

## South African Literary Cartographies: A Post-transitional Palimpsest

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**Abstract:** This article investigates three South African novels in an attempt to map the movement between transitional cultural production and post-transitional literature of the present. I briefly outline Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) as a formative text of the South African transitional period before discussing Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006) and Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin* (2007) as post-transitional texts. These novels all circle around issues of place and space, while also revealing the shifts in South African cultural history, as they comprise a set of related perspectives that inscribe meaning across times and spaces. I argue that a palimpsestic reading of this fiction opens up the possibility of reconceptualizing the relationship between space, place, and transnational connectivity. Each of the three texts under discussion writes the space of the city as a type of situated transnationalism where the local and the global exist as coeval discourses of signification. The fecundity of a palimpsestic reading lies in the revelation of how one transitional experience is already present in another. By inscribing one discursive act over another, the ruptures and continuities between textualizations reveal a wealth of imaginaries that, I argue, define the idea of post-transitional South African literature. But perhaps most importantly, the post-transitional can be read as a palimpsestic concept itself, much like the fiction explored in this article, in that it enables a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it. Rather than moving in a temporal linear fashion, post-transitional literature creates a palimpsest in which we can read the imaginaries circulating through and shaping South African cultural formations today.

**Keywords:** South African literature, post-transitional, transnationalism, Phaswane Mpe, Ceridwyn Dovey, Kgebetli Moele

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Much has been written about the literature of the South African transition, with its focus on unearthing buried histories, the legacies of resistance, suppressed conceptions of identity, and the deployment of nuance to describe ordinary life. After nineteen years of democratic rule in South Africa, the transitional period, understood as inextricably bound to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), has begun to wane. What, then, is emerging in South Africa after its period of transition to a democratic state, and how is this emergence reflected in the literary imagination? In other words, what defines the current cultural landscape of post-transitional South Africa? This article investigates three South African novels in an attempt to map the movement between transitional cultural production and post-transitional literature of the present. I will briefly outline Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) as a formative text of the South African transitional period before discussing Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006) and Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin* (2007) as post-transitional texts. These novels all circle around issues of place and space while also revealing the shifts in South African cultural history, as they comprise a set of related perspectives that inscribe meaning across times and spaces.

The textual, to paraphrase Robert Young, involves a discursive act: an enunciation that both creates and circumscribes the material world (qtd. in Chapman 200). I therefore argue that a palimpsestic reading of post-transitional fiction opens up the possibility of reconceptualizing the relationship between space, place, and transnational connectivity in South Africa. Each of the three texts under discussion writes the space of the city as a type of situated transnationalism where the local and the global exist as coeval discourses of signification. I am not focused on the relationship between now and then but am interested instead in mapping a type of current cultural history through an engagement with matters of place and space. The fecundity of a palimpsestic reading lies in the revelation of how one transitional experience is already present in

another. By inscribing one discursive act over another, the ruptures and continuities between textualizations reveal a wealth of imaginaries that, I argue, define the idea of post-transitional South African literature.

The term “post-transitional” is certainly not without its problems. It is, and is not, a temporal marker, as it does refer to something moving but does not claim that the issues involved in the transition have been resolved. As a referent it cannot but highlight the passage of time that has passed since South Africa’s transition into a democracy, yet it also points to the period before and after this formal transition as an unbounded period and discourse. The term “post-transitional” can be read in much the same way as the term “post-feminist,” with its attendant conceptual shifts that do not necessarily imply that the ideals of feminism have been attained and are now to be taken for granted. As Ashraf Jamal remarks, “The phrase ‘post-transitional fiction’ becomes most suggestive when the transitive accommodates the intransitive and when the prefix, post, signals not a negation or surpassing but a *zone of activity*” (15; emphasis in original). Characterized by a proliferation of genres, post-transitional literature encompasses diasporic South African writings (often examining issues of dislocation), proletarian disclosures, lyrical existential ruminations, memoir, satire, miracle narratives, and crime stories and addresses issues of return, the dynamics of illness, and questions of space and its contestation to name a few trends. It is then a zone of activity and an analytic that heralds a broadening of concerns and styles within a transnational frame.

