

University of KwaZulu-Natal

A Handful of Spaghetti: Entanglements of Space, Place, and Identity
in the Works of Imraan Coovadia

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DECLARATION

The Registrar (Academic)

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I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigation and research and that it has not been submitted in part or in full for any other degree or to any other university.

All citations references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged.

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Alan Muller

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ABSTRACT

Durban born novelist, essayist, and academic, Imraan Coovadia has been described by Jane Rosenthal as “turning into a national treasure as a novelist” (Coovadia 2012a: cover). Despite winning numerous prizes including the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize and University of Johannesburg Prize for *High Low In-between* (2009), and the M-Net Literary Award for *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (2012), there has been little extended scholarly focus on his works. This thesis focuses primarily on *The Wedding* (2001), *Green-Eyed Thieves* (2006), *High Low In-between* (2009), and *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (2012), with brief remarks, in the conclusion, on the recently-published fifth novel *Tales of the Metric System* (2014). I argue that Coovadia, while being a South African Indian author, eschews romanticising nostalgia that has come to typify much South African Indian authored fictions. In doing so, he looks beyond archetypal depictions of Indian experience in South Africa, opting for a more global and cosmopolitan approach to his works. My study examines how Coovadia, in his novels, is able to look simultaneously both directly *at* and *beyond* the South African cultural milieu, creating fictions that are punctuated by cosmopolitan places and people while retaining local specificity. Using selected theories of space, place, and identity, I suggest that the novels under discussion reflect an era of globalisation, interconnectedness, and hybridity through the construction of cosmopolitan literary cities and the hybrid identities that inhabit them. In doing so, I find that Coovadia writes beyond what Mphahlele has termed the ‘tyranny of place’ (Web2), creating literary spaces that are porous and offer potential for (re)definition, personal growth and fulfilment, and cultural newness. In this way, I argue that his works can be tentatively labelled as post-transitional texts that strive to craft connections rather than to construct self-isolating communities and characters seen in South African texts such as Richard Rive’s *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986), Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2003), and Phyllis Naidoo’s *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002). Coovadia’s status as a post-transitional author would group him with a younger generation of South African global imaginaries – like Lauren Beukes (*Moxyland* [2008], *Zoo City* [2010], *The Shining Girls* [2013], and *Broken Monsters* [2014]) and Phaswane Mpe (*Welcome to Our Hillbrow* [2001]) – that situate South Africa, along with its unstable and protracted political transition, within a complex global network characterised by global exchange of information, items, people, and cultures.

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CHAPTER 1: Macro/Microgeography and Identity

In order adequately to analyse the literary spaces and identities depicted in Coovadia's novels, it is imperative to view them through a theoretical lens that will provide this dissertation with the necessary foci. The following chapter will serve to construct a trifocal lens, drawing from theories concerning globalisation and time-space compression, contemporary urban experience and 'city-ness', and *international* or hyphenated identities. In an effort to proceed in a linear fashion, it might be useful to work from a macro scale to an increasingly micro one: from macrogeography to microgeography, concluding with theories regarding the construction of individual identities within localised geographical contexts. Put more plainly, having a firm grasp on the dynamics of the process of globalisation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of how contemporary cities are formed and function. The conditions of contemporary 'city-ness', in turn, contribute to a more complete understanding of how individual identities are constructed within/between those cities.

This chapter will focus on theories by David Harvey and Doreen Massey in establishing its macrogeographical foundation, discussing the global phenomena of "time-space compression" (Harvey 1989:284) in the postmodern era and the necessity to adopt a "a global sense of place" (Massey 1994:156) in order to alleviate the anxieties and uncertainties Massey suggests to be associated with the phenomenon of a 'shrinking' globe. Following Massey's assertion that globalisation and time-space compression need not "deny place [or] the importance of the uniqueness of place" (ibid.), this chapter will narrow its field of vision in order to focus on discourse concerning the urban milieu and the conditions of contemporary city-ness. Theorists such as Michel de Certeau and Walter Benjamin have written extensively about the textuality of urban space, how individuals navigate and utilise it, and how the city has been given literary representation. This dissertation will focus on theories of globalisation, urban geography and contemporary city-ness not only because all of Coovadia's novels are set in recognisable local and international cities but also because he is himself a global citizen, having resided and written in many cities across the world.

In exploring the notions of the textuality, navigation, and literary representation of urban space, this theoretical framework will consult the works of Michel de Certeau, Walter Benjamin, Edward Said and Sarah Nuttall. Benjamin and de Certeau have both theorised about the urban milieu and how best to experience it. While Benjamin's *flâneur* and de Certeau's *wandersmänner* may use the city for considerably different reasons, they both use

the pedestrian modality to navigate the city. Benjamin's *flâneur* - a man of leisure - ambles through the city for pleasure whereas de Certeau's *wandersmänner* walks the streets out of necessity. It is due to this express difference that de Certeau's "Walking in the City" (in *Walking in the City* 1993) will be used to analyse how Coovadia's protagonists and even peripheral characters traverse the literary cities of Johannesburg, Cape Town, Durban and beyond (as is the case in *Green-Eyed Thieves*). In this same essay, de Certeau touches on the idea of seeing the city as "text", one which its inhabitants "write without being able to read" (128). This idea of "writing" the environment has also been taken up by Palestinian-American literary theorist, Edward Said. In discussing Gaston Bachelard's *Poetics of Space* (1958) he suggests that:

the objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus a house may be haunted or homelike, or prisonlike or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here.

(Said 1978:55)

Said's use of the *poetics of space* will be useful in examining how spaces can be endowed, linguistically, with an emotional sense of familiarity, alienation, safety or danger. This is particularly useful in a South African context as space and land have been identified as common tropes within the South African literary canon. As the following chapters will suggest, Coovadia writes about land, and urban space in particular, in a significantly different fashion in comparison with many black South African writers.

While Benjamin's *flâneur* is less useful – for the purpose of this dissertation – than de Certeau's *wandersmänner*, he also offers the paradigm of using the literary city as a tool for critique. Mike Savage, in "Walter Benjamin's urban thought: a critical analysis" (2000), suggests that "[Benjamin] saw urban writing as a critical device allowing established and conventional values to be put to question" and was "not interested in describing cities or urban experiences but in using urban writing as a critical device" (40). Benjamin's construct of the literary city as a critical tool will be explored in order to ascertain how, and for what reason, Coovadia shapes the literary metropoleis in his work. As subsequent chapters will argue, Coovadia extends his frame of reference beyond what Es'kia Mphahlele terms as "the tyranny of place" (Web2) as his literary cities are not places of repression and terror but

possess potential for growth and personal fulfilment. It must be admitted here that while Coovadia's later novels, *Green-Eyed Thieves*, *High Low In-between* and *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, look beyond the tyranny of place, his historical Durban of *The Wedding* adheres more to the expected depiction of an oppressive urban space in apartheid-era South Africa.

Theorising the literary city in a South African context is one focus of critic Sarah Nuttall (2008, 2009). She suggests that "entanglement offers, for [her], a rubric in terms of which we can begin to meet the challenge of the 'after apartheid'. It is a means by which to draw into our analysis those sites in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways" (2009:11). Nuttall's insight, while pertaining primarily to Johannesburg and its inhabitants, can be extrapolated, for the purpose of this thesis, to apply to both Durban and Cape Town, and their citizens. The rubric of entanglement will be of particular use when considering Coovadia's novels as his protagonists are presented as inhabiting cosmopolitan cities, both existing as entanglements of culture, history, language, people, and even race.

Following Nuttall's paradigm of entanglement, this chapter will narrow its focus further in order to examine the "singularities" (de Certeau 1993:131) that inhabit Coovadia's literary cities. This will be done by examining theories of identity and identity creation within contemporary urban spaces. In establishing a framework for analysing the identities found in Coovadia's fiction, this chapter will consult the works of Homi Bhabha and Sarah Nuttall. Nuttall's framework of entanglement, when applied to the concept of identity, shares some similarities with Homi K. Bhabha's discussion of hybridity in "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences" (1995). He suggests a conceptualisation of an "*international culture, not based on exoticism or multi-culturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's hybridity*" (209). Bhabha's idea of *international cultures* will be beneficial in investigating how Coovadia shapes his protagonists; abjuring notions of cultural purity by endowing them with hybridised cultures and identities. This will be explored in Chapter Three, particularly applicable when examining the merchant, Ismet Nassin, of *The Wedding*, the brothers Peers of *Green-Eyed Thieves*, and jet-setting poet, Gerome Geromian, of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* as they are all migrant entities who adapt to new/changing environments. Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands* (1991), while referring mostly to Indian writers living in England, is of particular value when considering South African Indian writing as the older generation of writers can be seen to have created 'imaginary homelands' – whether they be of a different time or geographical location - in their novels and journalistic

pieces. Coovadia's novels might be read in the light that he, as a writer of Indian descent, is cognisant of Rushdie's warning regarding both "imaginary homelands" and "Indias of the mind" (10) and, as a result, avoids treading the same nostalgic water that has come to characterise a large portion of South African Indian writing. One could, to an extent, consider 'imaginary homelands' in diasporic literature to be the result of writers not embracing an identity of *internationality* in order to maintain (what seems to them) a coherent sense of self. The literary tropes of 'imaginary homelands' and 'Indias of the mind' will be of use in examining how Coovadia's narrative forms and characters navigate the pitfalls of nostalgia of cultural 'purity'.

This chapter will again draw on Nuttall's rubric of entanglement, this time applied to the identities and figures found in contemporary urban milieux. She suggests that identity should be thought of as a point of intersection between, *inter alia*, histories, languages and cultures. Furthermore, in her "Literary City" (2008), she mentions two urban figures that will be of particular use for the purpose of this dissertation: the *flâneuse* and the *sâpeur*. The *flâneuse*, she argues, provides a gender-based city consciousness in which most theorists of the city have been uninterested while the *sâpeur*, she suggests, is a "figure of spatial transition, operating in the interstices of large cultures" (199). The *sâpeur* will be discussed again later in this chapter when dealing with the rubric of entanglement as applied to identity. These two figures, as I will suggest in Chapter Three, are evident in Coovadia's novels in the forms of Kateja Haveri (*The Wedding*), Nafisa (*High Low In-between*), Shakeer (*High Low In-Between*), Gerome Geromian (*The Institute for Taxi Poetry*) and the brothers Peer (*Green-Eyed Thieves*).

