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The Future in the Post:
Utopia and the Fiction of the New South Africa

Abstract: Post-apartheid South Africa, having recently come into its own in terms of the Utopian national vision that has driven and informed its history, is in danger of assuming this to be the end of its history, with only a better delivery of that static vision being in question. This paper considers the utopian as a vital element in oppositional and revolutionary strategies. It then looks at the important role the future, deployed in a utopian mode, took on in anti-apartheid texts during the darkest period of the liberation struggle, and asks if we can identify a similar impulse in texts that take as their subject some of the less satisfactory aspects of the post-apartheid condition. Focusing on Phaswane Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow, one of the texts regularly presented as representative of new South African nation, the paper examines post apartheid fiction’s particular avoidance of a nationalised sense of the political. It then places this against the question of the national in relation to the utopian, and argues that the nation is useful to us as an idea if it is always beyond us, always calling the present into question.

I must be the only one writing about nationalism who doesn’t think it ugly. If you think about researchers such as Gellner and Hobsbawn, they have quite a hostile attitude to nationalism. I actually think that nationalism can be an attractive ideology. I like its Utopian elements.

(Benedict Anderson, Interview, University of Oslo, 2005)

1. (Post)-Apartheid and the Future

Twelve years into the new South Africa, contestation between and even within all levels of party politics turns on the issue of delivery. Delivery – be it in terms of services, employment, health, housing, land, water, education or any number of other issues – is the one line of critique that can be directed meaningfully at the overwhelming political dominance of the African National Congress (ANC). The party is virtually synonymous with the ideals enshrined in the new nation’s Constitution, a Constitution widely recognised as one of the most progressive in the world. The ideals themselves are incontestable, and their achievement through a high-profile but remarkable unbloody liberation struggle is regularly represent-
ed as exemplary.\(^1\) With liberation achieved, however, the ideals that were once the promise of the future are now enshrined in the present; no longer invoking the openness of the speculative, they govern what is to come on terms receding rapidly into the past. And so the urgency of the struggle for future deliverance is replaced by calls for patience as the new state attempts to deliver on promises in principle now achieved.

In this lies the fundamental and apparently all-too obvious shift between the modes and moods of anti- and post-apartheid discourses. Re-reading the cultural text of South Africa against this shift brings us up, at times, against some of its less obvious implications. Take for example the exemplary future-orientation of the joint statement of the three accused in the “Delmas” treason trial: “We view the present trial as an interim affair”, stated Patrick ‘Terror’ Lekota, Popo Molefe, and Moss Chikane in 1983, going on to say,

Somewhere in the future lies a date when black and white South Africans will take a second look at these moments of our history. They will evaluate afresh the events now in contention and our role in them. And since the privilege will belong to them, they will pass final judgement. We are convinced that theirs will be contrary to the present one. They will vindicate us.\(^2\)

In principle, post-apartheid South Africa is now thoroughly re-situated within the time of that “second look”; the citizens of the future have not only vindicated the accused but found the very structures within which the trial was staged guilty in the “final judgement” that is their privilege. But even as we celebrate the prophetic defiance of Lekota, Molefe, and Chikane having come into its own, elements of their statement take on a worrying note. Translated into the present, it is the once predictive force of the word “final” that becomes particularly problematic. In its new context, it suggests that the radical gambol on the future that defined and propelled the years of struggle has ended – that the history of the struggle, in terms not very far from those of Francis Fukuyama’s thesis on the collapse of Soviet Communism and the triumph of liberal capitalism, has resulted in the “end of [South African] History.” The tendency to run world- and South African history together in this way has been encouraged by the fact that South Africa’s democratic breakthrough coincided historically with the highpoint of international neo-liberalism. It has been all too easy to see the country’s negotiated transition blending in with the apparent opening up of a homogeneous global free market. Certainly parties with more radical social and economic agendas than those adopted by the ANC since liberation are taking

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\(^1\) Although this is by no means unproblematic; see Leon de Kock’s “South Africa in the Global Imaginary” (2001). Citing a colloquium on the theme of “Living Difference: Towards a Society of Communities” held at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg in 1998 where a number of eminent international guests expressed dismay at the cautionary or disillusioned attitude of the South African speakers to their “miraculous new nation,” de Kock notes that “it is imperative for others that South Africans succeed at the democratic, multiracial miracle that they (the non-South Africans) have yet to see realized in their own countries” (2001, 289).

\(^2\) Quoted in The Weekly Mail, 9 December to 15 December, 1988, 3.
some time to find their feet on this new terrain, and there is as yet no real sense of a political horizon beyond the ANC.

In what way, then, does the post of post-apartheid maintain within itself the promise of a post of its own? Odd though this may appear, given the sense of closure inherent in current conceptions of the South Africa nation-state, it is useful to stage this question in terms of the national.

