Passages into the World: South African Literature after Apartheid

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1 Introduction

In looking back at developments in South African literature since the transition, as well as looking ahead in order to consider present and future challenges in this area, it will be useful to start by posing a number of questions. These concern, first, the relation between current South African writing and apartheid. Secondly, and this is a more basic question, there is a need to ask why one would even want to consider "literature" in the context of an inquiry into the transition from apartheid.

A central question any such inquiry must consider is the extent to which apartheid still dominates South African literature. This question arises since arguably it is the case that apartheid did dominate imaginative writing during the time when the policy was il/legally in place. Indeed, this dominance was something with which influential intellectuals, people like J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, Albie Sachs, and perhaps most prominently Njabulo Ndebele, were concerned in their own writing. Ndebele's work in the 1980s precisely attempted to address what he considered the debilitating effect that the dominance of apartheid thinking and reactions to it had on culture, and in particular on literature. Ndebele, as we will see, was worried about the tendency of South African writing to fetishise victimhood and black suffering; the

concomitant stereotyped nature of such writing; and, particularly, what he deemed to be its unreflective and indeed unironic nature. One might say that the dominance of South African fiction by apartheid dominated Ndebele's writing about that writing.

Ndebele criticised what he took to be the artificial dichotomy between art and politics in the 1980s, and subsequently called for a "rediscovery of the ordinary," a concern with the everyday and a reflective, ironic engagement with it, in order thus to attempt to transcend apartheid and move beyond it on a fundamental intellectual as well as experiential level. Ndebele's work has been highly influential and has great potential for providing a lens through which to consider literature after apartheid. And an implicit focus for our inquiry might well be to consider the extent to which current South African literature has evolved in line with Ndebele's analysis of trends in the 1980s. My argument will be that, if anything, writing produced after the end of apartheid has exceeded Ndebele's hopes. This is not to say that there has been a radical break in South African literature after apartheid. Rather, one might talk about a continuum of concerns. Apartheid is still a major presence in texts produced during the transition, as surely cannot but be the case given its persisting legacy. At the same time, however, these texts testify to a worldliness which situates that legacy within much larger contexts, most particularly, those of the global struggles for justice and against AIDS. Moreover, the most interesting texts engage in these ways by means of real formal innovations with regard to modes of narration and in a radical, even painful, self-awareness. This is a literature of passage, passing, and

the past.[1] It makes explicit the struggle through the passage from an unjust system, through a difficult present, and into a new, uncertain future; often, it is a writing of passing into death; these passages, finally, are marked by the attempt to deal with and come to terms with the past.

Before I make this argument with reference to actual examples of texts, it will be necessary to pose some further questions concerning the relation between literature and apartheid in particular, and more generally the relevance of literature for thinking about transition. To the extent that apartheid dominated South African writing during the apartheid years, that it was the single issue about which writers were compelled to write and which they could not—nor indeed, with some exceptions, wanted to—ignore, the next question that arises is the following: What does one write about after apartheid?[2] This is of course a central question from the writer's point of view. And it gives rise to the question as to what writers are actually writing about after apartheid, and how they are doing so. We will consider some key recent texts to approach these questions. Another question that flows from the first concerns the extent to which current writing has transcended, or moved beyond, a concern with apartheid. In other words, to what extent can we talk about a "post-apartheid" fiction? Of course, in effect this question cannot be separated from the question as to the extent to which South Africa itself has actually moved beyond apartheid, and the question thus concerns the continuing legacy of apartheid. Concomitantly, given centuries of injustice and exploitation, as well as the persistence of huge socio-economic

disparities and discrepancies, one might consider the extent to which literature today suggests the achievement of a common national South African identity.

But before we get to address some of these questions, as mentioned earlier a perhaps more fundamental question is why one should even bother with literature, especially since there are a number of strong reasons why one might not want to pay much attention to it. In the first instance, literature is often viewed as an elitist domain of privilege, out of touch with the concerns, needs, and demands of ordinary people and everyday culture. This issue is perhaps even more germane in the case of South Africa, with its high rates of illiteracy and the prevalence of large-scale poverty.

There are a number of possible ways of responding to a line of argumentation that would question the relevance of an inquiry into the role of literature in the South African transition. One response would be to consider the question of what literature *is*, and how this relates to why it matters. Another would be to consider the implicit privileging here of literature, rather than popular culture, which thereby relates to the question of the scope of the present inquiry. I would therefore briefly like to justify the ambit of this paper.