A transnational framework or approach is centrally concerned with movements, flows, and circulations “not simply as a theme or motif but as an analytic set of methods which defines the endeavour itself. Put another way, a concern with transnationalism would direct one’s attention to the ‘space of flows’” (Hofmeyr qtd. in Bayley et al. 1443). Ian Baucom, in discussing the idea of the global, situates these same

“spaces-as-flows” as being linked to the furthest corners of the earth but that belong less to the city or state in which they happen to have come to rest than to the principles of exchange they embody, the “flows of precious metals, bills of exchange[,]

. . . monetary surpluses” they regulate, the conversion of endless variety into a single, general equivalent: money. (Baucom 160)

The idea of the global, and its attendant association to ideas of globalization, should be apprehended cautiously here. Isabel Hofmeyr warns against its association with activist scholarship that reinvokes World Systems Theory and ideas of development/underdevelopment: “In such flattening, the ‘Third World’ becomes the victim of the forces of the capital/the North/the Metropole. The political complexity of the South disappears” (qtd. in Bayley et al. 1443). These very ideas are explored in Moele’s and Dovey’s texts in different ways as this article progresses; I tease out the idea of the post-transitional within a transnational frame. If, as Hofmeyr describes, the transnational can be characterized as concerned with movements, flows, and circulation as an analytic set of methods that defines the endeavour, the post-transitional can be characterized as a sort of palimpsest in which the local and the global exist as coeval discourses of signification that circulate “not simply as a theme or motif but as an analytic set of methods which defines the endeavour itself” (qtd. in Bayley et al. 1443). This is not to say that the post-transitional is equivalent to the transnational as a “space of flows” but rather that it can be read as a coterminous analytic set of methods that is similarly concerned with movements and circulation.

The post-transitional does not point towards transition being complete but instead highlights what Meg Samuelson has called walking through the door (of transition) and inhabiting the house (of post-transitionality). She says:

The discomfiture or sense of stasis entailed in inhabiting the transitional margin is met by a desire to move on—to enter into a post-transitional state in which to create new structures of intimacy. Yet with the gloss of reconciliation now fading, transitional structures—and those that preceded them—may summon cultural workers and critics back to explore what they might yet contain and what unfinished business they have left us. . . . Rather than wistfully imagining the tearing down of

structures, then, it may be more pertinent to think in terms of the renovation and re-habitation of what has been inherited as a means to engage and unsettle the ongoing imbrications of past and present. (134-35)

As such, post-transitionality is Janus-faced, as one transitional experience is already present in another in some form, but as a signifier, it can be situated in, rather than bounded by, a timeframe. As a zone of activity and a discourse, post-transitionality points to a broadening of thought and form that is context-bound but global in orientation as it attempts to frame South Africa in the present, as well as in terms of the transnational relations that connect it to the globe. Perhaps most importantly, though, the post-transitional can be read as a palimpsestic concept itself, much like the fiction explored in this article, in that it enables a reading of the new in a way in which the layers of the past are still reflected through it.

Christopher Warnes defines post-apartheid as follows:

Postapartheid can therefore be described as a condition that paradoxically both precedes apartheid itself and that cannot be completely fulfilled even after the events of 1994 [since it] always existed and yet is impossible of full realisation: always existed because apartheid as a politics of permanent and institutionalised crisis has from the beginning been shadowed by its own transgression or suppression; impossible of realisation because the proliferating binaries of apartheid discourse will long outlive any merely political winning of freedom. (qtd. in Popescu 8)