2. Utopia and the Nation

Formed well after the period of ‘classical’ nationalism associated with the Americas, Europe, and Russia, significantly later too than the versions of anticolonial nationalism criticized by Simon Gikandi (1992) and others for their continuing dependence upon the colonial episteme, South Africa is a nation conscious of being constructed beyond the essentialisms of ethnicity, religion, language – even geography and history – long considered the basis of national formations. In this respect it recognizes implicitly in many of its state principles and governmental structures its “imagined” status, along lines not far divorced from those invoked by Benedict Anderson (1991 [1983]) in his famous formulation.

One result of this is that South Africa has had to pose more consciously than most the question with which Anderson closes his own quite critical reworking of the concept of the “imagined community”, The Spectre of Comparisons. The final chapter in this work is entitled “The Goodness of Nations,” and after citing a series of examples that illustrate why “no matter what crimes a nation’s government commits and its passing citizenry endorses,” the proposition remains, “My Country is Ultimately Good.” Anderson closes this book with the question, “In these straitened millennial times, can such Goodness be profitably discarded?” (1998, 368).

He has addressed this question in a number of ways since (not least in the interview from which the epigraph to this paper is taken), indicating that it remains an area of ongoing fascination for him. Admitting that “The Goodness of the Nation was a new and remarkable idea, since it appeared in the face of plenty of contrary evidence” (2001), Anderson traces one element of its logic to the centrality of the future in the construct of the nation. “The Nation was the first historical polity for which the Future was an essential foundation,” he writes in one version of this argument (2001). “Moving onward through Walter Benjamin’s ‘empty, homogeneous time’, ” he continues,

it was not headed for the Day of Judgment, and it knew it had no place in Heaven or in Hell. So it thought, and continues to think, about future Frenchmen and future Americans, who in their uncountable numbers stand lining up in Limbo for their entrance onto the national territory. These ghostly French and Americans, innocent of any crimes, frivolities, and other sins, are those before whom presently living citizens are morally arraigned, and to whose standards of virtue they are asked to do obeisance. They are understood as the guarantee that no matter how appalling the behavior and morals of “actually existing” French and Americans, We The People in the transcendent sense, and in the sense of Rousseau’s General Will, is always Good. (Anderson 2001)
Here is the essence of the Utopian element Anderson cites in defence of his view that “nationalism can be an attractive ideology.” That he means this not as some kind of wishful thinking, but in its strong sense as a version of critique, is clear in the lines that follow: “One might even go so far as to wonder,” he goes on, “whether this exalted Goodness does not generally require a lot of worry and dissatisfaction about the present condition of the nation” (Anderson 2001).

Such a view carries us into territory long inhabited by Fredric Jameson, and recently re-stressed in his latest book. The second half of *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) brings together Jameson’s major writings on Utopia, reminding us that throughout his career Jameson has associated the form with a progressive politics. This was compellingly set out as early as 1971 in *Marxism and Form*. In this book, Jameson is concerned with hermeneutics as “a political discipline,” one which “provides the means for maintaining contact with the very sources of revolutionary energy during a stagnant time, of preserving the concept of freedom itself, underground, during geological ages of repression. Indeed,” he continues, “it is the concept of freedom which [...] proves to be the privileged instrument of a political hermeneutic.” In this sense, freedom is “best understood as an interpretive device rather than a philosophical essence or idea. For wherever the concept of freedom is once more understood, it always comes as the awakening of dissatisfaction in the midst of all” (1971, 84). Jameson goes on to identify overtly freedom in this sense with the Utopian idea, which “keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is” (1971, 111).

The modalities of anti-apartheid thought were quite clear in this regard: one of the greatest fears expressed by writers during the darkest periods of oppression was the loss of a sense of the future. In his notebook entry for 26 December 1968, Athol Fugard wrote: “How do I align myself with a future, a possibility, in which I believe but of which I have no clear image? A failure of imagination” (quoted in 1981 [1974], xxv). By 1980 he was writing, “Today’s future barely includes tomorrow. At times I see the situation deteriorating still further, to the point where even the thought of a tomorrow will be a luxury” (1981 [1974], xxv).

At much the same time as Fugard declared himself to be “trying to live and work in preparation for that eventuality” (1981 [1974], xxv), Mongane Serote was taking up again *To Every Birth Its Blood*, a text that had been stale-mated by the pre-1976 context but was revitalised by the student uprising of that year. Crucially, however, it is Serote’s projection of his narrative into the historical future that carried the novel through to completion in 1981, making it thoroughly Utopian in Jameson’s sense of using the future as a “stubborn negation” of the present.