In the first place, for better or for worse, and in full awareness of how limiting this is, my focus here is on writing in English, so I do not consider texts written in any of the other 10 official languages. This is a gap in the paper but it also does provide a focus.[3] Secondly, the paper considers fiction, rather than poetry or

drama, partly because my own research is concerned with fiction, and partly because some of the most interesting writing from South Africa since the end of apartheid has taken the form of the novel. For the purposes of this paper I will therefore be using the terms “fiction,” “narrative,” “writing,” and “literature” interchangeably. Of course these terms are by no means synonymous but I will assume that not only are they not mutually exclusive, but in fact that narrative writing involves a necessarily fictional dimension inasmuch as such writing, even (and perhaps especially) when it is “autobiographical,” is engaged in the construction of identity. But my focus here, nonetheless, will be on texts which overtly announce themselves as fictions, and thus I will not be considering any of the important recent autobiographies or memoirs coming from South/ern Africa.[4] Finally, I will not be considering the work of world-famous prizewinners who, whether explicitly or obliquely, wrote “against” apartheid--such as Nadine Gordimer, Andre Brink, and J. M. Coetzee--but will rather be considering the work of writers who have come to prominence after apartheid, or whose most significant work arguably has been written since 1994, for instance:

- Mark Behr, *The Smell of Apples* (1993); *Embrace* (2001)
- Troy Blacklaws, *Karoo Boy* (2005)
- Achmat Dangor, *Kafka’s Curse* (1997) and *Bitter Fruit* (2001)
- K. Sello Duiker, *Thirteen Cents* (2000); *The Quiet Violence Of Dreams* (2001); *The Hidden Star* (2006)
- Damon Galgut, *The Quarry* (1995); *The Good Doctor* (2003)
- Anne Landsman, *The Devil’s Chimney* (1997)

- Sindiwe Magona, *Mother to Mother* (2002)
- Niq Mhlongo, *Dog Eat Dog*, (2004)
- Zakes Mda, *Ways of Dying* (1995); *The Heart of Redness* (2000); *The Madonna of Excelsion* (2002); *The Whale Caller* (2005)
- Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001)
- Njabulo S. Ndebele, *The Cry of Winnie Mandela* (2003)
- Sarah Penny, *The Benficiaries* (2001)
- Ishtiyaq Shukri, *The Silent Minaret* (2006)
- Gillian Slovo, *Red Dust* (2000)
- Ivan Vladislavic, *The Restless Supermarket* (2001); *The Exploded View* (2004); *Portrait with Keys* (2006)
- Zoë Wicomb, *David's Story* (2000); *Playing in the Light* (2006)
- Rachel Zadok, *Gem Squash Tokoloshe* (2005)

I need to add some provisos here: First of all, this list is by no means meant to be exhaustive. Inevitably some texts will have been left out, but these seem to me to be some of the more important texts to consider. Secondly, given the scope of my paper, I am of course not able to offer readings of all of these texts, and nor have I in fact read all of them closely. Finally, I am of course not claiming that Gordimer, Brink, or Coetzee have not done important work since 1994. Indeed, some would argue that Coetzee, for instance, has written some of his most important novels and other texts since then. But my interest here simply is not in them.

A final point concerning my scope here returns us to the question as to how "literature" is to be defined. As mentioned, given the nature of my brief, in the paper I consider not "culture" broadly conceived but literature as a small, and indeed rather limited and elitist, part of it. Thus a broader and lengthier inquiry would want to consider trends and challenges also in popular culture, including film, music, and the visual arts—particularly since pop culture is very much part of the concerns of many fictions after apartheid. What would justify a narrow focus on literature, and indeed the underlying assumption that literature can in some way be distinguished readily from other forms of culture?

First of all, despite its evident limitations in terms of readership (given illiteracy rates and, indeed, more generally the probable waning of the printed word in an era of new media) as well as its bourgeois class credentials or liabilities, literature does provide a space for self-aware engagement with current issues and thus forms an important cultural substratum for intellectual responses to such issues. But of course literature is not merely a mimetic reflection of some or other given reality; it is not merely a response to a given set of parameters "out there" in reality. Nor is it, on the other hand, just an imaginative engagement with that reality which necessarily elides contradiction and might thus be understood as a thoroughly ideological mystification of the real. Rather, I take literature to be a mediation of the social and thus as an imaginative engagement with society that helps shape it. Seen in these terms, literature is closely tied up with *identity*.

One might rephrase and recast Fredric Jameson's famous characterization of narrative as "the imaginary resolution of real contradictions"[5] and understand fictional (and narrative) literature as the imaginary negotiation of identity. This may be a particularly fruitful way in which to consider South African writing today since it captures the active process of identity formation implicit in all narrative writing, including texts marked explicitly as fictions. From this perspective one might then say that literature is a way of negotiating difference: it is a means of constructing a self and therefore necessarily a way of relating to others, which in terms of South Africa of course explicitly includes *racialised* others. Indeed, "race" must be a central concern for any inquiry into contemporary South African literature, most especially since the system of apartheid fetishised "race" and thus may be understood as a process—often explicit and in very self-aware ways, as Deborah Posel's work has demonstrated—of racialisation or constructing "race" and racial identities.[6] Another way in which literature is tied up with the negotiation of identity and thereby difference concerns its relation to the past. Literature is a way of *dealing with history*, of coming to terms with the inaccessible otherness of time that has passed and therefore is the past, in this case a particularly brutal past. It is a textual mediation of the past, a passage towards the future through the past, which as Jameson (again) reminds us is inaccessible to us except in textual form and must therefore be clearly distinguished from historiography, which is the form that this mediating textual process takes.[7] As a necessarily textual means to engage with the past, literature is a (historiographical) form of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*. Of course, what this suggests also is that literature mediates access to the real in

the present; it is not only concerned with the past and does not only look backward, but in doing so also looks forward. In engaging with the brute fact of history, literature constitutes not only a response to the past but also shapes our understanding of the present and thus works to shape the real and offer a space for critique, a "speaking truth to power."[8]

