

Representations of the National and Transnational in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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Abstract

As creative agents of knowledge production in the domain of humanities knowledge, South African writers such as Phaswane Mpe have the historical burden of participating in the transformation of knowledge in ways that revolutionize the role of artistic performance with a view to prompting social transformation. In our context, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) actively generates emergent grammars that underpin a transformational thrust through a distinctive transnational bent, where xenophobia and rural myopia are countered through a deliberative narrative of doubt cast on a putative insular South African-ness pitted against master narratives of national unity, on the one hand, and disruptive vectors such as HIV/AIDS and witchcraft, on the other. As a significant discourse that constitutes humanities knowledge, a novel such as Mpe's contributes to a project's transformation of knowledge in its departure from, and disavowal of, a totalizing master narrative of nationalism, putting in place a macabre post-national struggle of dystopia. It specifically tests the limits knowledge production and consumption around the topical issues of HIV/AIDS and immigration. It proceeds to show how Phaswane Mpe's novel has successfully debunked myths of a privileged autochthonous habitus. The novel eschews characterising unstable homologies of the rural and urban divide and, in like manner, the South African and 'foreigner' bar, as a starting point for meaningful knowledge transformation about immigration and the HIV/AIDS stigma through transnationalism and transculturation of language by way of an idiom of intertextuality represented by a transnational bent. We demonstrate throughout that transnationalism prompts a signification of cultural transformation in the novel under discussion, viz. *Welcome to our Hillbrow*.

Keywords: nationalism, trans-nationalism, post-apartheid South Africa, black South African identities, ethnic identities

Whereas Maithufi (2013: 10) discerns the virtues of variation, ironic distancing and defamiliarization in recent post-apartheid South African writing, this article concentrates on Mpe's distinctive handling of the black ethnic idiom as exemplifying distancing and defamiliarization through the creation of a transnational mise-en-scene that straddles Oxford in England, Hillbrow in Johannesburg and Tiragalong in Limpopo as a dimension of cultural transformation. Tlhalo Radithalo (2008: 94) has demonstrated that the setting of Hillbrow in novels such as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001) and Kgebetli Moele's *Room 207* (2006), amongst others, indexes a transnational atmosphere because since 'the 1970s it was already cosmopolitan and multiracial, attracting many immigrants from the rest of Africa and the world'. In this context, the use of African language idiomatic expressions and proverbs that pervade *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* make reference, for example, to foreign African nationals as 'stretching their legs and spreading like pumpkin plants' (26) is sardonically derived from the Northern Sotho proverb *monna ke thaka o a naba* – meaning that a real African man should not have only one sex partner. For the purposes of this paper, and having taken stock of this translational element of this literary idiom, we glean a definition of transnationalism from Homi Bhabha (1992: 48), who theorizes the temporality of spaces such as Hillbrow as 'the hybrid location of cultural value – the transnational as the transnational'. This element of transnationalism in the idiomatic expression constitutes what has been recently described as 'a simultaneous internationalization and indigenization of representational temporalities' (Masemola & Makoe 2014: 63), especially at the point in the novel's plot after 'accidental' sex occurs with the main character Refentše, and the woman Bohlale makes the difficult suggestion that the two must confess to the cheated boyfriend. When in this debacle Refentše finds the confession idea difficult, Mpe uses the Sotho idiomatic expression meaning to quest for a suitable solution for a serious problem, 'scratching your head gently/ *ingwaya hlogo*' (52, our own back translation).

It is also noteworthy that after innocent Piet is accused falsely through the tricks of a quack diviner of casting spells on his cousin, Molori's uncle uses the Northern Sotho proverb 'witches have no distinct colour through which other people can recognize and identify them/ *moloi ga a na mmala*', meaning that Piet's denials do not mean that he is not responsible for sorcery; etc. to convince his incredulous nephew Molori that Piet is indeed a wizard. One way in which Mpe's English text evinces the writer's distinctive handling of the medium of the novel is through the use of black ethnic idiom as both survival signification and cultural refashioning, discourse cultural transformation. An idiom is 'an expression that has a meaning contrary to the usual meaning of the words' (Lustig & Koester 2010: 176). On the one hand, Sope Maithufi notes that such contrariness underscores 'variations and defamiliarizations' (2013: 5) necessary for survival of cultures; on the other, for Homi Bhabha (1992: 46) such contrariness of meaning is necessary for 'a radical revision of the social *temporality* in which emergent histories may be written'. The defamiliarized reinscription of the African language idiom of communal thinking in the trans-national post-apartheid public Hillbrow/Tiragalong/Oxford captures the nature of culture as expressed in the black idiom that records emergent histories:

