

Conference Paper

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**Splinters in the Eyes’– Reading the Metropoetics of Crisis in Post-apartheid Johannesburg Fictions**

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**Introduction**

My research project responds to current moments in the study of cities and urban space– in particular, within the domain of African urban discourse. My focus is the city of Johannesburg: how it is portrayed in four post-apartheid fictions and the relationships between these ‘imaginary’ spaces and the real social and political makeup of the urban terrain. In a sense, my theoretical approach fuses literary theory with urban theory.

Although my field of study is South Africa, the ideas I aim to use to construct a theoretical framework have both global and local relevance or meaning. This combination is invaluable to my project. One cannot separate urban discourses in Africa from developments in urban thought throughout the rest of the world. One cannot imagine that urban thought in Africa has developed separately to global urban thought. Moreover, it would be a fault to develop such a study on African geopolitics using only African or South African critical texts, since the aim of this research is to find meaningful pathways through broad studies of the city, and to save African cities from being relegated to unpronounceable and distant places- so often executed in global discourse.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, since the nature of my research is interdisciplinary, the approach that serves me best could only be one that is not exclusive, but expansive. Ideas and representations of African cities do not exist in a vacuum. The pejorative inscription upon the sign of the African city, and of Africa itself, has been produced within outdated yet sustained and prevalent world-views responsible for casting long shadows over people and places that are not situated in the ‘centre’. In order to deconstruct the meanings around African cities, one needs to set up a dialogue between those writing and thinking in the west, and those in Africa, and ostensibly the rest of the subaltern world. Thus, in my particular case, the major contributors to my

theoretical framework are South African theorists and thinkers, who themselves situate their work within global urban practices and discourses and thus create vital avenues of thought through South Africa.

Many of this selection of writers are proponents or supporters of a wave of African urbanism that is becoming increasingly powerful as a discursive intervention into the accepted, yet outdated models of urbanity. For a while now, there has been a strong movement in critical cultural and social thought towards a mode of portraying African cities as places of enormous potential- for change, creativity and subjective agency– despite often-violent contradictions and hardships. The motivation for this new wave of African urban discourse is the development and need for an approach to urban Africa that focuses more on the alternative, creative and enabling characters of African cities, rather than what may seem like chaotic or disorderly systems. This African urbanism is also very useful in framing how global urban discourse itself needs to shift and change, to be able to accommodate the variances and potentialities in all the world's cities<sup>2</sup>.

### **Johannesburg: a case in point**

Indeed, in a post-apartheid urban environment like Johannesburg, we are inspired to see the city as full of the potential for change, and for new codes of meaning and being – through, for instance, an appreciation of *difference*. This has been an enabling narrative for forging possible pathways into the future, from a past marked with traumas political, social, economic, cultural and spatial. In the South African context, cities are seen to provide the arena in which our own histories of segregation and oppression can be remapped. Johannesburg has been studied according to many of the same principles of African urban thought, yet it is also an intensely interesting case study. It is often projected as an incredibly rich space in which new histories, realities and agencies can be realized, for locals and for foreigners. Rory Bester depicts this (South African) urban potential:

Cities... act as filtering mechanisms for the kinds of possibilities never permitted by differences that remain apart. So it is particularly critical at

this time in South Africa's history that cities are effective in negotiating difference. For most of South Africa's colonial and apartheid history, the city was used to manufacture and maintain difference... The fundamental challenge facing the city is developing the means to allow the spatial tactics of consumption effectively— in the sense of building shared networks of meaning— to negotiate difference<sup>3</sup>.

Bester, along with the likes of Jennifer Robinson, Meg Samuelson, Tomlinson, Beauregard, Lindsay Bremner, Mangcu, Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall are prominent figures in the intellectual terrain where these kinds of ideas are explored<sup>4</sup>. In various social, literary and cultural studies from Maliq Simone and Peterse and Bremner's urban literary politics, the city of Johannesburg has been approached as a site of great possibility. Despite the challenges of the place, Johannesburg, as the largest and most diverse post-apartheid city, embodies certain freedoms and opportunities—not least of which is the freedom from a past, oppressive regime. It has served as a vehicle for the formation of a black urban identity as well as serving as a symbolic and valid avenue for the reclamation of a geo-political position denied to black South Africans throughout most of the twentieth century. The creative tactics explored by its residents and workers make the city one of the only sites that demonstrates the possibilities and existence of an alternative urban system. Furthermore, the city of Johannesburg is regarded, in many ways, as the symbolic embodiment of what South Africa has to offer to the rest of the continent, to itself and to the world: a “first class” city in Africa. Projected by the gatekeepers of the new South Africa as ‘*EGOLI*’— the place of gold, the (new) great metropolis of the South— the presence of any kind of crisis is usually avoided, or considered irrelevant.