Space and Place

Before undertaking the task of analysing literary depictions of space and place, it would be useful to differentiate between the terms 'space' and 'place' as they will be of particular importance to this thesis. These terms are often used interchangeably but, when considered within the contexts of contemporary literary criticism and social geography, it is clear that these terms are incommutable. Chris Barker defines 'space' as "an *abstract idea*, an empty or dead space which is *filled with various concrete, specific and human places*" (2000:292, own emphasis). Abstract space thus consists of places that are endowed with specificity by virtue of their being considered in relation to humans. Similarly, Doreen

Massey, suggests that place is “*constructed out of particular interactions and mutual articulations of social relations, social processes, experiences and understandings*” (1993:66, own emphasis). Massey’s assertion, when considered in conjunction with that of Barker, results in the notion that place is, essentially, relational. The relational nature of place – as opposed to the abstract nature of space – allows it to become the focus of “human experience, memory, desire and identity” (Barker 2000:291). Put more plainly, “places are discursive constructions which are the target of emotional identification and investment” (ibid). It can be argued that Barker’s blanket terms of ‘emotional identification and investment’ are synonymous with the act of ascribing meaning to space. This thesis will use the term ‘place’ to refer to “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter et al. 1993:xii) while ‘space’ will be used to denote the abstract concept proposed by Barker – one that is lacking ‘meaning’ or emotional investment.

Place and Literature

A key concept underpinning this thesis is the interconnectedness of space, place and literature. One of the reasons for undertaking a study of this nature is that I am interested in how space and place are able to influence literary production. An exemplar of the close relationship between place and literature is the literary tourism industry, a form of cultural tourism that focuses on places associated with fictional texts or the lives of their authors. Mike Robinson, in *Literature and Tourism* (2002), describes the complex relationship that exists between literature and place:

Works of literature are recognized as expressive of economic, cultural and political change, replete with intimate and revealing perspectives on the relationships between people and place at various space scales.

(Robinson and Anderson 2002:3)

This being said, the relationship between place and literature does not only function in one direction; it is reciprocal. Claudia Mamet suggests that “[w]hile place is powerful in influencing literary production, literature is powerful in constructing place and readers’ perceptions of it” (Mamet 2007:11). Similarly, James Duncan suggests that place – like literature – is primarily a cultural construct. Fictional descriptions of place:

are necessarily constructed within the limits of language and the intellectual framework of those describing it. Such a language is not a set of words which have a one-to-one

correspondence with reality 'out there'. It is based in discourses which are shared meanings which are socially constructed. Descriptions can have meaning only in such a context-bound sense.

(Duncan 1990:12)

In postcolonial literary theory, there has been an upsurge in interest in how writers are using fictional descriptions of place to (re)define not only themselves but also the spaces they inhabit and choose to (or not) call 'home'. Place is a construct of particular importance in the work of Coovadia as he sets all of his novels in clearly identifiable locations – most of them South African. His sense of place is considerably different to that of earlier writers in that he adopts a global sense of place rather than one that reinforces notions of us/them or inside/outside. Coovadia's sense of place within his works is one that transgresses perceived boundaries of ethnicity or nationality. Coovadia's construction of place in this sense will be explored further in this chapter with specific reference to the work of Doreen Massey and what she refers to as a 'global sense of place'. Another focus of this thesis is what *kinds* of spaces Coovadia favours in his writings. Having set all of his novels in either Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town or international cities, it can be agreed that Coovadia favours contemporary urban spaces – with the exception of his debut novel, *The Wedding*, which is set in late 19th and early 20th Century Durban.

Meg Samuelson, in "Scripting Connections: Reflections on the 'Post-Transitional'" identifies a similar trend among other young South African writers such as Lauren Buekes (*Moxyland*, *Zoo City*, *The Shining Girls*, and *Broken Monsters*) and Ishtiyak Shukri (*The Silent Minaret* [2005]). She continues, suggesting that "what is even more evident in the literature is the drawing of spatial connections, or connections with other worlds" (2010:114). Coovadia's novel, *Green-Eyed Thieves*, as Samuelson points out, fits comfortably within the 'bounds' on a post-transitional text by challenging ideas of nationalism and political obligation. Chapter Three of this thesis will examine how his novels are able to "expand the map of South African literary engagement" (115) and 'script connections' between South Africa and the rest of the world.

Having briefly examined how place and literature are interconnected (particularly in a post-transitional context) and identified the kinds of spaces that feature in Coovadia's fiction, it is now possible to proceed with further constructing the theoretical lens through which this thesis will examine places and characters in the selected texts.

Macroeography: Time-Space Compression and a Global Sense of Place

Few would disagree that advancements in communication technology and global transport have resulted in an increasingly mobile and interconnected global society. David Harvey, in *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), suggests that “we [contemporary humans] have had to learn how to cope with an overwhelming sense of *compression* of our temporal worlds”, referring to this phenomenon as “time-space compression” (240). As faster modes of transport and communication have arisen, our perceptions of the relative size of the world and our place therein have also shifted. Figures 1 and 2 below represent what Harvey describes as “the time taken to traverse space [Figure 1] and the way we commonly represent that fact to ourselves [Figure 2]”.

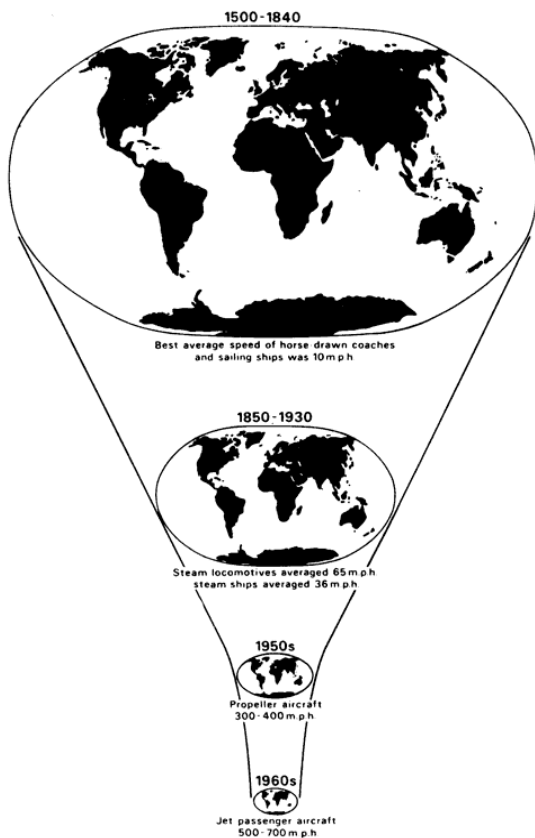


FIGURE 1: RELATIVE SHRINKING OF THE WORLD MAP

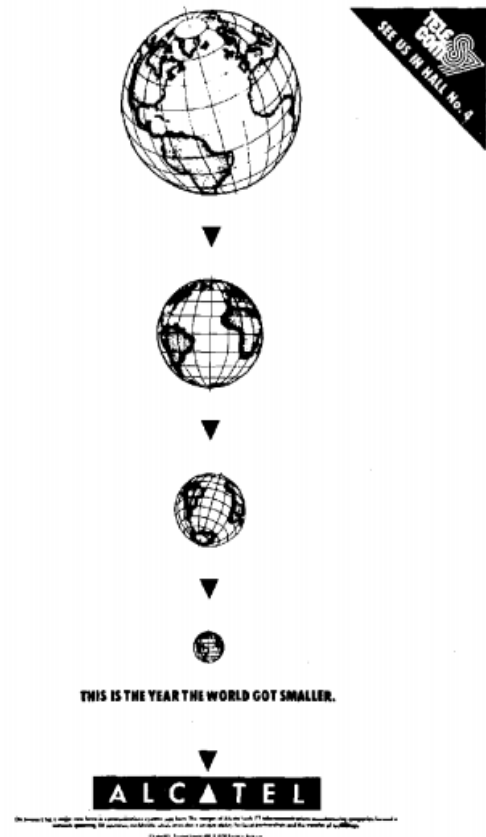


FIGURE 2: 1987 ADVERT POPULARISING THE NOTION OF A SHRINKING GLOBE

As the world continues to ‘shrink’, people are more inclined toward extensive travel and multiple relocations during a lifetime, effectively cultivating a ‘culture of mobility’. This culture, despite being endowed with a great deal of potential, has given rise to various

uncertainties. One such uncertainty, as Doreen Massey points out, is “an increasing uncertainty about what we mean by 'places' and how we relate to them” (1994:146). Uncertainties about ‘place’ have also resulted in uncertainties regarding home, belonging and (dis)location. Uncertainties of this sort have been identified as a symptomatic trope in a great deal of postcolonial and postapartheid literature. Massey argues that these kinds of uncertainties regarding “place” often result in an:

(idealized) notion of an era when places were (supposedly) inhabited by coherent and homogeneous communities [being] set against the current fragmentation and disruption. The counterposition is anyway dubious, of course; 'place' and 'community' have only rarely been coterminous. But the occasional longing for such coherence is none the less a sign of the geographic fragmentation, the spatial disruption, of our times. And occasionally, too, it has been part of what has given rise to defensive and reactionary responses - certain forms of nationalism, sentimentalized recovering of sanitized 'heritages', and outright antagonism to newcomers and 'outsiders'.

(Massey 1994:147)

South African Indian writers may, at present, be considered as falling into one of two generalised categories; an older, more nostalgic generation or a newer, more mobile generation. In light of Massey’s statement, the older generation of South African Indian writers can be seen as participating in a “sentimentalized recovery of sanitized heritages” (1994:147). Examples of such writers and their texts are Ravi Govender’s *Down Memory Lane* (2006), Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2003), Tholsi Mudly’s *A Tribute to our Forefathers* (2011) and Phyllis Nadiou’s *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002). While Mariam Akabor is considerably younger than these writers, I would still include her in this category due to the nostalgic and often romanticised depiction of Durban’s Grey Street complex and its inhabitants in her collection of stories, *Flat 9* (2006). I would argue, however, that Coovadia falls into the latter category of writers, being both culturally and physically mobile, and eschewing nostalgic romanticism and the ‘tracing of roots’ in his writing. Both Ronit Frenkel (2010) and Devarakshanam Govinden (2008) suggest that Coovadia, while still dealing with issues of indenture and migration in *The Wedding*, writes against the grain of mainstream South African Indian fiction. Govinden argues that: “[a]part from descriptions of indentured migration in the form of historical documentation, autobiographical writing of this history in South Africa follows a predictable pattern” (2008:57) while “Coovadia renders his plot in exaggerated, almost caricatured proportions, which creates not only a comic effect, but also

serves an ironic purpose” (ibid.). Similarly, Frenkel suggests that he unsettles “traditional tellings of migration to South Africa with humour and irony, disturbing the idea of a ‘sacred past’ to which all South African Indian narratives must subscribe” (2009:61). By “situating [his text] as inhabiting local and transnational, national and diasporic spaces simultaneously”, (ibid.) Coovadia is able to engage with – rather than react against – Massey’s suggested uncertainties of place. While the statements of both critics pertain specifically to *The Wedding*, Chapter Three will further examine how Coovadia is able to engage with (inter)national concerns and uncertainties of place in his later fictions.

