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MOVEMENT, MEMORY, TRANSFORMATION, AND TRANSITION IN THE CITY: LITERARY REPRESENTATIONS OF JOHANNESBURG IN POST-APARTHEID SOUTH AFRICAN TEXTS

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Abstract

"Writing the city," particularly writing the city of Johannesburg, in post-apartheid South African fiction can be considered a new approach to interpreting South African culture—a new approach that takes into consideration and reflects the changes taking place in present-day South African society. Texts written on Johannesburg such as Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006) and Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) are utilizing the subject matter and everyday life of the city as an "idea," as a means of expressing societal concerns and other important changes taking place in the country as a whole. The paper will identify and consider how depictions of the city of Johannesburg are being altered and modified in contemporary South African literature, and show the ways in which the narratives reveal how transformation is narrated and how this changes in post-transitional South African fiction. Topics such as the depiction of Johannesburg as a palimpsest, as a conflation of historical moments—past, present and future—will be explored. Reasons why this change is taking place and why this reinvention of the city of Johannesburg in fictional works is essential will also be discussed.

Keywords

automobility, Hillbrow, palimpsest, transitional fiction, walking

About the author

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In much urban theory, there seems to be consensus that movement through the city and the act of one's moving or walking in city spaces enables one to "remap," redeem, as well as create "new" space. Theorists (Amin & Thrift; de Certeau; Kruger; Soja; and Southall) acknowledge the changing nature and shape of the city, as well as the ways in which cities are actually constructed and made to exist precisely because of this constant movement and transformation of urban life. There is also an abundance of literature that focuses on movement in the city as facilitating one's

knowledge of the self and others. However, writings on the city of Johannesburg have tended to only acknowledge the need for drastic transformation in the structure of the city and have rarely recognized that such transformation is already taking place. Nuttall and Mbembe, as well as Mistry, have consequently argued that it is essential that the multifaceted layers of the city of Johannesburg be explored, especially in the post-apartheid context.

This multifaceted, layered, ambiguous nature of not only the city but also the country of South Africa has gradually begun to be explored by literary critics, theorists, and novelists alike. Discourses and structures that belong to and represent the apartheid past in South Africa cannot simply be erased and forgotten, but should rather inform and merge with the memory of the present. City space in South Africa is porous and permeable, and that past uses and structures of such spaces cannot be obliterated (Ellapen; J. Graham; S. Graham; Gunner; Lester; Rastogi). It is evident then that South African urban space is in the process of being studied as a palimpsest—as a layered space constituted and constructed in terms of its past, present, and future, which are all superimposed upon each other. De Certeau discusses the ambiguous temporal nature of cities, noting that they project and consist of both an “opaque past and an unclear future” (103). His argument will form a significant part of my discussion of the representation of movement and transition in the city of Johannesburg.

An important method to this study is that of reading the chosen texts as a type of cultural history or memory. I read Ivan Vladislavić’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207* (2006) as a means of constructing South African culture and history through textual production. Although this paper is informed by urban studies such as the work of de Certeau, it will not be concerned with the construction of Johannesburg as an urban system and its literary representations. Rather, the focus of this study will be on how the novels contribute to South African culture and history by narrating its transformative history. Themes and representations of movement, transition, and transformation in the city of Johannesburg will be dealt with, and topics such as the representation of Johannesburg as a palimpsest, as a conflation of historical moments—past, present and future—as well as depictions of Johannesburg as undermining or subverting the myth of “oneness” or unified nationhood (a common theme in works of fiction after apartheid) will be explored. Of particular interest in this discussion is the matter of willed mobility and migration in the post-apartheid/ transitional period of South Africa as opposed to the forced migration which took place during the apartheid era. I will also discuss the reliance on automobiles in the city, and how this means of traversing city territory alters not only the use of urban space but the perception of this space in national memory.