Culture as a strategy of survival is both *transnational* and *translational*. It is transnational because contemporary postcolonial discourses are rooted in specific histories of cultural displacement It is translational because such spatial histories of displacement – now accompanied by the territorial ambitions of global technologies – make the question of *how* culture signifies, or what is signified by *culture*, rather complex issues. It becomes crucial to distinguish between the semblance and similitude of the symbols across diverse cultural experiences The transnational dimension of cultural transformation – migration, diaspora, displacement, relocations – turns the specifying or localizing process of cultural translation into a complex process of signification (Bhabha 1992: 47).

Such localizing processes of cultural translation are also much in evidence in other post-apartheid novels such as Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995). For instance, in the instance where mourners are appalled by the caustic address by the youthful Nurse during a funeral, they express their disgust by

referring to the speaker as a young girl ‘who still smells her mother’s milk/ wa go nkga mekgato’ (18, our own back translation). This expression is derived from the Sotho idiomatic expression that I give, meaning someone is too young to speak as boldly and impetuously to his or her elders. African language idiomatic expressions are used consistently in Mda’s *Ways of Dying*, too, like ‘destroy the stomach/ntšha mpa’ (76, our own back translation), meaning doing an abortion; and in referring to the main character Noria as someone thoroughly thrashed by the world/ *a bethilwe ke lefase* (79, our own back translation), meaning from the ethnic identity perspective that in her adulthood ventures she had been dogged by misfortune.

It would be useful to consider that the negative connotation attached to induced abortion within black ethnic cultures should be read into the former expression due to its nature of being an African language idiomatic expression, as this is how abortion is viewed from the Africanist perspective of the speakers of the languages in which the idiomatic expression is found. The idea of being dogged by misfortune in the latter idiomatic expression used in Mda’s prose should also be understood in relation to the African traditional regard for the spiritual role of parents and ancestors in the prosperity of those who customarily revere them. Only in this way can the events of the novel and characterization of Noria be fully grasped beyond what the Englishness of the text conveys at first glance to a reader not using the approach of this paper. Although there are subtleties and nuances in the characterization, the same idiomatic signification of cultural transformation applies to *Welcome to our Hillbrow*.

Recognising the validity of the observation that ‘Mpe’s Hillbrow [lies] at the nexus of Western, post-colonial, and South African traditions of mapping’ (Ogden 2013: 194), we deem it necessary to also consider the radical proponents of evidence of a rather uncompromising transnational identity who assert that black post-apartheid identity as portrayed Phaswane Mpe’s post-apartheid novel is so eroded that ‘educated and urbanised individuals should no longer identify’ with and share beliefs having to do with ‘a common and accountable response to that which the community represents’ (Clarkson 2005: 454). For while critical and creative canons of South African literature have been reshaped on the anvil of contact with the political priorities of exile and the diaspora, it has maintained the one commitment necessary: the universal humanity that writers of African literature, from Chinua Achebe to Dennis Brutus – indeed from Es’kia

Mphahlele to Phaswane Mpe – inscribe into a national consciousness as a ‘world literature’ that foregrounds global concerns that affect diverse cultures (Smit 2010:36).

Further to corroborate this vacillation between the national and the transnational in the ‘national-world literature’ axis, in one place the ‘in-between signification’ of a transformative literary idiom has been elucidated as a complex struggle in the form of a simultaneous belonging and becoming: ‘This struggle often means that the options of operationalizing identity-making (becoming) or identification (belonging) in narrative’ (Masemola 2004: 49). This axis, in another place, has been described as underwriting emergent history ‘as a particular history that ...undertakes two simultaneous processes: *becoming* (identity-making) and *belonging* (identification) because the greater political society’ had rejected claims ‘of a citizen to a common identity’ (Raditlhalo, 2007: 336). Therefore the tension between belonging and becoming manifests as contrariness or restaging of ‘insider’ versus ‘outsider’ values in the literary idiom of Phaswane Mpe.