British social scientist and geographer, Doreen Massey, in *Space, Place and Gender*, asks: “[i]s it not possible for a sense of place to be progressive; not self-closing and defensive, but outward-looking? A sense of place which is adequate to this era of time-space compression?” (1994:147). The sense of place she has in mind here is what she refers to as “a global sense of place” (156) that is able to “hold on to [a] notion of geographical difference, of uniqueness, even of rootedness if people want that, without being reactionary” (151). In explaining how one can visualise a ‘global sense of place’, she uses an example of imagining oneself to be looking at the earth from the vantage point of an orbiting satellite. By visualising not only physical terrain and communication infrastructure but also social relations – whether they be sustained physically or electronically – it is possible to envisage an alternative interpretation of place (as in Figure 3). In Massey’s interpretation, what “gives a place its specificity is not some long internalized history but the fact that it is constructed out of a particular constellation of social relations, meeting and weaving together at a particular locus” (154). The notion of a place being a woven network of histories, cultures and languages will be returned to in discussion of Sarah Nuttall’s *Entanglement* and, later, de Certeau’s “Walking in the City”. In keeping with the purpose of this dissertation, I will argue that Coovadia’s fictional cities exist as idiosyncratic networks of social relations, being at once both specifically local *and* cosmopolitan in nature. Massey outlines four elements that her suggested sense of place would include: a) space is not static but palimpsestic in nature,



FIGURE 3: VISUAL REPRESENTATION OF MASSEY'S GLOBAL SENSE OF PLACE

b) places do not have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures (although an institution like apartheid may seem to problematise this)¹, c) places do not have unique 'identities' and are full of internal conflicts, and d) none of these factors deny place nor the importance of the uniqueness of place (155-6). This dissertation will be cognisant of these four elements when analysing Coovadia's novels and how he depicts palimpsestic urban environments, characters who are able to transcend both geographical and social borders, and cities – although filled with conflicting cultures – endowed with a specificity that sets them apart from other cosmopolitan spaces.

Microgeography: Urban Experience and Contemporary "City-ness"

Michel de Certeau, in his landmark essay, "Walking in the City", suggests that the urban milieu can – and should – be seen as a text, being 'written' by those who inhabit it. De Certeau's reference to the 'textuality' of the city has led to his work being widely used in the analysis of urban spaces as they appear in literature. He differentiates between two kinds of people who engage with the city: the *walker* or *wandersmänner* and the *voyeur*. In illustrating the capacity of the voyeur, de Certeau draws on the Greek myth of Icarus who, with his wings of wax, is able to transcend and "ignore the devices of Daedalus in mobile and endless labyrinths far below" (1999:127). This myth is then transposed to the context of contemporary New York with Icarus' wings being substituted with the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre. The elevation, serving as an Archimedean Point, effectively lifts one "out of the city's grasp", "transforming the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god" (ibid). De Certeau, however, points out that:

The panorama-city is a 'theoretical' (that is, visual) simulacrum, in short a picture, whose condition of possibility is an oblivion and a misunderstanding of practices. The ordinary practitioners of the city live 'down below', below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmänner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban 'text' they write without being able to read it. These practitioners make use of spaces that cannot be seen.

(128)

¹ I would suggest that it is the reversal of this point – the romanticised description of places with socially restrictive boundaries – that characterises the work of older, more nostalgic writers like Richard Rive, Aziz Hassim, Ronnie Govender and Phyllis Naidoo. Coovadia differs from these writers most in the sense that his cosmopolitan urban spaces are porous and allow social transgressions.

It is by taking what de Certeau refers to as “an Icaran fall” (127) that one is able to come down to “ground level” (131) and participate in the act of “writing the city”. The act of writing the city into being is not, however, done by just one walker but rather by an “innumerable collection of singularities” whose “intertwined paths give their shape to spaces” (ibid). It is worth noting that these paths are not idle meanderings in the fashion of Walter Benjamin’s *flâneur*, who aspires to an “‘idleness’ in which purposive activity gives way to phantasmagoric experience” (Amin and Thrift 2002:10), but find their genesis in necessity. It is this necessity that gives rise to what de Certeau refers to as the “rhetoric of walking” (de Certeau 1993: 131):

The art of “turning” phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*). Like ordinary language, this art implies and combines styles and uses. *Style* specifies “a linguistic structure that manifests on the symbolic level... an individual’s fundamental way of being in the world”; it connotes the singular.

(ibid.)

The ‘rhetoric’ that de Certeau has in mind pertains specifically to the locales that an itinerant pedestrian chooses to frequent and the paths they take to reach those termini. The rhetoric of walking is beneficial in studying literary representations of urban space as it is in this medium that linguistic rhetoric and the rhetoric of walking are in closest contact, effectively becoming one and the same. Sarah Nuttall (2009) concisely sums up de Certeau’s essay, suggesting that his “key insight was that people use cities by constructing who they are, producing a narrative of identity. They make a sentence or a story of particular places in the city, and the city is not available as an overview – the city is the way it is walked” (37).

It is important to note, however, that, while the pedestrian modalities of the walker and the *flâneur* are undoubtedly useful in revealing the hidden aspects of a city, they are not without various shortcomings. Amin and Thrift (2002) point out that the secrets revealed through the process of walking at street level are:

particular secrets, and of particular parts of the city. They do not authenticate a city, not least because the accounts are from distinct subject positions. Flânerie has never been gender neutral, for example.

(13)

They continue by suggesting that accounts have mostly been those of men. Similarly, as Sarah Nuttall points out, the work of Zygmunt Bauman (1996) includes a handful of urban

figures in addition to the *flâneur* yet “fails to include the figure of the sex worker, and like most other theorists of the city, he seems uninterested in what a gender-related city consciousness [...] would look like” (2009:38). This being said, urban writing has not been conducted *exclusively* by men. Amin et al. and Nuttall identify the figure of the *flâneuse* who is able to provide “empirical knowledge of the city’s grounded particularities, and through this, an exploration of being a woman in a city that is ‘frequently enabling, sometimes difficult, always irresistible², providing spaces in which these women can explore their identities [...]’ (228)” (in Amin 2002:14). The *flâneuse*, making her way through the city, is a valuable figure when considering Coovadia’s fiction, particularly *The Wedding* and *High Low In-Between* as Kateja Haveri and Nafisa are seen traversing the streets of both an ‘old’ and ‘new’ Durban respectively.

The work of Walter Benjamin offers an approach to “reading” the city that is considerably more literal than that of de Certeau. As mentioned earlier, Benjamin was more interested in how urban writing could be used as a critical device with which to comment on conventional values allowing established and conventional values to be put into question. While both de Certeau and Benjamin encourage the act of “reading the city”, Benjamin’s notion of the city as text is different to de Certeau’s textual city which is written by the walkers. His approach pertains specifically to the textual representations of urban space as it appears on the page. Savage also suggests that Benjamin saw the urban as problematising typical divisions ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, and hence saw the city as dislocating established, conventional, dualisms. This observation regarding divisions seems to echo Massey’s suggestion that “places do not have boundaries in the sense of divisions which frame simple enclosures” (1994:155). Chapter Three of this dissertation will suggest that Coovadia writes about the urban milieu in such a way that he is able to depict cities as porous, surrounded by permeable “boundaries” that deconstruct the notions of inside vs. outside and local vs. foreign. Benjamin’s paradigm of the ‘critical city’ will aid in analysing how Coovadia is able to unsettle conservative depictions of Durban and Grey Street in both *The Wedding* and *High Low In-between*, and construct cosmopolitan cities that suggest that cities are a site of growth and innovation.

Benjamin’s device of the critical city relies on the manner in which written language functions and is interpreted by the reader. Written descriptions and their subsequent

² I find the idea of the *flâneuse* having to be “always irresistible” problematic as it seems generous to the point of being sexist; possibly advocating the male gaze since the *flâneur* needn’t be irresistible in the same manner?

interpretation have the ability to endow literary spaces with particular feelings; what Edward Said (1978), borrowing from Gaston Bachelard, refers to as the *poetics of space*. Said argues that there is a “universal practice of designating in one’s mind a familiar space which is ‘ours’ and which is ‘theirs’” (cited in Gregory 2000:313) that plays a profound role in the creation of identity. The propagation of the dualities of theirs/ours or inside/outside has been characteristic of a large portion of South African writing. Coovadia, I will argue, deconstructs these binaries by often revealing these notions ironically. This, as will be shown in Chapter Three, is particularly evident in *The Wedding* and *Green-Eyed Thieves* as both novels deal with issues of migration and feelings of (dis)location not only in South Africa but also abroad. Furthermore, as suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Coovadia can be seen to write beyond the tyranny of place that has come to characterise much South African fiction. This will be expanded on when comparing Coovadia’s particular *poetics of space* with that of, among others, Aziz Hassim (*The Lotus People*) and Richard Rive (*Buckingham Palace: District Six*).

Identity

Working from the well-recognised notion that place is inextricably linked to identity, it seems impossible to discuss comprehensively the depiction of place in fiction without engaging with the identities of the characters within them. Harold Proshansky, in “The City and Self-Identity”, gives this link a visual representation by coining the hyphenated term “place-identity”. He suggests that:

[p]lace identity is defined as those dimensions that define the individual’s personal identity in relation to the physical environment by means of a complex pattern of conscious and unconscious ideas, feelings, values, goals, preferences, skills, and behavioural tendencies relevant to a specific environment.

(1978:147-169)

It has also been argued that all writing, to a certain degree, is autobiographical. Donald Murray suggests that “we are autobiographical in the way we write” (1991:67); that all writing is, in some way, an extension of our identities. If one is to accept the above premises that both writing and place *are* identity, it stands to reason that place, identity and writing are inseparable from one another. Thus, I am interested in how writers’ experiences in specific geographical locations are able to shape their writings. This is of particular interest in the

case of Imraan Coovadia as he was born in Durban, then travelled extensively – with a twelve-year sojourn in North America – returned to South Africa, and established a home base in Cape Town. Since place is identity, as articulated above, cosmopolitan cities have given rise to innovative hybrid identities. Bearing in mind Massey’s call for a ‘global sense of place’ and that place *is* identity, it seems necessary to adopt something akin to a ‘global sense of identity’.

