusion. Van Wyk writes:

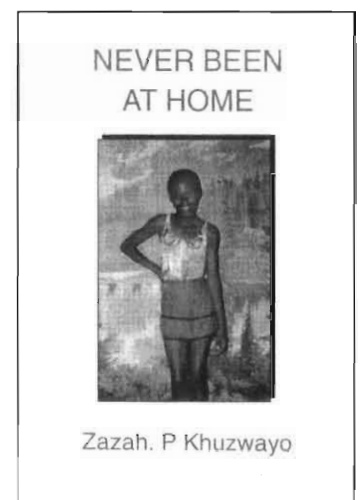
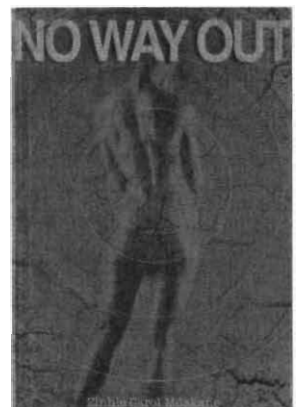
On this fatal day my parents came. My mother greeted Luisa coldly. My mother doesn’t want to know me any more. She doesn’t know what is wrong with me. She gave birth to me with difficulty, she says crying. They stood with me when I refused to go to the army. Why am I doing this to them? (2001:46)

Towards the end of the novel van Wyk’s narrator visits his parents in Bloemfontein and writes that it was like stepping back in time to the old South Africa. The man across the road “tells me how he assaulted the servant with a golf stick for misplacing the keys to his fishing trunk” (2001:77). Ironically, this is where van Wyk now lives after being severely assaulted by one of his woman companions and suffering ongoing ill health.

In comparison to *Man Bitch*, Mdakane and Khuzwayo’s books share common themes, style and even content. In his introduction to *No Way Out* van Wyk writes that:

when the narrator of *No Way Out* is kicked out of her home she describes it as “the beginning of the end of the world for me” and that is literally what is being portrayed in the following pages: street life, crime, poverty in the extreme, murder, drug abuse, but also humanity and sympathy and comradeship and melancholy (2001:1).

A similar paragraph could be used to describe Khuzwayo’s book. The writers have led comparable lives, as have all of van Wyk’s girlfriends that he writes about in his book. These texts chart the lives of two young girls as they endure abusive relationships and unbearable living conditions until they are forced to leave home

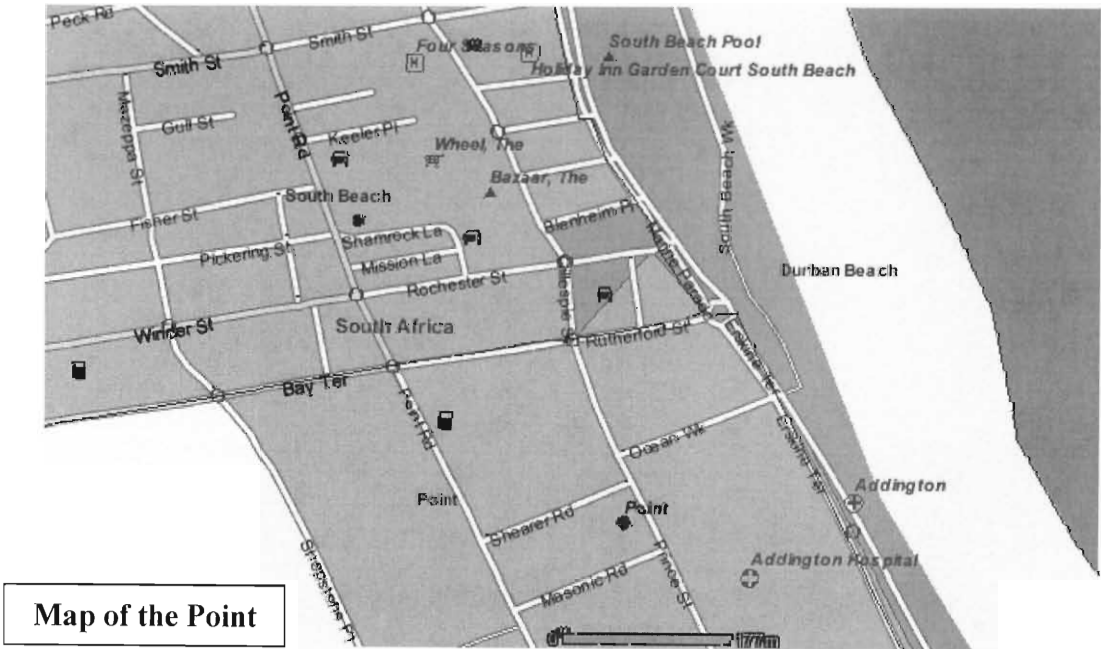


and end up on the streets of Durban. They come from broken homes, experience unhappy childhoods, criminal behaviour and substance abuse. The two books present the prostitute as a tragic figure who is not a prostitute by choice but through circumstance, who has been rejected by both her family and society, and who will do whatever it takes to survive. The importance of their work in this chapter is that they provide a counterpoint to the representation of prostitutes in *Man Bitch* where “they exist in the narrative, but the historical circumstances surrounding their actions are completely ignored by the narrator. These women have a history, yet the narrator does not allow this history to speak for itself” (Dube 2004:47). Apart from providing context and background for the women described in van Wyk’s text, the two stories also provide a critique of postapartheid South Africa and a glimpse into an urban reality that is incomprehensible to the average, middle-class inhabitant of Durban.

3. Reading inner-city Durban

3.1. Mapping the Area

Through *Man Bitch*, van Wyk re-maps the Point area of inner-city Durban according to his needs. The landscape features he presents are easily recognisable and locatable and include both buildings and, interestingly, people.



Apart from Point Road, the other place markers that van Wyk gives us in the text can easily be found in Gillespie Street and the surrounding area. In the first paragraph of the book, van Wyk sets the scene. The narrator hears music coming from the verandah of the Four Seasons Hotel, a constant reference point throughout the text. He mentions The Bazaar, a Moroccan themed shopping complex and the “towering Holiday Inn Garden Court (which) throws its blue glow across the city” (2001:2). Nkosi, familiar with the Point Road area and a sometime guest of the Four Seasons Hotel, describes the street that van Wyk’s flat is in as:

a lurid neonlit strip infested with drug addicts, black and white prostitutes and small-time crooks. Consisting mainly of prematurely decaying onetime luxury hotels, cobwebbed supermarkets, dust-mantled bottlestores and flyblown grocery shops, Gillespie Street is a horizontal hell without depth but a great deal of surface; its denizens a restless constantly shifting stream of humanity ostensibly sleepless for twenty four hours a day (nd:1).

Costa’s is the local bar where van Wyk’s narrator spends most of his time. It is a place to pick up prostitutes and it is where he meets most of his girlfriends. It is multiracial and multinational; the defining factor of all who are there is that they are either selling or buying sex. The other place he frequents is the nightclub Lido’s in Smith Street which is populated with a



Figure 11: Costa’s bar

“mixed crowd of Oriental and East European seamen” (2001:18), the clients of his prostitute friends. One night when van Wyk’s narrator is there, Lido’s is full of “Filipino sailors, sailors from Turkey, sailors from Russia, and the music was global” (2001:27). Lido’s highlights the fact that Durban is an important port city as well as being cosmopolitan.

Most of the action in the text takes place either in Van Wyk’s flat or on the street below, which he is constantly viewing from his window. This viewpoint from his flat

window Nkosi links to Pratt's study (1992) of the literary conventions governing landscape descriptions where the narrator is given a position of authority and a perspective of the landscape which she calls "monarch-of-all-I-survey" (Pratt 1992:201). Throughout the story, van Wyk describes looking out his window at the scenes below. Ironically, van Wyk's elevated lookout point conveys little sense of power. He writes,

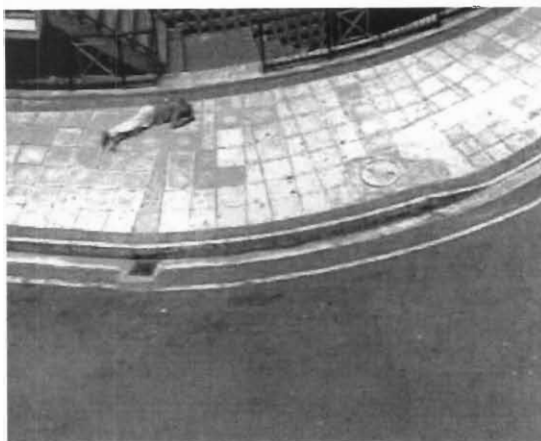


Figure 12: The view from van Wyk's flat

"Looking down from the fourth floor of Oxford House I feel like God: God's view, but completely helpless" (2001:3). Quite often what he sees disturbs him, "I look down at the street. Four street children sleep in rags on the sidewalk. 'Oh my God' is all I can mutter by myself" (2001:65).

The Four Seasons Hotel, one of the landmarks of Gillespie Street, represents a place that highlights the changing urban landscape in a postapartheid Durban and contains one of the requirements for a heterotopia as defined by Foucault – it has changed function within a single society over time. Once the domicile of visiting Afrikaans families on their annual pilgrimage from the Vaal to the strand, the Hotel now screens soccer games in the ladies bar – soccer being a traditionally black supported sport in South Africa. These places still hold traces of apartheid though, with the "Indian band" (2001:2) on the veranda a relic of the apartheid-era where Indians were traditionally the waiters and entertainers in Durban's beachfront hotels.

The inner-city was one of the first places to change with the collapse of apartheid. In Durban, the "desegregation of the apartheid city was generally taking place within the inner city" (Maharaj 2002:189). Van Wyk's narrator takes Mbali to "the Starfish Restaurant on the beach. She sits close to me at the window and we watch the harbor lights at the end of the pier and the ships coming and going" (2001:2). Under the apartheid regime this would be illegal and might still elicit stares in some of the more

conservative suburbs of Durban. But in the inner-city, in the new South Africa, the white narrator can sit with his black girlfriend and watch the ships sailing into the harbour.

Mdakane and Khuzwayo map the city in relation to where they come from, the township and their abusive homes. For Khuzwayo, “life in the big city was different. Too many things were happening, but everybody seemed to ignore it or nobody cared” (2001:67). Next to the restaurant where she works there was “a striptease club with topless waitresses and there was so much to be explored in the big city” (2001:68). She compares it to township life where everything came to a standstill at night as:

women were afraid to be on the township roads at night, because of the high rate of rape. Crime was getting worse in the townships especially among teenage boys. Car theft, housebreaking, rape, robberies, stealing and robbing people on the streets, taking jewellery, money and shoes. If you were working and coming late at night as a woman in a township you would be a target (Khuzwayo 2001:67).

However, both Mdakane and Khuzwayo escape from terrible living conditions at home, which was “a prison. I had to escape and find a life somewhere in the city. And I did that” (Khuzwayo 2001:68). The Point Road area is constructed in these texts as a dangerous place where death is never far away but their experience of the city, no matter how bad, is still much better than the situations from which they had come.

3.2. The ‘non-city’

Inner-city Durban is linked to and defined by that which it is not. In *Man Bitch*, and as we shall see later *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the inner-city is connected to places that are not it. These are places that the city’s inhabitants go to and return from. Jennifer Robinson writes that in the postapartheid era, the South African inner-city is no longer connected to the white suburbs but linked to the surrounding townships and other African cities (1999:170). The city also exists as a counterpoint to the unreachable places of rural black experience. The narrator writes in *Man Bitch* that “Mbali has not returned from her unreachable home as yet. It is a place, she explained to me, that is unreachable by car” (2001:9). This unreachable place is far from the city and is perhaps unreachable both physically and mentally for a white, middle-aged man. It exists as the anti-city. Mdakane and Khuzwayo’s points of origin are the non-city, the invisible township that

feeds the city with labour. When she becomes seriously ill with AIDS, Mbali decides to leave the city and go to a place to die. While AIDS and its spectres haunt the space of the city, it is not a desired place to die. It is an unreachable place to which she retreats. However, later, van Wyk does go from the city to the rural area of Marianhill to visit the dying Mbali, who needs money. There he describes her house:

Houses and huts and weed cover the hilly landscape. Makhosi directs me onto a gravel road and I slowly steer my car across ditches and dongas and grass. We park on a slope and walk on a footpath down a steep hill to an unpainted cement house. Outside Mbali's little boy squirrels shyly around the corner of the house when he sees us. The house is very neat. On the kitchen wall there are some calendars with religious sayings and a picture of a praying Jesus Christ (2001:12)

Her home is in stark contrast to high-rises, concrete and the absence of spiritual solace that characterise the place of the inner-city.

When the inner-city becomes too much for van Wyk he escapes to the Bluff beaches or Umhlanga nature reserve. This seems a betrayal of his vision of living life among the squalor and depravity of the city. It is here that, "unlike Durban the sea was alive ... with shells washed up on the beach and the remains of crabs and lobsters and oysters" (2001:17). The sea is alive as opposed to the sea bordering the inner-city which is polluted; a comparison can be made to the existence that van Wyk lives in the inner-city, where he feels he is living life to the full but is in fact dead, and the life he could be living outside of the city.

Maputo also serves as a place that is not the Durban inner-city in the text. Van Wyk's narrator goes to visit Luisa in Maputo for Christmas and describes the city as "an interesting place: backyard shacks and unpainted dilapidated flats" (2001:49). The flat Luisa lives in has traces of colonial space and van Wyk describes it as a flat that "must have been quite a place in colonial times" (2001:50). At one point, Luisa cautions him not to look over walls while he is in Maputo as "the police will arrest you" (2001:51). Thus, while van Wyk thinks that he is streetwise from living in Durban's seedy inner-city, each city has its specific codes of survival.

The middle chapter of *Man Bitch* is entitled “Europe” and is concerned with a trip van Wyk makes to Germany and England. It provides a short interlude from the madness, despair and dirt of the inner-city Durban and provides a place of comparison. Europe is a place where there are “no cockroaches”, one of the defining factors of the Durban experience. Also, “One never sees people in the streets,” (2001:34) while it is the streets of inner-city Durban where all the action takes place. Europe appears to be some kind of purgatory for the narrator where all he does is sleep, translate and wait. He’s “killing time” (2001:44). In fact, he can’t wait to leave and was “one of the first people to book my baggage through to Johannesburg” (2001:45).