In a recent study, Michael Dash explores an understanding of Patrick Chamoiseau’s notion of the novel as the discursive terrain of the author as a ‘warrior of the imaginary’, where the ‘the artistic work is far from being useless as it acquires a special purposefulness, an ethical efficacy’ (2012:116). Such efficacy is inextricably bound to the imperatives of knowledge transformation, in that superstitions that fuel stigma around HIV/AIDS are challenged by emergent histories of cultural transformation of the Hillbrow narrative: Phaswane Mpe creates characters who carry the effects of a traditional cosmology that ceases to be wholly relevant in the rational account of either HIV/AIDS infection or African migrants in Hillbrow without attenuating the force of the idiom that accompanies it . Ethical efficacy in Mpe’s novel reveals an interesting connection between writers and the governance of a country and its imaginary; for it is in this connection that Mpe’s work gains transformative credence as a ‘self-reflexive’ and thus ‘introspective work’ (Rafapa & Mahori 2011: 157) in both its idiom and temporality

Where Dash is saying that every society needs writers as a primary security group ahead of the police and the army to resist ‘annihilation’ (Dash 2012: 116), it becomes all the more clear that Mpe’s work resists internecine African annihilation that springs from the nefarious wells of xenophobia. If the space of Hillbrow is enlarged by a migrant African presence whose

occupation of space is defined solely by suspicion-driven violence, then Mpe successfully produces a narrative of knowledge production which ostensibly creates relationships that are romantic between black South Africans and Africans from the rest of the continent by creating a transnational mise-en-scene on which xenophobic blame is obviated. To be precise, the South African woman Refilwe goes to Oxford Brookes University England to study for a Masters in Publishing and Media Studies, in which setting she meets a Nigerian man with whom she falls in love and also discovers that both of them have been infected with HIV/AIDS before they met. Mpe's epistemic struggle against xenophobia, stigma and ignorance is therefore launched from a transnational axis bereft of suspicion and blame. The autochthonous myths of South African national 'authenticity' are tested and new knowledge of African presence is posited to redefine relations beyond an oversimplified and autochthonous national space:

Welcome to Our Hillbrow, as a work of art, has in simple narrative terms, reconstructed ordinary experiences of the people in post-apartheid South Africa by portraying the issues that South Africans are faced with on a daily basis. These are issues such as crime, the scourge of HIV/AIDS, the glaring presence of foreign nationals and its consequences, xenophobia and prejudice as well as the exponential rate of unemployment. The novel achieves this by its employment of ordinary characters such as students, who are at the periphery of the spectacle of grand political circles. Mpe presents these characters and their problems in a manner that mirrors the challenges of ordinary South Africans in the post-apartheid era In the novel there is a call for introspection primarily among members of the black South African citizenry (Rafapa & Mahori 2011:169).

In the same vein, there is something quite telling in the observation by De Kock when he says that the period after 1994 South African literature 'ushered in a much bigger world' where 'the desire was to step beyond the enclosure of the "national"', which can also be described as 'the "struggle" terrain' (De Kock 2011: 22). The interest of this study is to probe how the depiction of black identities in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* affiliates or disaffiliates to such a struggle-united national consciousness until the death of apartheid in 1994, and how such a black group identity fares in

the post-apartheid era described by De Kock (2011:22) as characterised by a 'transnational turn.' Besides a disavowal of parochial notions of South Africanness and xenophobia in the wake of melding cultures, this paper seeks to probe to what extent identities of black South African nationals in Phaswane Mpe's post-apartheid novel are reoriented under the transnational orientation.

Commentators on South African literature written in English profess contradicting states of the identities of blacks both during what De Kock (2011) calls anti-apartheid nationalism until 1994 and post-nationalism after 1994. For Mphahlele (2002: 253), prior to 1994 anti-apartheid nation building included the act 'to unify the ethnic groups into a strong nationalist base': a view that finds resonance later in Pommerolle and Simeant (2010:91), in their assertion that 'transnationalism ... does not dilute national and cultural identities; rather, it encourages the assertion of identities that can be legitimately claimed as proof of having constituencies'.

What counts as common in the post-apartheid novel necessarily ranges itself against rigidities of both nation and identity. Hence the cautionary stance with respect to transnationalism and identity:

The increasingly invoked notion of 'transnationalism', referring to various kinds of global or cross-border connections, currently frames the view of numerous researchers concerned with migrants and dispersed ethnic groups. 'Identity', although it has long been one of the slipperiest concepts in the social scientist's lexicon, can suggest ways in which people conceive of themselves and are characterised by others. Transnationalism and identity are concepts that inherently call for juxtaposition (Vertovec 2001: 573).