Homi Bhabha, in “Cultural Difference and Cultural Diversity” (1995), articulates the need to “rethink our perspective on the identity of culture” (207), calling for the conceptualisation of an ‘*international culture*’ (209) that deconstructs the binaries of *you* and *I* by expressing and embracing the hybridity of culture. He suggests that:

Cultures are never unitary in themselves, nor simply dualistic in relation of Self to Other. This is not because of some humanistic nostrum that beyond individual cultures we all belong to the human culture of mankind; nor is it because of an ethical relativism that suggests that in our cultural capacity to speak of and judge Others we necessarily ‘place ourselves in their position’

(207)

Bhabha’s rejection of humanism and ethical relativism seems to echo Massey’s assertion that a global sense of place need not deny the specificity of place. He is not suggesting a ‘whitewashing’ whereby cultures renounce their specificity but rather that cultures, places, and people would benefit from being recognised as a specific network of connected cultures. Cultures thus become specific nodes of interaction between others, taking on new hybridised forms of the ‘originals’. Bhabha emphasises the element of hybridity or state of being *between* conflicting notions of nationalism by presenting the term as “*international*”, eschewing the homogenising connotation of “international”.

He argues that cultural statements and identities always arise in an ambivalent space or contact zone that he calls the “Third Space” (208). The ‘Third Space’ is considered to exist in the interstices between cultures. In further discussion, he stipulates that:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory [...] may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*.

(209, original emphasis)

While Bhabha's suggestion to rethink notions of cultural 'purity' is of particular use for the purpose of this thesis, I would suggest that Bhabha's construct of the Third Space of Enunciation may inadvertently carry connotations of segregationism that undermines the idea that cultures exist as entanglements of various threads borrowed from others. The Third Space seems to rely on the assumption that there are First and Second Spaces that extend their cultural capital to the Third Space without the First and Second Spaces ever coming into contact with one another. Considering the physical mobility of people and the commodification of culture, this would almost certainly not be the case. Furthermore, the connotations associated with designating a 'third' and *separate* space that allows for cultural experimentation seems to suggest that the available options of articulation of hybridity are limited. In addition, seemingly having only two spaces from which to draw cultural capital, the third space appears even further limited with regard to the variety of cultural variation that it is able to utilise. While I would not attempt to suggest that the Third Space undermines the idea of hybridity, I would suggest that another model may be more adequate by allowing a more multidimensional hybridity that is less 'restrictive'.

French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1980), propose a post-structural approach to knowledge and identity construction. Borrowing from the field of botany, they adopt the rhizome to describe research and theory that relies on non-

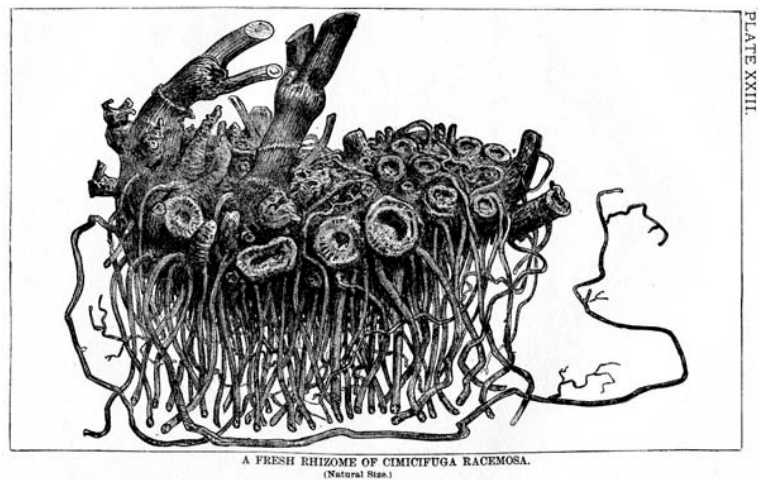


FIGURE 4: A RHIZOMIAN ROOTSTOCK

hierarchical multiplicity in order to represent and interpret data³. They oppose the rhizomatic conception of knowledge to an arborescent (tree-like) one which relies on dualistic and binary logic in order to function. I would suggest that, while Bhabha's conception of the Third Space does make a significant step toward theorising globalised cultural hybridity, his theory

³ The rhizome has been productively used by Édouard Glissant in his study of French West Indian identity and the development of the notion of *antillanité* in *Le Discours antillais* (1981).

still relies on a dualistic and binary logic – in the form of distinct First and Second spaces – in order for the distinct Third Space to exist.

Before endeavouring to illustrate how the rhizome can be applied to the construct of identity, it would be beneficial to outline what Deleuze and Guattari refer to as the “approximate characteristics of the rhizome” (1980:7). For the sake of clarity, I will both enumerate and group the characteristics as they appear in *A Thousand Plateaus*.

1+2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity: Deleuze and Guattari suggest that “any point of the rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be” (ibid.). This statement suggests that points of a rhizome must not only be connected but must also be heterogeneous or different to one another. By being both extensively connected and heterogeneous in nature, a rhizome becomes tangled to the extent where one ‘thread’ might be identified as being ‘other’ but is unable to be extricated from the hybridised mass. The principles of connection and heterogeneity will be of particular use when analysing the hybridised identities of Coovadia’s migrant characters such as Shakeer of *High Low In-Between*, and the “star-spangled anti-lovers” Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding*.

3. Principle of multiplicity: once a multiple – existing of extensive heterogeneous connections – is “effectively treated as a substantive ‘multiplicity,’” [...] it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object” (8). Deleuze and Guattari continue by suggesting that a “multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows)” (ibid.). These two statements explain that, once a multiplicity is treated as a functioning whole instead of fragmentary collection of disparate elements, it will no longer be considered to be a diluted or corrupted version of the ‘original’. Once the ties between object and subject have been severed, the rhizome finds distinctiveness in the nature of its heterogeneous connections. Furthermore, the ‘identity’ of a particular rhizome – like human identity – is not static. As new connections are constantly being made or old ones are severed, the nature of the rhizome changes. Bhabha’s concept of the Third Space does not sever the ties between the hybrid and ‘original’, the Third Space cannot be understood or conceived of without reference to the First or Second spaces. This particular characteristic will be utilised extensively to explore not only the cultural identities of the characters in Coovadia’s novels but also the South African or international cosmopolitan cities in which they live.

4. Principles of asignifying rupture: against the oversignifying breaks separating structures or cutting across a single structure (9). In order to illustrate this point, Deleuze and Guattari use the analogy of ants, suggesting that “[y]ou can never get rid of ants because they form an animal rhizome that can rebound time and again after most of it has been destroyed” (ibid.). Given the regenerative properties of the innumerable connections that make up the rhizome, it is impossible to get rid of one altogether. When one of its lines is severed, it will either start up again along the old one or begin a new line. In the context of rhizomian identity, this can be illustrated by the process of transnational relocation. By vacating a chosen country, the existing connection between the émigré and that location becomes severed and a new one will be formed between them and their new place of residence. The link between the émigré and their ‘homeland’ may rebound in the form of romanticised nostalgia, more subtle cultural practices or may not re-establish itself at all. This particular characteristic of the rhizome aids in shedding light on how hybridised identities are both formed and function and will be of particular use in the case of Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding* as they relocate from India to South Africa, severing connections, making new ones and often – albeit nostalgically – reconnecting old ones.

5+6. Principle of cartography and decalcomania: the rhizome is “a map and not a tracing” (12, original emphasis). Deleuze and Guattari explain that “[w]hat distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real” (ibid.). A tracing lacks the capacity for experimentation and is therefore always linked to the thing that has been traced in a subject/object relationship; a relationship that does allow the rhizome to function as a substantive multiplicity. Kaufman, in explaining how the rhizome functions as map, points out that a map is “not an instrument of *reproduction* [like a tracing] but rather one of *construction*” (1998:5). Kaufman points out that a rhizome is unique due to its idiosyncratic entanglement of heterogeneous elements and gives rise to new ways of thinking or being purely by chance. A tracing, on the other hand, is an instrument of reproduction and is unable to function without its original point of reference. With reference to the constructs of identity and culture, rhizomian identity and culture considered as a map, loses its point of reference and becomes a substantive multiplicity that does not have to be seen as a derivation of an ‘other’. While certain traits will invariably be identified as having been gleaned from others, the rhizome of which it forms part cannot be said to be a reproduction of the culture from which the trait came.

Considering Coovadia's position as both a postapartheid writer and well-travelled scholar, he can be seen to exist as a substantive multiplicity; a rhizome consisting of multiple nationalities, religions and models of education. Bearing this in mind in conjunction with Murray's assertion "we are autobiographical in the way we write" (1991:67), it might be fruitful to examine Coovadia's characters through the same lens of hybridity and *internationality* that is informed by Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome rather than Bhabha's concept of the Third Space. This will be examined further in Chapter Three with specific reference to Shakeer of *High Low In-between* and the brothers Peer of *Green-Eyed Thieves*.

In her book, *Entanglement: literary and cultural reflections on post-apartheid*, Sarah Nuttall suggests contemporary South African life offers new and varied cultural configurations that cannot be analysed through an old "lens of 'difference' embedded squarely in the apartheid past" (2009:19) because it overlooks their complexity. What she proposes is the rubric of 'entanglement', whereby one might be able to analyse and understand the kaleidoscopic and hybrid nature of contemporary society. In defining what 'entanglement' means to her, she suggests that the term:

is intended less to imply that we contest that forms of separation and difference do still occur, materially and epistemologically, than to draw into our analyses critical attention to those sites and spaces in which what was once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways.

(2009:20)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Nuttall offers an urban figure that can be observed in African cities: the *sâpeur*. She defines the *sâpeur* as a:

figure of special transition, operating in the interstices of large cultures, participating in a culture of appearance, especially expensive clothing; a mobile individual who [...] creates ramifying networks extending through time, space and multiple cultures as he circulates between countries, pulling off coups in otherwise invisible spaces in and between cities.

(38)

An example of this figure in an African context is a community in the Congo. Daniele Tamagni has documented this particular ‘culture of appearance’ in his photographic collection, *Gentlemen of Bacongo* (2009). The *sâpeur* can be considered to be a particularly visual illustration of Nuttall’s rubric of Entanglement applied to the construct of identity. Adopting aesthetic elements from various international cultures while retaining some ‘traditional’ Congolese ones has resulted in a culture that Bhabha might consider to be *international*. While Nuttall makes only brief mention of this hybrid entity, it will be of particular use in examining the mobile individuals who populate Coovadia’s literary cities. Chapter Three will return to the figure of the *sâpeur* with particular reference to Gerome Geromian (*The Institute for Taxi Poetry*), the brothers Peer (*Green-Eyed Thieves*) and – to a lesser extent – Shakeer (*High Low In-between*) as they all embark on extensive travels and (often unknowingly) invest in a mobile and *international* culture of appearance.