However, it is at this juncture that my own project stages its intervention. One cannot ignore how Johannesburg also challenges this euphemism. Many critics would, and do see a city like Johannesburg as still divided, an oppressive space for the majority: a suffering city with suffering citizens, a city system that is hostile and aggressive<sup>5</sup>. The focus for these thinkers is such a city's overriding narrative of being organised not through creativities or freedoms but by divisions, capital and greed. New prejudices and segregations can be noted as continuously emerging. The city is, in many ways, becoming striated along new

economic, socio-cultural, political and physical fault lines. We can understand these crisis lines to be both new and old, products of our country's history as well as products of a post-apartheid environment. Indeed, such critics point out factors that contradict the dominant national discourse— a discourse where the traumas of the past are obfuscated in favour of stories of national successes and imagined futures, of smooth democratic transitions, new political and social freedoms and the birth of a 'rainbow nation.' In a country that has become increasingly defensive about such issues, critics calling attention to crisis have to tread relatively carefully.

This critical view of post-apartheid Johannesburg warrants attention. One is easily swept away by the flexible and empowering approaches to urban forms and practice that give African urban discourse the ability to 'answer back' to traditional urban theory and to the derogatory sign so often allocated to Africa. One may argue that these conditions are bound closely to the city's resourcefulness and inventiveness. Both sides of the urban argument need to be engaged with in order to locate Johannesburg's present and futures, to find a critical response to its particular disorders, while not neglecting the importance of its immense creativities and potentialities. We need, nonetheless to find avenues of thought that do not obscure our engagement with its more unstable or negative aspects. It is important to consider whether reading Johannesburg according to a powerful focus on aspects of (new) crisis in this urban domain.

I would argue that Johannesburg is far cry from the golden African city that is so often suggested or promoted by the South African government, local business and many popular cultural narratives. Instead, it is a place of displacement, confusion, dislocation, anxiety— producing this in its citizens but also produced in effect by its citizens. But instead of this creating further anxiety, what we are faced with is the opportunity to develop ways of reading, depicting or *claiming* crisis in this urban terrain in order to understand its new symbolisms and meanings. It may be challenging and controversial but this stance or claim has the potential to offer new freedoms to the subject and to this country. The likes

of James Graham, Benita Parry, Ashraf Jamal, Claudia Braude and Louise Bethlehem, draw our attention to this approach. Braude, in a special city edition of *PLMA*, (2007) writes in “Mammon, Magic, Mimicry and Meaning in Public Postapartheid Johannesburg” that the postapartheid space is dangerously devoid of meaning. She muses:

I am left wondering if our creative African lives in a reviving, nonracial Johannesburg...city are on the brink, collectively and individually, of a new meaningful, and engaged urban experience, our spirits freed, or whether we will continue to be threatened by a hollowed-out experience, trapped in a copying and consuming relation to our environment and each other<sup>6</sup>.

Lindsay Bremner sees the state of Johannesburg as one of new openings and closures, polemical, a dialectic that should not be glossed over, but rather harnessed in order to understand the city:

Today, apartheid has ended and its boundaries have been redrawn. The city that has emerged is one that very few recognise. While, on the one hand, it is taking shape according to a political discourse whose objective is the construction of an egalitarian, integrated, non-racial future, on the other, its social and physical environments are being shaped by a new politics of closure, by new divisions and separations, new cleavages and fault lines. Rather than seeing these as part of opposing or different trajectories, they should be seen as intertwined components of the ways in which the city is emerging from its divided past<sup>7</sup>.

Perhaps then this is the only way to avoid what Ashraf Jamal defines urban terror:

In South Africa the fraught nature of the city is compounded all the more by the terror that stalks it. Terror, as understood here, is not merely the sum of empirical acts of violence but a pervasive and variegated *psychic seam*. It is this seam that must be tapped if we are to understand why the city works yet does not work. For, to my mind, there is no disputing that the South African city is a psychically agonistic and besieged terrain. Neither knowable nor wholly unknowable, the South African city exists in the shadowy interstices of its vaunted intentionality.<sup>8</sup>

The possibility that Johannesburg can become more knowable lies in facing these fault lines. Patricia Yaeger proposes an approach that in many ways suggests a method for this. In her introduction, to the journal, *PLMA* (2007), entitled “Dreaming of Infrastructure” she proposes a metropoetics for city

literature:

...a new practicum for looking at city literature, including (1.) the fact of overurbanization, (2) the predicament of decaying or absent infrastructures, (3) the unevenness of shelter (along with food, energy health care, and water make up the mythos and ethos of the nurturing city) and (4), the importance of inventing counterpublics, or communal alternatives to the official, bureaucratized polis<sup>9</sup>.