Mpe's novel in its narrative scheme and characterization of relationship tests the 'parculairity' of conditions of South African national 'identity' and its 'others' in its representation of the Hillbrow setting:

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 today 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 (Green 2005: 5).

Unlike De Kock (2011) who views nationalism as dissolving under trans-nationalism in the post-apartheid era, Mphahlele (2002) sees it discontinuing due to an implicit descent to ruralism. In *Welcome to our Hillbrow* doubt is cast, however, on rural inclination as a default backlash on which is shaped local African identity. A poignant point arises, according to Ogden, ‘when Refentse and Cousin discuss the role of foreigners in Hillbrow, their conversation does not come across as a staged debate about xenophobia but as an argument that says as much about Refentse as it does about local conditions’ (2013: 200). At base, both Ogden (2013) and Mphahlele (2002) seem to suggest that collective African identities at the lower level of ethnicity continue to exist after apartheid, yet threaten national unity due to a ruralist undercurrent that, by its nature, is exclusivist and expansionist. In the post-apartheid era, according to Mphahlele (2002: 255), such a nationalism among blacks can be strengthened by adherence to ‘unchanging truths that lie at the core of movements’, and can be weakened by ‘rural compartments’ and ‘trying to govern by ethnic exclusion.’ When one considers that nations are themselves ethnic identities of a higher federal order (cf. Anderson 1991), the ethnic identities of blacks before and after apartheid may be seen as lower-order nationalisms that had to be subsumed into some kind of multi-ethnic nationalism inspired by the struggle against apartheid. Moderate champions of post-apartheid trans-nationalism such as De Kock (2011: 26) concede to the ‘trans’ in trans-nationalism creating ‘a cusp between the national and what lies beyond it, not a severance.’ Traces of national identity, according to this position, remain even in public spaces characterized by a trans-national identity like the post-apartheid one.

A propos the above, it is necessary to probe to what extent the reconfiguration of social spaces in Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* has both tested and consolidated the commitment to universal ethical efficacy in the face of xenophobia. While analyzing the novel in pursuit of evidence of trans-nationalised black identities, it should be worthwhile to plumb for signs of resilient ethnic identity. A decoding of such signs of collective ethnic thinking will help facilitate intercultural communication demanded by at least two clusters of cultures intersecting in what the novel communicates to the reader through its setting.

Translational Rural Ethnic Identity in the Urban Milieu

In his novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Phaswane Mpe (2001: 48-9) reveals that,

You discovered, on arriving in Hillbrow, that to be drawn away from Tiragalong also went hand-in-hand with a loss of interest in Hillbrow. Because Tiragalong was in Hillbrow. You always took Tiragalong with you in your consciousness whenever you came to Hillbrow or any other place.

The rural village of Tiragalong is depicted as an embodiment of surviving African customs and traditions while Hillbrow is synonymous with urban and metropolitan African living. This is not to say that the urban environment of Hillbrow does not boldly mediate the rural customs of Mpe's characters when they migrate, true to Gluckman's observation in his study of Africans' rural-urban migration that 'rural custom and practice are effective, though much modified by the demands of the urban situation' (1963:76). The main character of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Refentše, embeds a miniature tragic story through a demonstrated passion for short story writing. Refilwe's character dies of HIV/AIDS related ailing after what popular gossip judges to be a morally lose life that she embraces upon arriving in Hillbrow. There is the idea of Refentše's character in his short story virtually committing suicide through her abandonment of traditional African morals when upon arrival in Hillbrow, reverberating throughout the many layers of storytelling in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. Mpe's stylistic manipulation of language use links the culturally positioned views of suicide to an Africanist eschatology in which suicide is viewed with repulsion (cf. Mbiti 1987).

The character Refentše literally commits suicide when he 'resolve[s] to tumble down the twentieth floor' of his flat (55). Refentše's former village girlfriend Refilwe goes to study at Oxford, only to return emaciated with full-blown AIDS (118). The motif of suicide is reinforced, as Refilwe's illness is judged as 'the fruit of sin' (112). Mpe ingenuously links the recurring theme of suicide to the social functioning of idioms and proverbs. Mpe's searing satire against the holier-than-thou African community of Tiragalong cannot be appreciated in its complete fullness unless his dexterity with language use is marshalled.