As should be evident from the above, Jameson's work forms an important part of my theoretical apparatus. But, with reference more specifically to South African writing now, and more generally postcolonial writing, my theoretical frame is provided by Ndebele as well as Achille Mbembe. I will return to Mbembe's critique of modes of African self writing with reference to what he considers nativist and Marxian narratives at the end of this paper, in particular since it seems to be a critique that is similar in spirit to Ndebele's. But first, in order to get to the actual texts to be discussed, I now need to consider Ndebele's critique of South African writing under apartheid.

2 Ndebele and the "rediscovery of the ordinary"

Ndebele, in influential essays published in the mid-1980s attempted to think through ways in which the political agency of black victims of apartheid could be enabled in order thus to restore an active (and activist) black humanity which could transcend apartheid thinking and offer true liberation.[9] These were bleak days in the history of South Africa, marked by unsuccessful attempts from the side of the state to contain resistance to apartheid through reform; insurrection

in black townships; grassroots mass action; an escalation in labour strife; and brutal state attempts to contain this "Total Onslaught" through various States of Emergency.[10] Ndebele's work should be read against this background.

Briefly, Ndebele's central, forceful argument was that, as he put it in a well-known formulation from the essay "Redefining Relevance" (1989),

> the greatest challenge of the South African revolution is in the search for ways of thinking, ways of perception, that will help to break down the closed epistemological structures of South African oppression. . . . The challenge is to free the entire social imagination of the oppressed from the laws of perception that have characterised apartheid society.[11]

Ndebele's sense of apartheid oppression was that it was not monolithic or total, without the possibility of any agency towards resistance, but that apartheid sought but failed to bring into being and administer a totalised society.[12] That is, Ndebele does not subscribe to a model of ideology that is inherently idealist, requiring a transcendence by the self of itself in order to come to a consciousness that would allow it to move beyond the ideology within which it finds itself.[13] The "closed epistemological structures" from which Ndebele seeks an escape do not describe apartheid as such as the effect it wished to accomplish. Elsewhere, in more recent essays, Ndebele considers the nature of apartheid oppression, with its exclusionary logic, more explicitly as having failed to be total. As he argues, referring to the work of Charles van Onselen, there were " 'nooks and crannies' of

social life during the days of apartheid, wherein the daily intricate intimacies of co-operation between master and servant may have created reluctant bonds . . . . The South Africans who sat together at the negotiating table [in the period 1990-4] were not total strangers to one another."[14] These "closed epistemological structures" for Ndebele resulted in a perception of reality as "a total polarity of absolutes," a polarity that is articulated in terms of "race", and that would have to be transcended if a post-apartheid society were to be achieved.[15] It is evident that writing plays an important role in the process of transcending these 'closed epistemological structures' of apartheid thinking. But what is striking is that the activist writing argued for by Ndebele is characterised not by protest but by irony.

Drawing a contrast between the "propagandist" writer and the "artist," Ndebele argues that the latter "can never be entirely free from the rules of irony," which he goes on to define as "the literary manifestation of the principle of contradiction."[16] In the 1980s essays he questions the relevance of "protest literature" for his time of writing because of its "representation of spectacle," its sloganeering, and its stereotyped representation of characters. According to Ndebele, the tendency of "protest literature" to focus on the stereotypical victimhood of the oppressed, resulted in a mere "articulation of grievance" and rendered the oppressed apparently without agency: "the rhetoric of protest began to replace the necessary commitment to engaging the forces of oppression."[17] Such sloganeering and stereotyping resulted in the instrumentalising of language characteristic of "an art of anticipated surfaces," Ndebele detects a diminution of agency. In counteracting the paradoxical collusion of writing against apartheid

with apartheid – since the mere “articulation of grievance” characteristic of “an unreflective rhetoric of protest,” one which is also significantly unironic, tends to preempt the “need for further analysis” and thereby impedes the coming to consciousness such writing had set out to achieve[18] – Ndebele called for a move beyond protest and for a kind of writing that would take account of irony. He makes this call in the context of his argument that protest literature, then current in writing against apartheid, “may have run its course in South Africa.”[19]

Ndebele’s deployment of irony in this critical work may be understood to be the name he gives the conscious attempt to insist on an identity – blackness, victimhood – but only in order to surpass it. His call for irony in the 1980s, with its appearance in more recent essays, is integrally part of his critical-political project to transcend apartheid thinking. This project is perhaps best known for what became the slogan “rediscovery of the ordinary”: a renewed concern with the present, everyday experience of ordinary people, “the cycles of daily life in our communities,” as Ndebele has recently put it.[20] Importantly, Ndebele’s deployment of irony needs to be understood also with reference to Black Consciousness ideology’s imperative of recovering the agency of the oppressed by means of consciousness raising. This is a process which requires that the oppressed recognise their (ironic) complicity in their oppression primarily through what Fanon calls their “epidermalization” of inferiority.[21]