3.3. Walking the city: the *flaneur*

Patterns of walking define the narrative of *Man Bitch*, with routes repeatedly followed in the text. Van Wyk roams the streets of inner-city Durban, looking to experience what the place has to offer. In contrast, the other characters in the text are prostitutes or ‘street-walkers’ who inhabit the streets for a very real



Figure 13: An inner-city street of Durban

purpose. It is the site where they conduct their business, and where some even live. In some ways van Wyk’s narrator is characteristic of the *flaneur* figure discussed in Chapter 1. While he is a constant observer, and like Benjamin’s *flaneur* figure, a type of voyeur, he also chooses not to get involved directly with the city crowds. The crowd is the *flaneur*’s element yet the *flaneur* is not a man of the crowd. The narrator lives in the city but is not part of the city. The urban crowd is rather the medium through which the *flaneur* moves, and in Benjamin’s view, the heroism of this figure resides in the fact that he refuses to become part of the crowd. While forming relationships with prostitutes in the area, van Wyk manages to distance himself from most of the other people living there. The *flaneur* provides an alternative vision of the city with his aimless wanderings; a counterpoint to the speed and direction of modernity. “Where are you going?” a

prostitute asks the narrator at one point, “Nowhere, I’m just walking” (2001:4) he replies. In this sense, *Man Bitch* also provides an alternative vision of the city. If we look at the *flaneur* beyond its First World context we are able to see that the *flaneur* exists as counterpoint to the mass, a trope that subverts conventional meaning and values, not a social type but “a theoretical, critical, counter to the idea of the mass, as an attempt to indicate the sort of potential for critique which continues to exist” (Savage 2003:38). Van Wyk questions the norms and morals of society through his whole experiment of living in the Point. On a superficial level, it is necessary to get down to street level in order to experience the city as it really is, to read the stories of the city.

De Certeau defines the verb ‘to walk’ as an action of lacking place as mentioned in Chapter One. It is mainly when van Wyk’s narrator has fought with or broken up with one of his girlfriends that he starts walking the city. After a fallout with one of his girlfriends, he writes “I decided to walk back to my flat. I wandered and wondered through the streets” (2001:16).

Like the *flaneur*, van Wyk is also constantly observing. At Costa’s he notices:

a few stools away sat a new girl. No make-up, and she looked quite intelligent. I never saw her before. Next to her on the right hand side was a typical loner outcast who earns his money as a car guard. He has a meditative face with stubble beard. On the other side of her was a round red-faced Brit, with watery blue eyes and a potbelly (2001:59).

This constant observation is necessary in the South African city when you don’t know where danger lurks, but also is a characteristic of the *flaneur*. The postmodern *flaneur* can recognise “the real, as well as supposed, character of the city’s threats, intimidations, menaces or simply challenges to free access” (Jenks 1995:157). The inner-city of Durban is a dangerous place where even the cockroaches, rumoured to be able to withstand a nuclear blast, die from “sipping leftover brandy in a brandy glass” (2001:3). In a *laissez-faire* manner, van Wyk mentions that he was stabbed:

by a gang of tsotsis in West Street for my cell phone. Thank god that was the end of the cell phone - but the tsotsi’s should learn to finish off their clients as I remained with the fucking doctors’ bills. I just remember the whites of the eyes

underneath this hat as this tsotsi aimed for my heart, while the others like hyenas grabbed the cell phone in my hand (2001:80).

This for Van Wyk, makes him “truly South African now” (2001:80) as he has “the mark of belonging to this hell” (2001:80), taking the experience of the city to a new and potentially deadly level. However, the danger of the city is more constant for Mdakane who writes that it “was so hard to believe that in such a short space of time I lost two friends and they were both murdered” (Mdakane 2001:138). While knowing who killed both of her friends, Mdakane chooses not to go to the police. For the most part, the inner-city exists as a lawless place where the police are not to be trusted. In a pragmatic manner, Mdakane decides to simply move on with her life.

Through the reading of *Man Bitch*, the reader in a sense becomes a type of *flaneur* figure without the danger of actually entering the inner-city. We experience the city through the narrator’s first hand impressions. Likewise, on a practical level the lack of strict plot and timelines allows the reader to pick the book up and read it at any stage. Ivan Vladislavic writes that people cross the city in regular paths and it is literally impossible for certain of these paths to cross (1998:305). For the most part this is true – a university professor is unlikely in the normal course of events to have much contact with the denizens of The Point. By an act of transgression, van Wyk forced a crossing of these paths with the inner-city being the site of this crossing. At one point, the narrator returns home to find “Maci, the sangoma waiting for me at the entrance” (2001:4). The *sangoma* in the city is symbolic of the clash between urban and rural, between African and Western, and tradition and modernity. The city exists as a place of intersection for cultures and in this way provides a valuable place for the tentative steps towards a new integrated South Africa. Van Wyk writes of his conversation with the *sangoma*:

We spoke about death and different cultural interpretations of death. A sangoma should not only heal, but also teach people how to die, a sangoma is someone who died already (2001:4).

The inner-city of Durban serves as a cultural meeting place; it is a cosmopolitan place with people from around the world meeting in the bars of the Point. In the inner-city space, different sources of power compete for control over space and its representation

and this is evident in the crossing over of different paths. The inner-city is a site for the clash of subcultures. One evening, the Four Seasons Hotel has “a motorcycle gang congregated there: guys and girls trying to see who could make the most noise with their bikes” while “some girls sang a beautiful Negro spiritual” and “their boyfriends gave it a kwaito-chorus” (2001:8). The meeting of a typically white subculture, the motorcycle gang, with a traditional African-American song and urban, black South African music highlights the postmodern existing in the inner-city and is symbolic of the formation of a new postapartheid identity facilitated by the inner-city space. At another point in the narrative, the city is celebrating as “Bafana Bafana won against Mauritius and the South African cricket team against Pakistan” (2001:10) – traditionally black and white sports respectively, but both being celebrated together. Later, the narrator notices that the “streets were full of high-school kids in tracksuits. Durban was the host to some big sporting event” (2001:14). The high-school kids are incongruent with the image of the area the narrator has constructed through the homeless, the whores and the drunks, yet this exposes the contradictions inherent in the city.

Races and cultures cross paths in these texts. At a party van Wyk’s narrator attends at Zodwa’s flat, about “five partygoers arrive: look like aunties and cousins who have not completely urbanized as yet” (2001:70) – the urban and rural exist together in the city with the rural feeding the urban and vice versa. In Khuzwayo’s text, Zazah’s friend Michelle introduces her to her friends. Khuzwayo writes, “I didn’t mind mixing with her friends. Some Coloureds, Indians and Whites. I was the only black” (2001:68). The social and legal restrictions to race mixing are no longer in place and this is highly visible in the inner-city. Furthermore, the city is no longer a site for the panoptical ordering of power and, as the above examples show, embraces a more diffuse use of power that is in keeping with Foucault’s definition of heterotopias discussed in Chapter One.

A by-product of this racial and cultural mix, the sounds of the city permeate Van Wyk’s flat. He writes that:

carnival sounds (“I’ll be a bachelor boy till my dying day”) come from the band playing on the veranda of the Four Seasons Hotel and very late at night there are the underworldly sounds of a dog barking (2001:2).

The inner-city is defined by its constant noise where “falling asleep is like going underwater in a sea of voices coming up from the street” (2001:3). The city surrounds one with so much noise that – to continue the metaphor – one can drown in it. As mentioned in Chapter One, and drawing from Benjamin’s theory, Gilloch states that to experience a city requires and privileges “a familiarity and reciprocity with its jostling crowds, a proximity to its profusion of objects, an expectancy and excitement in its encounters” (Gilloch 2002:95-96). Through roaming the inner-city streets and frequenting the bars and clubs, van Wyk experiences the city fully and intensely. His flat, drenched in the sounds of the city, provides little respite. The city is alien and, for the most part, impenetrable to van Wyk, and he needs his girlfriends to gain access to the ‘real’ city experience.

However, his girlfriends experience the city quite differently. This is shown through Mdakane and Khuzwayo’s texts and is related to the non-city where they come from (township as opposed to suburb), where they live (sharing a flat with ten other people or living on the street in contrast to van Wyk living alone in comparable luxury) and their economic conditions. For the most part, Van Wyk and these women experience the city separately. He finds them in the bars and nightclubs of the Point and invites them back to his flat in exchange for money. Once the relationship has begun, his girlfriends go out to clubs and bars on their own and come back to his flat to sleep, eat, collect money, and to have sex with him. Early on in the text, van Wyk writes that “Mbali disappears to the clubs at night only to return at about two or three in the morning passing out next to me still with her boots on” (2001:2) and this is a pattern that recurs throughout the text with his other girlfriends. Only infrequently do they experience the city as a couple.

As well as being a place, the city, like other places, is also a state of mind and is experienced as such. “I’m feeling lonely” (2001:4), writes van Wyk and this is one of the defining conditions of the city where, even when there are thousands of people in

close proximity to you, you can still feel lonely. This is the reason why van Wyk is constantly paying women to spend time with him.

The city constructed in van Wyk's text is an apocalyptic place that is constantly compared to, and referenced as, hell. It is a site of sexual and physical abuse and degradation. Nkosi writes that in *Man Bitch*:

Van Wyk's strip of Durban's waterfront is constructed out of the twin images of a sexually liberated paradise where a truly uninterfered-with integration of peoples happen but which turns out, as you read on, to be also a kind of 'hell' (nd:2).

In the first chapter, the narrator compares the city to “our beautiful Sodom” while “the band at the Four Seasons continues to play” (2001:3), refers to Nero playing his violin as Rome burned. Later, a drugged teenager in the street below is “swirling and screaming at someone she sees: ‘Hey Lahnie, God is coming, God is coming, God is coming for me...’ I complete her sentence ‘The devil is already here’” (2001:3). Yet walking through this ‘hell’ is how van Wyk is inspired to write and through walking he hopes to uncover beauty in the dirty heart of the inner-city.

3.4. Looking for ‘home’

Driving the narratives under discussion in this chapter is the desire for home and belonging and the reality of displacement. In postcolonial theory, these concepts are key. Tied to place and, as a result, to displacement too, is the concept of home, be it in the form of home countries, feeling at home in culture or country, or looking at home as a “pattern of inclusions and exclusions” (George 1996:2). There is no natural link between place and people writes Rosemary Marangoly George; links are created on material and spiritual levels. Home as a concept is related to belonging in both language and space, she holds, with homes existing on geographical, psychological and material levels, as places you escape to and from (George 1996:17). In dealing with ‘home’ in postcolonial literature, it is also helpful to look at Said's distinction between “filiation” and “affiliation” where filiation concerns natural links such as birthplace and family while affiliation relates to links you make at a later stage with “culture and society” (1983:8).

Van Wyk, a white, middle-aged, middle-class Afrikaner is displaced in the inner-city and is constantly looking to create a home with any and all of his girlfriends. These women, for the most part, come from broken homes with abusive parents and have never known what 'home' is. Van Wyk seems able to provide them with a semblance of it – he offers them a roof over their heads, cooks for, and, generally, cares for them. Most of his girlfriends move in with him immediately, out of necessity in some cases, but also because, I would argue, they are themselves looking to create or find a home. Home, (even in diminished circumstances), and the lack thereof, is a constant theme in *Man Bitch*. In Mdakane and Khuzwayo's text, the lack of 'home' and a search for 'home' drive their narratives with Mdakane tellingly entitling her life story *Never Been At Home*.

The places that his girlfriends call home are decrepit and disturbing. Van Wyk describes the place that Angel lives and works in as:

... a maze of dirty passage ways, little corners. Grey walls everywhere. The place was never painted. Passage ways are closed off by rusted steel gates. The place resembled a prison rather than a hotel (2001:16).

It is even worse than his desperate flat. So too is the place where Zodwa's son lives, the Ocasador block "is a dark building smelling of urine, dead cockroaches and poverty" (2001:69). Van Wyk offers his girlfriends an alternative to their desperate lives, he offers them a home, but can't deliver on his promises. He pays for Mbali's studies but then when he hasn't enough money to support her, sends her back to the street. However, when Mbali is dying, her cousin asks van Wyk for "fruit, milk, maas, ice cream and pocket money" (2001:11). He thus takes on the position of father and provider as well as boyfriend to these women.

Van Wyk's narrator invites a prostitute, Angel, up to his "empty flat" – his personal space is empty and it seems as if, in some way, he is trying to fill it with his girlfriends. Though, throughout the text, van Wyk ascribes worth to his girlfriends based on the price they charge him for sex, he also pays for groceries, clothes, jewelry, and school fees for his girlfriends. This moves their relationship from a simple money-for-sex exchange to something more complicated that draws on issues of 'home'. For example, van Wyk

buys Luisa, his Mozambican girlfriend, a ring in an effort it seems to establish their relationship as a couple, complete with domesticity:

Luisa fell asleep after a long day working: cleaning the flat, doing washing, cooking, but we did not make love tonight. Are we already bored with one another? (2001:26).

Shortly afterwards, Luisa moves in with her children. Taking Luisa's children for a walk along the promenade he bumps into a student, "A student came up to me: 'Hi, Prof. are they yours?' 'Yes'" (2001:28). He immediately claims the children as his own, his ready-made family, although, van Wyk in fact has two older children that don't feature at all in his text. He has rejected his white family and the weight of middle-class living and has embraced this constructed, temporary family. While happy with the arrangement to begin with, he soon feels that his private space has been invaded. He writes:

It was a mistake getting involved with a woman with two children, I keep on saying to myself the last week or two. We are incessantly fighting, and usually it is due to the stress brought about by the children. There is no more privacy. Big eyes peer from behind the curtain hanging in front of the entrance to the bedroom. There are the nagging cries of a child who does not want to go to sleep at night. We hardly have a sex life left. They just don't allow it to happen. How long is this going to continue? The flat smells like piss (2001:31).

There is no privacy and his flat "smells like a public toilet" (2001:47). Public and private space merge and van Wyk is given a taste of what living conditions for thousands of his neighbours in the inner-city must be like, ten people crammed into a one room flat where privacy is a luxury.

De Certeau examines power relations in terms of strategy and tactics, where strategy is the imposition of power through the organising of space. Luisa wants to fill van Wyk's empty flat and provide a 'normal' existence and he "had to buy a lounge suite and a TV" (2001:27). She tries to turn his flat into their home. By organising van Wyk's space she claims a type of control over him and attempts to create a home for them. Later, however, Luisa leaves van Wyk to return to Maputo "for no reason except that Maputo is her home" (2001:29). In contrast, returning from visiting Luisa in Maputo, the narrator has "a feeling of elation when the city of Durban became visible with its neatly

painted high-rise buildings and shopping centers” (2001:57). Durban is his home, in particular the inner-city. It is where he curiously feels comfortable even when he walks “past a tramp looking dead and rotting in a flowerbed next to the pavement” (2001:58). Like the French *Symboliste* poets mentioned earlier, he is at home with the dirt and despair as it is here that he feels he will find meaning in his life and be inspired to create something of beauty.

Home is also central to Mdakane and Khuzwayo’s work. At one stage, Mdakane returns to her home to visit her grandmother and baby and comes to the realisation that:

after everything I went through at home, I was better off without a home. I used to believe that home was a place where you felt safe, but for me it was the other way round. I never felt safe at home. I was better off on my own, wherever I was (2001:19).

Likewise, Khuzwayo felt that “home was not a home for us. Our home was not a place of safety, love and comfort from all the awful things that were happening in the streets” (2001:67). Raped when she was young, rejected by her mother and then abused by her stepmother, home for Khuzwayo was never a sanctuary but more of a war-zone.

As mentioned previously, *Man Bitch* is a self-published work with the place of publication given as Oxford House 27, Gillespie Street, Durban – the address of the narrator’s flat or home. No motivation is given as to why the author would choose to live in a flat in this area or make it home.