The challenge for readers or interpreters of texts using idioms of

languages other than the predominant medium the novel purports on the surface to be written in ‘is to understand the intended meanings of idiomatic expressions and to translate them into the other language’ (Lustig & Koester 2010:176). Which means, although Mpe’s novel is written in English, the ethnic idiomatic expressions in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* need to be ‘doubly back translated’ into the ‘other language’ – which this time is paradoxically the very English language in which it is written. The discourse of the novel may not be understood fully if nothing is done about the presence of such culture-specific idioms in its style. According to Lustig and Koester (2010:13), ‘Communication is a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings.’ This is why the indigenous African idioms in Mpe’s novel should be interpreted, their cultural context interpreted properly so that the text and the reader ‘create shared meanings’ within a community of interpretation.

When his cousin leaves him alone in a flat the first day he sleeps in Hillbrow, Refentše asks himself ‘Will they come back?/naa *ba tla boa?*’ (9, our own back translation). In Northern Sotho idiom, the question *naa ba tla boa?* (will they come back, ever?) implies that they may die any minute due to the high violence levels in Hillbrow’s perilous nightlife. Failure to decode the cultural source of this expression may lead to misleading conclusions that Refentše’s cousin has an unreliable character and may run away from the newcomer Refentše, perhaps because he sees the village bumpkin as a burden. In traditional rural life where initiation is practiced, the agitated question asked is usually whether the boys going for circumcision ‘*naa ba tla boa?*’, meaning, ‘will they return alive?’.

A similar danger of under-decoding the discourse of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* might arise if the Northern Sotho proverb ‘a corpse is always de-skinned on someone else’s back’ */letlalo la motho ga le bapolelwe fase* (45, our own back translation) is not detected as a proverb. What the proverb says is that generally or usually, no death in traditional African communities is accepted as natural. Specifically in relation to the plot of the novel, the proverb points out that the killing of the old woman on accusations of witchcraft following Tshepo’s death by a lightning bolt and his mother’s, apparently through shock on hearing the sad news, is baseless. By the same token, no reader of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* will blame Refilwe’s unrelenting hope that Refentše will one day return her undying love after they have re-united in Hillbrow, if the Sotho proverb ‘there was always a return to

the ruins; only to the womb was there no return/ *maropeng go a boelwa; go sa boelwego ke teng*' (82, our own back translation) is interpreted fully for what it means. The proverb means that generally, there is no folly in the act of one returning to something from which one earlier sulked, provided that the misunderstanding has been cleared. It is helpful, in this particular instance, that Mpe predicates the proverb with the words 'She knew, like all Tiragalong, that ...' (82), thus hinting that the dialogue or opinion is not at all individually attributable to the character Refilwe and does not simply apply specifically to her particular case.

A communal perspective of the novel is enhanced through such a sustained expression of societal sanction by means of proverbs and other Sotho idiomatic expressions. The effect is that even when dialogue ostensibly proceeds from the mouth of an individual character, it is not individual opinion that is uttered. Clarkson (2005:453) hints at this kind of individually expressed communal dialogue in his observation that 'In a traditional African worldview ... the notion of liability, or responsibility, is intensified to result in an understanding of the self *crucially* as an agent of cultural continuity.'

Idioms or any cultural forms in more collectivist cultural groups like those of indigenous African cultures represented by characterization in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, are almost always cited to lend a sense of the echo of a communal ring to all approaches, opinions and resolutions of individuals and groups in day to day living. This, while they are mostly averted in similar linguistic events in more individualist societies such as the European in order for credit, in the case of the latter, to reside accordingly in the individual. The fact of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* being a novel written in English and apparently English sentences actually containing African language idioms should warrant caution against factors that handicap successful cross-cultural communication or, indeed, transcultural critical literacies. In their explication of cultural-level dimensions that facilitate or inhibit cross-cultural communication, Gudykunst and Lee observe that 'individualism-collectivism is a major dimension of cultural variability used to explain differences and similarities in communication across cultures' (Gudykunst & Lee 2003:9). The reading I adopt in this discussion of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* attempts to facilitate such a communication across cultures that we here illustrate.

It is thus worth examining what is described in this paper as transnational and translation temporalities of belonging and becoming in the post-apartheid black idiom of Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, such as they

constitute a dimension of cultural transformation. Lucy Graham an analyst of post-apartheid South African literature, includes Mpe in the category of writers who show not ‘just fixed locations in space, but also trajectories through time-space’ (Chapman 2001: 9). This is an indication that both fixed identities and trans-nationally de-identifying existences can be found in the narrative of Mpe.