In both *The Restless Supermarket* and *Room 207*, characters are constantly confronted with combined relics of the past, present, and future in the city of Johannesburg. There is also a very

evident desire to harmonize space in the city, blurring parts of the old apartheid city with the new renovations and reconstruction taking place, emphasizing a need to move forward yet at the same time highlighting the fact that the past should never be forgotten. In fact, post-apartheid, transitional literature in general is still very much concerned with the relics of apartheid. Geertsema points out that "Apartheid is still a major presence in texts produced during the transition, as surely cannot but be the case given its persisting legacy" (2). Geertsema further maintains that this contemporary, transitional fiction is

a literature of passage, passing and the past. It makes explicit the struggle through the passage from an unjust system, through a difficult present, and into a new, uncertain future; often, it is a passing into death; these passages, finally, are marked by the attempt to deal with and come to terms with the past. (2-3)

These transitional texts are thus essentially about time, history, and how the nation's desire to overcome an unforgivable past should not necessarily be about forgetting or obliterating the memory of this important history.

It is the representation of the city of Johannesburg as a means of exploring this relationship of time, history, and memory which I aim to consider. I also intend to illustrate how these concerns, in turn, construct South African culture. Bremner notes that "writers have used the city and its transformation as one of the key tropes through which to interrogate post-apartheid society" (262). The image of the city can therefore be said to highlight essential characteristics and concerns of post-apartheid South Africa. Nuttall and Mbembe note that all metropolises are caught up in an ambiguous time-space situation. They write that in city spaces there is always "ceaseless birth, destruction, and reconstruction of forms, the aim of which is, on the one hand to, distinguish nature and landscape, and on the other hand to testify to the presentness of the past while making way for the 'new.'" They further maintain that these characteristics are all evident in Johannesburg "at different phases of its history" (17). Johannesburg disrupts any certainty, and therefore underscores the condition that is transitional South Africa, since it highlights the ambiguous nature of a country trying to move on from its past.

With regard to the representation of space and time in Johannesburg, Vladislavić's text maps South Africa's political and social transition by considering changes taking place in Hillbrow in the city of Johannesburg through the eyes of an elderly white male's perspective. Aubrey Tearle, a keen yet retired proofreader, interprets Johannesburg's transformation by means of highlighting "corrigenda" or so-called mistakes he sees arising as a result of the change in power dynamics in the city. His obsession with corrigenda draws attention to the disorder and disturbances that

have come to characterize the city of Johannesburg and, in turn, underscore the complexity of this urban space. On the other hand, Moele's *Room 207* traces similar themes of transformation through the depiction of the lives of six black men living in Hillbrow. The text considers the conflation of moments and memories of the past, present, and future by describing the different ways in which these six men struggle to deal with a disadvantaged past, a difficult, undefined present, and an unsure, elusive future. Hence, the nation's desire and effort to merge the unfortunate events of the past with changes of the present to move on to a hopeful future is captured in the representation of the daily lives and personal relationships of these four characters, as well as in the ways they have utilized city space for their own needs and desires.

The disruption of any certainty in the city is evident in depictions of Johannesburg's temporal structure. Hillbrow in particular, as depicted in the texts, is a densely layered in terms of space and time. It is portrayed as a hyper-urban environment with constantly changing meanings and indistinct temporal structures. What is significant, though, is that most areas in Johannesburg at present, including parts of Troyeville and Braamfontein, are going through processes of renewal and reconstruction in an attempt to bring people and businesses back into the city and out of the suburbs, while Hillbrow seems to remain untouched, ignored. This is evident in the relatively unchanging names of places, streets, and buildings of this area. In *The Restless Supermarket*, Hillbrow's street names and landmark buildings remain the same, while the rest of Johannesburg seems to be in a constant state of movement. Although Errol and Floyd (fellow customers at Tearle's favorite coffee shop, The Café Europa) steal the miniature replica of the Hillbrow Tower from Miniland, the real tower stays very much intact, much to Tearle's great relief: He laments that "At least the Hillbrow Tower was still there, the real thing I mean, ugly as it is" (122). Similarly, streets retain their original names in *Room 207*, and buildings such as Ponte remain the signifiers of Johannesburg (160). This apparent stasis is very significant; as Samin states, "the names of places [and perhaps the places themselves] ... still sometimes carry connotations of the past." Hillbrow seems to be a palimpsest of layers of time, depicted as consisting of an overlapping of time periods of the pre-1990s, the 1990s, as well as the post 1994 era. In the same instance that there are still relics of the space of pre-1990 Hillbrow, as evident in the tower, there are also elements in this part of the city that highlight other more recent time spaces—for example, the use of internet slang in advertisements in Johannesburg's street stores. Tearle notices the use of the "@" symbol in a Hypermeat store's sign that says "half a dead sheep @ R16.95 a kilogram" (501). This recent time-space is also depicted in *Room 207* in descriptions of the changed state or use of buildings. For example, the beginning of the novel opens with a description of how the building in which the men share a room "used to be a hotel" (13). The simultaneous layering of these time frames in the city underscores the shape-shifting nature of Hillbrow, and shows how the use of this