Figure 14: The author in front of his flat in Gillespie Street

In the short film “Man Bitch” (2002) by James Stewart, van Wyk explains how he ended up living there, “I was going down the road with an estate agent and I saw it and said what about that place and she

was surprised because nobody wanted to go and live there and that is how I got to it. It was very cheap”. It is almost as if he consciously chose the worst possible place he could find, the most removed from his previous suburban life. The inner-city is frequently the last place that the detritus of society can go to; it is a place for people who have no place. However, van Wyk chose this area to be his home even though he had other options.

The absence of ‘home’ and the need to belong and be loved leads the protagonists in these texts to abuse drugs and alcohol. Substance abuse is a constant theme throughout *Man Bitch* as well as in Khuzwayo’s and Mdakane’s work. Indirectly, this is also linked to the wish for ‘home’ or its lack. Alcohol and rock (crack cocaine) are the means through which the characters in these texts deal with living in the inner-city. At one stage, the narrator looks out his window to see “three drugged teenagers on a red pick-up van in front of the pie shop” (2001:3). The inner-city is a place whose inhabitants need to be drugged in order to deal with it. Mdakane is lured into the world of hard drugs and crime through an ex-streetchild friend. She describes how:

Most of the people staying in their block of flats were Nigerians. They used to go next door every now and then, and I found out that they went there to smoke rock. One day Michelle talked me into trying it. I knew it was a bad thing to do; but they were always happy and forgot their problems easily, I thought that was what the drugs did to a person. I wanted so badly to put my miserable life as far away from me as possible, and I told myself that I would take drugs if it helped me to forget. (Mdakane 2001:126)

She quickly spiralled into addiction and became “a low-life drug-addict girl” (2001:129). Khuzwayo also abuses alcohol which “became my close friend ... I was an alcoholic” (Khuzwayo 2001:73). Substance abuse in the inner-city is related to ‘home’ and belonging. With no place to go, substance abuse provides a retreat to a space where these women felt comfortable and safe².

‘Home’ in these texts can also fulfil the function of both private and work space. In the city there is a constant shifting and distorting of public and private space, of living and commercial space. The *flaneur* turns public space into private space through his wanderings. The prostitute turns private space (her bedroom) into public workspace. When van Wyk’s narrator wants to visit his girlfriend’s room, the doorman wants ten

rand to allow him onto the first floor, the prostitutes' level. Once there, van Wyk describes Angel's room:

For the first time I'm allowed into her living space. Against the walls there were big center spreads from *Hustler* of blondes sitting with wide-spread legs and spidery cunts (2001:22).

It is both a living space and working space but it is no 'home'. Women wouldn't traditionally choose to decorate their homes with naked, spread-eagled nudes, who are only there for the benefit of their clients. Later, Angel is in van Wyk's flat and leans out the window to look "nostalgically at the streets" (2001:21). The streets offer a space of freedom, control and income – a working space that is both public and private. The distinction between the street and home is problematised in the Durban inner-city where the places of the street and the flat interchange and intermingle. When Mdakane is thrown out of her flat, she writes that it "was like a wake-up call. We were back where we belonged, in the street" (Mdakane 2001:102). Luckily, they had already made friends with people who stayed in the street as they "used to leave our flat and visit some girls who were staying in the street and talked to them or sometimes sent them food" (Mdakane 2001:102). The places 'street' and 'home' are no longer separate entities in this inner-city where people move back and forth between the two. Mdakane and Khuzwayo are forced to make the street 'home' at stages in their lives. For van Wyk, the streets of The Point area he walks are where he feels at home.

3.5. Sex in the city

In postcolonial theory, Africa serves as the dark Other for Western civilization; a concept explained by Burden who writes "racial difference is defined as the representation of Otherness. The colonial text fetishises the subject races as inferior and degenerate by nature" (1991:1). This concept of Otherness has been fixed by western culture as anything that is not Western, with "everything in the white world (having) its antithesis in the black world" (Burden 1991:24). In Nkosi's *Mating Birds*, the protagonist is 'Othered' by the white apartheid society. Similarly, the black prostitute becomes the 'Other' to van Wyk's white, Afrikaner narrator.

The city is constructed through van Wyk's relationships with his girlfriends. These relationships are linked to money as the women are selling their bodies. Whoever has the money has the power and van Wyk is the one with the money, "Before leaving there is a moment of hesitation. I know what it means. She wants money. I'm not going to offer any" (2001:3). Angel, another girlfriend, asks him about Mbali, "What did you give her per week?" (2001:10). While van Wyk may say that his relationships are based on love, it is money that is the initial foundation for his relationships. This is evident when he writes, "After finishing my beer I went to the auto bank. Angel came to my flat soon afterwards" (2001:13). The reason behind Mbali's return later in the novel is revealed a few paragraphs later, "We started to talk. She wants to be a millionaire. I must help her become a millionaire. How, I asked? She will sell jeans in the township, from door to door" (2001:21). However, van Wyk has already moved on and doesn't want to be burdened with the dying Mbali. Coldheartedly he makes her an offer:

In the morning I put her before a choice. I will give her R200 and we stay together, or I gave her a R1000 to start her business, and I'm free to start my life with Angel. She complained. She wanted the R1000, but I must stay with her. I must help her. No, I said. I went to the auto bank. I drew a R1000. I returned with the R1000 and I told her she must leave (2001:21).

He later comes to the realisation that "I don't want to pay for love" (2001:60) while on his way to withdraw more money for Angel. Yet, the next day he "buy(s) groceries for Luisa, and drew R800. I delivered the box of groceries at the Panthera Azul and also the envelope with the R700" (2001:60). The story of Beauty repeats the pattern of his other relationships and the telling of it becomes monotonous and shorter. She too is also after his money, "Give it to me, Give it... Beauty squirms on top of me. It is payday. I'm confused. I cannot care any more" (2001:65). The same happens with Zodwa when van Wyk buys "groceries for her brothers and afterwards golden earrings for her" (2001:71). All his relationships are money-linked:

To these women picked up mostly from the bars of the Point area Van Wyk offers everything short of his life - money, food, shelter - only to be betrayed again and again, but each time coming back apparently for more punishment. If Van Wyk buys one woman a cell phone ... she immediately uses it to telephone her visiting Croatian lover, a sailor whose ship has docked in the Durban harbour. Invariably, these black women defraud him of his money, they make appointments they have no intention of keeping; he runs out of money (Nkosi nd:2).

The concept of *ukuphanda* is helpful in understanding the relationships van Wyk has with these women, as well as those Mdakane and Khuzwayo engage in. This term comes from the Zulu *phandea imali* which means ‘try to get money’ and is “understood to be using sex-for-money exchange to survive financially” (Wojcicki 2002:339). It is transactional or survival sex and is a common practice throughout Africa. In Nigeria, “sex is exchanged for school fees, in Cameroon girls have sugardaddies who pay the rent and give them money for clothes and food” (Wojcicki 2002:340). These informal sex workers commonly assist their families financially and occasionally provide “domestic services in addition to sexual services” (Wojcicki 2002:343). At one point, Mdakane starts a relationship with Michael, a middle-aged white divorced father of three, which in some ways is comparable to the relationship van Wyk has with his girlfriends. She writes that at the end of the month “he used to give me a thousand rand” (Mdakane 2001:113). This provides a suitable blueprint for van Wyk’s relationships where he buys groceries for his girlfriend’s family, pays her school fees, and gives others money for rent. In exchange, they provide him with sex and clean his flat. The power relations of the old apartheid system play themselves out in the narrator’s relationships, for example: he “return(s) from work to a cleaned flat” (2001:8) and thus knows Mbali has been there - she serves the purpose of a maid, and suggests old South Africa’s dirty secret where the white *baas* sleeps with the domestic worker.

Power and manipulation work both ways however. At one point Angel’s friend has a cellphone and she tells van Wyk that “she will be my girlfriend if I buy her one” (2001:15). Conditions always apply to his relationships. He calculated that “a cell phone would be an investment into a permanent claim on Angel” (2001:15). He needs to control his girlfriends or have some sense of ownership over them. He buys Angel a cellphone from the supermarket but she doesn’t arrive for a date he sets up:

At ten no Angel came, then it was eleven, then twelve, then one, then two and in my mind I imagine a drunken Angel fucking somewhere in a disco, with my heart beating and miserable feelings overcoming me (2001:16).

He comes eventually to realise the nature of their relationship when he asks, “Am I really Angel’s boyfriend? It was becoming clear to me that I was a fool” (2001:23). He finally realises their relationship is over when he knocks on her door, announces his name and she answers “Who is Johan?” (2001:24). Van Wyk thus tries to control these women, to control the city, to control his life, but fails each time. Towards the end of his narrative, he tellingly writes of one of his girlfriends that the “more I tried to make you mine, the more I lost control” (2001:75).

In Cambridge, England, when reading from *Man Bitch*, van Wyk is asked by a student whether he doesn’t feel like he has exploited the women in his story, to which he answers:

Yes, of course, but I’m not a moral person and I have never pretended to be one. Literature that is moral is boring. ... Who was exploiting whom? Mbali me, or me Mbali? Who could objectively determine that question? (2001:37).

Their relationships are exploitative from both sides and are reflective of the streetwise ways the inner-city works. However, Nkosi writes that:

the word “exploits” seems hardly justified to describe the conduct of Van Wyk’s narrator in whose chronicle he figures mainly as the “victim” of street-wise black women who driven by personal need, greed or pure malevolence, take their revenge on a well-intentioned member of what was once a powerful ruling white tribe in South Africa (nd:2).

Master or fool, Van Wyk is, however, clearly obsessed with sex. Apart from the graphic and sometimes disturbing sex scenes described between himself and his bevy of prostitutes, sexual references and metaphors litter the text – for example, the crowd watching soccer “orgasms” (2001:2). The narrator confesses that “I could not live without love or without making love” (2001:19) and they seem to be the same thing for him. At one point in the novel, van Wyk says to a fellow academic that “I cannot fuck any more. That is why I’m going through this existential crisis at the moment” (2001:78). The meaning for his life is based on sex with black prostitutes, with the inner city and the Point, notorious for its prostitutes and lax moral codes, as the place where his sexual fantasies can be realised. A link could be made here to *Mating Birds* where the disempowered black man attempts to attain control over the white woman’s body,

symbolic of the repressive white system in place. Van Wyk, a member of the white race that up until recently held all the power in South Africa, is vulnerable in his text. By sleeping with black women, van Wyk could be staking a claim to the potential power of the space of the black female. Another reading could see his sleeping with black women as a rejection of his Afrikaner apartheid heritage. Van Wyk, in an interview says, “I’m not really sure whether I’m really white anymore, I’m a South African, a person from the Point or Marine Parade in Durban. I am proud of the way people live together there: rich, poor, white, and the full spectrum of black.” (quoted in Nkosi nd:1).

However, race is still an important factor in the postapartheid city. Van Wyk, the constant observer, automatically divides people by race. He only sleeps with black prostitutes. When he meets a white prostitute he rejects her, (“not what I’m looking for” (2001:5)). Strangely, however, throughout his European trip, van Wyk is constantly fantasising about blondes, the antithesis of the African women of Durban, which raises the question whether sexual fantasy is related to place? Van Wyk’s attitude to women in general borders on misogynistic. He regularly pays for sex from young women (late teens, early twenties) and on a number of occasions coerces his girlfriend’s friends into sleeping with him in retaliation for some fight they have just had. His relationships themselves are problematic due to the age, race and economic factors at play which begs the question, are they symbolic of the new South Africa or just further exploitation of the black female by a white man?

Van Wyk later states, “I’m getting pretty confused between the women” (2001:67), as does the reader. As the text progresses, so the women and his relationships with them seem to repeat themselves. Consequently, the women are given less and less page space with the last chapter being devoted to Angel, Beauty and Zodwa and the last few pages about Z. His relationship with these women has now accelerated and formed a repetitive pattern. They no longer each require a chapter. The fourth girl we are introduced to is Zodwa Khuzwayo or Zazah. Zodwa shows van Wyk her autobiography and he is impressed, “She knows how to tell a story. I encourage her” (2001:69). This becomes her book *Never Been At Home*. The last female character we meet is “this

complicated character Z” (2001:80). This is Zinhle, the author of *No Way Out*. However, she is only given a few pages and her life-story is shortened, to be expanded in her own text. A mentor type relationship exists between van Wyk and these two girls. They have the sexual power and he has the intellectual power, represented by his computer that they all use when staying in his flat. In all his relationships, van Wyk represents a middle-class world to which his girlfriends aspire and it is this, along with his monthly paycheck, that attracts them to him.

3.6. AIDS and Poverty

A condition of the postapartheid inner-city is the presence of poor whites living on the streets, people who would previously have been cared for by the state under apartheid. Looking down from his window, the narrator muses that “poor whites retire on the streets of Durban, living from the rubbish in the containers on the street corners” (2001:9). During apartheid there were hardly any white people living on the street but now, in van Wyk’s text, it has become a regular sight:

I went to the bank this morning past a poor white beggar with two curly-headed daughters sitting on the pavement and another beggar with no legs in a shopping trolley (2001:61).

The urban embraces the changing sociopolitical conditions of South Africa and it is there that these changes are most visible. The city is an “embodiment of the political, economic and social structure of society” (Maharaj 2002:171).

Nkosi writes about the people of the Point area, stating that they are the:

newly liberated underclass of disappointed school-leavers, unemployed domestic and sex workers, or just spivs and drug dealers, all crowded into the waterfront where only a little over a decade ago they would have been rounded up and thrown into jail for loitering without intent. These vagrant bag snatchers, sex workers and dope peddlers of Gillespie Street represent the underside of post-apartheid society which in turn is generating a new kind of literature, from the hand-wringing expression of white guilt to a deliberate annexation of neutral space where the newly forged identities permitted by the collapse of apartheid can be reassembled in relative freedom (nd:3)

These people play a factor in the construction of the area as ‘place’. For example, the dwarf on the street in *Man Bitch* with “the anguished eyes and wild hair of Jesus Christ. He is called Three Quarters. He was born without two arms and a leg” (2001:2) becomes part of the landscape. For the most part, the people in the streets are portrayed in a negative light – a group of “loud drunks roams the streets like a pack of wolves” (2001:2). At one stage the narrator wonders if he is becoming a part of the inner-city decline when he questions, “Could I disappear into the filthy sidewalks? Will I haunt this block of the city?” (2001:9). Ironically, it is the filth that he embraces and where he feels most at home. Van Wyk later states, “I was not sure whether it is the buildings rotting or me” (2001:61).

Disease and death inevitably haunt all three texts. Towards the end of *Man Bitch*, van Wyk writes:

I’m looking out of the flat window, seeing a tall thin woman walking on a sidewalk, and the thought occurs out of the blue “Mbali has returned from the dead” (2001:12).

However, the thin, dying figure is not his long-lost girlfriend but a new city type: the AIDS sufferer. As AIDS ravages the urban landscape so the skeletal frame of the AIDS sufferer becomes a permanent feature of the cityscape.