South Africa is an ambiguous place marked by the overdetermination of racial taxonomies and a history of racial oppression, yet it is also a space that is iconic in what Leon de Kock calls the “global imaginary” of how oppression can be overcome and differences bridged. Burdened, then, by a history of violence and repression, and simultaneously celebrated as a site of justice in the global imaginary, South Africa as a signifier moves between polarities of thought. Rita Barnard has similarly traced

the image of South Africa in Oprah Winfrey's book club's reading of Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Barnard argues that the "master narrative of South Africa's democratic struggle . . . is made available as a resource in a therapeutic travelogue" (12), where South Africa is presented as offering a spectacle of suffering that may be overcome. Barnard links this idea to a transnational circulation of cultural production:

Oprah's Paton also suggests that geographies of cultural production and reception may become increasingly blurry and indeterminate. National boundaries, which have structured many histories of reception[,] . . . may gradually cease to be of importance. Or, more precisely, nations will come to signify in a new way, as mediascapes, occasions for certain kinds of stories, and (to be sure) certain kinds of touristic experiences. (15)

Barnard highlights the idea that South Africa, as a signifier, has a particular currency in terms of what stories are told and what histories of reception circulate transnationally.

This observation can also be applied to other imaginaries that designate South Africa as either being unchanged in the present (as in neo-Marxist readings) or uniformly transformed (as in the case of narrow conceptions of rainbow nationalism). The efficacy of binary systems of understanding from World Systems theory to ideas of the colonial/postcolonial are problematized as a means of understanding post-transitional South Africa. Similarly, Achille Mbembe has described the city of Johannesburg as having both a provincial and cosmopolitan nature, pointing to yet another layer of South African cultural life that is better understood as a space of flows. The inherently ambiguous character of these post-apartheid imaginaries is textualized in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207*, and Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin* in very different ways.

There is a long tradition of city writing in South African literature and culture from migrant labourer narratives, to Serote's poetry, to the trope of "Jim comes to Joburg." Johannesburg is often central to these imaginings and connects us to ideas of place and space. Liz Gunner says that "[i]n contemporary literature, particularly fiction, the city emerges

in an even more self-conscious way as an aesthetic, a political and an imaginary site, a vivid and explicit template for an entire array of social fears and possibilities.” Johannesburg is the subject of much debate: it becomes an “elusive metropolis” in the work of Nuttall and Mbembe and an “unimaginable,” “unmanageable,” “edgy” city in the work of Loren Kruger.

Finally, it is a city where historical structures of racial inequality are simultaneously being sedimented and unbundled; in which conceptions of race are being reinterrogated and remade; and in which cosmopolitanism resides, flourishes, or lies dormant—an “unfinished city” thrust by the force of circumstance into a conversation between the past and the future, between Africa and the world. (Bender qtd. in Mbembe and Nuttall 25)

The elusive and ambiguous nature of Johannesburg becomes metonymic of post-apartheid South African cultural imaginaries in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to our Hillbrow* and Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207*. Jie Lu, in a discussion of the discursive relationship between fiction and the city, says:

the specific ways in which urban fiction and the (post)modern city interact . . . re-structures urban experience and urban complex, which in turn both complicates the urban representation and demands a new structure of vision/representation. By writing and analysing the city then, writers and theorists construct this urban space. (326)

Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) has become one of the formative textual markers of the post-apartheid period. Mpe’s text attempts to redefine the inner-city, vice-ridden neighbourhood of Hillbrow in central Johannesburg by utilizing it as both a literal and figurative space. This astounding novella is undergirded by a rich conception of cosmopolitan humanism and seems to perform an almost evangelical function in its attempt to convert the reader to its ideology. The narrative focuses on Refentše, who moves from a rural village to Johannesburg to attend university, and it is narrated after his suicide. While a surface reading of the text may designate it as heralding fail-