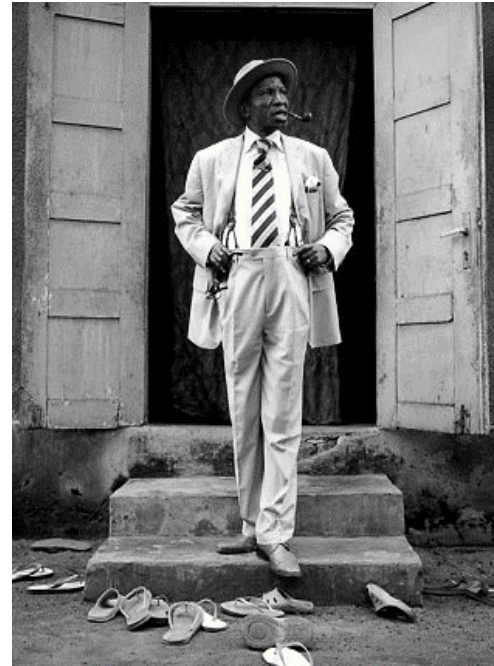


FIGURE 5: A SÂPEUR OR GENTLEMAN OF THE CONGO

This chapter has outlined how time-space compression and a ‘shrinking’ globe have resulted in more interconnected international communities and a ‘global sense of place’ in contemporary urban environments. The ensuing sense of racial, linguistic and historical entanglement has had the effect of fostering hybrid identities that challenge conservative ideas of nationalism or cultural purity. The next chapter will move to a biographical sketch of Coovadia, beginning with his birth in Durban, progressing to his tertiary education abroad and ending with his current post as the director of the creative writing programme at the University of Cape Town.

CHAPTER 2: Biographical Context

The preceding chapter served to construct a theoretical lens through which this dissertation will analyse the works of Imraan Coovadia, paying attention to notions of globalisation, time-space compression and contemporary city-ness and how they influence identity construction. The literary cities of his fictions are places of potential and hybridity, where characters are able to straddle boundaries of culture and nationality. As mentioned in Chapter One, I am particularly interested in how the experiences of writers are able to influence their works, be they fictional or otherwise. Since the purpose of this chapter is to examine Coovadia's life and the experiences that may have impacted on his fictions, it would be advantageous to have some form of autobiographical writings at hand. Bearing in mind Donald Murray's assertion that "we are autobiographical in the way we write" (1991: 67), it would be wise to consider Coovadia's collection of essays, *Transformations* (2012), as it is here that his personal views, critical thought, and experiences are relayed without the artifice of fiction that often serves to distance the writer from views expressed in their writing.

Born in Durban in 1970, Coovadia spent much of his early childhood in the suburb of Overport. His familiarity with Durban is particularly evident in his debut novel, *The Wedding* (2001), and his essay, "The Azan Clock", in *Transformations*. In this essay he references elements, such as the "loud-



FIGURE 6: IMRAAN COOVADIA

speaker at the Riverside mosque" (2012b:46), his family's "house in Overport in Durban" and "Adams Bookshop in West Street" (47), that lend his writing an element of geographic specificity. Coovadia was educated at KwaZulu-Natal private boarding schools: Highbury and Hilton College, in Hillcrest and Hilton respectively. In his essay, "One of Us" (Malan 2008), Coovadia explains that "[a]t Hilton [he] was being trained to belong to an elite [he] didn't want to, and couldn't, belong to" (in Malan 2008:184) because:

I was Indian. So were my parents. I was a socialist, more or less, and so, more or less, were my parents. I didn't want to be 'one of us'. I had my own 'us'. In fact I had an 'I' rather than an 'us'.

(ibid.)

I will return to this notion of individualism that rejects ideas about collective identity, after discussion of Coovadia's essays, "Coetzee in (and out of) Cape Town" and "America's Fellow-Travellers".

After completing his schooling at Hilton College, he read for a bachelor's degree at Harvard University, graduating in 1993, and obtained a Ph.D. from Yale University in 2001. It was during this time that his debut novel, *The Wedding*, was published simultaneously in the US and South Africa; his most 'traditional' depiction of South African Indian identity. The novel received wide critical acclaim and was shortlisted for the 2002 *Sunday Times* Fiction Award, 2003 Ama-Boeke Prize, IMPAC Dublin International Literary Award (2005), and was chosen as book of the week by Exclusive Books (South Africa) and Asian Week.com. While the novel was published during 2001, it had appeared in shorter forms as early as 1993.

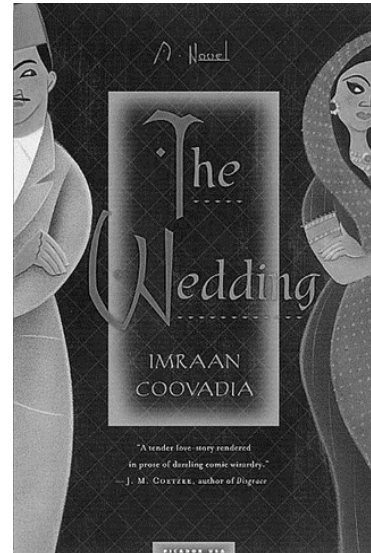


FIGURE 7: *THE WEDDING*

A story entitled "Match Made" won third place in a 1993 competition edition of *The Harvard Advocate* and documents Ismet Nassin alighting from a train and effectively 'buying' Khateja Haveri as his wife. While the novel deals with Indian indenture and the transposition of Indian culture into a South African context, Coovadia's exaggerated plot and comic whit rewrites this microhistory. It is due to Govinden's suggested "ironic purpose" (Govinden 2008: 57) of this seemingly traditional story that I would identify *The Wedding* as the genesis for tracing Coovadia's trajectory as a post-transitional writer rather than one of a narrowly South African Indian tradition.

His next novel, *Green-Eyed Thieves*, was published in 2006 and adopted a more contemporary subject than that of *The Wedding*. While he was still located in New York City at the time, this publication signalled the beginning of a fruitful publishing relationship between Coovadia and Cape Town publisher, Umuzi. He was to return to South Africa the following year to fill the position of Associate Professor of

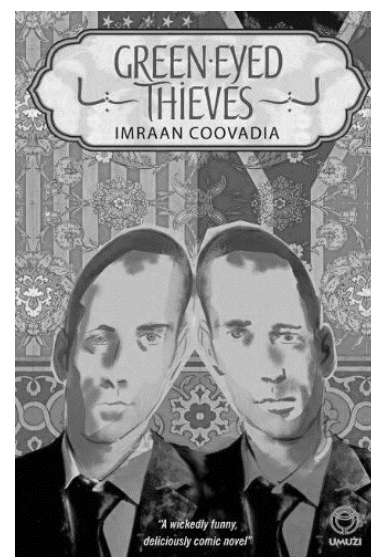


FIGURE 8: *GREEN-EYED THIEVES*

Creative Writing at the University of Cape Town. His 2009 offering, *High Low In-between*, has been his most acclaimed work to date; winning both the 2009 University of Johannesburg English Literary Award and 2010 *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize. Like *The Wedding*, this novel too was preceded by an extract offered as a short story. Originally published in *n+1* magazine during 2009 as “A Broken Window”, the story was rereleased the following year as the opening chapter of *High Low In-between*. 2012 saw Coovadia release two publications; a novel, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, and a collection of essays entitled *Transformations* - both of which were shortlisted for the 2013 University of Johannesburg Prize for best creative work in English. September 2014 saw the release of Coovadia’s fifth novel, *Tales of the Metric System*, for which I will provide a brief summary in the conclusion of this dissertation. At present, Coovadia is the associate professor at the University of Cape Town and resides in Oranjezicht in Cape Town.

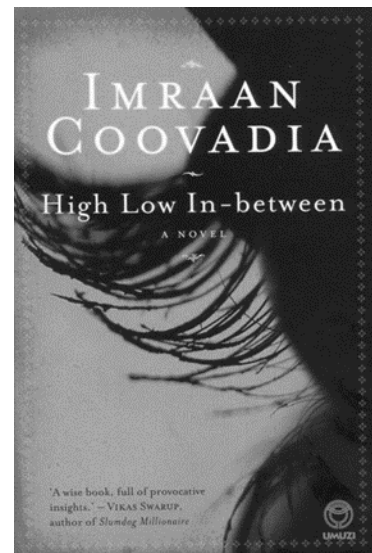


FIGURE 9: HIGH LOW IN-BETWEEN

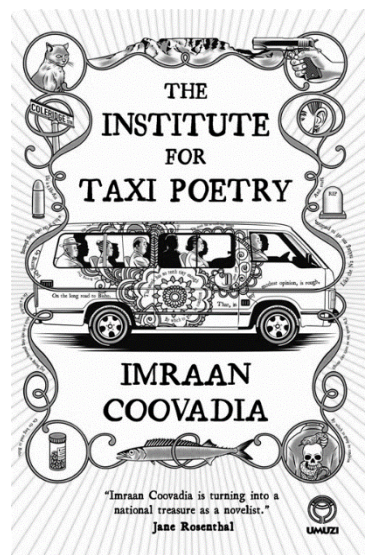


FIGURE 10: THE INSTITUTE FOR TAXI POETRY

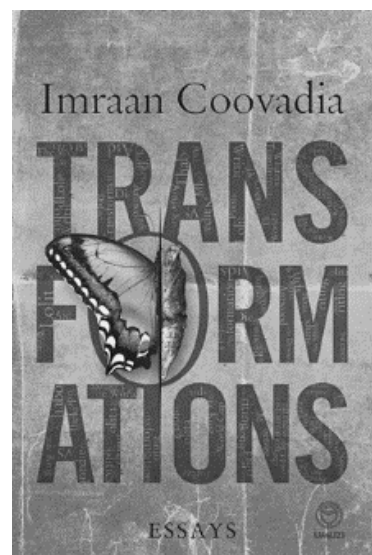


FIGURE 11: TRANSFORMATIONS

As previously mentioned, a careful analysis of Coovadia’s non-fictional pieces may provide the closest thing to autobiographical writing in his oeuvre. The following paragraphs will thus serve to identify tropes or patterns in his scholarly or creative thought. While I will identify themes that serve the purpose of this study, the following discussion will by no means be an exhaustive study on all thematic dimensions of the pieces mentioned. In keeping with the theoretical framework outlined in the previous chapter, I will analyse the selected pieces in relation to Coovadia’s life while bearing in mind notions of time-space compression, hybridity and entanglement. Many of Coovadia’s essays might be grouped according to their consideration of either local (South African) culture and politics, international politics and academia or addressing matters of hybridity. Three essays from

Transformations that have a decidedly local scope are “Vuvuzela!”, “Diary of a Bad Year: Mbeki’s 2007 Letters to the Nation” and “Midnight’s Children (in South Africa)”. While these are not the only essays with a local focus, I have selected these three because they serve my purpose while allowing me to be brief. In “Vuvuzela!” – which first appeared on the *n+1* magazine website in June 2010 – Coovadia uses the image of the “one-metre long plastic trumpet” (2012b:112) to introduce a momentary discussion of clichés in both the South African literary climate and society. He suggests that canonised South African writers have been popular because there is a “great audience for their clichés” (114). He continues by suggesting that:

White readers in the US and the UK, whether of the right or the left, of the colonial camp or the postcolonial, have generally been interested in how white people, so mysteriously like but unlike themselves, are doing in South Africa. It’s this long-distance fantasy which, for good or ill, does most to explain South African literary culture from Nadine Gordimer and Alan Paton in the 1950s to JM Coetzee in the 1990s. And a fantasy is nothing but a cliché.