At one point in the novel, van Wyk’s narrator dreams of “being fucked by a skeleton” (2001:3). Sex and death are closely connected throughout the text, with AIDS being a central theme behind this work and life in the inner-city. The twin illusion of sex and degradation can be seen in Angel who wears a “velvet bra underneath, jeans and boots (the smell of vomit came from them)” (2001:14). In his essay “The Suffering Body of the City”, Frédéric Le Marcis defines the relationship between AIDS and the South African city:

Parallel to the period of transition to a democratic society, the epidemic in South Africa has increased dramatically. The level of HIV infection in the adult population (ages 15-49) rose from 1 percent in 1990 to more than 20 percent in 2000. People obtained their freedom and fell sick the same time. The newly acquired sovereignty has enabled individuals to explore previously unavailable

urban spaces, to develop innovative forms of political mobilization, and to access, in new ways, health services that had once been forbidden to them (2004:453).

Mbali is the title of Chapter One in *Man Bitch* and the name of his (first?) prostitute girlfriend. She also serves as a constant reference point for van Wyk, a means of comparison to his future girlfriends and an imaginary ideal. She has AIDS, and is representative of the disease, and as such haunts the pages of the text. It is in his imagination that she continues to live, long after their relationship is over – van Wyk’s narrator is annoyed with her later when on occasion she visits him, forcing him to face the reality of her slow death from a virus that he has also possibly contracted from her. When Mbali visits, van Wyk gives her “my last R20. Like a ghost she leaves my flat” (2001:28). Mbali’s name “means flower, but she dislikes flowers. Their withering away reminds her of the slipping away of life” (2001:2). At this stage she is already ill with AIDS and her condition deteriorates as the chapter progresses. Mbali has full-blown AIDS at the start of the narrative; she suffers “from stomach-ache and vomits incessantly” while van Wyk’s narrator marvels at “how big the head seems when the body is becoming thinner” (2001:3). Her health deteriorates as the story continues, to the chagrin of van Wyk’s narrator. “Mbali, I’m not happy. I’m not even allowed to touch you” (2001:6) says van Wyk to the dying Mbali who does not want to have sex with him. The fact that Mbali is skeletal and dying of AIDS does not deter the narrator from wanting sex with her. This is a surprising attitude from a highly educated, middle-class man but it almost seems as if the death wish of the inner-city has infected him.

Later, he writes that “Mbali was angry with me for touching her hipbone and saying “Jesus, you are thin. Only skin and bone.” She swore at me. Later we made love. She took me to places where I have never been before” (2001:9). It seems that he enjoys the fact that she is thin and sick. When asked by a prostitute if he has taken an HIV test he replies “No, I don’t want to know...I don’t want to be miserable for the rest of my life...” (2001:10) – he is living in denial about his HIV status. Later on, a seriously emaciated Mbali returns and van Wyk writes that he “took off my clothes and climbed in bed with Mbali’s skeleton” where he “got a hard-on like never before” (2001:20). They make love and he “could feel with my hands on her small buttocks my cock moving

inside her” (2001:21). This disturbing scene links sex and death more closely than any other. Later that night Angel calls needing money and the narrator makes a date to see her the next evening. While having sex with her, “the condom came off” (2001:23). Van Wyk’s narrator seems not to care about the danger to himself or Angel who says that if she contracts the disease “she would drink petrol, and set herself alight on the highway” (2001:58). While most of his actions, such as moving to the inner-city and living among the urban poor, can possibly be romantically linked to the *Symboliste* philosophy, his nihilistic death wish, particularly in his high-risk sexual activities, is more difficult to comprehend.

As in Nkosi’s *Mating Birds*, the women’s bodies in *Man Bitch* become a place to control, and through them control the city they represent. However, increasingly with such liaisons comes the threat of AIDS in the modern era. It is a threat that covers all three texts like a miasma – a threat to male, female; black, white; middle-class, poor.

4. Conclusion

Through a close reading of *Man Bitch* and references to Mdakane’s and Khuzwayo’s texts, I have explored the experience of the inner-city of Durban at a particular moment. This experience is subjective and is shown primarily through the eyes of van Wyk; however, reference to *No Way Out* and *Never Been At Home* provides a counterpoint to the white, male view and gives substance to the female characters that would otherwise have existed merely as props in van Wyk’s story. The inner-city is a dangerous place, where crime and poverty are the norm. The characters in *Man Bitch* feel just at home on the street as they do in van Wyk’s flat and, through their profession as sex-workers, have blurred the boundaries between public and private space. The inner-city is also shown to be a cosmopolitan meeting place of the old and the new, of different cultures and belief systems and of people across the race and economic divide.

An examination of setting reveals that place and text are intrinsically linked in this work. The author fictionally constructs the place Point Road (though tied down to the facts of the area) while at the same time, the area in a very real way creates the central

‘I’ character and the story itself. The city is constructed in *Man Bitch* through people, through the various female characters in the novel and through van Wyk’s relationships with them. AIDS is a constant reference point in the inner-city, and the way the characters react to it both as an abstract concept and when they are forced to deal with it in reality, is symptomatic of South Africa’s larger response to the pandemic. Van Wyk constructs the city as a type of hell, wherein he explores issues of morality and mortality as they relate to a postapartheid South Africa. Lastly, the city is created by what it is not. It is not the township, it is not nature, nor is it Europe or the ‘unreachable’ places his girlfriends retreat to. The text ends with the narrator losing himself inside “the bloody darkness of Z” (2001:82), embracing the nihilism of getting lost in the one place where he finds comfort: Durban’s inner-city.

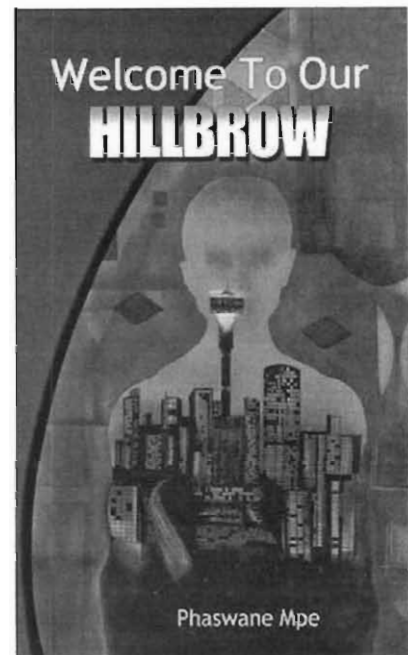
In the next chapter, I will be investigating these issues as they relate to the inner-city suburb of Hillbrow in Johannesburg as represented through the novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) by Phaswane Mpe.

Endnotes

1. Grammatical inconsistencies are correctly quoted from van Wyk’s text which, being self-published, was largely unedited.
2. Working on a streetchildren project in Cape Town a few years ago, I asked one of the children why he ‘sniffed’ glue. He answered, “because it makes me feel warm, like when my mother hugs me” (personal communication, Cape Town 2002). Drugs and alcohol provide a temporary ‘home’ where abusers can escape the un-homelike place that is the inner-city.

Chapter 3

Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001) by Phaswane Mpe deals with a specific place in the inner-city, Hillbrow, and explores themes that are endemic to the area – AIDS and xenophobia – and to the country as a whole. In contrast to the books under discussion in the previous chapter, Mpe’s novel received a large print run and has been hailed as an important postapartheid novel. Critical work has been done on it by both South African and international critics. Supplementing this novel, I will be looking at the short story “Autopsy” by novelist Ivan Vladislavic which maps the area of Hillbrow in a similar way to Mpe. In the same way as Nkosi’s *Mating Birds* served as an introduction to the postapartheid works in Chapter Two, I will look at selected poems by Soweto Poet Mongane Wally Serote as an introduction to these texts and issues relating to the city of Johannesburg.



To contextualise the place of Johannesburg, a brief history of the city will be given focusing on its gold rush inception, the apartheid period and the postapartheid era. I will then provide a short introduction to Mpe and summarise his text. Like the writers in Chapter Two, Mpe constructs the inner-city in his novel. Unlike these writers, he devotes a quarter of his novel to a mapping of the area under discussion. He maps the physical location as well as the cultural space of Hillbrow. No longer concerned with the legacy of apartheid, Mpe deals with issues relevant to Hillbrow in particular and, on a larger scale, the whole of South Africa. In his novel, the image of a ‘new’ South Africa as imagined by black South Africans is contested by the arrival of numerous ‘foreign’ Africans and the abandonment of the inner-city by big business. Hillbrow is mapped through Mpe’s novel, with his character Refentše walking the streets of the inner-city, and I will interrogate how this is done.

Home and belonging are central themes in this novel and, when threatened, take the form of violent xenophobia. Issues of power relating to the rural / urban dichotomy are explored, as well as the relationships between the characters in the novel. AIDS, as in *Man Bitch*, redefines the urban space of the inner-city with the community's response to it bearing similarities to their xenophobic response to the foreigners. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* illustrates a postapartheid experience of place that is in some ways similar to *Man Bitch*, while in others very different. Through a close reading of Mpe's novel, we can draw conclusions about Johannesburg and South Africa and our response as a nation to the pressing issues of our time.

1. Johannesburg

1.1 Gold Rush Era

Johannesburg is one of the youngest cities in the world, and arguably the most modern and prosperous on the African continent. It owes its existence to the discovery of gold, with its Xhosa name of *Egoli* literally meaning 'city of gold'. In 1886, gold was discovered just below the surface of the *veldt* in the area that is now Johannesburg, resulting in one of the largest gold rushes in history. People descended on the place from all over the world. Describing this period, Herman Charles Bosman writes in his short story "Johannesburg" (1992) that:

You can still come across lots of people who can tell you about the spirit that prevailed here in the early days when Johannesburg was a roaring, wide-open mining camp, in which every citizen was imbued with the one laudable desire of making all the money he could in the shortest possible time. It was an all-in-scamble with no holds barred. The place teemed with shoot-outs to a gaudy opulence. And venturers from all parts of the world heard that there was money going in Johannesburg, and they flocked here to get some (1992:166).

Within months the tented camp held tens of thousands of prospectors and had acquired the name of Johannesburg, named after either President Kruger or Johan Rissik, depending on whom you ask. For the first five years of its existence, everything that Johannesburg needed had to be imported from the port cities of Cape Town and Durban. The massive growth of the city, tied to the huge deposits of easily accessible gold, led to Johannesburg becoming a city while it was still essentially a mining camp. Novelist

Sarah Gertrude Millin writes of Johannesburg's ambiguous nature in her autobiography, stating that when she arrived in the city:

there were still corrugated-iron buildings in the heart of the city ... at the same time, it was also undeniably a mining town. For right through it, right beneath its streets, ran the gold reef ... and the tarnished-silver mine dumps made part of its sky line (1992:169).

By 1936, however, Johannesburg was the largest 'European' city in Africa. Since its inception, the city was always known as a city of *uitlanders* or foreigners; as I will show this still applies to the city created in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Johannesburg now houses 'new' immigrants from across the African continent.

1.2. Apartheid Era

As an introduction to the city of Johannesburg and a means to discuss its construction in contemporary South African literature, I will briefly look at a selection of poems from the Soweto Poet Mongane Wally Serote highlighting his approach to the urban. South Africa under apartheid was racially torn between relatively affluent white cities and the poverty-stricken townships that serviced them. Behind the material and mental oppression of the apartheid ideology was a system of economic exploitation based on racial discrimination and access to land and resources. For black South Africans, the claim to the land as their own had been worn down by "years and years of relocations and evictions aimed at dispossessing all the autochthonous populations of Southern Africa" (Vivan 2000:58). Apartheid ideology manifested itself in a number of ways to control the minds of the South African people. Represented in the landscape by the fortress architecture of the apartheid cities and the cramped, inhumane and derelict townships, these two very different places, one created for whites and the other for blacks, were physical and external motifs of the internal vision of the apartheid government.

Serote lived in the townships surrounding Johannesburg and was an active participant in the cultural and political struggle against apartheid. He grew up at a time when the apartheid government was consolidating its power and passing ever more repressive laws. These factors were imperative to his writing as he "sought [his]

significance as ... [a] writer within a particular historical context” (Watts 1989:5). In Serote’s poetry we see:

an attempt to emphasise ‘resistance’; ... [where] language is not utilized primarily in order to confirm ‘facts’ of oppressive structures, but to effect a social and psychological transformation” (Chapman 1984:194)

This is apparent in the representation of landscape in his work where it becomes a resistance tool in response to the “harsh facts of township life ... under apartheid” (Chapman 1984:217). The Soweto Poets inhabited:

a socio-economic terrain which ... conforms to radical rather than to liberal views of the working of South African capitalism; the black man is shown to be trapped in an economic system designed to suppress the black worker – to use his resources without providing human development. ... Racial formations are seen to cut across social (class) formations, thus condemning the articulate poet and the semi-literate manual worker alike to the same restrictions of movement (Chapman 1984:220).

This environment led to the theories of the Black Consciousness Movement taking a firm hold in the minds of the youth and becoming a rallying force in the struggle for liberation.

Jane Wilkinson writes of the Soweto Poets’ relationship to urban South Africa and their need to ground:

their art within the divisions and restrictions of the landscapes they are obliged to live in and the forms of expression they are obliged to use. They assert their right to possess them and rebuild them, taking them to pieces in order to compose a new pattern or code of meaning and to create new possibilities of communication, and restoring the city to its essential and semantic function as ‘the place of our meeting with the other’ (1994:98).

The fact that Serote dealt with an urban environment and experience is due to the need “to interrogate and transform it, seeing its limits and constraints as a challenge that must be confronted” (Wilkinson 1994:98). Serote was influenced by “the life and topology of (his) early home” (Wilkinson 1990:41), with place playing an important part in his poetic development. Sophiatown and parts of Alexandra were destroyed as part of apartheid South Africa’s grand plan of racial separation and, besides this physical destruction:

there is [also] the constant erosion or contamination brought about by its [Alexandra's] relationship with Johannesburg, the 'Golden City' this schizophrenic 'Dark City' is separated from, but also intimately connected with, like night with day, and on which its divisions and disruptions depend (Wilkinson 1994:93).

The township as place was "dominated by void, waste and violence, for many of the houses have been demolished, their place taken by uniform, unwelcoming migrant worker hostels" (Wilkinson 1990:40). Combined with the dongas in the street and the poorly maintained infrastructure, it was a destructive urban reality. It is this destructive reality that Serote deals with and eventually embraces in his poem "Alexandra" when he writes "I cry Alexandra when I am thirsty / Your breasts ooze the dirty waters of your dongas" (1978:22).