The future in *To Every Birth Its Blood* becomes an essential element in an oppositional technique, a strategy of protest rather than prediction, and the forward-looking impulse that carried Serote’s once-deadlocked 1970s text into completion found a real purchase amongst other novels of the early to mid-1980s. I have argued in *Novel Histories: Past, Present, and Future in South African...*
Fiction that South African fiction of this period throws up a significant number of what I have come to call “future histories” (Green 1997). These works seek to comment upon the past and present by projecting the implications of the past and the present forward in time. In this they reverse the standard techniques of historical fiction, but remain directly related to them. They use the future in much the same way as the historical novel uses the past, producing a deep engagement with another time whilst retaining a serious commitment to their particular and specific historical conditions.

It is such a vital relation to the present that Dominic Baker-Smith makes central to distinguishing between the utopian and other future-oriented modes. “At the centre of all utopian writing is a concern with the mediating process between ideal forms and the inadequate provisions of experience,” he writes.

Whether it is utopia or dystopia that we are considering, the separation from fantasy is absolute: both imply a reference back to the world of concrete acts and familiar experience which fantasy excludes. The central feature of utopian writing is the effort to reconcile ideal possibilities with the recalcitrance of the known. Even in the case of dystopian writing it is that emphasis on the obstinate features of a known world which suggests desirable alternatives. (Baker-Smith 1987, 8)

It is in such a utopian strategy that “future histories” find their generative principal. As we read in Sasha’s scattered notes on utopia in Gordimer’s *A Sport of Nature* (another text from the 1980s in which the narrative is carried through into an imagined future liberation),

the dynamic of real change is always utopian. The original impulse may get modified – even messed up – in the result, but it always has to be there no matter how far from utopia that result may be.

Utopia is unattainable; without aiming for it – taking a chance! – you can never even hope to fall far short of it.

...Without utopia – the idea of utopia – there’s a failure of the imagination – and that’s a failure to know how to go on living... (217-218)

...or writing, *A Sport of Nature* enacts literally Jameson’s view that “all plot may be seen as a movement toward Utopia, in its basic working through to some ultimate resolution of the basic tensions” (1971, 146); in this sense “the very time of the work may itself stand as a figure of Utopian development: ‘Every great work of art, above and beyond its manifest content, is carried out according to a latency of the page to come, or in other words, in the light of the content of a future which has not yet come into being, and indeed of some ultimate resolution as yet unknown’” (1971:149; Jameson is quoting Ernst Bloch). For Jameson, such a perspective

may serve as an object lesson in some of the ways available to a Marxist hermeneutic to restore a genuine political dimension to the disparate texts preserved in the book of our culture: not by some facile symbolic or allegorical interpretation, but by reading the very content and the formal impulse of the texts themselves as figures – whether of psychic wholeness, of freedom, or of the drive towards Utopian transfiguration – of the irrepressible revolutionary wish. (1971, 159)
It is very much in something like this sense that Schoeman’s *Na die Geliefde Land*, Coetzee’s *Life and Times of Michael K*, Gordimer’s *July’s People*, and Hope’s *Kruger’s Alp* – along with a plethora of non-fictional political and economic analyses – join *To Every Birth Its Blood* and *A Sport of Nature* in trying imaginatively to go beyond the ‘interregnum’ of the apparently dead-locked struggle. In each case, the use of the utopian mode (or for that matter the formally identical dystopian mode) is not so much predictive as pre-emptive. Whether inspirational or admonitory, these texts are explicitly interventionist, at the very least affirming the ability of the imagination to concretise itself in the face of enormous suppression.

Not unsurprisingly, in the anti-apartheid mode at least, such a strategy easily took on national dimensions. Whilst this may not apply in every case in the globalized context of the new millennium, South Africa is not entirely isolated in being an appropriate case for seeing something of the prophetic in Jameson’s claim, made in 1981,

> that a Left which cannot grasp the immense Utopian appeal of nationalism (any more than it can grasp that of religion or of fascism) can scarcely hope to “reappropriate” such collective energies and must effectively doom itself to political impotence. (1981, 298)

Aligning the appeal of nationalism with that of fascism and religion is a clear indication of Jameson’s sense of the multivalency of all these terms and the differences they may take on in the specificities of various contexts, but his point has a particular force in the ‘new South Africa.’ Translated into Anderson’s terms, appeals to the “Goodness” of the new nation are a common mode for attempting to deal with many of the more intransigent features plaguing its coming into being in line with the ideals of its Constitution. This is possibly the predominant way in which the utopian has been translated from oppositional and revolutionary modes into those of nation-building in the South African context, and I would like to read this shift against a novel intimately concerned with one of the literal and symbolic centres of both the utopian ideals and threatening realities of a united post-apartheid South Africa, Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*.