ure through the death of its protagonists, the overarching perspective offered by this view of earthly concerns from heaven allows Mpe to transcend the petty divisions between the rural and the urban in his quest to construct a cosmopolitan humanism that is expansive in terms of its ideological framework. The narrative traces the factors involved in Refentše's suicide through the second-person narrator, who moves through his story and that of his girlfriend in order to tie the strands of this non-linear narrative together. While the novella follows a "Jim comes to Joburg" trope, it also builds on it by utilizing the familiar to deconstruct various assumptions. Minesh Dass argues that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is a dialogic text in that it is centered on the kinds of responses it anticipates from its readers as it shows, at the very level of the language it uses, a constant awareness of the reader and how he or she is expected to respond. The reader becomes *a part* of the story and is inextricably implicated as a member of the ever-expanding community the novel maps out. Words like "Welcome," "Our," and the ubiquitous "You" of the second-person narration all address or summon the reader, thereby asserting a sense of communal ownership for Hillbrow and its attendant vices. Like the central character Refentše at the beginning of the novel, Mpe anticipates and utilizes the fear that the inner-city neighborhood of Hillbrow summons as an icon of criminality. I will discuss below how Mpe expertly narrates Hillbrow as both an internal and an external space to create a sense of collective responsibility for issues like crime, homelessness, AIDS, xenophobia, and other sorts of prejudice.

Most critics have read *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* through Michel de Certeau's notion of "walking in the city." For de Certeau, there is a "rhetoric of walking" where the walker reclaims space and redefines the meaning of street names and monuments through his or her movement in space. Meaning is therefore constantly remade by the walker in whom agency resides (157-59). In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Mpe meticulously describes the narrator's movements through space as he crosses various streets and traverses neighbourhoods en route to his university. The narrator walks along streets with names that herald apartheid history—Kotze, Louis Botha, Wolmarans—but these names now



announce his arrival at the top end of South African higher education in the late 1990s. Apartheid as a spatial practice is redefined in much of the literature of South Africa's transition to a democracy, as is the case here. Mpe, then, creates the first palimpsest of this article as he inscribes the young black narrator's meaning over that of the apartheid past. The text itself is "saturated with death," yet in its characters' insistent crossing and recrossing of the streets of inner-city Hillbrow, it has affinities with de Certeau's gestures of reclamation where 'the chorus of idle footsteps' creates a language set apart from the overpowering 'letters' of the skyscrapers" (Gunner 2). While both Mpe and his narrator would not have been allowed unrestricted access to central Johannesburg during the apartheid years, this palimpsestic reinscription moves beyond questions of access into questions of meaning—and, as Foucault reminds us, whoever controls processes of signification, controls how knowledge is produced. In light of this shift, Mpe's text can be read as producing new forms of knowledge and reclaiming processes of signification—which may then release other forms and concerns as it opens the field of representations.

On an internal level, Mpe utilizes Hillbrow as a barometer of prejudice, exploring what it means to position oneself in the spaces of various kinds of discourse. Rural prejudices against urbanites lead to the alienation of Refentše and contribute to his suicide. Stereotypes that associate promiscuity and disease with an urban disintegration of traditional values are inverted in the characters of Refilwe and his girlfriend Lerato, while rural violence like witch burnings are revealed to be based on similar constructions of ignorance and fear, as in the case of Refentše's mother. Hillbrow is then also revealed to be an internal space where our personal failings have dire consequences but ultimately mark us as human—and this is the base of Mpe's cosmopolitan humanism: the behaviour we designate as "other" ultimately belongs to the self. The very behaviour that is attributed to foreigners in South Africa's xenophobic discourse is really local in this narrative, where we are united across and through borders of various kinds by our prejudices and failings. The "welcome" is therefore also a welcome to "our" prejudices and preconceptions of Hillbrow. The narrative forces us to realize that we share the

very prejudices that the novel points to (Dass). While this may seem to be a pessimistic view, Mpe's ability to remap our internal and external landscape results in an expansive ideological formation or a type of cosmopolitan humanism that transcends divisions and asserts a paradigm of tolerance—born out of an intimacy with its opposite. This text, I argue, contains formative features of transitional South African literature: history is retold and reclaimed, personal relationships are deeply political, and a cosmopolitan humanism links South Africa to the rest of the world through the assertion of a transcendent morality. This ability to overcome past prejudices and forgive mistakes naturally links this text to the ideological underpinnings of the TRC—another feature of transitional literature.