She continues:

We need a metropoetics that remaps the intricate structures at play in non-western overurbanized city regions; spaces that seem to have failed but remain profoundly resourceful and inventive—refusing (in every sense) to solve the West's wage puzzle. These cities lack, their zeroes, reproduce a staggering sublime. As the architect Rem Koolhaas says, "In Lagos there is no choice, but there are countless ways to articulate the condition of choice"<sup>10</sup>.

Andreas Huyssen, in the same edition of *PLMA* uses Adorno's phrase to express this: 'the splinter in your eye is the best magnifying glass'<sup>11</sup>. The metropoetics I seek in a local, postapartheid context will ideally use both Yaeger's suggestions and what Huyssen implies with Adorno: that it is necessary to engage with Johannesburg, and its fictions, by first acknowledging the presence of what may be a permanent splinter, and to use this as the lens through which we can understand the realities and subjectivities found and represented in this city.

### **Johannesburg Fictions**

Writing about Johannesburg and its fictions, the likes of Sarah Nuttall, Meg Samuelson, Benita Parry, Carrol Clarkson and Liz Gunner, to name a few, explore ways in which writers and their characters are seeking and imagining meaningful realities in the city, and how the city creates and produces its citizens and a mode of writing. A thread that runs throughout most of these secondary pieces, is the fact that Johannesburg is a heterotopic space, a city made up of many cities, a place of radical shifts and new beginnings, but also of fatal flaws and fault lines. It is in the world of literature that these difficult realities can be faced and understood without rupturing our sense of reality or stability. The nuanced but intricate relationship between physical spaces and works of imagination is an important one to grasp. It is in the realm of literature that one

can turn to as a way of deciphering space, to interposing oneself into the places that are depicted in the novel. The world of fiction can offer us access to social realities in ways that the sciences perhaps cannot. Many regard city literature to have the capacity to embody the whims of the urban landscape and its peoples as well as inform social urban thought and theory.

Rita Barnard explains this:

The city can be thought of as an ‘ambiguation of the boundary between social reality and the representation of social reality, and therefore as an entity straddling the subjective and the objective.’ It is for this reason that fictional works may serve a cognitive function by helping urbanists come to an understanding of the emergent spaces of the African city, just as literary critics, in turn, may arrive at a better account of the generic and characterological peculiarities of contemporary fiction by attending to recent work in urban studies<sup>12</sup>.

I wish to suggest that if we look at some of the most recent Johannesburg fictions, we see ways in which many portray the ‘lacks and zeroes’ of a city captured by its own tenuous presence, a city destabilized from having being cast as the urban symbol of an uncertain 'rainbow nation' (while still depicted in the global domain as chaotic, dangerous and off-limits), a city split from being forced to forget its past in order to pave the way for an unresolved future. In its various modalities, this view of the city as a contested site is becoming increasingly important as one tries to understand the socio-political landscape of South Africa, its representations, ‘realities’ and futures. While this could be seen as portraying a typically dystopic vision of the South African city, one must rather look for the potential in this portrayal, or approach to the urban question in this country, as Jennifer Robinson argues in her recent paper, “Living in Dystopia: Past, present and future in contemporary African cities.” (2009) In fact, one could argue for the fact that this vision of the city is empowering, a poetics of the city that gives the writers a space to resist the dominant national (urban) discourse and to offer alternative avenues to discovering meaningful relationships to the city and self in Johannesburg. Indeed, the allegorical dismantlings of the “egoli’ narrative can be seen as acts of resistance, counter

responses to the stories of resolution and golden futures preferred by powerful, and often elite, national storytellers.