3. The Fiction of the New Nation

Hillbrow is an inner city area that has been described as being to Johannesburg what the East End was once to London. Relatively early in its history, it took its character from the successive waves of European immigrants who settled there, at least until they were able to improve their economic circumstances enough to move. Even before the scrapping of influx control, this dense area of high-rise flats and residential hotels located on the periphery of the comparatively liberalising influence of the University of the Witwatersrand had begun to attract a

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3 Tellingly, this novel has recently been filmed as something of a comment on the ‘new’ South Africa.
new kind of immigrant. Large numbers of ‘illegal’ city-dwellers seeking to escape their enforced location in the areas prescribed by apartheid found in the counterculture atmosphere the area had begun to develop during the 1970s and 80s a kind of refuge, particularly because it encouraged the rapid loosening up of all sorts of official control.

By the 1990s Hillbrow was considered either a sophisticated melting pot of culture, class, and ethnicity or a decaying cityscape of violent crime, drugs, prostitution, and AIDS. In this it embodies the best and the worst of contemporary South Africa, but the real test of its significance for the new nation is the high proportion of African migrants – primarily Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, Nigerians, and Malawians – making up its population. Victims of official intolerance and popular rejection, they are stereotypically accused of taking what little work there is from South Africans and held responsible for most of the social ills that plague the area. The threatened and marginal status of many living in Hillbrow makes the area a perfect breeding ground for xenophobia of the worst sort. The capacity for the new South African nation to demonstrate its inclusiveness, particularly when it comes to ‘aliens’ from states that supported the present power-holders when they were underground or in exile and provided bases for their operatives in the armed struggle, is in crucial ways the measure of its highest ideals, and in this respect Hillbrow is the ultimate testing ground for the utopian hopes of the nation.

“Welcome to our literature” is the headline of one of the major reviews received by Welcome to Our Hillbrow, and the carry over of the collective possessive from a “locality of just over one square kilometre, according to official records” (Mpe 2001, 1) to the entire nation is not as hyperbolic as it may at first seem. Published in 2001, this novel now earns Mpe a regular emblematic place in recent accounts of post-apartheid literature. In articles such as Rachel L. Swarns’ “South Africa’s Black Writers Explore a Free Society’s Tensions,” published in no less an organ than the New York Times (24 June 24, 2002), Mpe joins Zakes Mda and K Sello Duiker as part of what has now become something of a regular triumvirate forming the kernel of a new canon for the new nation.

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4 In a recent survey, 62% of new immigrants “said they had been assaulted by local residents merely for being foreign,” and policing statistics established that “foreign nationals were more likely to have been the victims of crime than were locals in every category polled” (Leggett 2002).

5 An excellent article on the make-up and attitudes of Johannesburg’s migrant communities is Abdoumaliq Simone’s “Going South: African Immigrants in Johannesburg” (2000).


7 Swarns actually opens her article with Mpe: “The small crowd cheers as Phaswane Mpe reads from his new novel in a quiet corner of the decaying neighborhood of Hillbrow,” she writes, going on to say that “(h)e finds inspiration on these shabby streets, amid the crush of hustlers and aspiring students, the graffiti and barbed wire. Here, the new South Africa dazzles and disorients, offering young blacks previously unimaginable opportunities even as AIDS and crime threaten to shatter their dreams. Whites and racial tensions are almost invisible in this community and in Mr. Mpe’s well-regarded novel, Welcome to Our Hillbrow” (Swans 2002).
The criteria for the post-apartheid canon are clear. In terms of content, no concentration on race and little mention of apartheid – instead, engage with one or more of AIDS, crime, xenophobia, homosexuality, returning exiles, urbanization, new forms of dispossession, and identity displacement. In terms of style, take as much latitude from the standard realism associated with struggle literature as possible – association with ‘magic realism’ is acceptable, as long as it is made clear that this is drawn from African tale-telling traditions rather than any particular international influence.

It goes without saying that the novels identified as representative post-apartheid works are uniformly written in English. To use any one of the indigenous languages would risk being identified with the years of apartheid-inspired social (and linguistic) engineering aimed at creating stereotypes of racial and ethnic separateness. English signals alignment with the avowed nation-building, antitribalist strategy of the new government, and also makes it possible, of course, to gain for the novel something of the international acclaim garnered by the miracle of the new nation.

I slip into caricature here not out of any necessary disrespect for many of the works embodying these elements, but because of the all too easy way in which the novels that exemplify them can be taken up in superficial nation-building exercises. In *The Spectre of Comparisons*, Benedict Anderson corrects an “unstated assumption” in *Imagined Communities* that “the deep original affinity between nation-ness and the novel meant that they would always be adequate for one another” (1998, 334). “In the second half of this century,” he goes on to say, “the affinities have become visibly strained”; changes in the novel form and in the formalised production of the nation through ministries of information and culture, “handled by specialized state functionaries, advertisers, and the like,” mean that “nations with states – nation-states – have less and less need of the novel” (1998, 335). When “specialized state functionaries” do have a use for the novel, it is, these days, more likely to inspire doubts about the form rather than an appreciation for its national significance. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow’s* thorough immersion in the new canonical criteria has, for example, amongst other honours like being shortlisted for national literary awards, earned Mpe a place on “South Africa’s Official Internet Gateway.” Here he is to be found amidst Advice for Foreigners, Investing in South Africa, Smart Travel Tips, Fauna and Flora, Geography and Climate, Sport, and History and Heritage, listed by the International Marketing Council of South Africa as one of the “many writers worth checking out” who represent South Africa’s efforts to find “a new national – and hybrid – identity” (Thale, 2001).