While Mpe narrates the movement from one place to another and from one condition to another, Kgebetli Moele narrates a very different but related story of Hillbrow in *Room 207*. Where Mpe's narrative unsettles stereotypes and exhibits a sort of expansive morality, Moele's text reinscribes stereotypes and exhibits a dubious morality that can be read palimpsestically over *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. *Room 207* (2006) tells the story of six young men sharing a former hotel room in Hillbrow. The novel traces these characters' travails through the underbelly of Hillbrow, as they chase phantom dreams and real women and engage in whatever is needed to survive without formal employment. The narrative is fast-paced, urban, and disturbing—much like its setting. Where Mpe utilizes the readers' prejudices to rewrite a narrative of Hillbrow, Moele humanizes the same prejudiced narrative of Hillbrow that Mpe seeks to problematize in order to move beyond anything associated with the past. The novel opens as follows:

It used to be a hotel, back in the days of . . . you know, those days which the rulers of this land don't want you to forget. Corner of Van Der Merwe and Claim, there used to be a hotel. Once. Then. And now it's residential. I stay there. We stay there . . . it's been a temporary setting, since and until . . . I can't tell. What I do know is that we have spent eleven years not really staying there. . . . This room is our safe haven during the light-

ed dark night of dream city. . . . Open the door. You are welcomed by a small passage with a white closet on your left, full of clothes and innumerable hand-written papers that are more valuable to us than our lives. Bags fill the rest of the space and on the top there is . . . a trumpet, two hotplates and about a thousand condoms . . . the place is rotting. (Moele 13)

The novel begins with a biting comment on official discourse and its focus on apartheid history. Much like young Jews' of the 1950s disavowal of their history of "victimhood" during the holocaust, Moele depicts a young black South African disavowal of apartheid history. Saturated with traumatic history, Moele's protagonist is more interested in Johannesburg as a "dream city" than as an apartheid-inflected space. While Irikazaye Manase notes that history and the nature of memory are recurring concerns in many contemporary representations of Johannesburg (197), Moele's text certainly points to a departure from earlier texts' concerns. Rather, the narrative shifts to a description of the inner space of the room. The described space immediately signifies the life worlds of those who inhabit the room as their "refuge"—some are artists who value their written papers above all else, others are in transition between school and marriage, but all are "running away from poverty" (19) and chasing dreams. Where Mpe describes his protagonist's reclamatory walking through Hillbrow, Moele describes walking through the inner space of his studio that sits above the very same streets that Mpe describes—a space where the self, albeit collectively, may be reclaimed.

The difference between these depictions is important. Mpe's Hillbrow is an external space that signifies crime and a new history and an internal space that signifies how prejudice may be transformed; Moele's narrative does something different altogether. His narrative is about his personal living space within Hillbrow. The reader is not given access to any of the characters' internal dialogues or their personal histories outside of their lives during the eleven years in 207. History, it seems, is no longer of interest. The focus shifts to the ordinary as such and the ability to focus on the self. The enforcing mechanisms of apartheid have vanished in

2006, and Moele is not concerned with any residue that is left behind. The characters here are interested in fast money, scams, parties, and women—and Hillbrow is the perfect place for such pursuits. Rather than being marked by any sort of expansive ideology, Moele's characters are utterly self-focused and desire only to be players in a global capitalist economy that centers on the accumulation of personal wealth—returning us to Baucom's point that such choices “belong less to the city or state in which they happen to have come to rest than to the principles of exchange they embody” (160). Women are portrayed as uniformly promiscuous and duplicitous—and in this misogynistic narrative, they are beautiful, transferable, and available at all times. “Freedom does not get freer than this” (100) says the narrator after leaving his girlfriend's apartment in the early morning and walking down the road naked. This freedom is freedom to move and dream uninhibited by anything—social rules, legal codes, family, ideology, or the past.