Owing to a different focus in critical interventions, some interpretations of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* by critics such as Clarkson (2005) have, by default and good reason, not paid any serious mind to traces of localized ethnic identities among the urbanized characters around whom especially the novel’s careful critique of the societal taboos around HIV/AIDS – is mounted. This at first may appear as a grave omission, as *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* makes it clear that HIV/AIDS, xenophobia and disillusionment are central to the novel’s concerns. For Clarkson (2005: 454), ‘the background beliefs of the community of Tiragalong are challenged to the extent that Mpe presents them as nothing more than a toxic brew of superstition and xenophobia, with little purchase on or authority over the very people they supposedly unite.’ Such an observation leads Clarkson to add that ‘t is hardly surprising that *educated and urbanized individuals should no longer identify with these beliefs*, or share them, or that they should no longer feel obliged to offer a common and accountable response to that which the community represents’ (Clarkson 2005: 454, our emphasis).

Failure for any reader to prioritize the interpretation of the cultural context of humanity metonymised by the non-English idiomatic expressions, in and by itself creates a possible communicative barrier between the text and the reader. The African language idioms of even English language expressions in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are symptoms of a continuing black ethnic cultural sensibility among the urbanized characters of the novel. The description of culture as ‘a learned set of shared interpretations about beliefs, values, and social practices, which affect the behaviors of a relatively large group of people’ (Lustig & Koester 2010:25) affirms that the individually expressed communal verdicts on societal matters handled in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* symbolize a culture other than that regularly transmitted through normative English. Given that ‘*Welcome to our Hillbrow* is constructed within what remains a rare and idiosyncratic mode’, where ‘the second person as it is used in the novel does not take on the extradiegetic address of an omniscient author to the reader’ (Green 2005: 9) it is worth considering a

dialogic feature of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* identifies with what the writers Gudykunst and Lee (2003:15) define as collectivist communities whose communication is indirect ‘and read[s] other people’s minds’ when they communicate in their in-groups.’ The use of the idioms of the indigenous languages through which the characters in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* are shown to communicate is a symptom of such collectivist communities’ way of communicating, known for indirectness and the assumption of communally shared meanings in a message.

Conclusion

In recognition of what Johannes Smit has aptly described as the defining character of the priority of diversity in commitment to universal humanity, in which the African writer decries ‘the deformation and mutilation of humanity’ (2010:48), this paper has so far attempted to demonstrate that there is a need for readings of the novel that recognize continuing relevance of ethnic and/or multiplicitous African identities in the trans-national post-apartheid public space, for the aspect of intercultural communication also forming part of the discourse of the novel. A Intercultural communication needs to be consciously attended to in situations where ‘large and important cultural differences create dissimilar interpretations about how to communicate competently’ (Lustig & Koester 2010:52). Competent communication between Mpe’s novel and the reader on the balance of its semblance and similitude can best be possible if the barrier of non-English idioms is consciously attended to as the search for the emergent meanings of a new broader, transnational African signification of social consciousness is forged.

As demonstrated in the analysis of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* throughout this article, the notion of trans-nationalism that is congruous with the depiction of South African black post-apartheid identities cannot be an extremist one dismissing the contribution of ethnic identities in some nationally inflected trans-national public space. Mpe’s discourse on trans-nationalism that can be derived from the literary idiom of cultural transformation in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* is more in line with theorists like Vertovec (2001), read in tandem with Pommerolle and Simeant (2010:91), in their assertion that ‘Transnationalism ... does not dilute national and cultural identities; rather, it encourages the assertion of identities that can be legitimately claimed as proof of having constituencies’. Suffice to conclude

that the idioms of transnationalism in Mpe's narrative should be seen through the prism of the 'cultural differentials' of race, history and gender that are neither totalizable as nouns that are South African nor binaristically opposed to nouns denoting African foreign nationals like *makwerekwere*:

These cultural differentials are more productively read as existing in-between each other. If they make claims to their radical singularity or separatism, they do so at the peril of their historical destiny to change, transform, solidarize. Claims to identity must never be nominative or normative. They are never nouns when they are productive; like the vowel, they must be capable of turning up in and as an other's difference and of turning the 'right' to signify into an act of cultural translation (Bhabha 1992: 55).

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