It is in such comments that we find Mpe’s novel explicitly linked to the utopian ideals associated almost as a reflex with ‘the new South Africa.’ And yet *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* begins with as damning an image of the destructiveness of effusive nationalism as one could wish to find. “If you were still alive, Refentše, child of Tiragalong, you would be glad that Bafana Bafana lost to France in the 1998 Soccer World Cup fiasco” (1), says the narrator at the opening of his
address to his ironically-named protagonist (Refentše is Sepedi for “we have won”) that makes up the bulk of the novel. The narrator goes on to contrast the comparative peace of walking through Hillbrow in the wake of that loss with the South African national team’s victory over Ivory Coast in 1995, when the residents of Hillbrow in their jubilation hurled bottles from high-rise windows and one of the many wildly racing cars threw a seven-year-old child into the air. “Her mid-air screams still ring in your memory,” the narrator rather pointedly reminds Refentše, who has committed suicide by throwing himself from the twentieth floor of a Hillbrow building; “when she hit the concrete pavements of Hillbrow, her screams died with her” (2).

Nothing of the utopian clings to such an image, nor of goodness. I would argue however that Welcome to Our Hillbrow asks us to judge this violent image – along with a litany of other ills infecting contemporary South Africa – against an implicit sense of the utopian and ‘the good’ as they are associated with both the nation in general (in Anderson’s sense) and South Africa in particular. An incident drawn from the fervour generated by a national sport is as good a place as any to begin the playing off of ideal against reality in this regard. In a recent oral address on the theme of “the Goodness of Nations” presented in South Africa, Anderson gave force to his recently published observation that “his view of nationalism had become drier” by adding sportsmen and women to his list of examples of the ways in which the citizenry were shown the ideal nation; the constant depictions of their health and beauty illustrate, he said, how the hope of the country depends upon concealing actual suffering. Given the enormous status of sport in defining contemporary national identity, he could easily have added that it is perhaps only proper that the novel today should recognise its own displacement as a vehicle for the national when touching on anything to do with a game of such – and the word here must be used in its most conventional sense in the discourse of nationalism – epic proportions. Certainly the relatively new South African government went out of its way to frame its hosting of the Soccer World Cup in this way: the state-owned broadcasting medium saturated its coverage with the new national doctrine and its symbols, from the wide display of the new national colours and footage of famous moments in South African history to videoed slogans such as “To be South African is to believe in miracles” and “For this united nation, no challenge has been too great” (Fjeld 2000, 395). Such education in a common national heritage is not needed by the residents of Hillbrow, however, and the death of the child that opens Mpe’s novel only briefly interrupts their singing of the unofficial national sporting anthem; after a few calls of “Kill the bastard!” hurled at the driver who is already long gone, Sho-

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8 This address was given at several South African universities, but the one at which I was present was that given at the University of KwaZulu-Natal on 21 September 2006.

9 This is in his response to Marc Redfield’s contribution in Grounds of Comparison, where Anderson says, “over twenty years my view of nationalism has become drier. The chapters on ‘Replica, Aura, and Late Nationalist Imaginings’ and ‘The Goodness of Nations’ in The Spectre of Comparisons are thus written in a sardonic style mostly foreign to Imagined Communities” (2003, 233).
sholoza is taken up again, “drowning the choking sobs of the deceased child’s mother” (2).

It is this scene that presages the introduction of the novel’s titular refrain, heard initially from a passer by. Although the opening section of the novel – entitled “Hillbrow: The Map” – is made up of following Refentše on his first walk through the area’s streets from downtown to the university, in the space of the work’s mere 124 pages, the recurring catchphrase “Welcome to our...” rapidly expands beyond the Hillbrow of the novel’s title to subsume all the locations included in the narrative, from the protagonist’s home village of Tiragalong to Alexandra to the greater Johannesburg to Oxford to England. The expansion continues until all literal location is left behind and we are welcomed to “our All” (104), “to the World of our Humanity” (113) and ultimately, in the concluding words of the novel, “to our Heaven” (124). The one location to which we are never welcomed in the novel, it should be noted, is South Africa.