Moele narrates Hillbrow's underbelly in this text as his characters engage in all sorts of illicit behavior, from stealing cell phones, to fighting in drunken brawls, to defacing public property, cuckolding their friends, talking their way out of paying for groceries, seducing very young women, and the like. Violence and crime haunt each chapter of this novel but are normalized—much in the same way as Mpe speaks of crossing the street, Moele speaks of the violence of ordinary life in Hillbrow. For example, the character Modishi beats his seventeen-year-old girlfriend quite severely; Moele glosses over the actual incident but describes the aftermath as follows:

Modishi showed up at the hospital, just hours after the incident. . . . [We] were the ones who took her there, after much discussion and not knowing what exactly to do. . . . Because you see the hospital is full of female nurses with perpetual man hate, and if you could see what Modishi did to Lerato: one disjointed rib, one broken, as well as first-grade bruises, by his hands only. . . . (206)

Modishi's violent behaviour is not the central issue in the text and he is problematically portrayed as a sympathetic character who is described

as loving his girlfriend “so much that he is going to kill her and then kill himself” (209). In a studio apartment inhabited by six men, the issue is not one of stopping the violence but rather whether to take the victim to the hospital afterwards. Violence is thereby both humanized and aestheticized through the space of *Room 207*. This normalized violence forms a backdrop to what Moele designates as the issues of everyday life in “dream city.”

For Moele, Johannesburg as a dream city is really the central concern of the narrative. The novel is framed by the following quote by T.E. Lawrence that appears at the start of the narrative:

All men dream: but not equally. Those who dream by night in the dusty recesses of their minds wake in the day to find that it was vanity: but the dreamers of the day are dangerous men, for they may act their dream with open eyes, to make it possible.  
This I did. (qtd. in Moele preface)

There are numerous references in the novel to dreams that die and are born in an endless cycle of the city where dreams “have one thing in common: money. Respect and worship are the ultimate goals” (Moele 19). This links Hillbrow to “the furthest corners of the earth[,] . . . the ‘flows of precious metals, bills of exchange, . . . [the] monetary surpluses’ they regulate, the conversion of endless variety into a single, general equivalent: money” (Baucom 160). Moele is also pointing to a particular reading of T. E. Lawrence that is transnational in its circulation of ideas: “Lawrence of Arabia” is no longer framed as an agent of empire but, more importantly, as a visionary who lived a dream despite his background. The irony here is a historical one: while Moele’s characters disavow the impact of apartheid history on their current circumstances (much like Lawrence was able to accomplish), they are relentlessly inserted into another historical narrative through the idea of Johannesburg as a dream city. Johannesburg has very colonial roots as a tent city built on dreams of gold and wealth rather than near water as is usually the case with settlement patterns. Marked by a ruthless history of violence and exploitation in the pursuit of personal riches, this is a city where the past has been written and rewritten, without an eman-

cupatory discourse, except during the anti-apartheid struggle. Moele's characters' pursuit of the Johannesburg dream of riches forms another palimpsestic inscription as it writes this new-old narrative over that of Mpe's emancipatory one. Where Mpe reinscribed a freedom of movement over apartheid restriction and a cosmopolitan humanism over the hatred of bigotry, Moele moves back to the future, as it were, with his discourse of personal gain and hedonistic pursuit of dreams. This narrative also connects Moele's text to a transnational discourse of individual success within a global capitalist system—a type of modernity, if you like—where success is measured through the accumulation of goods rather than through the accumulation of emancipatory knowledges, as in Mpe's case. In this respect, a major shift is measured where the post-transitional is able to connect transnationally (in the same way those countries not mired in oppressive systems do) to the idea of individual emancipation through the accumulation of wealth.

