From Geography to Semiotics : Visions of Urban Environments in a Few Black South African Novels

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HAL Id: hal-02343100

https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02343100

Submitted on 1 Nov 2019

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Introduction

Cultural geographers in South Africa have often considered Black South African fiction and autobiographies as sources of valuable information for the study of social relations and daily life in Black townships and locations. According to some of them, like Gordon H. Pirie, Black townships are "terra incognita" (65) and Black literature therefore proves useful to construct what he calls "mind portrayals" (66) in an urban environment and, as a result, "literature has great potential for conveying the sensate and unimagined or darkly expressed essence of urbanism" (69).

If one can agree with geographers that literature provides useful and reliable data on life in urban areas it would be misleading however to assume that these texts were merely meant to document urban life. Literary texts constitute a codified way of representing the world and even if writers were keen to expose the details of segregation as accurately as possible their main aim was to give form and meaning to a chaotic jumble of impressions and feelings by resorting to narrative and semiotic codes. As Gordon H. Pirie points out "the images of these places are situated in an in-betweenness of perception" (62). The idea of "in-betweenness" points to the representative nature of literary texts as they necessarily offer a mediated vision of the city. As Burton Pike notes, "within the literary world this image becomes part of a coherent system of signs and its meaning may be only tenuously involved with the empirical city itself" (ix). Pike's remark raises an interesting point which is worth

examining in that he implicitly reverses the geographers' generally mimetic approach to literature in favour of a semiotic one.

The aim of the paper is to show that the geography of urban space as reconstructed in literature is not so much a mimetic space as a semiotic one and analyse how the network of narrative devices and cultural concepts which structure it into imaginary configurations has changed with the political transition to democracy. It will also focus on recent literary developments and particularly on how the writings of contemporary writers break free from the constraints of the mimetic representation of urban space to explore new avenues of expression.

The City as a Phenomenological Experience

One never perceives a city, or any other place for that matter, as a thoroughly external or objective reality. Perceptions and representations of space city are grounded in a phenomenological experience.

The knowledge we have of the world proceeds from the synthesising activity of our consciousness—or intentionality. The categories which order our experiences in terms of inside and outside, experiencing subject and experienced world are not preordained but proceed from intentionality itself.

The literary text recreates this phenomenological experience. Despite the ostensible objectivity of the world it represents it is always already the product of a synthesising act of consciousness which intuits the essence of things and experiences them as meaning to be constructed. This is probably what Joseph Conrad meant when he writes in his preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*: "Confronted with the same enigmatical spectacle the artist descends within himself, and in that lonely region of stress and strife […] he finds the terms of his appeal" (11).

It is this immediate intimation of meaning which the writer seeks to articulate through narrative and semantic categories in order to make the world understandable. The impression of reality which a place conveys is a superficial one and does not account for the totality of its meaning. There is always something hovering on the surface that remains elusive or in excess and constitutes a kind of halo of potential meaning. This phenomenon brings to mind Gilles

Deleuze's definition of the transcendental: "a potential that overlays the world and exceeds it yet does not exist outside it but constitutes its outer limit or the obscure reserve from which it draws its strength" (141-42).[1] Thus when in *A Walk in the Night* Alex La Guma alludes to "deserted castles" or "wasted ghosts in a plague-ridden city" (La Guma 1968 21) in his description of District Six in the early stages of its destruction, the reader is inclined to conjure up vague reminiscences of the medieval world and its alleged intellectual backwardness. These images endow La Guma's description with a potential meaning which exceeds its mimetic representation and enriches our perception and interpretation of the place.

The Significance of Urban Planning in South Africa

The representation of the city in Black South African literature is first all framed by the historical categories which determined the formation of urban space.

Urban planning in South Africa was a function of political moves to ensure that topographical divisions would correspond to the aims of racial segregation. It was a topographical projection of the racial hierarchy upon which the social structure of the country was predicated.

Official legislation since the early days of colonisation had always sought to monitor the movements of African workers between city and country. The Sauer Commission which elaborated for the National Party the ideological framework upon which apartheid was founded prior to the 1948 election was convinced that Africans could never form part of the urban population and as a result their access to cities had to be restricted.