Johannesburg in "City Johannesburg" is portrayed in Serote's poem as a "vicious, mobile, octopus-like monster, drawing the surrounding territory into its omnipotent and all-devouring net" (Wilkinson 1994:91), with its tentacles stretching out to all the surrounding townships, penetrating the very fabric of their social life. It is this idea of an all encompassing ideology that is difficult to escape from, even when you are 'at home' in 'your' township, that Serote invokes when he writes "I can feel your roots, anchoring your might, my feebleness / In my flesh, in my mind, in my blood" (1978:4). For black South Africans living in the surrounding townships, Johannesburg was "the city of the white people, with its opulent surfeit of everything" (Sinha 1992:61), which contrasted sharply with the squalid 'sister city' of Alexandra. Serote describes the relationship between Alexandra and Johannesburg in his novel *To Every Birth its Blood* when he writes:

Alexandra is one of the oldest townships in South Africa. It is closely related to Johannesburg. From the centre of the golden city to the centre of the Dark City is a mere nine miles. Where one starts, the other ends, and where one ends, the other begins. The difference between the two is like day and night. Everything that says everything about the progress of man, the distance which man has made in terms of technology and comfort, the Golden City says it well; the Dark City, by contrast is dirty and deathly. The weekdays of Alexandra are those of a place which has been erased; in Johannesburg week days are like a time at the end of a pilgrimage, nothing is still, the streets buzz (1983:21).

The distance travelled from one extreme, the township, to the other, the city, is one that crosses physical, economic and mental landscapes. Looking at the contrast between the inner-city slum of Hillbrow and the affluent northern suburbs, a similar contrast can be drawn between the city and township of the apartheid era.

“City Johannesburg” and “Alexandra” are concerned with South African cities, or, more to the point, concerned with two aspects of one city. The townships, although situated away from the white city, are still very much a part of it with both relying on each other for survival. These urban landscapes are the products of the apartheid system that dictated people’s relationship to place and juxtaposed the township to the city. Johannesburg appears to be a mirror opposite of Alexandra. Yet, the ‘mother Alexandra’ is infected and warped by the greed and cruelty of Johannesburg; they are inextricably connected and feed off each other. The dichotomy of the South African urban experience that is created out of these two poems is one where Johannesburg is symbolic of “white achievement” and affluence while Alexandra is symbolic of “shared suffering” (Chapman 1984:221). But the Johannesburg inhabitants have “frozen expressions” on their faces while Alexandra inspires emotions, even though they are of anguish.

The landscape of the township is more than just scenery to the township residents but rather becomes “a human circumjacence [where] the inhabitants wear their hovels and backyards like old clothes” (Watts 1989:158). Thus the “physical geography of the place has no existence apart from the people who live in it” (Watts 1989:158). The townships suffer from poor infrastructure and in some cases are little more than slums. Serote is therefore “intensely aware of how these houses and these dirt roads, with their muddy pools and dongas, have shaped the people who constructed them” and his poetry manifests a strong physical consciousness of place (Watts 1989:158). Through “Alexandra”, Serote attempted a “mapping of the physical and human geography of Alexandra” (Wilkinson 1990:50). Despite all the dirt and despair, the poet’s persona claims ownership of this place, warts and all, as he states that this is “My dongas, my dust, my people, my death” (1978:22). In a similar way, Mpe claims ownership of

Hillbrow with his constant call of “Welcome to Our Hillbrow”. Despite the negatives associated with the place, he still asserts his ownership of it.

Serote was an outsider in one city and insider in the other, needing legal permission to travel from one to the other as illustrated in the poem “City Johannesburg”: “My hand pulses to my back trousers pocket ... / For my pass, my life” (1978:4). The pass book legitimises black existence in the city landscape. Thus, black South Africans were made alien in Johannesburg by a legal document, the pass book, and could never call the city home. The repression is structural and their separation absolute. Yet, through Serote’s poetry, he rejects the legitimacy of this situation and of the apartheid government.

The Johannesburg in Serote’s poem appears to Wilkinson as “a viscous, mobile, octopus-like monster” (Wilkinson 1990:39). It is a living form, needing the black workers to survive. A relationship is thus established between the city and the township; yet, Johannesburg is an alien space to black South Africans, only allowed within its confines during the day and on producing a passbook. The city needs their labour and the relationship of the city to the township, of the whites to the blacks, is one of necessity. The city ‘breathes in’ the people it needs to survive like oxygen, and then expels them once their work is done. The city under apartheid is dehumanising and through this poem Serote provides a telling critique of the apartheid ideology and the urban landscape it spawned.

1.3. Postapartheid Era

The city of Johannesburg was:

designed as a cosmopolitan European city in Africa, but only for a small segment of its population. ... Roughly 90 percent of Johannesburg’s inner-city residents were not living there ten years ago. (Simone 2004:411).

This immense change in demographics has also led to a subsequent change in the popular image of the city. The international image of a postapartheid Johannesburg today is one of crime and deterioration. At one stage the city had the dubious honour of being the murder capital of the world. This did not attract the investors and tourists hoped for by

the new ANC-led government. Johannesburg is no longer a citadel of white dominance but a new African city with an inner-city that is crime- and dirt-ridden. The city has also changed in the minds of those who live there. Once a:

white, European (predominantly English) city in Africa, its purity eroded in the 1980s as a mixture of European and African life-styles appeared. No longer unrelentingly white, the city became dappled with gray areas, black spots, and illegal residences. By 2001, parts of the inner city had become almost wholly black and African, with a recent population of “foreigners” providing a new arena of racial and ethnic tensions (Tomlinson et al 2003:xii).

Tomlinson et al continue, stating that there are now as many “Johannesburgs as there are cultural identities” with each group experiencing the city differently and each of these experiences being valid (Tomlinson et al 2003:xi). While the inner-city has become a type of ‘other’ for the white, affluent northern suburbs, it represents something different in the collective psyche of black South Africans. It is a source of employment and a place of opportunity. After 1994, black South Africans imagined Johannesburg as a place they could live and work in. However, whites fled, taking with them retail business, insurance companies and the stock exchange and leaving the shell of the city for the black population. At the same time African immigrants took up residence in the inner-city and “moved aggressively into street trading and illegal activities such as prostitution and drugs” (Tomlinson et al 2003:xiii).

Hillbrow, the area of the inner-city under discussion in this chapter, was a home to early European immigrants. Located near the University of Witwatersrand in the centre of the city, the area comprises roughly 200 apartment buildings. Hillbrow has always had a reputation for being slightly seedy, as does The Point area in Durban dealt with in the previous chapter. Under apartheid, the area housed illegal city-dwellers and was one of the first areas to be desegregated. Coloureds, Indians and blacks moved into flats in the area because of a severe shortage in their own areas. Hillbrow was officially white, but unofficially multiracial. It was one of the first urban neighborhoods in Johannesburg to experience the de facto collapse of the Group Areas Act of 1950. Alan Morris points out in his study of Hillbrow, *Bleakness and Light*, that “Hillbrow is one of the few neighbourhoods that, despite the Group Areas Act, moved from being an all-

white neighbourhood to being predominantly black” (Morris 1999:3). The shift in racial demography was followed by the physical deterioration of many Hillbrow apartment blocks. Many of the buildings, owned by absentee landlords, are in a state of disrepair with their residents living in squalor. Like The Point area, Hillbrow is a vibrant part of the city with clubs, bars and restaurants spilling out onto bustling streets. However, there is also a high crime rate, rampant drug dealing, and violence.

Comprising an area of one square kilometre, the population of Hillbrow is estimated to be over 100 000 during the week, and possibly over 200 000 during weekends. The actual level of crowding is probably much worse, however, because a substantial portion of the residents are squatters and undocumented migrants, both groups likely to evade official head counts. As such, it is one of the most densely populated areas on the continent. Once compared to New York as a cosmopolitan melting pot, the area today is seen as a “decaying cityscape of violent crime, drugs, prostitution, and AIDS” (Green 2005:5). Hillbrow is renowned for immigrants and crime, with the area well known for being the epicentre of drug activity in the country. As such, it is associated with architectural deterioration, drug dealing, sexual vice, poverty and corruption.

2. Text

2.1. Biographical background: Phaswane Mpe

Born in 1970 in what is now Polokwane in Limpopo, near Tiragolong, the rural village from which his protagonists hail, Phaswane Mpe moved to Johannesburg in 1989 to study African literature at the University of the Witwatersrand (Wits). He settled in Hillbrow due to the cheap rentals to be had. After completing his MA, Mpe did a diploma course in publishing at Oxford Brookes University, (as does Refilwe in the novel), and then lectured at Wits for several years. While Sepedi was his first language, Mpe wrote mainly in English. In 2003, Mpe



Figure 15: Phaswane Mpe

began a doctorate on sexuality in postapartheid fiction, which he abandoned to begin training as a traditional healer.

Mpe wrote his novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* to escape the depression which plagued him and to make sense of the chaos of the place (Hillbrow) in which he lived. He also wrote poetry and short stories, many of which are about HIV/Aids, published newspaper articles on culture and politics, and was a judge on various literary award panels. His work can be compared to that of Kerouac and Ginsberg, and he has been grouped with K Sello Duiker and Zakes Mda as the new voices of postapartheid fiction (see Leong Yew “The New Black Literature in South Africa”). He was the first South African novelist “to record the huge changes that have transformed its inner cities over the past 10 years” which grappled with “the struggle of black South Africans to create a post-apartheid identity after the collapse of the old racial hierarchies” (McGregor 2004: www.guardian.co.uk). Mpe provided a fractured, kaleidoscopic view of life in the inner city and his book put an entirely new spin on the “Jim comes to Jo’burg” theme. Mpe died in 2004 from the disease he warned against so eloquently in this novel.

2.2. Summary of Text

In his novel, Mpe portrays inner-city Johannesburg and its myriad of inhabitants. The story follows two childhood sweethearts, Refentše and Refilwe, and their move from the rural village of Tiragalong to Johannesburg to study. The details of their interactions with people and the city construct a place that is crime- and poverty-ridden, yet still manages to harbour people with a joy for life. Through the second person narration we learn that Refentše is already dead, succumbing to the moral and social decay that permeates Hillbrow life.

The novel is about, on one level, love and betrayal. The relationships formed in the city are constantly being tested due to one partner’s infidelity. Most of the characters in the novel die, connected in some way to this infidelity. Refentše, the main character, moves from Tiragalong to study at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, where he becomes a lecturer and meets Lerato, his girlfriend. After discovering her and

his friend Sammy in bed together, Refentše commits suicide. Linked to his death are the deaths of both his girlfriend and mother. Lerato later kills herself out of guilt; Refentše's mother is burnt alive by the villagers of Tiragalong, after being accused of bewitching Refentše and causing his death. Bohlale, Sammy's girlfriend with whom Refentše had sex in an earlier situation ironically mirroring the one Lerato and Sammy found themselves in, is killed by a runaway car on her way to visit Sammy, who is in hospital after being stabbed in the streets of Hillbrow. The other main character in the novel is Refilwe, a young woman who hailed from the same village as Refentše and who had once been his girlfriend. Refilwe still harboured warm feelings towards Refentše and consequently was resentful towards Lerato, spreading rumours that her father was a Nigerian, an ethnic slur in this milieu. Lerato's father, Piet, was in fact from Tiragalong and was killed by Molori, a man who was also from Tiragalong, for supposedly bewitching his mother. Refilwe goes to Oxford to complete an MA in Publishing and Media Studies. There she meets and falls in love with a Nigerian man. Through this relationship and her time in Oxford, her xenophobic attitude is questioned and she has a change of heart. Unfortunately, both discover that they are in the advanced stages of AIDS and Refilwe returns to Tiragalong to die.

Mpe sites his protagonist in the city, and it is here that most of the action takes place. However, the story is set in three places – Hillbrow, Tiragalong and Oxford, with Heaven being the 'place' of narration. The other locations are linked to the city but the bulk of the story is sited in the inner-city of Hillbrow. An unspecified narrator directs the narrative to the dead Refentše (he died a year before). Mpe's novel is:

relentlessly written in the second person, and in its explicit address to 'you', the narrative has the disorientating effect of simultaneously distancing, but engaging the reader in the implied community signaled by the 'our' of the novel's title (Clarkson 2005:452).

This novel-long monologue is the means through which Refentše is informed on what has happened in his absence and recalls what lead to his death. Refentše's story follows the life of Mpe – both were academics, short story writers, and residents of Hillbrow – and in this way, the novel is partly autobiographical. The style of the novel draws on magical

realism and can also be linked to the African tale-telling tradition. This style of writing has been adopted by, amongst others, the novelist Zakes Mda and has become synonymous with postapartheid writing that seeks to reject the stark realism of struggle literature. The main tropes of the novel are those of migrancy and disease. Mpe deals with the stigma associated with AIDS and the xenophobia endemic in South African society. As a contrast to the white racism dealt with in struggle literature, Mpe is concerned with black xenophobia, as it manifests itself in Hillbrow and Tiragalong. Liz McGregor writes that Mpe:

belonged to the generation who grew up with the humiliations and deprivations of apartheid and expected to enjoy the fruits of freedom under democracy. Instead, they were confronted by new social ills: unemployment, poverty and HIV/Aids (2004: www.guardian.co.uk).

Welcome to Our Hillbrow interrogates these social ills. The novel also deals with tropes of violence and death. There are three suicides, two necklacings, a car accident, a stabbing and the constant threat of death by AIDS, which becomes a reality for Refilwe. Violence and death are closely linked in the South African inner-city and this is compounded by the dysfunctional social relationships inherent in Hillbrow.

As a supplement to this novel, I will be looking at the short story “Autopsy” (1996) by the novelist Ivan Vladislavic. This story follows a man as he tracks a person whom he assumes to be Elvis through the streets of Hillbrow. A constant mapping takes place that provides an interesting contrast to the mapping done of the same area by Mpe ten years later. Twenty years Mpe’s senior, Vladislavic is however white and middle-class and this allows us to contrast and compare these responses to the same place across race and class lines. For instance, whereas Mpe lived in Hillbrow and experienced it day in and day out, Vladislavic was only visiting it, wandering the streets like Benjamin’s *flâneur*. In this way, similarities can be drawn between van Wyk and Vladislavic’s experience of the inner-city, which involved a measure of choice, and Mpe, Mdakane and Khuzwayo who lived and walked in the city out of necessity.