Ceridwen Dovey's *Blood Kin* (2007) departs from the previous texts quite substantially. This finely crafted novel weaves together the first-person narration of different nameless characters—the portraitist, the chef, and the barber. Each is imprisoned in the president's summer residence after a coup, brought there by the commander who has seized power from the president. No one is named in the novel, but each character is defined by his or her relationship to the president and then the commander who replaces him. These characters performed minor functions in maintaining the president's power through daily barber treatments, regular portraits, or food preparation, and they represent the accoutrements of power. The second section is narrated by “his barber's brother's fiancé,” “his chef's daughter,” and “his portraitist's wife.” The split between the male and female voices in the narrative is also a division between vertical (as in top-down) and lateral personal relationships that swirl beneath the overarching political structure of both the text and the concepts it invokes. This allegorical novel explores the various mechanisms of power through the internal narratives of these mostly minor characters on the stage of political power. The various voices stand as “false” textual guides, because the story only really has coherence when told collectively, as the individual narratives are other-

wise stranded between textual gaps and speculations. Where Mpe invokes collective responsibility for social ills, Dovey invokes a collective construction of truth. However, both narratives are undergirded by the idea of complicity in the maintenance of power structures—be they in maintaining a corrupt regime or bigoted social norms. Dovey and Mpe therefore each rely on an emancipatory discourse that asserts collective responsibility as a transnational imaginary within South African cultural life.

Each of the narrators' stories personalizes the experience of power by those with limited access to it, drawing a disturbing picture of the effects of unrestricted power. The president in this novel is a dictator who has suppressed his opponents with brutal but clandestine operations that maintain the illusion of peace. This is a world where wives are chosen for their wealth and social standing, a stammer is unforgivable, and a woman's ugliness is seen as buffer against infidelity. Power, because it is not mediated or checked, becomes a performance of extreme behavior in the hands of those with no equanimity: the president, it is revealed, is the biological father of the portraitist's wife. The president then seduces his daughter before she learns the truth of her birth in a perverse exercise of power. His son is the chef's daughter's lover and has ruined her relationships with others by inextricably linking pleasure with pain for her. The commander who ousts the president moves into his residences and places posters of those the president maimed all over the city—to both document what was hidden and to establish his own power. His wife turns out to be the barber's dead brother's fiancé and she consequently has an affair with the barber. The commander tortures her when he finds out, leaving identical scars on her arm to those inflicted by the presidents' men who tortured her as a dissident—forming a palimpsest of scars on her body that link both the space and hegemonic hold of these regimes. The usual icons of political repression form the backdrop to the aestheticization of power that is acted out in the personal narratives and relationships between these characters in a seemingly neo-colonial but unmarked setting.

Through her novel's decontextualized space and the absence of nomenclature, Dovey displaces what would otherwise be controlling refer-

ence points. The setting of the novel is not stipulated, but references to jacaranda petals (3, 134) refer to both South Africa which abounds in the trees or India where they originate; further references to the disappeared link the text to Colombia. Cumulatively, place is thus allegorized as the Global South with its attendant circulation of colonial and neo-colonial histories and forms a transnational neo-colonial grounding for the plot. Jeanne-Marie Jackson discusses the tension between the literal and the allegorical in reading post-colonial fiction as either “representative of ‘local’ history or of ‘global’ trends” (352). Dovey’s text, however, does not fit neatly into either of Jackson’s categories, as Dovey uses allegory in order to allow the reader to fill in what she does not by removing all controlling reference points to place or identity. This links Dovey’s text to what Shameem Black has characterized as “fiction across borders.” Black argues that border-crossing fiction is defined by two criteria: it foregrounds a dissonance between the subject and object of representation while also trying to “surmount these productions of social difference. Border-crossing fiction therefore embraces the challenge of representation with an intensity that surpasses the general concern with alterity that preoccupies fiction at large” (3-4). Dovey, through her tightly crafted allegory, is able to imagine difference across her characters while also allowing the reader to graft a different version of such imaginings onto the text through the removal of controlling reference points. She weaves questions of power through constructions of exotopy and alterity while remaining aware of the dissonance between the reader and the characters and between the characters themselves. Dovey is able then to imagine the lives of others in terms of her characters’ relationship to power; her depiction of them centers on this relationship rather than on identity markers that convey as much as they hide in terms of what we associate with various subject positions.