The infinitely extendable, and it is correct in this context to say quite precisely, the universalising dimensions of the novel’s refrain are generated by what appears to be a desire on Mpe’s part to counter Kevin Lynch’s description of the city as (in Fredric Jameson’s summary), “above all a place in which people are unable to map (in their minds) either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves” (Jameson 1991, 89). The insistent mapping of Hillbrow that dominates the first section of Welcome to Our Hillbrow is an almost compulsive attempt on the part of the narrator to site his protagonist in the city. It is almost as if Mpe has taken to heart Jameson’s reminder that new forms of political art need to “regain a capacity to act and struggle [...] at present neutralized by our spatial as well as social confusion” (1991, 91). Jameson insists, however, that such new forms will have to do this while at one and the same time holding “to the truth of postmodernism,” and in this respect it is an open question as to whether the novel’s attempts at situating itself are finally overwhelmed by a post-modern or – one could say and without too-exaggerated a conflation – a post-apartheid ethos.

For the narrative enacts both posts as it takes on the literal dimensions of the map in clinging to its spatial surfaces and resisting temporal depth. True to its canonical requirements, the few glimpses into South African history that Welcome to Our Hillbrow allows us are simply phantasmagoric snatches – “stuff that would be called surrealism or magic realism or some other strange realism were it simply told or written as a piece of fiction” (19), as the novel’s narrator puts it after a brief and at best impressionistic attempt at catching a sense of the past in his attack on the accurately rendered xenophobic present. History in Mpe’s narrative has very little purchase on the present, as little perhaps as geography in its ability to situate its narrator or its characters on national – as opposed to local – terms. Where then, in any serious sense, may we locate a claim for the novel to be representative of the new nation?
4. Addressing Utopia: the Second Person

We can approach this question through the formal orientation of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Instead of the overdetermined insistence on the third person mode of bearing witness or the first person of confession (not of course mutually exclusive in overt formal terms) so characteristic of anti-apartheid literature, the novel employs, for nearly the full length of its narrative, the second person. In making this point, I do not mean to essentialise the formal mode of person, but rather bring out the ways in which Mpe’s particular concentration upon the second person serves to underscore the often strange interplay of utopianism and critique that informs the novel’s overtly post-apartheid status.

In *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, an unspecified narrator addresses the bulk of the novel to the dead Refentše (“If you were still alive, Refentše, child of Tiragalong” [1]), who has killed himself after his lover’s betrayal and the frustration of his literary hopes, and the final section to the dying Refilwe (“Now you can sigh with resignation, child of our Hillbrow and Tiragalong and Oxford, as you think of your imminent entry into heaven” [122]), a friend of Refentše’s who has developed full-blown AIDS. Refentše has by the time of his death moved from Hillbrow-initiate to University of the Witwatersrand academic and published short story writer, whilst Refilwe, after following a similar trajectory from Tiragalong to Johannesburg, first finds employment in a publishing house and then takes up her studies again in the MA programme in Publishing and Media Studies at Oxford Brookes University. We may note in passing that the experiences of both Refilwe and Refentše are based closely on Mpe’s life experience, but the important point about the two protagonists is that they are both tied to literary ambitions that are cut short. In effect, the story told in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is generated by the conceit of the account of the death of the two protagonists producing the works of fiction they themselves are unable to complete.

Refentše and Refilwe certainly function as the subjects of the second person address which produces this effect, but the novel shares with many other second person texts the particularly problematic question of where the narrator is to be found. Certainly no locatable “I” appears in the novel, making the implied first person of the narrator entirely a reflex of the second-person mode of address. As such, the “you” encompasses the narrator as well as the protagonists/narratees. The fact that the very vehicle of that address, the novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, completes its protagonists’ frustrated creative ambitions, demonstrates that the second person in this case is a form of split address through which the author lets us overhear his address to himself as a fictionalised subject. While the use of the second person is conventionally taken as an invitation to projection aimed at drawing the reader into the text, the effect in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* draws attention instead to the rhetorical split itself, to the distance between narrator and protagonist or, if you will, given the autobiographical note introduced above, implied authorial experience and expressed fictional experience. The failure, upon
the part of Refentše, to write his novel is constantly brought up against the fact of the very novel one is reading.

The achieved fact of the novel lies then in a space beyond the physical specificities of its narrative. I say “space,” but if we are to use this term it must be in the special sense reserved for the utopian: in line with the etymological root of the word, the place from which the narrative is generated and where it finds its conclusion is “no-where” – nowhere, that is, in everything but a theological way in this novel, for the only location we can apply to the otherwise absent narrator is at first sight a thoroughly metaphysical one: “Now you can sigh with resignation, child of our Hillbrow and Tiragalong and Oxford,” he says to the dying Refentše, “as you think of your imminent entry into Heaven” (122).