3. Mapping the area

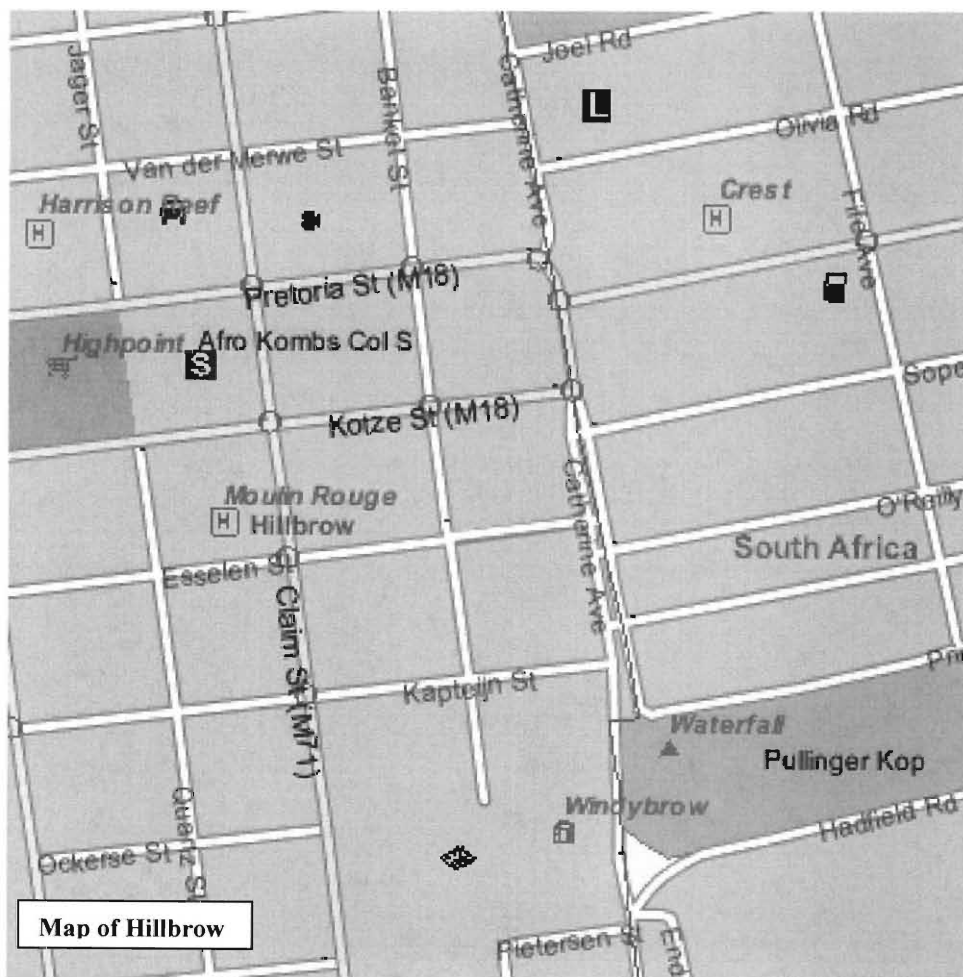
Mpe constructs a fictionalised Hillbrow in his novel that is at times both magical and realistic. The place he creates is immediately recognisable as Hillbrow yet in his descriptions we see represented the whole of South African society and its complex social and cultural interaction with its past, present and future. Liz Gunner feels that the text can be seen as a biography of the inner-city itself. She writes that the reader is able to participate in “the violence of poverty; to hear the voices of the outsiders who live in the dangerous and alienating space of the inner city” (2003:6).

The legacy of colonialism and apartheid define Hillbrow, and the entry of South Africa into the global market continually affects its construction. Globalisation affects the construction, both physically and symbolically, of the city through the influx of immigrants. The apartheid ideology of separation also still influences the city. The story of Hillbrow is a story of two cities. The high-density, crime-ridden streets sit side by side with the business district of Johannesburg and this is a direct reflection on South African society. The reality of an overcrowded and rundown city centre, uniquely Hillbrowan, is realised in Mpe story. The construction of this city takes place through descriptions of the people living there and the locations they move through. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a:

patchwork of individual narratives, with conflicting versions of the same events. Its notion of place is both surreal and fractured, with a subversive and disrespectful stance towards conventional geographical and ontological boundaries (Goodman 2003:94).

It is through “the depiction of Refentše’s walking in the city of Johannesburg that the current mapping of the inner city is portrayed” (Manase 2005:90). Like Benjamin’s *flâneur* who constructs an ‘experience map’ through his urban wanderings, so too does Refentše’s map consist of real places, people and experiences and, like the postmodern *flâneur* referenced in a previous chapter, Refentše too needs to be aware of the city’s real and imagined dangers. The city is thus constructed through mapping Refentše’s journey through Hillbrow, the activities (drug-dealing, prostitution) that happen there and the inhabitants’ acceptance of them. A “map is a source of power through knowledge”

(Sienaert and Stiebel 1996:95) but the map that Refentše creates is more than that. It is necessary just to survive as Hillbrow is a dangerous place where getting lost could prove deadly. The mapping of Hillbrow also becomes a mapping of the space of postapartheid fiction, a new democratic urban space that is characterised by both chaos and order. Urban space offers the potential for individual and societal transformation in Mpe's novel. The city is the site of possibility; in a way, this is opposite to the inner-city as created in van Wyk's *Man Bitch*. However, tempered with this is the real hardship and danger associated with life in the inner-city. Mpe defines this union best when he writes "welcome to our Hillbrow of milk and honey and bile" (2001:41).



The first chapter of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is titled "Hillbrow: The Map". In a concrete way, Mpe maps the area of Hillbrow; however, he also maps the space of his novel in this chapter. In the first few pages he introduces the central themes of his story –

AIDS and xenophobia. A young man dies of a strange illness in Tiragalong and the migrant workers say it must be AIDS. “After all, was he not often seen roaming the whorehouses and dingy pubs of Hillbrow?” they comment. He was also seen with “*Makwerekwere* women, hanging onto his arms and dazzling him with sugar-coated kisses that were sure to destroy any man, let alone an impressionable youngster like him” (Mpe 2001: 3).

The narrator of Vladislavic’s story “Autopsy” also maps the area of Hillbrow through walking through the streets. Like Mpe’s novel, this story is located in Hillbrow with Vladislavic mentioning recognisable buildings and streets. Using a similar magic realist style, the narrator thinks he spots Elvis and sets off on a chase through the streets of Hillbrow where he observes every move ‘the King’ makes. The narrator shares characteristics with that of Benjamin’s *flaneur* in his search for experience that only the inner-city can offer. He is also, like the *flaneur*, a constant and obsessive observer, noting the price paid for his food – “grated cheddar as yellow as straw (R1.80 extra)” (1996:39) – as well as every small element of his environment, naming places and objects accurately on his walk through the city. Hillbrow is defined as “Johannesburg’s most cosmopolitan suburb” (1996:40), which, as I will show later, is true. Although set in 1992, apartheid is already dead for the narrator – this is highlighted for him by the fact that one of the street-children is Indian. He later states, in a reversal of race identities that, the “King and I felt like blacks, because of the way He walked. Everyone else felt like whites. Nevertheless apartheid was dead” (1996: 48).

At one point in Vladislavic’s tale the narrator loses his bearings and wanders, “Where am I? Or rather: Where was I? Hollywood Boulevard? Dar es Salaam? Dakar? The Botanical Gardens in Durban?” (1996:41). As mentioned in earlier chapters, Foucault’s concept of the heterotopia where one space can exist as many places is linked to this scene. The city exists as a space that can have different places inscribed on it simultaneously. This disorientating effect means that it can be all these places at once. In one long paragraph the narrator tracks the path of the ‘King’ while referencing buildings and retail outlets that are both generically South African and yet unique to

Hillbrow. It is through the street and shop that Benjamin's *flâneur* feels that the real identity of the city can be discovered and through the narrator's aimless wandering after 'Elvis' that the identity of postapartheid Hillbrow is interrogated. The narrator also mentions the street / pavement culture that has come to define postapartheid South Africa, the global mix of international brands and localised, South African icons:

He passed Checkers. He passed the hawkers of Hubbard squashes, He passed Fontana: Hot roast chickens. He passed the Hare Krishnas dishing out vegetable curry to the non-racial poor on paper plates. He passed the International Poker Club: Members Only, and the Ambassador Liquor Store: Free Ice, He passed the Lichee Inn: Chinese Take-aways. He gave a poor girl a dime. He passed the hawkers of deodorant and sticking-plaster. He passed Hillcity Pharmacy, Wimpy: The Home of the Hamburger and Summit Fruiterers ... He passed the hawkers of wooden springboks and soapstone elephants. He dropped His Diner's Club card in a hobo's hat. He passed the café Three Sisters, Norma Jeans Look and Listen, Terry's Deli, The Golden Egg, Le Pocket Chicken Grill, Gringos Fast Food, Bella Napoli and Continental Confectioners: Baking by Marco. He passed the hawkers of block-mounted reproductions of James Dean with his eyes smouldering and Marilyn Monroe with her skirt flying. Late, both of them. He passed the Shoe Hospital: Save Our Soles (1996: 46)

This mapping occurs at both a physical and cultural level and creates an authentic image in the reader's mind of the place of Hillbrow.

In a similar paragraph to that in "Autopsy", Mpe uses Thobela FM to 'map' the area through the crimes that are reported. The radio station broadcasts:

snippets of car hijackings robbers' shoot-outs with the Johannesburg Murder and Robbery Squad every news hour. Five men were found with their ribs ripped off by what appeared to have been a butcher's knife. . . Two women were raped and then killed in Quartz Street ... Three Nigerians who evaded arrest at Jan Smuts Airport were finally arrested in Pretoria Street for drug dealing ... Street kids, drunk with glue, brandy and wild visions of themselves as speeding Hollywood movie drivers, were racing their wire-made cars through red robots, thus increasingly becoming a menace to motorists driving through Hillbrow, especially in the vicinity of Banket and Claim Streets . . . At least eight people died and thirteen were seriously injured when the New Year's Eve celebrations took the form of torrents of bottles gushing out of the brooding clouds that were flat balconies ... Men going anywhere near the corner of Quartz and Smit Streets were advised to beware of the menace of increasingly aggressive prostitutes . . . a few men had allegedly been raped there recently ...(Mpe 2001:5).

The fragments of scenes, of people and places of the radio broadcast, link back to Benjamin's *Arcades Project* in which he amassed quotes and references to Paris as a means of understanding the city. However, in this short paragraph we are given a violent view of what it must be like living in Hillbrow. Mpe fleshes this out through his novel. By a close mapping of Hillbrow, mentioning specific places and street/ business names, authenticity and veracity is extended to the events that accompany these names.

3.1. Walking in the city: the *flaneur*

Through Refentše physically walking in the city, a current map of Hillbrow is drawn that encapsulates all the different spaces he walks through. His walk from the quiet building Vickers Place to the main shopping district of Kotze Street, with its noise and people, highlights the unique experience of walking the streets of Hillbrow. These spaces, be they residential, financial or retail are juxtaposed with the overcrowding of the streets he is walking down and the constant barrage on the senses from street vendors, beggars and the ever present prostitutes. Unlike the *flaneur* who wanders for pleasure, Refentše has a destination in mind but like the *flaneur* he is constantly observing and experiencing the inner-city street life as he walks. His wanderings through this space allow him the opportunity of experiencing and remaking the meaning of spaces “initially constituted to speak of power” (Robinson 1998:166). Robinson continues, stating that in their everyday activities:

subjects are witness to the possibility of other forms of spatiality through their bodies and their movements, as well as in their imaginations, in the dynamism of their inner worlds which are both made through, and themselves remake, the ‘external’ spaces of the environment (1998:166)

The persistent crossing and recrossing of the streets of Hillbrow by the characters in Mpe's novel reclaim and rewrite, as de Certeau states, the story of the city. This story contradicts the Modernist vision of the city that Johannesburg was meant to



Figure 16: A street in Hillbrow

represent as powerhouse of South Africa and skyscraper monument to the success of the apartheid government; thus this city of “everyday experience and imagination is already a different space, it is already a space of difference” (Robinson 1998:170).

While Mpe’s mapping can be seen as a conceptual reclamation of the inner-city, it is also a very real and practical exercise in defining an area. He writes that Hillbrow extends “from Wolmarans Street, at the fringe of the Johannesburg downtown, to the head of Clarendon Place, at the boundary of the serene Parktown suburb” (2001:2). He then provides us with directions to get to his cousin’s house, the place where he was staying, and in doing so creates his own personal map of the area:

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 drive or walk past Esselen, Kotze and Pretoria Streets. You will then cross Van der Merwe and Goldreich Streets. Your next port of call is Caroline Street. Just cross to the other side of Caroline. On your left-hand side is Christ Church, the Bible Centred Church of Christ, as the big red letters announce to you. On your right-hand side is a block of flats called Vickers Place. You turn to your right, because the entrance to Vickers is in Caroline Street, directly opposite another block, Da Gama Court (2001:6).

These are the type of directions you would give an out of town relative, and Refentše, coming from a small rural village, would have had these directions imprinted on his mind. On his arrival in the inner-city, he did not see the car-chases, the shoot-outs or prostitutes that he expected of Hillbrow, as constructed in the collective imagination of Tiragalong. Rather it is the bustling crowds at nine at night that make the most impact on him. Vickers Place, the flat where Refentše is staying, is quiet. This again was unexpected in Hillbrow and contrasts with van Wyk’s flat in *Man Bitch* where the constant noise of the city flooded his flat. Refentše does wake in the middle of the night to gunshots, women screaming, and police sirens (2001:9) which serve to provide an audible mapping of the inner-city. Later, when his cousin takes Refentše to the University, a similar close mapping occurs. This time, the mapping becomes more subjective and cultural than the street names and buildings of before. Refentše notices what looks like a large dog kennel to him, but as they walk by a young man crawls out

smoking dagga (2001:12). Further on, a beggar greets Refentše and his cousin. Refentše replies “Ngiyabonga baba” (thank-you father), for which his cousin scolds him:

Hey you ! You do not go around greeting every fool in Hillbrow. He looks harmless. But not all people who greet you in Hillbrow are innocent well-wishers (2001:12).

A similar situation occurs in *Man Bitch* where van Wyk, new in Maputo, is told by Luisa how to behave to avoid attracting attention. Each city has a code of survival that must be learnt in order to live and walk in the city and this becomes part of Refentše’s ‘map’.

As in van Wyk’s book, Mpe provides us with places that are easily locatable in the city. He also provides us with information that only a local would know, such as the fact that the ATMs in the shopping centre were ‘temporarily out of service’ on Sundays and after 8 at night as protection from possible muggings. The centre of Hillbrow is Kotze Street where “OK Bazaars shared the pavement with the rather quiet pub, *The Fans*, and the louder one, *The Base*” (2001:7). It is here that Checkers competed with a noisy shebeen called *Jabula Ebusuku* and with its neighbour the Universal Kingdom of God. Retail, relaxation and spiritual outlets all share pavement space in the inner-city. While some of the place markers given by Mpe are very Hillbrow specific, others are more generic of the South African inner-city. For example, the concrete pavements that swarmed with informal business in the form of fresh fruit and vegetable vendors are representative of any South African city or town.

Similar to The Point area in Durban, Hillbrow is also a site of intersection between people of different nationalities, classes and culture. In his essay “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg”, AbdouMaliq Simone proposes the notion of people as infrastructure in the African city. This emphasises:

economic collaboration among residents seemingly marginalized from and immiserated by urban life. Infrastructure is commonly understood in physical terms, as reticulated systems of highways, pipes, wires, or cables. These modes of envisioning and articulation are viewed as making the city productive, reproducing it, and positioning its residents, territories, and resources in specific ensembles where the energies of individuals can be most efficiently deployed and accounted

for. By contrast I wish to extend the notion of infrastructure directly to people's activities in the city (2004:407).

He continues, stating that:

African cities are characterized by incessantly flexible, mobile, and provisional intersections of residents that operate without clearly delineated notions of how the city is to be inhabited and used (2004:407).