This constitutes the third palimpsestic reinscription I will deal with in this article as Dovey takes Moele’s idea of self-interest to its extreme—to the point, indeed, where it becomes perverse. Yet, the extreme focus on the self, coupled with an excess of political power and the absence of an emancipatory discourse, links *Blood Kin* to both Moele’s and Mpe’s



novels in different ways. Dovey reinscribes Moele's "Freedom does not get freer than this" as a type of pathology, because political disinterest has the potential to support dictatorships transnationally through the circulation of silence—one of the very lessons that Moele's disavowed apartheid history teaches us. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is reinscribed by Dovey through her narration of Mpe's shadow: where Mpe narrates a micro-narrative of the effects of bigotry on ordinary people, Dovey narrates a macro-narrative of ordinary people caught up in the larger institutional mechanisms that make prejudice possible. Her displacing of reference points simultaneously grounds and denies,

recognizing [that] our doubled positions (both inside and outside) can be politically productive because it both allows us to exhaust the meanings of margin and centrality and sharpens our critical capacity. By understanding that we . . . move between/across margins and centers, we can destabilize unexamined dualisms and boundaries as we begin to see the inherent connections between inside/outside, centre/margins, same/other. (Pratt 15)

In a different but related argument, Sarah Nuttall says that the segregated political system in South Africa led to the production of "segregated theory," a bifurcated logic that is undergirded by master dualisms such as perpetrator and victim, oppression and resistance, black and white on both a literal and figurative level (Nuttall 31). The post-transitional can then be seen to move through the dualisms that marked the past as it points towards a space in which the connections between things are more apparent.

In a context that is pertinent here, Stefan Helgesson argues, "We are asked not to take the stories seriously as a window onto reality but to take them all the more seriously as comments on their conditions of signification. They highlight the ambiguous properties of print as something that can both suggest and deny a world" (222). As conditions of signification, both *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* and *Room 207* highlight these ambiguous properties in that both texts suggest and highlight the hyper-urban life-worlds of Hillbrow. While Mpe suggests a world

beyond the death and failings of his characters that is based on cosmopolitan humanism, Moele suggests a world based on maintaining the self without recourse to any sort of overarching ideology. Moele's text lacks the idealist drive found in earlier texts like Mpe's that are rooted in cosmopolitan humanism. However, both texts, on some level, deny the world of the other writer: Mpe by his reliance on a higher order of principle and Moele by his negation of anything beyond self-preservation. Dovey complicates any neat theory that asserts an absolute break in transitional and post-transitional narratives. The shift between these texts reveals how the residue of what came before patterns the present. Yet, it is a present where tolerance and heterogeneity are ascendant across the plethora of concerns and styles that mark current cultural formations.

The post-transitional is clearly not merely a temporal marker but rather, I believe, widens the scope of what characterizes current cultural formations in South Africa. The post-transitional summons a broadening of concerns and styles that reaches both backwards and forwards with a wider scope. Interestingly, in the above quotation, Helgesson is talking about the stories of the *Drum* era and its transnational relationship to Mozambican cultural formations, but the theoretical impetus towards ambiguity and transnational connectivity is already present here, fifty years before these other city texts were written. The ambiguities that apartheid attempted to eradicate not only remained but thrived, emerging in a post-apartheid context in different ways. Rather than moving in a temporal linear fashion, post-transitional literature creates a palimpsest in which we can read the imaginaries circulating through and shaping South African cultural formations today.

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