Heaven, we have already noted, has appeared throughout the novel as the outermost horizon of the locations to which the narrator welcomes the subjects of his address. As such, it seems to reinforce the novel’s distancing itself from the national, for the nation, as we have seen in Anderson’s formulation, has no such dimension. “[T]he nation, no matter how grandly conceived, is intrahistorical: it has no place reserved for it in Heaven or Hell”, he writes (1998, 360). It is for this reason that so much of his argument for the Goodness of Nations turns on “The Unborn,” the citizens of a determinedly terrestrial future. It is they who impose obligations upon us to behave well in the present; as national citizens, we must “rise to the expectations of the future”:

It is, after all, in the name of the Unborn that we are asked to work hard, pay our taxes, and make other substantial sacrifices – in order to preserve heritages, reduce national debts, protect environments, defend frontiers, and, if needs be, give our lives for unborn descendents to not one of whom can we give a guaranteed personal name. (Anderson 1998, 362)

In order to exert this Utopian pull upon us, however, they must share nothing of our “messy and often dirty [everyday personal lives]: lies, evasions, cruelty, treachery, laziness, greed, frivolity, and the rest of anyone’s long list” (Anderson 2003, 240-1). “The tense here is,” says Anderson, “so to speak, the Future Perfect” (1998, 362). The Unborn “have no social lineaments at all, except for their [nationality]; and it is exactly this monochrome purity that guarantees their Goodness, and that allows them to impose on us obligations that we might resent accepting from a large number of [the] actually alive” (1998, 362).

The people of the future in Welcome to Our Hillbrow – in the sense of those who live on after the protagonists – display none of these features. Towards the conclusion of the novel, Heaven is shown to have a distinctly worldly character. As the narrator explains to the dying Refentše, “Heaven is the world of our continuing existence.” This, he says, is located in the memory and consciousness of those who lived with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone hold the real true version. Just as you, Refilwe, tried to reconfigure the story of Refentše; just as Tiragalong now is going to do the same with you. Heaven
can also be Hell, depending on the nature of our continuing existence in the memories and consciousness of the living. (124)

Heaven – or is it Hell? – has nothing of the utopian about it in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Neither utopian nor dystopian, it is simply business as usual, with rumour and gossip continuing there the destructive effects – which include ostracism, suicide, and necklacing – that the novel devotes much time to tracing in the earthly lives of its protagonists. Gossip is particularly powerful in the rural community that the main characters leave when they journey to Hillbrow, but it follows them in a deeply damaging pattern of prejudice and superstition – especially whenever this has anything to do with foreigners and AIDS. As such, the future in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, rather then serving as a basis for “the Goodness of Nations,” feeds into the much more ambiguous “biography of nations” with which Anderson closes *Imagined Communities*: This is the final section of a chapter entitled “Memory and Forgetting,” and Anderson tells us there that “All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives” (1991 [1983], 204). “As with modern persons, so it is with nations,” he continues. “Awareness of being imbedded in secular, serial time, with all its implications of continuity, yet ‘forgetting’ the experience of this continuity … engenders the need for a narrative of ‘identity’” (1991 [1983], 205); the main narrative purpose of such remembering/forgetting is to establish that identity “as ‘our own’” (1991 [1983], 206).

This is a dubious advantage for Refilwe who, as the narrator tells her as death closes in, will become just “one more sad example of the dangers of love gone wild” which Tiragalong will use “in future [to] admonish its children” (123). Her identity as it lives on after her death is thus hardly “her own” in an individual sense, and serves no basis at all for a national one.

“[W]hat the reality of Heaven is,” says the narrator in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, “what makes it accessible, is that it exists in the imagination of those who commemorate our worldly life. Who, through the stories they tell of us, continue to celebrate our existence even after we have passed from this Earth” (123-4). This brings us to the second category that Anderson invests with the power to give the category of the national its Utopian dimension: the Dead.

It is specifically the “National Dead” – those who have died in war for the nation – who have this status, and so it might seem entirely out of place to consider them in the context of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. And yet Anderson’s argument in this regard does have some bearing on the larger context in which we are considering this novel. “It is remarkable,” writes Anderson of a memorial to the dead of four very different American wars, that the monument treats all these dead as absolutely equivalent; it makes not the slightest difference whether they met their ends on a glorious or shameful battlefield. The sacrifice of their lives is thus radically separated from historical Right or Wrong. This separation is elegantly achieved by positioning them as sacrificial victims. National Death has, so too speak, paid their bills and cleared their moral books. (1998, 363)
Much may be said about the absence of the national as a significant dimension of the ever-widening context of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* by comparing this American monument to the Freedom Park’s Wall of Remembrance scheduled to be unveiled on Reconciliation Day in Pretoria in 2006. This will bear the names of 75,000 struggle heroes, including the names of 2,106 Cuban soldiers who died in combat in Angola. Not included on it, however, will be the names of the South African Defence Force members “who died while fighting to protect the security of the country”, as the *Independent* newspaper would have it. Whatever the justness of this decision, it is not hard to imagine the pain and sense of rejection it will occasion for a significant number of people whose only possible affiliation as citizens is with South Africa. When Anderson comments that “the national dead and the national unborn [...] mirror each other, and provide the best sureties of the ineradicable Goodness of the nation” (1998: 364), it is on the assumption that both the inclusivity and exclusivity of the nation is a matter more settled than it is in the current form of South Africa, whether it is as defined in relation to citizens from neighbouring African states or the nature of a just war as defined by the Geneva convention.10