With years passing the spatial formation of the South African city resulted in a general configuration conceptualised as the model apartheid city especially after the adoption of the Group Areas Act of 1950 which was defined as "one of the major measures designed to preserve White South Africa" (Christopher 105). While in the early years of industrialisation, in the wake of the discovery of major mineral resources (diamond and gold), no proper housing scheme had been actually provided for the accommodation of the Africans

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[1]   My translation.

who had come to work in cities—they mostly lived in slum-yards close to their working places—the government and the local authorities gradually came to realize that it was becoming urgent to introduce regulations to control the settlement of Black people in urban areas.

The racial zoning of urban areas was therefore part of an overall pattern which ensured the efficiency of a colonial economic system based on the exploitation of a Black migrant workforce and also generated deep inequalities. Africans, with a few exceptions as defined in terms of section ten of the Natives (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act N°25 of 1945 (owners of land in a township, chiefs, headmen, certain teachers, ministers of religion, policemen, warders and interpreters), were not supposed to become permanent residents in urban areas but only temporary ones authorised to live there for as long as they had a valid contract of service (Horrell 1978: 172).

Making Sense of the City

The upshot of this topographical partitioning was that people had a partial and fragmentary experience of urban space.

Black writers have explored the combination of the themes of fragmentation and correlated precariousness and poverty by transforming the representation of the conditions of life in the city into a metaphor of existential ambivalence.

The city in Black literature is both a fascinating and frightening place, a place where a majority of people wished they could stay and yet a place where they were not certain they would be allowed to stay, a place where they were segregated against and yet one which they could identify with, and finally a squalid place and yet one where the people felt at home. As a testimony of the strong attachment to a place like Sophiatown one need only quote the incipit of Bloke Modisane's *Blame me on History*: "Something in me died, a piece of me died, with the dying of Sophiatown" (5) or Mattera's elegiac remark in *Memory is the Weapon*:

> The time of execution had come for our homes like it had for so many thousands before ours. Throughout the country, cosmopolitan townships—the antithesis of separation and racial prejudice—were being

wounded and felled by the crushing blows of the white man's laws. So it
was then, so it is now. (16-17)

The experience of the city boils down to a confrontation with a
jumble of confused impressions which are in themselves shapeless
and meaningless but which claim for some kind of ordering so as to
make sense. As one French critic and writer, Philippe Forest, points
out:

> "The novel answers the call of the real [...] Something happens which
> demands to be articulated and it can only be articulated in the language
> of the novel because only this language remains faithful to the dizziness
> which is thus generated in the fabric of meaning" (8).[2]

In order to think or imagine the city writers, artists and even
certain geographers build their personal perceptions and experiences
of the city into urban mindscapes which combine conceptualisations
of the city's real landscape with images conveyed by cultural repre-
sentations, memory and imagination along with tropes and narrative
patterns. The elaboration of urban mindscapes conditions the creation
of a veritable poetics of the city.

The City as Palimpsest

A poetics of the city aims to analyse how urban landscapes can
be read and interpreted in literature. Under apartheid the literary
construction of the city was predicated upon the ideological
underpinnings of its partitioned topography.

A first approach consists in incorporating actual lived-in urban
experiences, such as precariousness, poverty, discrimination, police
harassment, pass-laws, crime, squalor, corruption, political struggle,
trade-unionism, self-fulfilment, acculturation, and survival into
conventional narrative and discursive patterns pertaining to a variety
of genres—the detective story, stories of adventures, romance,
journalistic reportage, myths, allegories—, or from other media like
the cinema.

In this perspective the representation of the city is like a
palimpsest upon which layers of narrative patterns and cultural
memories are superimposed. A case in point would be the variegated
visions of Johannesburg by some of the writers of the *Drum*

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[2] My translation.

generation, like Arthur Maimane with his detective stories, who saw their city through a grid of reading provided by American hard-boiled novels or New Journalism. The African townships of Sophiatown, Alexandra in Johannesburg, or District Six in Cape Town, for example, have often been represented as duplicating the typical urban background of American pulp fiction with its so-called heroes: petty or tough gangsters, pimps, boxers, drug pushers, heroin addicts, sleuths, policemen etc. Thus the pull of American popular fiction and films somewhat alleviated the dreariness and misery of South African urban townships. They brought along a whiff of the vast and free world outside and fuelled the imagination of urban Africans who jibbed at the idea of being trapped within the confines of a white-imposed African culture. This is how journalist Anthony Sampson, one time editor of *Drum*, reports how a reader of *Drum* responded to an early issue which dealt almost exclusively with traditional matters:

> "Ag, why do you dish out that stuff, man?" Said a man with golliwog hair in a floppy American suit, at the Bantu Men's Cultural Centre. 'Tribal music! Tribal history! Chiefs! We don't care about chiefs! Give us jazz and film stars, man! We want duke and Satchmo and hot dames! Yes, brother, anything American. You can cut out that junk about kraals and folk-tales and Basutos in Blankets – forget it! You just trying to keep us backward, that's what! Tell us what's happening right here on the Reef!" (Sampson)

Thus the city became the site of stories of crime, adventure and love (romance), of displacement—the Jim-comes-to-Jo'burg theme—with its successes and failures. In R.R.R. Dhlomo's novel *An African Tragedy* (1931), with its underlying religious vision of the city as a place of moral corruption, the hero ends tragically whereas in Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1945) Xuma, the country bumpkin who comes to work to the city for the first time, finally gets to know the mechanisms of survival in a complex city without losing his essential human values.

The articulation of the particular and the general in these stories allowed for representations which could be aimed at both local and foreign audiences but which somehow warped the specificity of the South African cityscape.

"Sociality" and the Realistic Representation of the City

So another approach to the reading of the South African city is to address the very notion of realism and examine how literary representations feed into the understanding of urban reality.

It is obvious that the large bulk of Black fiction from R.R.R. Dhlomo's *An African Tragedy* to today's Sello Duiker's *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001) locates its stories in urban settings which are made to look as convincing as possible. But their realistic import cannot be reduced solely to their informational value. It proceeds from what critics like Claude Duchet or Jacques Dubois call "sociality" (Duchet 446-54) (Dubois 43).

They explain that realistic representations proceed from the articulation of two semiotic structures: language and narration. The referential function of language is articulated upon the narrative structure of the story. The language refers to the outside world and feeds the fiction with informational elements borrowed from the historical, social and political contexts constituting the backdrop or external sociality against which the validity of the knowledge contained in the story is tested. The second structure concerns the organisation of the story proper—or the diegesis, the fictitious universe of the story—insofar as it generates the principles of its own internal coherence. It constitutes its own code of social lisibility by displaying its own mechanisms of social relations (between characters, between institutions, between institutions and characters etc.) and human motivations within a spatial and temporal framework. The "sociality" of the text is thus the meeting point between the empirical data of an external sociality summoned by language and the coherent internal sociality constructed by narrative and logical categories.

Thus, for example, we have no difficulty in contextualising La Guma's District Six in *A Walk in* the *Night* or even in *In the Fog of the Season's End* (1972) and in piecing together the discarded narrative elements to make up a coherent world. The experience of temporal dislocation which the reading of these novels generates does not affect the underlying unity of the universe which La Guma has constructed. This unity is posited upon the political will and consciousness of the hero, Beukes, who maps out for the reader the coherence of his life experiences from childhood to adulthood. As a

member of the oppressed Black community and as a political activist Beukes is compelled to change places and as he wanders and moves across all the artificial boundaries between white and non-whites areas, the centre and the periphery, imposed by white legislation he reconfigures a virtual non-racial and undivided urban space.

Heterotopias and Myths: The City as the Locus of Ambivalence

The demise of apartheid and the instauration of democracy in South Africa did not of course eradicate the geographical zoning of the urban areas overnight. Visible signs of divisions remain but they have taken on new meanings in the sense that they are no longer the symbols of a political order and people are no longer confined by law to a particular area as they can move freely from place to place if they so wish. What is recorded in post-apartheid Black fiction is not so much the political event itself as its deep-rooted impact on people's minds and how they have gradually changed their relation to place and negotiated their appropriation of it.

In this perspective Beukes's wanderings in *In the Fog of the Season's End* anticipate those of characters in post-apartheid fiction but with a major difference: while Beukes's efforts were pitted against an environment framed by a racial ideology, the characters of Zakes Mda, Phaswane Mpe or Sello Duiker are free to move over a theoretically undivided space. While before apartheid characters were confined within parts of a divided space, after apartheid they are scattered upon an unlimited surface.