This idea of infrastructure ties into the network of relationships created in a city with people of the same profession, class or cultural group. Simone writes that this area compels "uncertain interactions and cooperation among both long-term Johannesburg residents and new arrivals, South Africans and Africans from elsewhere." He continues, stating that these interactions occur between "aspiring professionals and seasoned criminals, and between AIDS orphans living on the streets and wealthy Senegalese merchants living in luxurious penthouses" (Simone 2004:415). While being defined by its urban decay, the Hillbrowan "urban dweller shows a tenacious character exemplified in his/her restructuring of a socially and morally disrupted space into one where meaningful relationships, decisions and views of the self and society are reconstituted" (Manase 2005:103). Hillbrow is the point of entry to Johannesburg for many South Africans and other Africans. It is a place of escape from problematic home conditions in the surrounding townships, as well as other countries on the African continent, and as well as being a point of intersection, it is also a link in a much wider chain. Robinson elaborates on this link when she writes that it is:

not just the flow and connections within cities that reflect and generate their dynamism, and might change their spatiality, but the way they are connected through a wide variety of different linkages to other cities, other places, other times. Different parts of the city are connected differently: the linkages in and out of inner-city, high-rise Hillbrow and the suburban Sandton have always been different. Today, however, Hillbrow is not only connected to townships in Johannesburg and other cities, rather than to white suburbs and the white city centre as before, but the routes of many of its residents stretch the length of Africa (1998:170)

Whereas the inner-city in Durban was defined in *Man Bitch* by that which it was not, the non-Hillbrow places in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are closely linked and connected with the inner-city. When the characters leave Tiragalong for Hillbrow, and

then later Oxford, they take a part of the place with them. Likewise when they return to Tiragalong, they take Hillbrow with them. The inner-city is internalised and becomes a part of the characters' identity, just as Tiragalong was the defining place of their origin and identity. Mpe writes that you "always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place. In the same way you carried Hillbrow with you always" (2001:49).

Although there are some obvious differences between Tiragalong and Hillbrow, Mpe chooses not to explore them in any real depth. The one difference that Refentše highlights is the lack of water in Tiragalong where "you could only bath once a week" (2001:10). It is rather the similarities between the two places that interest Mpe. While Hillbrow is imagined by Tiragalong as a crime-ridden hell, Mpe argues that if you "work out the number of crimes per number of people then Tiragalong will be just as bad" (2001:18). In fact, some of the crimes carried out in Hillbrow are a result of people from Tiragalong bringing their grudges to the city. Lerato's father, Piet, is murdered as a result of a reading conducted by the local witchdoctor from Tiragalong. The actual crimes committed in Tiragalong that we hear about are usually related to accusations of witchcraft and the manner in which they are carried out (by necklacing) and the fact that they are carried out by members of the community, makes them even more horrific. The crimes that we read about in Hillbrow are random acts of violence, such as Sammy's attack (2001:51) and Bohlale's 'hit and run' by hijackers (2001:53). However, both Tiragalong and Hillbrow represent a loss in traditional values and notions of Africanness and community.

The other significant place in the novel is Oxford, where Refilwe goes to complete an MA programme in Publishing and Media Studies. England is constructed through stereotypes – the foreign students comment that the English are "as cold as their weather" (2001:105), unfriendly, but professional and dedicated to their duties. Oxford is not given the close mapping that Hillbrow gets and it serves rather as a place where Refilwe can question her xenophobic attitude and a place outside of Hillbrow where she can discover her HIV status. Oxford exists in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* like Europe of *Man*

Bitch. It provides respite from the chaos of Hillbrow and the Point and allows the characters to reflect on their relationships to the respective inner-city place they call home.

3.2. Home, belonging and xenophobia

Hillbrow has an ambivalent nature and its residents have an ambivalent response to it as a place and as home. As a theme, Mpe's novel traces "the dissolution of notions of 'home'; of what constitutes a 'community', as the characters move from the rural village, Tiragalong, in impoverished Limpopo province, to Hillbrow, inner-city Johannesburg" (Clarkson 2005:451). This ambivalent nature is described when Mpe writes:

Refentše, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow, welcome to our Hillbrow of milk and honey and bile, all brewing in the depths of our collective unconsciousness (2001:41).

The inner-city can offer both hardship and opportunity. This represents the reality of life in postapartheid South Africa. It is a place that is attractive to foreigners but at the same time offers a harsh existence once there. There is no sense of community in the inner-city; rather fragmented ethnic and language groups stick together. It is seen as an extension of the black township and a place to escape from the township (see Gotz and Simone 2003:129). However, it is also a place of relative freedom and anonymity. Yet, for many in the inner-city, the township or the foreign country from which they originate still exists as 'home'. Thus, for some, there is no home in the city, only temporary existence.

This ambivalent nature of the South African city is also highlighted through its inhabitants. These range from people from the rural areas to African migrants from around the continent. Hillbrow is not an easy place to call home. When a child is hit by a car in a hit-and-run, her



Figure 17: Hillbrow children

screams are quickly covered up by celebrating soccer fans (Mpe 2001:2). And yet, the narrator repeatedly calls it “Our Hillbrow”. The word ‘our’ is ironic especially when applied to “places marked by their rootlessness and lack of ownership” (Goodman 2003:92), such as Hillbrow. Clarkson writes that “Our Hillbrow”:

calls up expectations of a community in propertied relation to a specific place, but the narrative to follow systematically undercuts expectations of a locatable community premised on a shared set of beliefs and recognised obligations. Few of the inhabitants of Hillbrow are native to the place, so that the ‘our’ of the novel’s title starkly, if ironically, registers notions of dispossession (2005:452).

The repetition of “Welcome to Our Hillbrow” attempts to construct a sense of place and belonging where there is none. This sense of displacement is not unique to Hillbrow but is seen in cities around the world. However, where Hillbrow differs is that in:

this fictional representation of the southern African urban space shows that the cities are not entirely rigid, but still offer the potential for the inhabitants to reconstitute their identities and lives and redefine their alienating city spaces (Manase 2005:89).

The postcolonial city, although fragmented and alienating, also allows for a situation where identities can be reconstituted and redefined, and this applies to postapartheid society as a whole. Belonging, to Hillbrow and to South Africa, is therefore defined “through a sense of experience” (Lovell 1998:3). Xenophobia plays a large part in the construction of the city as home. Home is “a way of establishing difference” (George 1996:2) and in this way Hillbrow is constructed as home. Home is connected to xenophobia; is constructed through xenophobia. The inner-city is home to various migrant communities who cluster in certain areas due to safety issues, as well as shared language and culture. The migrants are stereotypically assumed to be stealing jobs from South Africans and are targeted by gangs and criminals as soft targets. Termed *Makwerekwere*, many of the foreigners make their living as hawkers which has resulted in numerous clashes with South African hawkers and the Greater Johannesburg Hawkers Association (Palmary, Rauch and Simpson 2003:112). Foreign Africans are blamed for an overcrowded informal trading sector, the growth of the narcotics trade, and the general deterioration of the inner city. There is a situation of conflicting spaces occurring where different cultures exist side by side. The native South Africans complain about the crime

and grime of Hillbrow and blame it on the foreigners who are responsible “not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay” (Mpe 2001:17). It is the general consensus that the *Makwerekwere* should stay in their own countries, as South Africa has enough problems as it is. This attitude is juxtaposed with President Mbeki’s vision of an African Renaissance and the formation of the African Union.

The transition to democracy and entrance into a global social and economic network can partly be blamed for the influx of foreigners to South Africa. Simone, in his essay “Going South” (2000), explains the reasons behind the influx of foreign Africans to the inner-city of Hillbrow:

Johannesburg has long been Africa’s most developed city. But the accelerated turnover of populations in the inner-city areas has provided a feasible cover, if not necessarily a major motivation, for the sizeable immigration of foreign Africans to Johannesburg. This migration, in turn, has substantially shaped the nature of inner-city life and commerce, further contributing to its overall availability to a process of internationalization. Because the inner city is one of the most circumscribed and densely populated urban spaces on the continent, with neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow made up of row after row of high-rise apartment blocks, this socio-cultural reconfiguration has taken place with a large measure of invisibility (434).

This is representative of a global city where the localised notions of belonging and identity clash with wider national and international interests. The xenophobia that defines Hillbrow is representative of the xenophobia that defines South African society and in this regard the construction of Hillbrow is representative. However, Hillbrow finds definition “not as a place of belonging, but as a place of nonbelonging, a disparate conglomerate of all the *Makwerekwere* of the continent” (Clarkson 2005:452)

The mid-1980s saw a move of black South Africans into the gray area of Hillbrow followed by a sizable immigration of foreign Africans in the 1990s resulting in new informal economies taking hold in the city’s already crowded streets.



Figure 18: Hillbrow cityscape

Hillbrow, as mentioned earlier, is one of the most densely populated urban spaces on the continent where the “urban dwellers’ lives are characterized by dislocation and restlessness” (Manase 2005:93). Their lives have typically been disrupted socially or economically. This dislocation is also linked to the “early establishment [of the city] as a colonial space for capitalist exploitation, the influence of apartheid and the current placing within a shifting global economy” (Manase 2005:94). Refentše himself is a foreigner, his “personal history and memories originate elsewhere: he is new to the place, and the place is new to him. Hillbrow, for Refentše, is devoid of a history and of an identifiable set of shared values or beliefs” (Clarkson 2005:452). Thus, the inner-city represents a “veritable vacuum of belonging, where almost no one presently living there can claim an overarching sense of origin in this place or profess a real wish to stay” (Gotz and Simone 2003:129). The stories of the migrants in Tiragalong created Hillbrow as a “menacing monster” but the lure of the monster was “hard to resist; Hillbrow had swallowed a number of the children of Tiragalong, who thought that the City of Gold was full of career opportunities for them” (Mpe 2001:3).

AIDS and xenophobia are closely linked in this text. According to popular myth in South Africa, AIDS had travelled down from central and western parts of Africa (Mpe 2001:3-4). Following this logic it was the *Makwerekwere* who had brought AIDS into South Africa. Refentše’s cousin agrees stating the ‘they’ “transported AIDS into the country” (2001:20). Further proof was that Hillbrow, “the sanctuary in which *Makwerekwere* basked” (2001:4) was devastated by AIDS. Refentše questioned his cousin’s xenophobia, accusing him of being hypocritical because of his:

vocal support for black non-South African teams, whenever they played against European clubs, contrasted so glaringly with his prejudice towards black foreigners the rest of the time. Cousin would always take the opportunity during these arguments to complain about the crime and grime in Hillbrow, for which he held such foreigners responsible; not just for the physical decay of the place, but the moral decay (2001:17).

Cousin insisted that “people should remain in their own countries and try to sort out the problems of these respective countries” (2001:20). At the same time he used his position as a policeman to extort money from the foreigners. This xenophobic attitude was not

restricted to the black South African residents of Hillbrow. Refentše's superintendent, who is white, tells him that Hillbrow had been just fine until "those Nigerians came in here with all their drug dealing" (2001:17).

Refentše has a more open-minded view of the foreigners. He sees most Hillbrowans as originally wanderers from rural villages like Tiragalong. As such, they share similarity with the *Makwerekwere* who are students, lecturers, and professionals as well street vendors and the notorious drug dealers (2001:18). Many of these people are also refugees from war-torn countries who have been forced into exile and in this Refentše draws a comparison to the days of apartheid when their countries provided refuge to the struggle exiles.

Furthermore, Mpe shows us in his novel that xenophobia is not restricted to Hillbrow. Tiragalong is just as xenophobic. When Refentše falls in love with Lerato his mother is shocked and threatens to disown him unless he breaks off his relationship with that "Hillbrow woman" – even though Lerato is from the township of Alexandra. Refentše's mother, though she had never been to Johannesburg, knew "that all Hillbrow women were prostitutes" (2001:39) from the stories she had been told from the migrants. For the people of Tiragalong, the *Makwerekwere* and the Johannesburger were the same, both defined as "Immoral ... drug dealing . . murderous ... sexually loose ... money grabbing" (2001:46).

In England a similar xenophobia occurs in this novel where the Nigerians and Algerians are subject to intense scrutiny and harassment at the Heathrow border control. The South Africans, not considered 'African' due to the goodwill that the international community held towards Nelson Mandela, are let through with little trouble. The Africans, however, are stereotypically thought to be bringing AIDS into Britain, ironically just as the *Makwerekwere* were thought to be bringing AIDS into Hillbrow and the Hillbrowans were thought to be bringing AIDS into Tiragalong.

3.3. Sex, power, race

Power relations as they relate to place are explored in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* yet do not form as central a theme as in *Man Bitch* where I explored the relationships between black and white characterised by a 'sex for money' exchange. Johannesburg exists as two cities in one, with its office blocks and postmodern shopping complexes bordering high density, neglected suburbs. This contributes to the fragmented nature of the city. The first time Refentše is stabbed ironically occurs in the white suburb of Hyde Park (2001:22), not in dangerous Hillbrow. Later, when Refentše and a friend are hijacked at gunpoint, the surrounding people are jubilantly singing *Amabokoboko ayaphumelela* in support of the winning South African rugby team and 'nation-building'. As with Mbeki's vision of an 'African Renaissance', the concept of a 'Rainbow Nation' is contrasted with the reality of life on the streets.

In Mpe's novel, the relationship between urban and rural is juxtaposed resulting in a split identity for those inhabitants who share allegiance to both. This dialectical link can be further elaborated between "poverty, wealth, life, death, home and homelessness which result in the constitution of restless and dislocated identities for a majority of the urban dwellers" (Manase 2005:88). The city dwellers are thus vulnerable and alienated, but as Manase writes, have the potential to "reconstitute their identities and lives and redefine their alienating city spaces in accordance with their needs" (2005:88). The narrative:

re-shapes the communities of Tiragalong and Hillbrow by moving away from the assumptions of 'modern' urban and 'backward' village life while also challenging the assumptions of the reader by placing these opinions in an exaggerated, prejudiced context, letting the story overturn the ideas flaunted with confidence at the beginning (Attree 2004:70)

Gunner agrees, stating that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* presents "the rural shadow in the city" (2003:6).

Mpe's narrative encompasses the sexual relationships between the characters in the city. These "markers of sexuality and power are overturned by the importation of disease from 'outside' the accepted fabric of society" (Attree 2004:64). In Tiragalong,

the accepted cause of AIDS was “the bizarre sexual behaviour of the Hillbrowans” (2001:4), in particular homosexual sex, the description of which shocked the citizens of the village. However, the sexual behaviour of the representatives of Tiragalong in Hillbrow is dangerously unsafe. Refentše’s girlfriend from Tiragalong sleeps around with more than one man at a time (the reason for their break-up), Refentše sleeps with Sammy’s girlfriend Bohlale (after she tells him that Sammy had brought home a prostitute), and Lerato sleeps with Sammy, the cause for Refentše’s suicide. “Love. Betrayal. Seduction” (Mpe 2001:38): these are the things that define relationships in the inner-city.