“race” is of course still a potent force in South Africa today. The question of how the non-racial ideal is to be attained hinges on how essentialised, racialised

identities are to be overcome: by first insisting on them, violently if needs be, or whether it would be possible somehow to let them slide away. The question of the post-apartheid not only becomes the question of the non-racial, but of the *human*, as famously adumbrated by Fanon in his call for humanity, and in particular that large part of humanity oppressed by Europe, to "turn over a new leaf" (or shed its skin, in a more accurate translation).[22] Similarly, Paulo Freire (approvingly quoted by Ndebele)[23] calls for "the appearance of the new man", and notes that "the goal of the oppressed is to become fully human."[24]

We might then turn to contemporary literature written in South Africa to consider the degree to which Ndebele's critique of writing dominated by apartheid, as unwittingly reinforcing the very system such writing sought to oppose, applies today. In short, to what extent does literature today in South Africa remain beholden to apartheid? How is apartheid figured in such writing? How is "race" negotiated in the construction of identity? Might one say that writing after apartheid is more, or less, "ironic" in the sense Ndebele means the term? What are some of the issues which currently inform literature in South Africa? In the next section I discuss a number of novels that seem to me to be particularly significant texts after apartheid, and I do so against the background of Ndebele's critique.

3 **Texts: Passages**

To discuss South African literature now I have decided, for reasons of space, to focus on only two major texts from the past decade: K. Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* and Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (both 2001). Each of these remarkable texts is by a young author, and each of them is now dead. I will also briefly refer to Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001), Zakes Mda's *The Whale Caller* (2005) and Ishtiyaq Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* (2006).

Rather than focusing on the admittedly crucial considerations of witness and testimony, specifically of course with reference to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (a crucial component of contemporary South African literature which has been dealt with extensively by other critics), I would like to concentrate on one of the most striking things that the most interesting literary texts after apartheid have in common, namely their *worldliness*. So it is on the *passage to the world* accorded by such worldliness that I will focus in the remainder of this paper. By the term "worldliness" I mean to invoke Edward Said's powerful double sided notion that what writing does is to engage actively with the world, while at the same time worldly circumstances affect those texts. The result is a complex dialectic, one that moreover in often ironic ways foregrounds the complexity of that dialectic. This notion shares Jameson's basic theoretical position that texts are passages to the real, but it perhaps more explicitly adds an activist edge to that position. When we read texts we need to be aware of their place-in-the-world, and we need to notice their active engagement with that world.[25] Perhaps stretching Said's notion a little bit, one could argue that after apartheid South African fiction is more than ever involved in engaging with the world, and indeed

that it adverts the reader to this engagement. This is not to say, of course, that fiction written during apartheid was not worldly, just that—in Ndebele's terms—that engagement was perhaps narrower than it is now, understandably focused as it was on the direct, immediate challenge of responding to and shaping an culture permeated by the racist discourse of apartheid.

While contemporary South African fiction still, obviously, is concerned with apartheid, its worldliness strikingly situates that concern within a much larger global context but, strikingly, often against an urban backdrop. Indeed, the city now and processes of urbanisation, with the resulting dialectic of tradition and modernity, the rural and the urban, constitutes a central presence, with few exceptions, in contemporary South African fiction. Dangor's Mickey returns to the township to explore the Newclare his parents have left for the Johannesburg suburb of Berea; Shukri's Issa, Katinka, and Kagiso find themselves in the heart of the metropolis, in post-9/11 London; and Mpe's Refente and Refilwe are confronted with life and death in post-apartheid Hillbrow.

Thus Duiker's novel *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* daringly, and explicitly, situates its interrogation of "race" in the contemporary South African city with reference to the complex contexts of insanity, drug use, gay sex, and male prostitution. The novel explicitly complexifies these topics, refusing to offer any simple moralistic response to any of them. The novel recounts the story of its protagonist, Tshepo (or Angelo, the name by which he is known in the world of paid sex): young, public-school educated, and from Soweto. His complex story is

intertwined with that of his good friend from school, Mmabatho, as well as with various characters whom he meets along the way, and whose voices make up interspersed individual sections of the novel: Patrick and Akousia, immigrants from the DRC from whom Tshepo rents a room before being evicted because of what appears to be drug-induced behaviour; Charles, an ex-con with whom Tshepo shares an apartment and falls in love, who takes him to Rastafarian meetings and ends up anally raping him to punish him, apparently because of rent arrears; West and Sebastian, prostitutes at Steamy Windows, the massage salon where Tshepo starts working out of desperation and desire. For the first part of the novel, Tshepo is incarcerated in the mental hospital Valkenberg, where he meets Zebron, a murderer and rapist who, it transpires later, was involved in the murder and killing of Tshepo's own mother at the behest of his father. Dealing with this violent event in his past, with his father's gangsterism, as well as—in a different way—with his own public-school education and the racialised complexities (evident in his self-awareness about his accent) is a major burden of the novel. Upon his release, Tshepo works as a waiter at a Waterfront restaurant before losing his job after being assaulted by Chris. As mentioned, he then starts working as a prostitute; large sections of the novel present his sexual experiences, often in highly charged erotic terms. After leaving the apartment he has shared with Chris, Tshepo (now known as Angelo) rents a room from the Satanist Jacques who, it appears, puts him under an evil spell.