5. **A Post for the Posts**

Does the use of the second person in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* not generate a national vision in its fictional project because the conditions for such a vision are not yet in place? More importantly for the subject of this paper, why is it that a novel so regularly cited as representative of the new nation fails to call up a utopian vision with which to confront the demonstrable lack in the material conditions for such a nation? Where in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is the sense of a post for the current limits of the post-apartheid nation, some indication of what it would mean to take the national beyond being defined by its past. During the struggle years, South Africa was regularly referred to by those striving for liberation as pre-Azania; what would be the pre- for post-apartheid South Africa? Well, that is the business of the Utopian in its strong form, as we saw in the literature of the anti-apartheid period.

We can push this question as it applies to *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* a last significant step further. Arguing against Fredric Jameson’s proposal that “All third-world texts are necessarily [...] national allegories” (1986, 69), Aijaz Ahmad points out that the “allegorising” of individual experience – which he sees as associated with “the whole history of realism in the European novel” – does not necessarily involve the category of “the nation” (1992, 110). His point that the allegorising effect could invoke many other kinds of “collectivity” is one that we need to bring to our consideration of Mpe’s novel, primarily because the work is

10 “Freedom Park Deputy CEO Peggie Photolo said the Geneva Convention clearly outlined what a just war was and stated the just causes for a war.” The Independent on Saturday, 30 September 2006, 3.
such a vivid manifestation of the non-national collectivities of post-apartheid society.

This, I think, has significance for the missing national dimension in the ever-widening embrace of the “Welcome” of its title. The issues that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* focuses on so passionately – “euphemism, xenophobia, prejudice, and AIDS” (59) – have, for the most part, been taken up by the left-leaning, community-based social movements that present possibly the most energetic protest against the dominance of the profit motive and the unfettered market and corporate power that characterise so much of the current political terrain in the new South Africa. Independent of the government, if not necessarily anti-ANC (although some do see themselves as ideological opponents of the post-1994 South African state), movements like the Treatment Action Campaign, the National Association of People Living with HIV/AIDS, the Education Rights Project, and the Concerned Citizens Forum, quite specifically try to give ordinary people a voice and some control over their daily lives without calling upon a nationalised sense of the political. If we are to read *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* seriously in terms of an attempt to “regain a capacity to act and struggle” in the post-nationalist political world of post-apartheid, then it is for some sort of alignment with these social movements that we could most profitably look. To the degree that the novel employs a utopian method of critique then, this slips from a national to issue-based interventions.

In itself, this is a potentially powerful shift in a strategy of critique. But in the case of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, the separation of the utopian from the national is not entirely convincing or effective. The universalising trope running throughout the novel, in which an infinitely expanding perspective becomes a globalized norm against which distorted local values may be measured, tends to flip the novel over into a moral – even moralizing – rather than a political agenda. The split address of the second person, in which narrator and narratee are meant to represent in combination a self completed in the aesthetic act and mapped into a meaningful totality of city, nation, and novel does not, finally, pass through a sufficiently politicised space to achieve this. The doubling up of the lyrical through the second person ends in an elegiac mode – none of the novel’s characters survive Hillbrow or the issues Mpe raises – rather than in the kind of specifically directed engagement we find in the specific aims of the most militant and engaged social movements or, for that matter, in Anderson and Jameson’s more general sense of the strategic value of the Utopian.

*Welcome to Our Hillbrow*’s status as a novel representative of ‘the new South Africa’ is thus revealing with regard to both the strengths and weaknesses of this belated national category. And Mpe’s work of fiction is telling when it comes to exposing just how limited the utopian force is of a national formulation thrown about with a particularly superficial utopian effusiveness. As a ‘post-apartheid’ work it is by no means alone in registering how far the new nation has fallen short of its ideals, and yet we may still be able to leave the last word on the national and the utopian to Anderson. Responding to Partha Chatterjee’s criticisms
of his work, Anderson says, “He is probably right in saying that what he terms my defence of classical nationalism is utopian, but I disagree that this nationalism is irrelevant. I think it is precisely this utopianism, the utopia of an endlessly receding horizon ‘over the rainbow’, that makes it relevant” (2003, 240). In examining the shape of the national in the discourses of post-apartheid, we must remember with Anderson that it is not to be measured in its achieved form: “The nation in effect offers a receding ethical horizon” (2003, 241).

Works Cited