The power of sex and betrayal in the inner-city is dealt with, but so too is a more subtle betrayal through the power of the story. On her return to Tiragalong, Refilwe constructs a story as to why Refentše committed suicide, laying the blame on the Johannesburg woman Lerato, so his suicide is construed as evidence of the “dangerous power” of *Makwerekwere* women (2001:44). The power of the story is further developed through the indiscriminate witch-killings that take place in Tiragalong on the basis of rumour. Refentše’s own mother, according to rural suspicion, had bewitched him and made him mentally unstable and the comrades of Tiragalong had therefore necklaced his mother to death (2001:43). Another women, accused of having sent lightning to kill Tshepo, Refentše’s friend and role model, is necklaced in a similar manner for her crime of witchcraft. Stories, or ‘telling tales’, it is shown, are dangerous and can result in death.

3.4. AIDS and poverty

AIDS has reached pandemic proportions in South Africa and is fast becoming the discourse of postapartheid. The statistics, even from two years ago, are staggering:

4.7 million South Africans living with HIV and AIDS-related deaths are estimated to make up to 31% of all deaths, increasing the mortality rate by 45%. By 2010, when such deaths are projected to peak and to comprise 67% of all deaths, mortality will increase by 205%. (Thomas 2003:185)

Johannesburg is estimated to have over “287,000 people living with HIV, making up 10.4% of the population” (Thomas 2003:185). Those not infected are affected by it,

whether it be through contact with loved ones, work colleagues or domestic help. Behind the statistics is a terrible stream of stories concerning abandoned babies, child-headed households, stigma, rape, suicides and evictions. Mbeki's government has only recently acknowledged the link between HIV and AIDS and the relatively slow roll-out of anti-retrovirals and the subsequent HIV grant of R700 a month come with a cruel condition. It is necessary for your CD4 count to be below a certain level in order to have access to the grant and the drugs. So while you may be sick, you need to be very sick in order to be helped.

The disease disproportionately affects certain places – the township, the squatter camp and the inner-city slum have the highest levels of infection. Le Marcis writes that:

The body afflicted with AIDS ... constitutes an archetypal figure in the city of Johannesburg and how, in its search for care and for sanctuary, it acts as a place of mediation and meeting between the public and the private, the official and the unofficial, the here and the elsewhere (2004:454).

AIDS is placed alongside a “xenophobic attitude to foreigners (Makwerekwere) and treated as the ‘other’ that has invaded their community” (Attree 2004:62). However, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* also “undercuts the sense of a national invasion envisaged by Refentše's cousin, by constructing the narrative to lead the reader into placing Refilwe's infection abroad”, undercutting the reader's expectations (Attree 2004:68).

The irony of the situation is that when black South Africans achieved political freedom, at the same time they fell sick. Free to move across the lines of apartheid, with no restrictions to claiming the space of the city as their own, the inner-city inhabitants of Hillbrow now have to navigate the space of AIDS, between the healthy and the sick, the hospital, hospice and clinic. The street still exists as the site of interaction, but where it once was white and black it is now positive and negative, healthy and sick. Through this crossing and interaction the space is redefined.

While the inner-city is the site for HIV infections and AIDS death in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, “inciting venomous and xenophobic attacks ... on the so-called

Makwerekwere, ... as many mysterious deaths occur in Tiragalong—the only difference is that these deaths are attributed to ‘witchcraft’ (Clarkson 2005:453). As Mpe writes, “strange illnesses courted in Hillbrow, as Tiragalong knew only too well, could only translate into AIDS” (2001:3). However, even villagers who had never been to Johannesburg have also died of sexually transmitted diseases thereby dispelling the myth that the disease is brought in from the urban areas. When in Oxford, Refilwe has a relationship with a Nigerian student. They both discover that they are in the advanced stages of AIDS, while Refilwe has been infected for a decade or more (2001:117). They both decide to return to their respective homes to die. Refilwe wanted to die:

here at home, to be buried in the sun-scorched lands of the Northern Province that was filled with dry grass and tree leaves turned white, like bleached bones. She wanted to be laid to rest in our Tiragalong, even if it meant exiting this world amidst the ignorant talk of people who turned diseases into crimes (2001:116).

Returning to Tiragalong she experiences stigma and shame from her family and community – in essence, the xenophobia that she helped instil. Through her illness, however, she finds acceptance of herself and others. She realises that she is a “Hillbrowan. An Alexandran, A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A *Lekwerekwere*, just like those you once held in such contempt” (2001:122). AIDS is the great leveller. No longer South African or Nigerian, people become AIDS-sufferers and find common ground to unite. Refentše writes a short story about an HIV positive woman who is ostracised by the community of Tiragalong, who felt she deserved what she got. This woman decides, self-referentially, to write a story about Hillbrow, xenophobia and AIDS (2001:54). This then is the story that Mpe writes. Hillbrow, the place, is closely connected with both xenophobia and AIDS, and as Mpe shows us these two malaises have the same response from the community at large.

4. Conclusion

This chapter has explored some of the key issues affecting the inner-city of Johannesburg, as constructed in the novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. This place, like the inner-city of Durban, is a place of crime and poverty, with the ever present threat of danger lurking. The inner-city is also a site of interaction between South Africans and

foreign Africans and a site for interaction between South Africans and the disease AIDS. A change in attitude to one could instigate a change in attitude to the others and create a South Africa that is free and fair for all. It is in the place of literature that we come symbolically to terms with the issues affecting the place of the inner-city. Hillbrow is crowded and chaotic with antisocial behaviour like prostitution and drug-dealing on the street corners. It is a fragmented and commodified space. Yet, it also has elements of joy as Mpe has shown. In these ways, the construction of Hillbrow is particular to itself. However, it is also used as an archetype to represent the contemporary South African society and opens up the question whether AIDS will become the overwhelming narrative of the future.

Conclusion

Frank Lloyd Wright has been quoted as saying that the “modern city is a place for banking and prostitution and very little else” (Knowles 2003:345). Although Wright’s comment was undoubtedly made with irony, it is at least half true for the South African inner-city written about in the texts under discussion. The banks have fled the inner-city for the relative safety of the leafy suburbs and fortified shopping complexes. However, prostitutes still inhabit the sidewalks of Mpe and van Wyk’s text, and in *Man Bitch*, dominate the pages. The space of the inner-city that allows prostitution to thrive also creates a space where drug dealers, illegal immigrants and criminals can set up home, for the most part undisturbed. Through the close, spatial reading of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, *Man Bitch*, *No Way Out*, and *Never Been At Home* in the previous two chapters I have explored the inner-city of Johannesburg and Durban as constructed through these texts. While the inner-city as experienced through the narrators in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Man Bitch* is different for each novel due to the socio-economic, age and racial differences between the authors, similarities can be drawn. Comparisons can be made between the two places and the two texts, the main focus for this thesis. These comparisons serve to characterise the postapartheid inner-city. Both authors lived the inner-city life they wrote about in their books. Both also tragically fell victim to the dangers of this milieu: Mpe contracted AIDS and died, while van Wyk was attacked and seriously injured by one of his girlfriends.

As discussed in the previous two chapters, the inner-city of South Africa as constructed in the selected texts reveals a site of intersection where previously spatially-restricted racial groups can now freely mingle. The inner-city is now a space where the barriers separating race and class have been broken down. This results in a place that is hard to define, and for its inhabitants, hard to bond with. While not being a ‘new’ place per se, the mix of race groups is what is new about it. Both texts also deal with a search for ‘home’. This search leads the writers to The Point and Hillbrow, two areas not readily associated with home but where they do find a type of home. The inner-city, while not conforming to our traditional notions of what home is, does provide a level of acceptance and inclusion to anyone regardless of race, class, sexual preferences,

occupation or HIV status. It is ironic that in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* this acceptance turns into xenophobia as space and resources become limited. Linking back to the definition of 'place' in Chapter One, I would argue that through these texts, place is constructed, albeit transiently, for both the city inhabitants and the authors who lived side by side with them. While these texts fit the theoretical models elaborated in Chapter One in so much as they can be read through the strategies of walking and the representation of space and power, they also provide a launching pad for debate on a postapartheid approach to place-based, and in particular urban, literary studies that deals with issues such as xenophobia and AIDS that are specific to contemporary South Africa cities.

The inner-city in these texts is a place where the experiment of the new South Africa is revealed at its rawest. Black South Africans were restricted to certain areas under apartheid, with the inner-city proving inaccessible for many. The collapse of the apartheid government saw an influx of black South Africans to the areas of The Point and Hillbrow, both being the first areas in their respective cities to become desegregated. The speed and totality of the transformation of these inner-city places meant that buildings still bearing traces of apartheid and colonial pasts are now being used for completely different purposes. The legacy of apartheid space is inscribed on the buildings and streets that are now home to a vast array of previously 'undesirable' tenants. As such it is a space of transformation. Flats that once housed a single person are now home to families of illegal immigrants. This transformation highlights the anomaly of van Wyk's move to the city. His flat on Gillespie Street is where holidaying, working-class upcountry visitors, in Durban for a beach holiday, would have stayed under apartheid and where a middle-aged, Afrikaner's move now disturbs the equilibrium of the rapidly changing area. Ironically, van Wyk attains a level of acceptance in this inner-city milieu while the black, African immigrants in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are subject to harassment and abuse from the black South Africans. A product, and at a generalised level, of the apartheid era, van Wyk's power is no longer political but more diffuse, visible in the economic / housing benefits and access to the middle-class respectability he offers to his prostitute girlfriends. Using his romantic infatuation with them, his girlfriends also wielded power and used this to control their relationships with van Wyk. The inner-city

thus provides a space for these changed power-sharing relationships to form between white and black. Sex, and associated power relations, is also a dominant theme in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* where it serves as a catalyst in the death of the main protagonist as well as being the reason behind Refilwe's contraction of HIV. The intensity of life in Hillbrow means that it is necessary to rely heavily on interpersonal relationships for support. Refentše's girlfriend's betrayal results in him committing suicide, an action he regrets later in the text, but perhaps the only way out of the inner-city for some.

The existence of van Wyk and Mpe in the inner-city suburbs of Durban and Johannesburg respectively was the result of opposite trajectories that both were following. Both were academics, yet van Wyk had sloughed off his middle-class respectability that Mpe was aspiring to. Leaving the safety and blandness of suburbia behind him, van Wyk was intent on finding inspiration and meaning in the marginal characters of the inner-city. Coming from a rural community, Mpe was on his way to a successful academic career which would have seen him able to afford to move out of Hillbrow. Both trajectories were cut short by the dangers associated with the places they were living in, so we can only guess as to where each writer would have ended up. However, their books provide us with a record of a place that they called home at a particular moment in their lives. This record is all that remains of places that are rapidly changing and as such these two texts can be seen as literature of an era that has since passed or is in flux.

The inner-city exists as a temporary place for some, with people passing through to better places, or leaving to return home after their goals (usually financial) have been achieved, and quickly replaced with more people; others are doomed to remain indefinitely. The characters in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* were mostly destined for middle-class lives in the postapartheid South Africa. However, their existence in the inner-city led in some way to their unfortunate deaths. Mpe himself was on his way to a comfortable life in suburbia when he fell ill and died of AIDS. Of the female characters in *Man Bitch*, Mbali died, Luisa returned to Maputo while the rest faded into the shadows

of The Point, only to be remembered as names in a book. Van Wyk himself suffered long-term damage after being attacked by one of his girlfriends, and has since moved back to Bloemfontein to live with his parents. The one success story of these texts is that of Zazah Khuzwayo who, after a stint in prison, is now employed by the Mpumalanga tourism association with her book *Never Been At Home* recently republished by David Philip. Khuzwayo has moved on beyond van Wyk and his intellectual mentorship with all traces of his editing erased from her republished text – van Wyk is not even mentioned in the credits. The inner-city generates pragmatic and transactional relationships that, once fulfilled, are erased and van Wyk becomes a stepping stone on Khuzwayo's upward trajectory to middle-class (financial) stability. The transient inner-city is not solely associated with crime, grime and hardship, therefore, but also provides a site for creative endeavours and was the driving force behind the creation of the texts discussed in this dissertation.

While the authors no longer live in the inner-city that inspired them, the people and places that fed into their texts are also under threat. Both the inner-city of Durban and Johannesburg are earmarked for massive redevelopment. The Durban inner-city is set to become the site for the construction of ten new hotels in time for the 2010 Soccer World Cup, with the area van Wyk writes about becoming a safe and sanitised tourist destination. The Johannesburg inner-city is seeing a move back into the city by well-to-do, young, white and black professionals. Coming with them are an array of restaurants, coffee shops, galleries, and hotels which aim completely to revitalise and remake the inner-city of Johannesburg. The texts under discussion thus provide a very real record of the inner-city in postapartheid South Africa immediately after the dismantling of apartheid, a place that is now about to be transformed. The transitory nature of the place of the inner-city means that the literature that is produced through and of the area is linked to that era as well as to the place.

Beyond the scope of this thesis, but by way of suggestion, comparisons can be drawn with another inner-city area, that of District Six in Cape Town, with the literature that accompanied it providing a record of this famous spot. District Six was a vibrant,

multiracial area of inner-city Cape Town. However, like The Point and Hillbrow, District Six was also characterised by poverty, crime and architectural degradation. The houses were often overcrowded, with as many as five families living in one house. Owned by white, absentee landlords, many of the buildings were in a state of disrepair. In the late sixties, District Six was declared a whites only area under the Group Areas Act and its residents were forcibly removed. Families were relocated to the bleak Cape Flats, 25 kilometres outside of Cape Town, with their homes and buildings in District Six demolished. Richard Rive's 1986 work *Buckingham Palace: District Six* represents the people and place of District Six during the 1950s and 60s and captures this unique inner-city milieu which at times is similar to postapartheid inner-city Durban and Johannesburg. Furthermore, Rive's reasons for writing the novel are comparable to the results of *Man Bitch* and *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. He felt "a need to write a contemporary history, a record of what it was like to live in District Six" (www.districtsix.co.za). While *Buckingham Palace: District Six* is just one of the cultural products of this area, many poets, writers, and artists have found inspiration in this inner-city place, and what came to represent.

Van Wyk chose to move to the inner-city, Khuzwayo and Mdakane saw it as an escape from harsh homes, for Vladislavic it was a place to wander and imagine and Mpe felt a close connection with it as his home. In the inner-city, life is at its most raw. It is a space that has not been homogenised and sanitised like suburbia and thus provides a powerful inspiration for creative production. Both writers touch on this in their texts. Van Wyk was actively searching for beauty in the extremes of life as presented by the inner-city; Mpe produces a beautiful text whose narrator comes to the realisation that the inner-city provides reason enough to live. In a way both texts are elegiac for a time and a place that is no more, yet served to inspire their literary production.

The inner-city is ephemeral; it is a site of change. In the postapartheid context, it has seen a radical move from the white citadel of the apartheid era to a new, vibrant, potentially dangerous African city. The city is once again set to change with capital now flowing back into the area to transform it to a tourist attraction in Durban and an

upmarket residential area in Johannesburg. The only constant in the postapartheid South African inner-city is its ability to change, this in itself provides hope. In future years, the fate of the inner-city will represent the fate of South Africa as a whole. Currently home (and sanctuary) to illegal immigrants, the urban poor and AIDS sufferers, the way government and capital deals with this place and the people will reflect on how they deal with these social problems on a larger scale.

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