space changes how it is perceived. Even the way in which the six men in *Room 207* refer to their stay in Hillbrow indicates a blurring of time-space in the city as they seem to be in a liminal state, constantly reiterating that their stay in the city is not permanent. They all repeatedly refer to the “out-of-Hillbrow party” (14) they plan to have when they leave Hillbrow, emphasizing that they are trapped in a constant struggle with the past, present, and future. This fluctuation between the concerns of the past, present, and future is also expressed in the text’s preoccupation with dreams and the act of dreaming. In the narrator’s argument that in the city, “dreams die each and every second, as each and every second dreams are born” (19), the overlapping of time frames again becomes evident as some dreams are relegated to history, to the past and the forgotten, while new dreams surface in the present and simultaneously indicate a looking forward to the future. Similarly, Malamo’s favorite quotes that he posts on the wall of Room 207 emphasize this continuous relationship with and interlinkage of the past, present, and future as they repeat the importance of the connection between yesterday, today and tomorrow, the most fitting quote being: “*You should have twenty rands that you used the day before yesterday and used yesterday, use it for today and still use it for tomorrow and all other tomorrows*” (19).

In addition to being portrayed as blurring these time-spaces, the transformation Hillbrow has witnessed during these time periods is also reflected in the texts. Samuelson notes that “during the 1980s, Hillbrow moved from being an exclusively white to a predominantly black neighborhood” (250). However, it should be noted that Hillbrow is known for being a gray area in the late 80s and early 90s. Regardless, Samuelson further argues that “[s]uch shape-shifting ... continues to characterize Hillbrow in the following decade, in which its make-up is reconfigured by an influx of continental immigrants” (250). Thus, Hillbrow has witnessed a transformation from being a white area during apartheid to being the home of migrants and other black people in the 1990s and after, to a shelter or space for immigrants post-1994. This movement is mapped by means of Tearle’s obsession with telephone directory records in *The Restless Supermarket*. Tearle is shocked when he first comes across an African surname, “Merope with a Hillbrow address,” in the Johannesburg telephone directory (129). He even dials the number of the residence to see if a black person really lives there. Indeed, he finds that “a daughter of Africa” answers the phone. However, he does not stop here and decides to visit Mr. Merope’s home to prove that a black man is actually living in Hillbrow. To his surprise, he notices more black people than he expected leaving the lift of the building on their way to work: “black men wearing business suits and toting briefcases ... and half as many black women” (129). In addition, the increasing movement of black people into Hillbrow in the 1990s is emphasized by Tearle’s racist comments. Tearle snidely remarks that “Silently, while we [white people] slept, the tide was darkening” (129), and observes that “there were more and more people of color in Hillbrow” (130). He also notices the appearance of news

about the “‘greying’ of Hillbrow” (130) in the newspapers and is appalled that no one is doing anything about it. Similarly, the characters in *Room 207* also note the increase in the amount of black people living in Hillbrow at present (89).