(ibid.)

While I am using this particular essay to demonstrate how Coovadia writes both from within and about the South African milieu, it is worth noting that he does so without losing sight of South Africa’s position in a global context. He remains cognisant – albeit critically - of the international literary community that had taken great interest in the works of Gordimer, Paton and Coetzee. Coovadia perhaps expresses a view similar to Massey in that he provides South Africa with a global sense of place by emphasising literary connections beyond its borders. Moreover, literary connections of this nature have been possible due largely to Harvey’s time-space compression associated with technological innovation and the increased exchange of commodities – in this case, books - and information across great distances. Later in this chapter I will return to the notion of literary connections due to time-space compression in discussion of the publications Coovadia has selected for the release of many of his essays.

The ironically named “Diary of a Bad Year: Mbeki’s 2007 Letters to the Nation” – given Coovadia’s controversial essay on JM Coetzee to be discussed later in this chapter – moves away from South African literary culture but remains rooted firmly within local politics. This essay was originally published in October 2011 in the *The Chimurenga Chronic*, the once-off edition of an imaginary newspaper which is issue 16 of *Chimurenga*, and addresses Thabo Mbeki’s “style, as a writer, and a politician” (Coovadia 2012b:80). In

his critique, he suggests that “the more direct the problem, the more indirect his language, and the more indeterminate his intention” (ibid.). Unlike “Vuvuzela!”, however, his focus here remains on South Africa without broadening its scope to include the country’s position in the global context. In an interview for *Words Etc*, with M. Neelika Jayawardane, Coovadia points out that “[f]or some reason America never became [his] subject matter. It’s always been much more South Africa. And that really changes your career, and changes who you are, in some ways” (Jayawardane 2009:25). This suggestion – when considered in relation to his fictional works – is able to account for the local focus of his novels but, as suggested previously, Coovadia’s South Africa has global connections that prevent it from becoming a “self-closing and defensive” place but rather encourages it to be one that is “outward looking” (Massey 1994:147). In addition, it is worth considering the nature of the publications in which these essays first appeared. This will, however, be discussed later in this chapter

Another of his essays, “Midnight’s Children (in South Africa)”, again focuses on South Africa and, more specifically, Durban. Here he shifts his perspective to that of a South African Indian citizen and elaborates on the “anxiety that saturates Indian life in Durban” (Coovadia 2012b:77). He points out that, “[like] most people who don’t have an African name but live and expect to die in South Africa, I cannot help hearing the demand to Africanise the country as an attempt to exclude me, and anybody like me, from its future” (ibid.). While acknowledging his position as being of Indian descent, Coovadia suggests that he still expects to live and die within the borders of South Africa like any autochthonous citizen who may have a ‘legitimate’ claim to the land. Moreover, he expresses his anxiety regarding Africanisation as a process of defensiveness and exclusion. By acknowledging both his desire and inability to fit comfortably in an environment in which he belongs, Coovadia exists as what Claudia Perner – drawing from Obioma Nnaekema – refers to as an inoutsider. She conceptualises the inoutsider as “a person who either has acquired access to a sphere that is not originally his or her own or, alternatively, feels alienated in an environment that is his or hers by ‘birthright’” (Perner 2013:8). Having a sense of both belonging and not belonging puts Coovadia in a position where he is forced to live in either a state of anxiety about his lack-of-fit or to embrace his hybridity and take advantage of its potential. This has led to him – in a considerable number of his pieces – to address not only his own hybridity but also that of culture and the world around him.

In the paragraphs that follow, again drawing from *Transformations*, I will briefly analyse a selection of essays that express either Coovadia’s own hybridity or his observations

of hybridity of the world around him. In “The Azan Clock”, he recounts how, “returning from her first haj, [his] mother brought back to Durban this miraculous fusion of technology and spiritual devotion (Hk Reg. Design No. 0501136. 4M002)” (Coovadia 2012b:44). His immediate observation is that the clock is a ‘fusion’ of two seemingly opposed elements in that spirituality is seldom equated with technological progression. Another remark he makes upon inspecting the packaging of the clock is that “[the] small box was printed with Arabic lettering on the one side, English on the other” (ibid.). Even an item that is metonymic of religious doctrine and inflexibility is ironically hybrid in nature by virtue of having its packaging printed in two languages. Coovadia continues by suggesting that:

To live in South Africa – on the periphery of the continent, on a stretch of the long coast of the Indian Ocean, on the other side of the world from the United States, from Japan, from Europe, from Asia – is for good and bad, to encounter the world with a provincial consciousness. The Intercourse between the centre and periphery is mediated by objects ... by the azan clock, by CDs and DVDs, by books of religious philosophy by some krank in Oklahoma or Beirut, by manuscripts and web pages which somebody has hit on by chance.

(47).

This statement can be related again to the notion of how modernity and time-space compression have resulted in the mass exchange and transportation of items and information between individuals and, invariably, nations and cultures. Cultural and linguistic exchanges that have become commonplace in the present era have no alternative but to result in hybridised identities, languages, cultures and even items such as the simultaneously modern/secular and conservative/religious azan clock.

Coovadia’s controversial and well-publicised “Coetzee in (and out of) Cape Town” also addresses matters of movement, hybridity and the cosmopolitanism of contemporary urban space. Here, he seems to rebuke Coetzee’s lack of hybridity brought on by his emigration to Australia in 2002. He suggests that to “choose Australia, for many white émigrés, is to reject South Africa [...]” (11). He adds that “*Michael K* imagines the formerly Jewish seaside section of Sea Point as a burnt-out and post-apocalyptic cityscape, something like the Australia of *Mad Max*. Today you wander down the Sea-Point promenade past twenty-million-rand apartments, and roller skaters, and the afternoon cricket games with Congolese and Nigerian players in uniforms. You could ask whether Coetzee was offering a

warning or something more like a wish” (14-15). Coovadia’s Cape Town of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, however, is a city

run by Croatian disco men from Zagreb and Malay gangsters from Pinelands, by publicity girls wearing long earrings, by dollar millionaires with business connections to the ruling Congress Party, by old Trotskyites and Bukharinites, and by the cabinet ministers and dictators from elsewhere who reside along the Atlantic seaboard or the wine estates inland.

(Coovadia 2012a:11-12)

Furthermore, he suggests that “[a]lmost nothing of the city – its life, its beauty, its specificity, and its traditions – makes it into *Disgrace*, much of which is set inside the municipal boundary” (2012b:14). Coovadia’s critique of Coetzee seems to be twofold in that he objects to Coetzee’s rejection of South Africa and his lack of attention to South Africa as a place of optimism and potential, given its complex cultural identity. Put more plainly, Coovadia’s critique seems to stem from a perceived lack of hybridity on Coetzee’s part with regard to both his personal identity and his creative work.

Such a ‘lack of hybridity’ is, however, evident neither in Coovadia’s personal identity nor in his creative fictions. In a piece entitled “America’s Fellow-Travelers⁴”, he mentions his son who is “all or half Jewish and half Russian and half a New Yorker (on his mother's side) and all or half Muslim, half Indian, and half South African (on his father's side)” (Muller 2013). This statement is of particular value because here Coovadia addresses not only his own cultural/*international* identity but also those of his wife and son. By pointing out that one could be considered to be all *or* half a particular group, he makes clear that identity is ascribed as a choice, depending on the frame of reference one might choose to favour. He continues by suggesting that “[y]ou will see that the fractions add up to more than one hundred percent, which, I feel, is as it should be” (ibid.). Perhaps Coovadia is suggesting that cultural/national complexity makes for a more rounded and possible ‘complete’ person. In a move that is antithetical to that of Kenyan writer, James Ngugi changing his name to Ngugi wa Thiong’o in assertion of his purely ‘African’ identity, Coovadia and his partner opted to name their son Zaheer Zev Ostashevsky Coovadia; a name that leaves no question regarding his mixed parentage and their own complex identities.

⁴ This piece, sent to me by Coovadia under this title, was published in Ulrich Baer's *110 Stories: New York Writes after September 11* as “The Same Tune”.

I will now return to the idea of Coovadia's rejection of collective identity and expression of individualism. Bearing in mind that Coovadia is inclined to view both people – as in the case of his wife and son – and items – as with the azan clock – as hybrid entities that exist as entanglements of different cultures, it seems reasonable to suggest that he has a propensity for viewing both people and items as unique entities that do not exist in accordance with national or cultural stereotypy. I suggest that Coovadia values an individuality that favours global connections without being reduced to a kind of cultural homogeneity or whitewashing. In a similar manner as in “One of Us”, in “How They See Us”, he points out that “like most writers, [he] never wanted to be part of a them; writing privileges individual judgement, and resists collective understandings, especially those which we're supposed to have by birth or geography” (85). In not wanting to be neither “part of them” nor “one of us” (Malan 2008:184), it is clear that – although he identifies himself as a writer - his identity is a multi-faceted one that can change depending on what he requires. Coovadia seems well aware of the multiplicity that accompanies such a hybrid and individualist identity as he points out that:

People ask, how do you feel as a Muslim? How do you feel as an African? As a South African? Well, writers, just because we create characters, now that viewpoints are plural and contradictory and that one person, not to say one large subset of humanity, can harbour more than one feeling and that those very feelings can split and mutate and won't stay still for inspection (2012b:85).

Here, again, it is clear that he is aware that individuals exist – as per Nuttall's rubric – as entanglements of religion, culture and nationality, each being different regardless of many commonalities. As I have mentioned earlier in this chapter, Coovadia himself, due to his multi-national education and numerous global relocations, exists as an entanglement of multiplicities. Jayawardane suggests that “multiplicities in Coovadia's own life – multiple homes, multiple homelands, multiple moves between socio-economic classes, too, perhaps – intrude on his person and his work, transferring what he has experienced into his fictional worlds (2009:25). While this is most certainly correct, I would suggest that these multiplicities impinge on not only his fictional works but on his non-fictional ones also.