The novel presents the reader with a vibrant but bleak Cape Town. Just under the surface there is pervasive drug use, the constant threat of AIDS, brutality, and

xenophobia. Duiker strikingly describes the apparently all-encompassing commodification of society, where everything has its price, most powerfully articulated—of course—by Tshepo's decision to prostitute himself. These then are the terms in which the extended descriptions of erotic encounters with clients are to be understood: they express Tshepo's reduction to the status of a commodity. However, at the same time, it is true that the novel breaks new ground with its explicit engagement with gay sex, not all of which stands under the sign of violation, rape, and prostitution. Towards the end of the novel Tshepo is released from the cycle of self-destructive behaviour in which he appears to be caught, and which the novel suggests has mystical underpinnings via the Satanist Jacques, by a mysterious quasi-Rastafarian, quasi-Islamist "Indian guy" called Nasuib, who releases him from the evil magical spell cast upon him through anal intercourse.[26]

Perhaps what is most striking about the novel is the nightmarish quality that pervades large sections. Duiker's work demonstrates a self-awareness, an ironic self-reflexivity that is painful and that appears to drive his protagonist towards insanity. This insanity is a function not only of self-awareness but of the desolate world of indigence that is the contemporary South African township:

> There are no parks to go to, no video arcades to explore, just dirty streets and longdrops festering with diseases. A lot of capable looking men hang around corners, their hands idle, frustrated, itchy with desperation. Are they plotting their crimes quietly? There is a goldmine in the suburbs, even

> the dustbins eat well. Perhaps inside they are bruised, feeling forgotten, progress going at lightning speed while poverty takes them at a snail's pace. We lived through '76, Casspirs, detention, Botha, and now this, everyone grabbing as much as they can for themselves, they seem to say. Perhaps we are not that different from the rest of Africa, our leaders are just better thieves. Too much money and a small ruling elite, are we that far from Africa? A Coca-Cola sign towers above on a billboard. What does it mean to us, what does it mean to them who have nothing? Buy more even when you have nothing? . . . . Everywhere I go I look. I feel like I'm decoding the madness, wrapping my brain around it, facing it, making it easier to see, to understand to name. Maybe it is called capitalism, making money for the sake of making money, not building communities. With capitalism it seems someone has to lose, someone has to be the underdog, someone has to play the poor bastard that holds up the structure, so that the rich can rich.... Maybe the poor are more powerful that they imagine, a whole system, a way of being depends on their wretched lives, their complicity.[27]

Passages such as these bespeak the madness not only of apartheid but also of the new order after apartheid. We see described here a society in which what matters most is profit, a country paradoxically rife with the commoditizing power of advertising and poverty at one and the same time. But it also suggests an awareness of the continuum between apartheid itself and the period after apartheid: as Steve Bantu Biko argued back in the 1970s, reflection is needed:

> to make the black man [*sic*] come to himself; to pump back life into his empty shell; to infuse him with pride and dignity, to remind him of his complicity in the crime of allowing himself to be misused and therefore letting evil reign supreme in the country of his birth. This is what we mean by an inward-looking process. This is the definition of "Black Consciousness."[28]

In Duiker's work we find an acknowledgement of such ironic complicity couched within the larger context of transnational capital and its dependence on the labour of untold masses of the poor. But it is an awareness that is experienced in, and arguably leads to, madness. The parallels here with the work of Joël Matlou's groundbreaking collection of stories *Life at Home* (published individually during the 1980s but first collected 1991), a writer whose work Ndebele celebrated in his influential essays "Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction" and "The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa." In the course of a discussion of new township stories, Ndebele stated that "[the] significance of these stories for me is that they point the way in which South African literature might possibly develop".[29] Like Matlou's protagonist, Duiker's at times wanders aimlessly through the urban wastelands of apartheid townships. Unlike Matlou, however, Duiker explicitly addresses—in a way that is immensely worldly—the imbrication of capital and class with "race", and he explicitly engages with neo-liberal assumptions concerning profit. Moreover, he does so in the context of the anger and bitterness of a frustrated liberation that leads to crime, violent sex, and AIDS; even if the novel, at 460 pages, at times seems a

little overlong, Duiker sustains his vibrant and entertaining engagement with these issues over a much more extensive duration that Matlou did. At the same time, the long passage from Duiker's novel quoted above might create the impression that this is a sententious text. Nothing could be further from the truth: Duiker's nightmarish style, the quiet violence of his dreams, as it were; his masterly alternation of different voices (as mentioned, chapters are narrated from within the consciousness of a number of central characters); and his narrative mode which in places appears magical realist, together ensure a creative and provocative engagement with issues and ideas very much of a piece with those trends and challenges presented by the second decade after apartheid being discussed at this conference.