This depiction of transformation in Hillbrow in the novel reflects the manner in which black people have changed the way they use space in the city of Johannesburg since apartheid. Samin maintains that post-apartheid fiction has recorded not so much the political event of apartheid and the transition “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.” Notably, it is not only black South Africans who have made Hillbrow their home, but also immigrants from all parts of Africa and the rest of the world. Gunner emphasizes that the very nature of the immigrants’ occupation of the city space questions the idea of a singular national home or nationhood (qtd. in Manase 95). Manase states that this changing relationship to space and place is depicted in literature by means of portraying the city “as a space inhabited by different characters each uprooted from his or her home and family—where colonialism and apartheid placed them and all contesting for different opportunities” (95). The interrogation of a single nationhood or nationality that is South African in the city of Johannesburg thus occurs as this cosmopolitan nature of the city highlights the way in which it is constructed by multiple stories, voices, and time frames. These multiple visions of the city result in the city’s being viewed as a palimpsest. The palimpsestic nature of the city is reflected not only in terms of layers of time and space but also layers of people of different nationalities and from different cultures. Johannesburg is thus a palimpsest of cosmopolitan life. Manase refers to this diverse cultural mixing in the city as a form of “agency” as it encourages the remaking and remapping of urban space and people’s ideas about and relationship to place (102). This layering of difference in the city encourages this agency, ultimately encouraging the transformation and remaking of space. In *The Restless Supermarket*, this palimpsest of cosmopolitan life is reflected in the diverse cultures, races, and backgrounds of the patrons who begin to frequent Tearle’s beloved Café Europa. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is introduced to Tearle’s waiter Moses, who is from Mozambique, as well as to the original manager of the Café, Mrs. Mavrokordatos, a Greek woman (7-8). The Café hosts Tearle, a “‘European’” (15) as he refers to himself, his fellow white English friends Spilkin and Merle, his Afrikaans friends Wessels and Mevrouw Bonsma, as well as young black and colored people like Errol, Raylene, Floyd, Nomsa, and Eveready, among many others. *Room 207* also refers to the cosmopolitan element of Johannesburg life in its description of the many different people, from all over the country and world, who come to the city and make Johannesburg their home. For example, Matome labels The Sands Hotel in Johannesburg “Hotel Lagos” because of the influx of Nigerians in this area (161), while the narrator remarks that, in Hillbrow, “you’ll find Europeans and Asians that by fate have become proud South Africans” (19).

This depiction of Johannesburg as a palimpsest is also evident in representations of a combined past, present, and future in the city. The future of the city is depicted by means of the synthetic space-times of places such as those resembling the Melrose Arch style of architecture which Mbembe discusses. Melrose Arch and Montecasino are synthetic space-times since they are “constructed tableaux on which disparate images are grafted” (Mbembe 400). These space-times “exist ... as interfaces of other local and faraway places”; “[t]heir architectural styles are based on the recombination of borrowed imagery” and “marketed by private developers and property owners in contrast to an unraveling, chaotic city center besieged by swarming and inchoate crowds, incessant shouting and peddling, and a failure to contain disease, crime, and pestilence” (Mbembe 401). These sites are advertised as safe havens, as worlds which one can enter into in order to escape the cruel, dangerous city. Although Vladislavić’s text does not deal outrightly with these exact space-times, Tearle’s particular interest in the blocks of flats in Hillbrow that are modeled and named after European influences (26) highlights the creation of alternative time-spaces in Johannesburg. In fact, Tearle mentions that “[p]ortmanteu names ... have always been popular in Johannesburg” (26), underscoring the mixture of the local and abroad in flat names such as “Lenmar Mansions ... Milrita Heights ... [and] Alanora Maisonettes” (26). Mbembe further argues that post-apartheid commercial architecture can be viewed as a mode of erasure of the past. He maintains that this erasure emphasizes “the failure of the racial city to assimilate the passage of time” and that such structures are themselves symbols of forgetting (402). With regard to this, Samuelson argues that these constructed spaces of security “continue to separate the spaces inhabited by the rich and the poor, holding townships at bay from the city proper and sealing off enclaves of luxury from increasingly dilapidated inner cities” (248). In *Room 207*, the extent to which these constructed spaces of security segregate people in the city is emphasized in Zulu-boy’s discussion of the difference between white suburbs such as Sandton and inner city areas where black people live such as Hillbrow. He considers “how clean Sandton and all the other white suburbs are” (91), indicating a juxtaposition of “safe” suburbs and dangerous inner city areas, and in effect almost emphasizing that the dangerous city be fled and deserted.

Yet, it is important to note that the past is never completely obliterated. In Vladislavić’s text, imagery of nostalgia, hate, and apathy about the past combine to underscore that the city ensures that these memories are never discarded. For example, Tearle constantly thinks back to the “good old days” when there were “benches for whites only” (15) in the city parks and cafés in the street (16). *Room 207* also constantly refers to the injustices black people still have to endure as a result of apartheid. Mbembe writes that the juxtaposition of time-spaces is important when depicting transition because “[p]articularly in Africa, the blurring of the distinctions between what is public and what is private, the transformation and deformation of inherited urban shapes, is one of the

ways by which urban citizens generate meaning and memory” (404). The fact that Johannesburg is made up of different layers of historical time, space, and structures (Mbembe 404) reveals the manner in which the metropolis has become a site in which this meaning and memory is being created.