This shift of perception can be accounted for in terms of a transition from a "grooved space" to a "smooth space" to use the concepts coined by Gilles Deleuze. A "grooved space" is a concept which refers to patterns which frame, divide or partition intellectual constructions as well as territories. On the contrary "smooth space" implies the absence of, or breaking free from, such intellectual or spatial constraints.

In most post-apartheid Black fiction the space of the city is no longer seen in terms of exclusively binary opposites between city and country, Black and white areas, inside and outside, prohibited and authorised zones—even if the names of places may still sometimes carry the negative connotations of the past. Urban space is now more

generally perceived as a surface criss-crossed by individual trajectories forming a network that connects points and intersects itself. Whereas in the past spatial divisions were the expression of a political discourse, now urban space has become the arena conducive to the expression of individual passions and pursuits.

However the impression of homogeneity and unicity is slightly deceptive. The city is still very much a heterogeneous site fraught with uncertainties and dangers. This impression is nowhere more perceptible than in the shifting positioning of heterotopias.

Heterotopias, in Michel Foucault's definition of the term, are "other places" but unlike utopias, which are virtual places, they are real ones that exist in "the founding of society […] in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted" (Foucault). These places are different from all the other places and sites they reflect and speak about, in other words they are counter-places which imply all the other places.

Foucault classifies them in three categories. Crisis heterotopias are "privileged, sacred or forbidden places for individuals who are in a state of crisis in relation to the society in which they live" (Foucault) in other words places which are instrumental in facilitating and marking the transition from one state to another for people such as adolescents, menstruating women, pregnant women, elderly people. The same would apply to boarding-schools, military barracks, and honeymoon hotels in modern societies. Heterotopias of deviation are places "in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required mean or norm are placed" (Foucault) such as prisons, psychiatric hospitals, and even retirement homes in countries where being old is a sort of deviation. Finally, heterotopias of compensation are perfectly ruled and meticulous places like early Puritan societies in the American colonies.

Among the several traits that define heterotopias one is particularly relevant to the question of urban spaces in South Africa. According to Foucault "heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolate them and makes them penetrable" (Foucault). Either the entry is compulsory or the individual has to submit to a series of rites and purifications. For example, in the context of apartheid South Africa the townships could be

assimilated to heterotopias of deviation where entry for Blacks was compulsory while they served to protect white society against the threat of racial difference for the sake of ethnic purity. But in Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995) the shack which Toloki builds in the midst of an informal settlement, becomes itself a heterotopia of compensation as it is metamorphosed by his imagination into a veritable white middle-class home which completely "contests and reverts" its seedy immediate surroundings. Conversely certain places in the city centres, which in the past were the exclusive preserves of whites, are transformed into heterotopias of deviation such as the brothels, clubs, rooms or flats in which some of the characters in Sello Duiker's or Phaswane Mpe's novels are confined, sometimes by force, as sexual labourers.

The heretopias of the periphery have been duplicated in the centre and vice versa thus blurring clear-cut divisions. The same applies to the dichotomy between village and city with the village representing a sanctuary of permanent traditional values whose inhabitants firmly believe that they are preserved from the corrupt city. But in Mpe's novel it finally turns out that like the city, the village is affected by Aids. The village is no longer a heterotopia of compensation, perfect and meticulous, and the city has been turned into one of crisis where people have to negotiate their entry into a new world and a new way of life through specific rites. Hence the prevalent perception of the city as an ambivalent, heterogeneous and polymorphous configuration whose meaning remains elusive.

This pattern of shifting heterotopias is also enriched by networks of symbolic or thematic elements which foreground the complexities and ambiguities of the city such as the journey, the labyrinth and the jungle. The literary pattern most commonly found in contemporary fiction is that of a solitary hero—a young man or woman—who has to shift for himself in a generally hostile urban environment, destabilised by the political transition and shifting patterns of values and meanings. The political theme somewhat recedes in the background as the hero is no longer actually motivated by political commitments.

The narrative pattern which underpins his progress is that of the initiatory journey which lands him into all sorts of traps and quandaries from which he doesn't come out totally unscathed when

he does not simply fail. Roaming the streets of a city is thus associated with the theme of education (*Bildungsroman*), of adventure and romance. A jumble of impressions assails the hero at first before he can re-order them into a more coherent pattern of understanding.