### **Methodology**

To map out this metropoetics of crisis and counter-discourse, I turn to the following selection of novels:

Ivan Vladislavic- *The Exploded View*

Marlene Van Niekerk' *Triomf*

Phaswane Mpe *Welcome to our Hillbrow*

Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*

I have selected these novels for a number of reasons. Firstly, they are varied in content and form and are written by different 'types' of urban authors. The backgrounds of each author— ethnic, socio-political and cultural—are relatively broad. Each novel deals with an aspect of Johannesburg's social space and constructions of meaning from a range of different character types or tropes— informed by the author's varying perspectives. Each novel is a fiction that operates as poetic and realistic textual space that creates an imaginative, yet jarringly familiar landscape. And, each novel develops plots and characters that display a conflicted and ambiguous map of South Africa's largest city, enabling the reader to access the ontological and spatial crisis that surrounds urban performances in contemporary urban South Africa.

These fictional portrayals of urban crisis arrange from being subtly executed to quite spectacular. In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Phaswane Mpe, writes about Hillbrow, the notorious inner city of Johannesburg. He conjures characters, simultaneously real and yet allegorical various techniques to depict the ways in which Hillbrow's inhabitants— locals or foreign nationals— interact with the geo-social fabric of the place. Mpe's novel presents a dystopic urban vision about xenophobia and HIV and AIDS, about the tense relationships between rural South Africa and Johannesburg, about education and writing, and about the distances between ourselves and what we wish to be, or to become. It is a novel

that uses melodramatic turns of phrase, evoking the melodrama of Hillbrow and the hectic pace of the city. At times shocking, at times reassuring, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is arguably one of the more important urban novels to emerge from the post-apartheid literary scene.

In *Room 207*, Kgebetli Moele also draws the reader into the enclave of Hillbrow, although this time, the story is a primarily local one, where the characters are all young, South African males. The issues brought to light here are much more ambiguous than in Mpe's novel, where the reader sees the youth grappling with their urban personas, their sexuality, their identities, as well as the place they— as Hillbroweans and self-confessed 'hustlers'— occupy in the greater urban spatial and temporal landscape of the city. We see here the characters' and writer's intellectually nuanced negotiations with Johannesburg, and visceral encounters with its caprices. Also at times melodramatic, yet thoughtful and sparsely fleshed out, this urban fiction draws out the many contradictions facing the black youth of today as they try to find a sense of place within the nation's largest urban hub.

Marlene Van Niekerk's *Triomf*, is set in the predominantly Afrikaans suburb with the same name, Triomf. Originally published in Afrikaans, set just before the 1994 elections, Van Niekerk's novel revolves around a poor, working class, white Afrikaner family. It is a novel that depicts some of the horrific, albeit ironic, realities suffered by the Afrikaner majority in South Africa during the National Party's reign, as well as their traumas—social, political, economical and ontological— on the eve of democracy. Van Niekerk's novel, like Mpe's and Moele's has garnered many critical responses from the academic and the public sphere, although there is arguably no other post-apartheid novel that depicts the horrors and perversities of a group of South African people in the way that Van Niekerk's does. Written in a multitude of voices, particular to each character, Van Niekerk's novel lays out the deep, tenuous relationships between her subjects, their heritage and their geopolitical environment. Highly symbolic, but also highly quotidian, this novel draws the reader into the anxieties and volatilities of the new post-apartheid Johannesburg.

Ivan Vladislavic's *The Exploded View* is a novel that openly pursues the problematic of how one negotiates and understands social and physical space. We see Vladislavic depicting various characters in a constant negotiation with themselves and the place they occupy within Johannesburg's layers— of concrete and symbolism. Vladislavic draws the reader into a textual space where contemporary post-apartheid amnesias are caught up in the traces of past regimes of power—discursive, linguistic and material. While his depiction of a time and space of urban crisis may not occupy the same spectacular mode as does some of the other selected novels, Vladislavic shows us many of the ambiguities and slippages bound up in attempts to negotiate the city of Johannesburg. Comprising of four vignette-type narratives, the novel allows the reader to trace the lines and wounds that emerge through different, yet linked, experiences and conceptions of the city. The materiality of the city intersects in the novel with the writer's dream-like topographies, creating a poetics of the metropolitan that is simultaneously softened, jarring, lyrical and disturbed.