Regardless of the seemingly static nature of Hillbrow’s development, the way people use space in this part of the city has changed from the times of apartheid to the present. Before discussing this transformation of use of space in Hillbrow, it should be noted that the act of walking itself blurs the boundaries of time. In fact, walking allows those in the city to experience this space on an individual level, appropriating certain parts of the city and discarding or ignoring others depending on his or her own needs and desires. According to Bremner,

[w]alking recomposes the city through two rhetorical tropes: synecdoche and asyndeton. Synecdoche, a part standing for the whole, permits a walker to engage with the city by focusing on details which stand in for the whole; asyndeton, the suppression of linking words in a sentence, allows pedestrians to select routes and fragment the city, skipping over links or leaving out pieces. The technological, geometrical space of the city is transformed by trajectories that combine, skip over, fragment or distort its immobile order ... This propels movement through the city in a way that eludes urban systematicity. (30)

Walking is thus an empowering activity, encouraging individual agency, which in effect drives movement and change. Bremner further notes that walking as a trope is “useful in that it redefines urban space as a space of social, theoretical, cultural, and critical interaction, rather than as a static or formal object” (34). The act of walking in the city therefore encourages a view of the city as a living, breathing space, capable of movement and change. Furthermore, walking, and the individual path a person chooses to walk, creates city space. According to de Certeau, “[t]he motions of walking are spatial creations. They link sites to one another. Pedestrian motor functions thus create one of those ‘true systems whose existence actually makes the city’” (105). The active selection of certain paths, routes, or destinations over others on behalf of the walker transforms the city space as this act creates discontinuity. In this way, walking can also be seen as a means of asserting individual authority, since the walker “makes only a few of the possibilities set out by the established order effective ([the walker] goes only here—not there)” (de Certeau 107). However, de Certeau notes that walkers are unaware of their creation of such spaces in the city. He argues that the ways in which walkers “write” or create city space are not read or understood (102). The city is therefore always fluid. He further maintains that this creation or “writing” of the

city is an interconnected network, made up of diverse, multiple bodies. The palimpsestic nature of the city thus again becomes evident since as de Certeau argues, the “networks of these forward-moving, intercrossed writings form a multiple history ... made up of fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces: with regard to representations, it remains daily, indefinitely, something other” (103). The city is thus always undefined and in the process of transformation as walkers constantly create it.

Although both Vladislavić and Moele’s texts popularize the trope of walking, the reality of the Hillbrow of the present is rather different. Most residents travel by car, taxi, or bus, and thus map the city in terms of a different kind of mobility. This form of mobility enables an even more heightened feeling of empowerment for city dwellers than the act of walking as it allows for a richer, more specific selection of routes and fragmentation or leaving out of certain spaces of the city. Although Tearle explores the city’s streets on foot, new ways of viewing and exploring the city become evident in the increasing presence and use of automobiles as the novel progresses. In fact, Tearle, who represents the past use of space in Hillbrow (as an old, white male free to walk the city streets), feels threatened by this increasing use of and reliance on cars in the city. He is almost knocked down by a “baker’s delivery van” and seems extremely alert and guarded about the movement of vehicles. His seeming fear with regard to automobiles is further emphasized in his statement that he was “as mindful of the traffic regulations as ever” on the day he was almost driven into (23). Moreover, Tearle’s quick attention to the vehicle’s registration number (23) as well as his admission to feeling disorientated and needing a drink (24) highlights his anxiety and insecurities about this means of travelling through the city.