Coovadia points out that “the ties of a million friendships between individual Americans and foreigners criss-cross the globe, forming a true community. It is no exaggeration to say that, in India, in South Africa, in England, every second person with some mobility and education has a close friend from Boston or Los Angeles or New York City”

(Muller 2013). His ‘multiple homes’ and ‘multiple homelands’ have not allowed him to not only be *aware* of the planet’s interconnectedness but also to be a *part* it and to be the person that ‘every second person’ in India, South Africa or England knows. Coovadia’s personal entanglement of cultural and educational threads has resulted in academic writing and essays that can be – as previously discussed - intimately local, or - as I will now demonstrate - decidedly European or American. Drawing again on examples from *Transformations*, I will here suggest that Coovadia is able to shift perspectives so that he is able to do critical work on international texts without reading them through a narrowly South African lens. His essays “How to Read *Lolita*” and “George Eliot’s Realism and Adam Smith” and exhibit an ability to dislocate himself from a South African context in order to approach critically works of American or European origins.

Coovadia suggests that “moving and shifts do give you new perspectives on things, and even enables perspectives” (Jayawardane 2009:25). “How to Read *Lolita*” deals with the idea of shifting perspectives that provides a more comprehensive reading of Vladimir Nabokov’s *Lolita*. While Coovadia’s shifting perspectives give him the means to work on such a text, it can be argued that his shifting perspectives are also what allow him to write compelling and culturally complex fictions. Coovadia’s own examples from “How to Read *Lolita*” can serve to illustrate how shifting perspectives provide him with diverse subject matter to write about (whether it be fiction or otherwise) and how shifting perspectives would enable a reader to gain most profitably from his writings. Both the Necker Cube (Figure 12) and Wife and Mother-in-Law (Figure 13) illustrate how shifting one’s perspective or ways of thinking can give rise to new ways of interpreting the world. In this way, Coovadia is able to write as an American, South African, Indian or Muslim – either simultaneously or respectively - depending on his chosen perspective(s). Acknowledging culture’s (and one’s own) hybridity and entanglement within a global society provides a range of enabling perspectives that one could adopt.

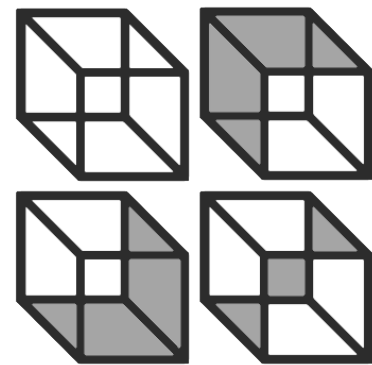


FIGURE 12: NECKER CUBE



FIGURE 13: WIFE AND MOTHER-IN-LAW

In “George Eliot’s Realism and Adam Smith”, Coovadia is able to remove himself from any national context and immerse himself in the culture of international scholarship. This essay sees him straddling national boundaries by dealing with an English novelist and Scottish moral philosopher (on whom Coovadia had worked for his Ph.D. from Yale). Instead of addressing matters of a national or cultural nature – as in “Vuvuzela!” and “Diary of a Bad Year: Mbeki’s 2007 letters to the nation“ – this essay sees Coovadia examining how Eliot’s later novels deliberately highlight the complex forms of interdependence and interaction in a modern society” (Coovadia 2012b:141). His study reveals an interest in modern society and its existence as an interconnected network of individuals. He argues that a study of both Eliot and Smith “renews our sense of both their projects, at the core of which stands the simple conviction that society is shaped by its members’ intersecting trajectories” (152). Coovadia reveals here an attitude toward modern society that is strikingly similar to de Certeau’s observation that urban society’s “swarming mass is an innumerable collection of singularities. Their intertwined paths give their shape to spaces. They weave places together” (1999:131). Coovadia’s approach to modern urban society is also similar to that of Nuttall in that they both see society as an entanglement of different cultures, resulting in a heterogeneity that holds a great deal of promise and potential for new possibilities of being. His attitude towards modern society is evident in his novels as they are all set in contemporary urban spaces – whether it be Durban, Johannesburg or Cape Town or international cities - that are woven together by the intersecting paths of locals and foreigners alike. This approach toward contemporary urban society is most likely informed by his position of being part of neither ‘us’ nor ‘them’ and having lived in Melbourne, Birmingham, London and the major cities of the US (Jayawardane 2009:25).

In addition to the subject material of Coovadia’s various essays, it is beneficial to consider where many of his pieces were first published. As I have mentioned previously, “Vuvuzela!” along with the opening chapter of *High Low In-between* and a story entitled *Dr. Atomic* were first published in the New York-based online and print magazine, *n+1*. Similarly, the controversial “Coetzee in (and out of) Cape Town” was first published internationally in the Pilipino journal, *Kritika Kultura*. “Diary of a Bad Year: Mbeki’s 2007 letters to the nation” was first published in an edition of *Chimurenga Magazine*. Although based in Cape Town, its contributors and target readership are of pan-African orientation. In choosing to contribute to international or pan-African publications such as these, Coovadia shows his ability to both think and write across borders by shifting perspectives as he needs

to. Time-space compression and technological advancements have not only allowed him access to publications of this nature but have also allowed a greater number of readers to access them and enrich their already hybridised cultural capital. He takes advantage of the international literary connections mentioned earlier in this chapter. His awareness of the potential to transgress borders in this way has given his writing the flexibility to address a varied range of topics and utilise tropes that would not usually appear in writings by a South African author.

One such trope that belies Coovadia's American education is the utilisation of Greek myth in his fictions. While he never studied any courses in the Classics, he suggests that "you invariably read, you know, Plato, Aristotle, Sophocles, Dante, as an undergrad. And I've kept reading the Greeks a lot - esp. Plato, Sophocles, Euripides, The Illiad (sic), and [The] Odyssey" (Muller 2013). General education in the Classics is not prioritised in South African Universities and, for this reason, I would attribute his exposure to them to the American system of tertiary education. An education of this sort has served to enrich Coovadia's cultural capital from which he is able to draw, resulting in his existence a particularly rich entanglement of knowledge and culture. I will return to his utilisation of the Classics in his fictions in the next chapter, when discussing his novels.

Having explored some thematic concerns expressed in Coovadia's thought, it can be argued that Coovadia, while identifying himself as a South African, is cognisant of being far more 'connected' with regard to his *international* identity. His identity consists of multiple homes, cultures and systems of education. The following chapter will explore how these multiplicities intrude on his fictional works, creating cosmopolitan urban spaces in which hybridised characters exist within an entanglement of cultures.

CHAPTER 3: Novels

The previous chapter served to suggest that Imraan Coovadia's identity exhibits itself as a rhizomian entanglement of multiple homes, cultures and systems of education. This chapter will now examine how Coovadia's novels and characters exist – as a result of his own hybridised identity - as complex entanglements, avoiding simple dichotomies of us/them, home/exile or local/foreign. Since part of this thesis focuses on the cosmopolitan nature of contemporary urban spaces, I have chosen, for the purposes of this chapter, to group the novels under discussion according to the cities in which they are set. The first section will focus on Coovadia's debut novel, *The Wedding*, while the second section will deal with the *Sunday Times* Fiction Prize winner, *High Low In-Between*. While these novels are both set in Durban, I have chosen to split them into individual sections as they are set more than a century apart, providing a considerable amount of time for the city to change and develop. The third section of this chapter will focus on *Green-Eyed Thieves* and the capers of the brothers Peer as they manage to reshape their identities in Johannesburg and abroad. The fourth section will examine Coovadia's fourth novel, set in a somewhat altered but recognisable Cape Town, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*. Drawing on the theoretical framework outlined in Chapter 1, this chapter will examine how Coovadia's novels reject notions of collective identity and cultural purity by constructing fictional cosmopolitan urban spaces that become home to characters that do not conform to expected cultural 'norms'.

3.1 Durban: *The Wedding*

To begin the discussion about Coovadia's novels set in Durban, and an analysis of his works more generally, I have selected his transcontinental love story, *The Wedding*. My reasons for choosing this novel as a starting point are two-fold. Firstly, in the context of the section looking at his 'Durban novels', *The Wedding* is set approximately a century prior to *High Low In-Between* and working with the novels in such a quasi-chronological order will facilitate discussion on both how the city of Durban has changed and on what it means to be 'Indian' in South Africa. Secondly, in the context of Coovadia's oeuvre, *The Wedding* serves, as I have suggested in Chapter 2, as a genesis from which to plot Coovadia's progress as a post-transitional writer who eschews writing in the vein of a narrowly identified South African Indian tradition.

Described by J.M. Coetzee as a “tender love story rendered in prose of dazzling comic wizardry” (cover of the Picador edition), *The Wedding* follows a young clerk from Bombay, Ismet Nassin⁵, as he sees Khateja Haveri, “the most beautiful woman in the world” (2001:16), through the window of a train. Khateja is sold off by her father to become Ismet’s begrudging bride. After Khateja refuses to be the doting wife that married life requires of her, Ismet, at the suggestion of Tejpal Reddy, decides to move them both to South Africa in the hope that the “aboriginal forge Africa would throw them ever more tightly together” (120). The rest of the novel recounts the turbulent love story between these two ‘merchant class’ Indians who live and work within the Grey Street complex in central Durban of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Divided into three sections – East, South and North – the novel deals with the spatial translocation of the two protagonists. The opening section, East, is set in India and concludes with their voyage to Port Natal on the *Truro* in 1860. While this part of the novel is not set in any urban space, it is still of particular interest when read in light of the common trope of ‘imaginary homelands’ that has come to characterise much South African Indian literature. These ‘imaginary homelands’, as outlined by Salman Rushdie, are often romanticised by nostalgia. Coovadia, however, seems cognisant of Rushdie’s warning regarding the creation of these ‘homelands’ in diasporic Indian fictions. The depiction of India in the first half of *The Wedding* is not idyllic or constructed as a homogeneous nation that is without internal ethnic/cultural conflict. As early as the opening page, Coovadia seems to write against the nostalgic idea of a cohesive ‘Indian’ culture that shares a collective goal. While on a train to Mumbai, Ismet Nassin observes a family of Sikhs sharing his compartment:

A slovenly, turbaned race, he thought to himself, glancing across the bridge of his nose at the father, on whose lap two children were bunched up with ribbons in their hair. Then there were three children sprawled over their mother on the next bench. How these people bred!

Imagining he saw before him a vast human pyramid – young, old, wiry, Sikhs; clawing, spitting Sikhs, chewing one-way. The horror!