What might be called the magical realist turn, something not considered explicitly by Ndebele in his 1980s essays[30], is prominent also in a number of other post-apartheid fictions, most pertinently in the work of Zakes Mda but also in that of Achmat Dangor and Phaswane Mpe. In Mda's case, the plays he wrote before 1994, and before he turned actively to novel writing, already evince a certain magic realist element. If anything this dimension of his work has grown in the series of novels published since 1994. What is more, Mda in his latest novel (*The Whale Caller* [2005]), in addition to sharing with other writers much of the formal experimentation and a concern with similar issues, also articulates a green, environmentally aware consciousness that pertains to the rights of others who are non-human: whales, the sea, the land.

Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* shares with Duiker's not only a meditation on mental illness and AIDS, and consequently a certain nightmarish quality, but perhaps most remarkable of all is its tightly controlled and highly innovative narrative mode: this is a short and highly concentrated novel, and as in the case of for instance Shukri's *The Silent Minaret* the reader has to work hard to fill in the gaps in his non-linear writing style. Mpe's style in the novel is characterised by a most unusual literary device, at least in the context of South African literature: perhaps the most striking aspect of the text is that takes the form of a prosopopoeia, a direct address to the dead (and therefore infinitely absent) Refentše as well as, later, Refilwe. The novel is thus told in the *second* person, rather in the much more common first or third. This has the uncanny effect of evoking while at the same time confirming the absolute absence of the dead addressee in each case. The narrative mode allows for an explicit emphasis, as Ndebele would have wanted, on—as Mpe puts it—"ambiguities, paradoxes, ironies … the stuff of our South African and *Makwerekwere* lives" (23). It is noteworthy that irony, along side the many ambiguities and ironies of contemporary South African life, is foregrounded here in his examination of the issues he explicitly, and repeatedly, foregrounds: "the profound questions of euphemism, xenophobia, prejudice and AIDS" (59).

As intimated before, the processes of urbanisation and the disjuncture of country and city are explicitly foregrounded in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, though in the end what the novel does is deconstruct that opposition. In the course of the novel, Mpe deals with the phenomenon of witch burning, a fate suffered by Refente 's

mother and a number of other characters. Just as Hillbrowans are shown to be hostile to foreigners from elsewhere in Africa, the villagers are suspicious of Hillbrowans and, indeed, of those in the village who appear to them to be evil. In the end, Mpe's novel suggests more or less explicitly, everyone is in principle *Makwerekwere*, and therefore no one is *essentially* or stereotypically this way or that. After all her xenophobic generalisations against African foreigners, the supposed bringers of AIDS to South Africa, or the cold English, this is how the narrator addresses Refilwe:

> The semen and blood of *Makwerekwere* flows in your Tiragalong and Hillbrow veins.... That Tiragalong should know well enough that its children are no better than others; the necklacing of witches ... cousins stabbing and shooting each other in Alexandra and Hillbrow ... Terror raping innocent and defenceless women and girls in our Hillbrow—all these things are enough evidence of that.[31]

In thus questioning the geographical dialectic between the country and the city that it sets up, as well as between South Africa and the rest of Africa, and thereby showing how people in Tiragalong and Hillbrow form part of a larger whole and are bound in as many ways as they are divided, Mpe's work also interrogates race and questions its stability. In questioning racial essentialism and stereotyping Mpe confronts one of the major challenges faced by South African literature, one brought to the fore by Ndebele in the 1980s in his critique of stereotyping. This interrogation works, as in Duiker's and Dangor's novels, to consider the question

of beneficiaries, the complexities of complicities with apartheid in the past (though also global systemic injustice). Refentše benefits through his cousin, a xenophobic policeman who engages in torture yet is represented as ordinary in a banal way: this is the person who welcomes Refentše to Hillbrow when he arrives from the Northern Province village of Tiragalong, helps him to settle in.[32]

A final point to make about Mpe's writing is his ironic self-awareness with regard to the status of his text as literature. The heroine of the story Refentše writes is a writer whose novel remains unpublished because she refuses to tone down her language, which was unacceptable to publishers for reasons of a moralistic political correctness. Whereas her manuscript "called things by their proper names [she] was grieved to discover that good literature was not judged according to artistic beauty and the truth value of what was said. She was dismayed to learnt hat artistic skill and honesty could be compromised in the name of questionable morality."[33] But most powerfully of all, Mpe's novel appears to be skeptical about its own force as literature, intimating the inadequacy of literature (a contributing factor in Refentše's suicide) to deal with the huge issues facing South Africa:

> Euphemism. Xenophobia. Prejudice AIDS. You wrote your story to think through all these issues, child of Tiragalong and Hillbrow. But your story was neither long nor sophisticated enough. You realised when it was published that it would never be sufficient. You became keenly aware that

> no matter what other stories you might write, none of them would ever be sufficient to answer such imponderables....[34]

This ironic self-awareness of fiction in the face of the future, a future marked by a necessary passage to the past, marks Mpe's novel, with Duiker's—and to a greater or lesser extent a number of other important texts after apartheid—as worldly mediations of and meditations on the post-apartheid condition.