What this says about the space of Hillbrow is quite complicated as it highlights the sense of fear that engulfs most of the inner city (as there is a greater sense of safety when one travels by car), but in the same instance also underscores a new sense of freedom, access, and independence for Johannesburg city dwellers. This is because movement through the city in automobiles grants one a more authoritative stance with regard to the use of this space as this becomes a new means of mapping, and interacting with, city space. In *The Restless Supermarket*, the authority and agency granted by the use of cars in the city is evident in Tearle’s comment that because of the deteriorating state of Hillbrow, “No one who could afford to drive a car wanted to come [t]here any more” (11). The use of cars in the city thus allows greater choice with regard to which parts of the city one can visit or avoid. In *Room 207*, characters acknowledge that traveling by car in the city affords one a greater advantage not only in terms of getting to and from destinations, but also with regard to signifying status. An example of this is Molamo’s girlfriend Tebogo’s desire to show their son how hopeless his father is, since Molamo “had neither a car nor a degree” (43). According to Livermon, automobility, especially for black people who were mostly immobilized during apartheid, changes

one's access to and appropriation or use of city space; "the nature of encounters in the city is increasingly defined by the movements made possible by the car" (274). Cars, taxis, and buses are therefore becoming the principle means by which people navigate the city streets. A reason for this is not only fear of being a victim of crime while on foot, but also because automobility extends the activities and time one can experience in the city. Livermon maintains that the use of automobiles "influences individual patterns of consumption, pleasure, and ideas of achievement among the growing black middle class" and thus argues that cars are essential for urban, social life to take place in Johannesburg (274-75).

However, this act of driving instead of walking in the city results in a lack of physical connection to the city space with one's body. Samuelson states that being a pedestrian enables the one to be "intimately familiar with the histories and resonances of the inner city's crooks and crannies that shape and inflect the movements of the body" (254). Driving in the city erases this connection with the urban environment as the driver or passenger can now gloss over previously vital links between surfaces of city space and their own selves. Traversing the city landscape by means of automobiles can therefore be said to obliterate city dwellers' concrete ties to memories held in the city streets. The question of whether the boundaries so evident in transitional city space can still be transgressed by means of traveling by car thus arises. The answer to this seems to be yes because this new means of moving through the city can be viewed as being transgressive in itself. For example, drivers break the laws of the city, speeding, parking, or stopping where they are not allowed to, driving through red robots, going down one-ways and getting lost, etc. Cars enable their drivers and passengers to revisit past spaces, thus enabling the erasure of past uses, although not completely, and encouraging the altered use of such past space to suit the needs of the present.

Another possible problem with driving rather than walking in the city is that driving and the use of automobiles is contradictory. This is because cars highlight divisions in the city space. Livermon argues that "the mobility rendered possible by the use of the car is paradoxical, if only because the car highlights the very segregated and divided nature of the urban metropolis" (275). It should also be noted that cars not only underscore geographical separation in the city but also class divisions. This is emphasized in Tearle's reference to the fact that not everyone who lives in the city can afford to drive a car (11). On the other hand, though, Livermon points out that automobility also works to blur such divisions: the car reveals this divided nature of the city "to be a segregation or division that can be disturbed or shifted," and "[w]ith an automobile, a city is more easily traversed and its temporalities more easily refigured" (275). Traveling by automobiles also works to link or connect different parts of the city that are usually segregated such as the inner city, the suburbs, and the townships. In addition to this, the use of automobiles extends time (Livermon 275) as there is a belief that in cars, you can arrive or depart at any time. This therefore links back to the

idea of the city as a palimpsest since the nature of time and space and the boundaries these create become blurred in this extension of time.

To conclude, what this representation of the changing nature and use of space and time in Johannesburg achieves is a creation of a sort of mapping of memory and history of the city itself. *The Restless Supermarket* and *Room 207* illustrate how literary descriptions of movement and transformation in the city work to construct South African culture, history, and memory by serving as a record, regardless of fictional quality, of cultural and historical progress and growth. The texts record the history and growth of Johannesburg by considering the existence of different layers of space and time in Hillbrow as well as the changing nature of the use of space in this part of the city. The mapping or recording of the history and memory of Johannesburg is revealed by means of depicting Johannesburg as a palimpsest in terms of the layered nationalities and cultures residing in the city, as well as through representing a combined, overlapping past, present, and future in this space. In addition, transformation of the use of space in the city is evident in descriptions of the changing nature of mobility in the city space and in the portrayal of how traveling by automobiles ultimately enhances one's access to, and agency in, the city. Ultimately, South Africa's memory is being mapped and remapped through the representation of the city of Johannesburg.

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