### **Conclusion**

My aim is not to use these texts to attack Johannesburg, to undermine the great lengths many of its citizens are going to make their lives meaningful, or to challenge the relevance of other, more enabling ways of reading African cities. Rather, I aim to argue that these fictions are deliberate resistances and rebellions against the euphemistic and often ill-placed narrative of the new (urban) South Africa. In this, I choose to argue that by showing how Johannesburg and its citizens are often traumatised or lost, and thus by resisting our national story, these texts provide the grounds for an alternative kind of engagement with our national story, as well as an alternative metro-narrative— a difficult but important metropoetics for the reader and for South Africa. This metropoetics is one where fiction can become a therapeutic call to attention. By outlining crisis, the reader, and hence the citizen is offered a chance to engage and possibly emerge from it. What I intend to portray most strongly is the potential that lies in understanding or opening up the discourse to the presences of dislocation, violence and crisis in

the contemporary local terrain. I wish to suggest that instead of avoiding naming the crisis, as one tends to do when searching for solution to a difficult situation, it is in crisis that the renewal of a country's discourse of suffering resides. Moreover, it is in creating a healthy engagement with crisis that one can develop ways of handling the issues facing the country at this critical moment. Most importantly, and here we speak again to the overarching discourse of African urbanism, one needs to create a different understanding of how one reads crisis and to what uses one can put a knowledge of it. It is not an act of ideological evil or an unpatriotic act to identify and seek avenues to understand the harsh realities of Johannesburg— or any difficult subaltern city. The realm of literature is one such space that allows a certain freedom to do so.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> For excellent reading on this subject, see any of F. Fanon's writings—such as, *Black Skins White Masks* (1967) *The Fact of Blackness* (1952), or *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963); A. Mbembe's *On the Postcolony* (2001), J. Fabian's *Time and the Other* (1983), or S. Hall's 'West and the Rest: Discourse and Power' in *Formations of Modernity* (1992).

<sup>2</sup> This mode of thinking about the world and about space can be referred to as postmodern, or more fittingly, postcolonial, or post-apartheid. Although these terms are not interchangeable, they share a common thread: all refer implicitly to the act or of challenging the presences or dominances of absolute, inherited and fixed structures, ontologies and epistemologies. This has a distinct political edge in postcolonial Africa. Hence, the postcolonial approach has attempts to redefine the entire continent as more than just the intractable and the mute 'victim' of history. We see in the postcolonial, the deconstruction of hegemonic world-views and discourses of control and power. Postcolonial thought, in general, prioritises a nuanced understanding of the way the world's people create choice and how they may empower themselves and their spaces.

<sup>3</sup> R. Bester, 'A Moving City' in *Johannesburg Circa Now: Photography and the City*. Terry Kurgan and Jo Racliffe (eds and publishers, 2005) p.15

<sup>4</sup> See for instance, *Emerging Johannesburg: Perspectives on the Postapartheid city*. Tomlinson, R, Beauregard, A. Bremner, L and Mangcu, X (Eds) (London, New York: Routledge, 2002) or Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttal's special edition of the *Journal of Public Culture* (2004) Vol 16, 3

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, H. Molotch's 'The City as a Growth Machine: Toward a Political Economy of Place' in *American Journal of Sociology*, 82, Sept. (1976) and Paolo Ceccarelli's 'Ex Unio Plures: A Walk through Marxist Urban Studies' in *Cities of the mind: Images and Themes of the City in the Social Sciences*. 1984—for an overview of this approach to urban studies. Locally, S. Irlam's 'Unraveling the Rainbow: The remission of nation in Post-Apartheid Literature' in *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 103- 114, (Fall 2004) J. and J. Comaroff's recent, *Ethnicity Inc* (2009), M. J Murray's *Taming the Disorderly City* (2008), Lindsay Bremner's 'Bounded Spaces: Demographic Anxieties in Post-Apartheid South Africa' in *Social Identities, Volume 10, Number 4*, (2004) p. 457; as well as the work of E. Peterse and X. Mangcu are excellent sources of material

<sup>6</sup> C.B. Braude. 'Mammon, Magic, Mimicry and Meaning in Public Postapartheid Johannesburg' in *PLMA*, Jan 2007, p. 292

<sup>7</sup> L. Bremner, 'Bounded Spaces: Demographic Anxieties in Post-Apartheid South Africa.' *Social Identities, Volume 10, Number 4*, (2004) p. 457

<sup>8</sup> A. Jamal. 'Terror and the City' in *The African Cities Reader*: available online from UCT's African Centre for the City.

<sup>9</sup> P. Yaeger, 'Introduction: Dreaming of Infrastructure' in *PLMA* Jan 2007, Vol 122 (1) p. 13

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p.24

<sup>11</sup> A. Huyssen, 'Modernist Miniatures: Literary Snapshots of Urban Spaces' in *PLMA*, (Jan 2007) Vol 122 (1), p 27

<sup>12</sup> R. Barnard, 'Location of Popular Culture' in *Apartheid and Beyond: South African Writers and the Politics of Place*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008)