4 Conclusion

Let me end by highlighting what seems to me to be the most crucial challenges to literature in South Africa after apartheid. In the first instance there is the question of gender. By this I means specifically the relative absence of writing, and here I again mean fiction, by women—and specifically by black women. Of course there have been some exceptions, but arguably the most interesting texts since the transition have been written by men, something which is illustrated by the authorship of the texts I have discussed here. It is true that Sindiwe Magona's novel *Mother to Mother* is important, and that Zoë Wicomb continues to produce very rich work. But overall this seems to be an area that needs attention. As Duiker remarks in an interview, "where are the young black women writers?!"[35]

What is the road forward for South African literature? "Race" and questions of racialisation will continue to be important considerations for years to come. The

city, with its complex negotiations of post-apartheid spaces and, more broadly conceived, the environment and global climate change are issues that are sure to arise (as for instance in Mda's *The Whale Caller*). Above all, if the texts considered here are anything to go by, South African writing will continue to explore their own worldliness: here the diasporic dimension, with émigré as well as immigrant experiences, should continue to be noteworthy. The tendency of connecting apartheid not only with colonialism but with current neo-colonial adventures, such as the "War against Terror" and terrorism (as is the case in Shukri's *The Silent Minaret*), is also likely to grow. What this amounts to is a worldliness that is also a historicisation: seeing apartheid, and South Africa after apartheid, in terms of much larger stories, and coming to terms with the legacy of apartheid in terms of those stories. To this extent contemporary South African writing is going way beyond Njabulo Ndebele's plea for a return to the ordinary, the everyday practices of people. In short, these practices, the texts suggest, form part of a much larger if fragmented globality.

To this extent, South African writing now is involved in the performance of complex identities that far exceed the racist frames of apartheid and colonialism, as well as of—as Achille Mbembe has pointed out, albeit somewhat controversially[36]--what he terms nativist and Marxian responses to those systems of power. Mbembe's argument is that there is no single African identity, and that attempting to define it in terms either of autochthony or in opposition to oppression, loses sight of the "practices of the self."[37] These practices are, as his argument makes clear, always situated in the world and thus mobile, subject to

time rather than being fixated on geography and its concomitant, blood. In their engagement with the world, South African fictions after apartheid demonstrate their imbrication with the world—its passages to the world--in ways that are full, mobile, and complex.

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[1] For more on *pas*, which considers its multiple meanings (step, dance, negation) and its etymological links (for instance to passage), see Jacques Derrida and Anne Dufourmantelle *Of Hospitality: Anne Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*. Trans. Rachel Bowlby. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.

[2] Talking about the transition in South Africa with specific refernce to writers, Achmat Dangor puts this succinctly as follows: “What I do think is different is that we no longer have this big Bogeyman called apartheid that we can target, and for many writers, that’s a challenge. Suddenly your raison d’être has been removed and you have to find new ones, different ones. In tone, in milieu, in subject matter, we have to move away from simply identifying old enemies, old foes, in the same old way.” *Stacey Knecht,* **“Interview with Achmat Dangor.”** ***The Ledge*** March 2005. < http://www.the-ledge.com/flash/ledge.php?conversation=57&lan=UK>. Cited 25 April 2007.

Compare also Coetzee’s remarks, in his “Jerusalem Prize Acceptance Speech” (1987), on the dominance of the imagination by apartheid. He expresses the longing he and many of his fellow South African novelists feel “to quit a world of pathological attachments and abstract forces, of anger and violence, and take up residence in a world

where a living play of feelings and ideas is possible, a world where we truly have an occupation. J. M. Coetzee, *Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews*. Ed. David Attwell. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1992.

3 The necessary task of considering all writing, and indeed all cultural phenomena, from South Africa would be vast. One fairly recent attempt to do justice to South African writing in all the languages perhaps inevitably suffered severe attacks. See Michael Chapman, *Southern African Literatures*, London: Longman, 1996. For some of these attacks, see ...

4 Compare work by Peter Godwin, Alexandra Fuller, J. M. Coetzee.

5 Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*: *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY.: Cornell University Press, 1981. 77. Also compare 118: the ideologeme can be grasped "as the imaginary resolution of the objective contradictions to which it thus constitutes an active response."

6 See for instance Deborah Posel, "Race as Common Sense: Racial Classification in Twentieth-Century South Africa." *African Studies Review* 44.2 (2001): 87-113.