The labyrinth is a place full of intricate passageways and blind alleys where people lose themselves or find themselves. Living in the city can be an enlightening experience leading to a revelation about oneself and others. In fiction we often have characters groping for some way of survival and often urgently seeking a meaning for their lives. Burton Pikes interestingly notes that "the labyrinth becomes a map when seen from above" (9), in other words geography is substituted for mythology, *logos* for *muthos*. But in contemporary fiction we note that both representations—the labyrinth and the map—are kept in tension thus generating the ambivalence which underpins the image of the city: a vision at street-level and one from above.

This is best illustrated by the opening pages of Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001). The narrator first invites us to follow the main character as he moves through the maze of streets in Hillbrow: "If you are coming from the city centre, the best way to get to cousin's place is by driving or walking through Twist Street" (6). There follow very precise and useful indications which come in handy if one doesn't want to lose one's way. At the same time this vision at street-level is coupled with an implicit vantage point from which the narrator invites the reader to share a panoramic vision of the neighbourhood. The hero's progress at street-level serves to map out the territory where the action of the novel will unfold with descriptions of all the places where the characters will live, move and die. The elevated position of the narrator's stance is sustained by the rhetorical figure of prosopopeia as he directly addresses the deceased hero Refentše. The ironic distance created by the narrative and rhetoric structures generates a scathing satire of his contemporaries' foibles and crass prejudices or inadequacies as they discover the problems and contradictions of the present times and grope towards some kind of self-adjustment in the chaotic world of Hillbrow.

The image of the city as a jungle with its lurking dangers and implicit lawlessness is also one which offers a semantic framework

to understand the conditions under which the characters have to make their way in life. This is the case with both Toloki and Noria in Mda's *Ways of Dying* as the novel retraces their respectively hazardous and winding paths which lead them to the city and bring them together again. In a more raw and abrasive way Sello Duiker's novels, *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and *The Quiet Violence of Dreams* (2001), present characters who hang precariously on the edge of survival in a city—Cape Town—which seems to be shrouded in violence and sexual perversion. In *Thirteen Cents*, one of the white characters addressing two Black boys says: "You too are cool, man. You know what I mean? Urban culture. Like urban living. You guys are living the concrete jungle, scavenging". And he further adds: "Okay, you guys have got this aggression thing completely going. Is that like your way, like that survival of the fittest thing?" (Duiker 2000 22-23).

With Duiker the city becomes a sinister heterotopia of illusion, the symbolical dark flipside of a world of sunshine and apparent order. Hence the suggestion of a mythic underground associated with mystery, darkness, squalor, chaos, evil and crime.

In the mirror of contemporary fiction the South African city has become the site of contradictory and elusive meanings articulated by innovative narrative and rhetorical devices. It is a vast network of individual trajectories and shifting heterotopias which unfolds between a heavenly vision from above, as in *Welcome to our Hillbrow,* and a hellish one from below, as in *Thirteen Cents* or *The Quiet Violence of Dreams*, and displays a site of paradoxically open-closed spaces which are also spaces of illusion and deception.

Conclusion

A city is a daunting object of knowledge whose complexity can never be fully apprehended and remains to a large extent elusive. Geography alone cannot account for the totality of its meaning. It becomes amenable to understanding only if it is apprehended through urban mindscapes. Thus for Gordon H. Pirie the validity of the literary representations of the city lies in the fact that "they organise perceptions into memorable and reproducible patterns…They function as signs of a specific mode of living" (63-71). The vision of the city is always mediated by the imaginary and the human gaze but

this gaze is the product of history and culture and is never the mere receptacle of passive impressions: it belongs to a level of perception where the memories of the past and literary devices merge to produce images whose meaning is often elusive. The part of the mystery of the city that eludes understanding contributes to the elaboration of urban myths. A few urban neighbourhoods or cities in South Africa which have come to symbolise Black people's urban culture have acquired such a status as a result of the empirical combination of historical, political and cultural factors. They loom large in their collective memory as landmarks of an urban identity. But they do so because to a large extent their memory has been consigned in literary discourse. Finally the city as represented in literature becomes a paradigm of how we relate ourselves to both the real and the imaginary, of how our imagination structures the real and as Richard Lehan notes, "tests our sense of reality" (272).

Richard Samin[3]

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