7 Jameson, 82. Jameson further writes that 'history . . . is *not* a text, for it is fundamentally non-narrative and nonrepresentational; what can be added, however, is the proviso that history is inaccessible to us except in textual form'. The brute fact of history, the raw force that it enacts, the actuality of what happened, cannot be represented but is, nonetheless, only accessible through the mediation of textual form, that is, through historiography as the writing-of-history, and literature as an engagement with the historical past.

[8] Compare Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*. London: Vintage, 1994.

[9] In this section I draw on my discussionof Ndebele in my essay "Ndebele, Fanon, Agency, and Irony." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30.4 (December 2004): 749-763.

On Ndebele's emphasis on *black* humanity, see T. Morphet, 'Cultural Imagination and Cultural Settlement' in I. de Kock and K. Press (eds), *Spring is Rebellious*. Cape Town: Buchu Books, 1990. 139-140. There is of course a huge body of historical literature, much of it drawing on Gramsci, concerning the agency of the oppressed in the face of colonialism. For a critical survey and useful introduction to many of the issues involved, see D. Engels and S. Marx, 'Hegemony in a Colonial Context' in D. Engels and S. Marks (eds), *Contexting Colonial Hegemony: State and Society in Africa and India*. London: I. B. Taurus, 1994. 1-15.

[10] See A. J. Norval, *Deconstructing Apartheid Discourse*. London: Verso, 1996. 219-274, for an insightful examination of this period.

[11] Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 65. Though "Redefining Relevance" was first published in 1989, an earlier version dates back to to 1986. See N. S. Ndebele, 'Beyond "Protest": New Directions in South African Literature' in K. H. Petersen (ed.). *Criticism and Ideology: Second African Writers' Conference Stockholm 1986*. Uppsala: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988. 205-216.

[12] For an understanding of apartheid in similar terms, see R. Thornton, "The Potentials of Boundaries in South Africa: Steps Towards a Theory of the Social Edge." *Postcolonial Identities in Africa*. Eds. R. Werbner and T. Ranger. London: Zed, 1996. 141-144.

[13] See Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980. 118.

[14] Ndebele, 'Of Lions and Rabbits: Thoughts on Democracy and Reconciliation', *Pretexts*, 8, 2 (1999), p.153.

[15] Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 58. See 23, 37 for Ndebele's elaboration of this polarity in racial terms, and its articulation in 'protest literature'.

[16] Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, p.67.

[17] *Ibid.*, p.61.

[18] *Ibid.*, pp.62-63.

[19] Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, p.58. He extends this argument forcefully in especially three essays: 'Turkish Tales and Some Thoughts on South African Fiction', 'The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa', and 'Redefining Relevance', all included in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*.

[20] N. S. Ndebele, 'South Africans in Search of Common Values', *Pretexts*, 10, 1 (2001), p.77; *Rediscovery of the Ordinary* pp.37, 27, 25. That Ndebele's work has itself become the subject of sloganeering (he is arguably, in literary critical circles at least, chiefly associated with the slogan 'rediscovery of the ordinary') of course entails a degree of irony in itself, one which I do not pursue here.

[21] F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. C. L. Markmann (New York, Grove Press, 1967), p.11.

[22] F. Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. C. Farrington (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1967), p.255. As Alessandrini points out, the phrase '*il faut faire peau neuve*' is more accurately rendered 'we must grow a new skin', thus also referring back to *Black Skin, White Masks*. A. C. Alessandrini, 'Humanism in Question: Fanon and Said' in H. Schwarz and S. Ray, *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (Malden, MA., Blackwell, 2000), pp.438, 448.

[23] Ndebele, 'Democracy and Reconciliation', p.155.

[24] P. Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. M. B. Ramos (New York, Herder and Herder, 1968), p.42.

[25] Edward Said, *The World, The Text and The Critic*, 1983.

[26] See 438.

[27] ibid., 430, 431-432.

[28] Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, ed. A. Stubbs (London, Heinemann, 1987).

[29] Ndebele, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, 55.

[30] The strangeness of Matlou's stories lends itself to characterisation in terms of magic. A number of critics, such as Dorothy Driver, Andre Brink (26-27) and Michael Chapman (376), have approached Matlou in terms of magic realism. See Dorothy Driver, "'Introduction' to *Appendix: South Africa*." *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (*Annual Bibliography of Commonwealth Literature*

1991) 27(2): 110-118; Andre Brink, "Interrogating Silence: New Possibilities Faced by South African Literature." Derek Attridge & Rosemary Jolly (eds.) *Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 14-28; Chapman, ibid.

31 ibid., 123

32 Mpe, 20-21.

33 ibid, 57-58.

34 ibid., 60.

35 Victor Lakay, " 'I'm a travelling salesman.' An Interview with Novelist K. Sello Duiker." *Q-Online.* <http://www.q.co.za/2001/2002/04/17-duiker.html>, accessed 1 April 2007.

36 For responses to Mbembe's argument, see the articles collected in *Public Culture* 14.3, September 2002.

37 Achille Mbembe, "African Modes of Self Writing." Translated Steven Rendall. *Public Culture* 14.1 (2002). 272.