(1)

At the novel’s outset, Ismet’s bellicose observations alert the reader to the fact that subcontinental Indian society is more complex than the rest of the world – including the

⁵ Misprinted as Nassim on the dust jacket of the first edition by Picador USA.

Indian diaspora – may choose to think. There are innumerable ways of being ‘Indian’, depending on linguistic, geographical or religious combinations; while the family of Sikhs and the Memon Ismet are markedly different in their cultural practices, surely neither of them can be said to be less ‘Indian’ than the other.

Coovadia, throughout the novel, continues to disrupt expected narrative forms with regard to ‘exotic’ places and peoples. As he begins to describe a new location, he appears to conform to a romanticising tradition of creating an idyllic Indian homeland or an African proving-ground⁶ where Ismet can develop to his full individual potential. However, once his protagonists become immersed in the landscapes within which Coovadia places them, they begin to deconstruct the unrealistic façade, revealing physical and cultural landscapes that are less homogeneous and stereotypical than one is initially led to believe. This is particularly evident as Ismet Nassin, having seen Khateja standing on the platform, alights from the train. From the station he sees a pastoral scene that at once seems like one in which Ismet should feel right at home:

The plain was cut up by stone walls and fence posts into bright green squares, here and there a desultory cow, a stone well, a telegraph pole. Lit up in places by running water, the plain rose up in the distance to blue hills right near the top of which he could see the tree line and, on the tallest of them, the snow cap, slate-colored, sparkling.

(17)

This scene – barring the telegraph pole – would not seem out of place in an imperial romance novel like Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885). From Ismet’s perspective the land is inviting yet elusive as it holds the treasure which he will endeavour to find. Based on this depiction of the Indian landscape, it seems as though Ismet’s journey may proceed unhindered. As Ismet strolls beyond the confines of the station, however, the idyllic scene dissolves, revealing a landscape in which he feels decidedly out of place:

Unlike the cultivated land he’d seen from the train, which had been carpet green, the ground here was red and sandy, strewn with pebbles and twigs. There were goats, mangy sedated creatures that untucked their heads, looked him up and down with their rusted eyes. Then they yawned and curled up again.

⁶ Depictions of Africa in British imperial fictions serve as particularly strong examples of Africa as a forge in which white men test and temper their masculinities by enduring the hardships of the ‘dark continent’. This idea is extended here to include Indian masculinity. For a more detailed examination of this, see Bristow, R. 1991. *Empire Boys: Adventures in a Man’s World*. London: Harper Collins (127-169).

Both of these scenes can be read in light of Said's *poetics of space* as they reveal something about the attitudes of both the character and author toward the place. Said suggests that linguistic representation is able to endow a literary space with a sense of emotional 'weight' which might be positive, negative or even purposefully ambivalent. The two scenes above clearly do not share a similar poetics, juxtaposing them in terms of not only aesthetic but also ideology. Ismet feels alienated in his own country – especially in the rural setting – and yearns for a milieu that is free from endless history and complexity. In this unfamiliar place he begins to question even basic cultural signifiers like food as he ponders that things “seemed to have lost their edges, their definitions. In this new climate [rural India] would a *bharfee* be a *bharfee*, a three-cornered *samosa* a three-cornered *samosa*?” (29). It is made evident that Ismet not only feels alienated in this space but that the shock has left him in a position to examine his own expectations and assumptions regarding culture:

Compared to what he'd imagined, immersed in his parochial, urban, clerical ways – he'd taken it for granted that village life was slow, steady chained to the rhythms of season and field; maintaining that these people were, like grain, without guile, slow moving, plain speaking, and forthright – how little he'd known!

(ibid.)

Coovadia as author appears to question the idea of belonging and rootedness based purely on one's birthplace as he depicts Ismet as not only feeling out of place in 'his' India but also longing for a place to which he has never been. Ismet, after speaking with Tejpal Reddy, begins to construct an imaginary “history-free” (119) Africa to which he and Khateja will escape from “hoary old India” that is “old, broken, worried apart at the seams, overrun by long-worn races, cut up by rain and rock” (76). The Africa he constructs is much like the India he sees from the train before disembarking; a romanticised, atavistic landscape that exists as an argosy of imagined potential. Initially, his Africa acts a foil to the India that Ismet seems to have grown to loathe, becoming

a clean table of a continent: its long plain wasn't cut up by stone walls, wasn't swarming with a dozen peoples, and wasn't ringing from end to end with this endless chatter. The plants firm and green and white veined. There were rivers with high banks

and white water, mountains rising up through air, air that hadn't been breathed in and out over and a thousand times over again.

(119)

Once Ismet has established Africa as a place that is nothing like India, he begins to elaborate on his imagined 'dark continent' by including an "untamed volcano, a chop-licking leopard circling around in the evening time, [and] poisoned darts of the bone-nosed natives whistling through the air" (120). These elements serve to duplicate the image of Africa that dominated imperial fictions of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In this sense, Ismet the colonised becomes Ismet the coloniser but – like many who came out to the colonies – he encounters an Africa that is startlingly dissimilar to his imagined continent.

The Durban he and Khateja encounter is depicted – upon their arrival – as a "shining city" (137) with "railways heavy with locomotive and track [...] tall buildings, even a minaret, clean plaster houses by the hundreds, sorry, thousands" (ibid.). As mentioned previously, Ismet and Khateja find accommodation in the Grey Street complex. Claudia Mamet points out that "it was a second 'wave' of Indian immigrants, known as passenger Indians, who first settled in the Grey Street complex" (2008:73). Indian settlers were limited to living either on cane estates as indentured labourers or within the 'Indian zone', of which Grey Street formed a part. These "star-spangled anti-lovers" (Coovadia 2001:222) find that Durban may be a "beachy, subtropical, Commonwealth city one million strong: one-third black, one-third white, one-third Indian" (ibid.), but the Indian inhabitants there no longer have the sense of cultural heterogeneity that Ismet exhibits at the beginning of the novel:

Since Durban housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India, it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical city in the world. (And the piebald, multistripped composition, the municipality of Durban inculcated in the mind of the expatriate Mohandas Gandhi, who was currently residing there, the outrageous conviction that each disparate subcontinental belonged to the same nationality – and so, in a sense, Durban created the nation-state of India.)

(142-143)

The conviction that "each disparate subcontinental" should belong to the same nationality can be seen as a reaction to the uncertainties regarding place and belonging – as suggested by Massey - that accompany spatial disruption commonly associated with transnational

migration. The remotely administered form of nationalism that Coovadia mentions is an example of what Massey refers to as one kind of reactionary response to the ‘crisis’ of globalisation and cultural hybridisation. It is worth noting, however, that this statement is not merely dismissive of Indian nationalism in South Africa but the preceding lines also acknowledge the racial and cultural diversity of Durban. While Coovadia draws attention to the cosmopolitan nature of the city, he simultaneously exposes self-closing, reactionary responses that often accompany it. Reflecting one such homogenising reactionary response is Vikram Naidoo, supervisor and part owner of the building in which Ismet and Khateja take up residence. His ‘advice’ to Ismet is that he ignore the cultural differences that he had known in India in order to join a larger, less specific conglomerate of ‘Indians’:

“So please Ismet, one word of advice that I can give for you. In this country you must not come with stories of you are this Bombay-Indian or that one Tamil, one what-what Gujarati-Indian [...] No, my friend, what is essential is we must stand together as one, that is my point,” while Ismet listened without saying a word but fuming inside.

(150)

Moving then from representations of India and Africa, *The Wedding* is of particular interest due to Coovadia’s use of “unlikely characters in order to transgress traditional concepts of Indianness” (Frenkel 2011:4). The opening chapters of the novel at first seem to position Ismet and Khateja on opposing sides of an expected binary of urban versus rural. Ismet, a Bombay-trained clerk is established as being absorbed in English culture; being “quite fond of these English and their elastic bands and their cricket balls and Brussels sprouts” (2001:4), while Khateja is initially presented as an unblemished village girl who is oblivious to the world beyond her immediate borders. These binaries are, however, soon blurred as Coovadia endows his protagonists with traits that are in contrast to their ostensibly ‘conservative’ depictions. Ismet, although an urban ‘Indian’, is by no means purely Indian as he assimilates various English customs such as wearing a waistcoat and reading the *London Times* “though it arrived a fortnight late”. He is aware that he is Indian, though, as the narrator reveals that Ismet is “quite fond of *these* English” [own emphasis] (4). By referring to them as *these* English, it reveals that Ismet feels a profound sense of not being one of them by virtue of being born in India. The use of the term ‘these’, however, as opposed to ‘those’, carries connotations of being in close proximity and perhaps being relatable to some degree.

In conjunction with his English waistcoat, he also wears a red fez⁷ - which bears with it a number of factors that further complicate Ismet's multicultural identity. The fez, originating in the city of Fes, Morocco, spread with the success of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th and 17th centuries, later becoming a symbol of Islamic identity in India. In addition to being associated with Islamic identity, the fez was also assimilated by British and American societies, becoming part of men's luxury smoking outfits. While Ismet is geographically Indian, his defining religious headgear is a cultural signifier that carries connotations of colonial conquest, national ambivalence, and global cultural exchange. Having a combination of British and (loosely) Indian culture may be considered by Bhabha to be hybrid and *international*. As I have explained in the preceding chapter, Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome applied to the concept of identity is able to offer a more comprehensive understanding of Ismet's identity. To bisect Ismet's character into merely dichotomous English and Indian traits would be to oversimplify the matter as the India depicted in the first half of the novel is culturally heterogeneous.

Nostalgia and Imaginary Homelands

Discussion of a novel like *The Wedding* would be incomplete without mentioning the effects of nostalgia on the writing process. While this novel is often mistakenly associated with nostalgic novels like Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People*, Phyllis Naidoo's *Footprints in Grey Street* and Mariam Akabor's *Flat 9*, *The Wedding* writes strongly against the grain of such traditionally nostalgic texts by South African Indian authors. The kind of nostalgia evident in Hassim's *The Lotus People* serves as an isolating and homogenising force that reflects the 'self-closing communities' that Massey identifies as a reaction to the uncertainties of place associated with globalisation and geographical displacement. As mentioned earlier, Coovadia's protagonist, Ismet Nassin, is sensitive to the complexities of culture when in India. The Memon Muslim, Ismet, sees the family of Sikhs with whom he shares a train cabin as not merely religiously and culturally different; he considers them to be a "slovenly, turbaned *race* (own emphasis)" (3) - a racial group entirely dissimilar to his.

Throughout the novel, Coovadia highlights the homogenising capacity of nostalgia. He does this initially through Vikram Naidoo and Charm Soolal, Indian emigrants who have been in South Africa from some time before the arrival of Ismet and Khateja. Having been

⁷ This is in evidence on the cover of the novel, designed by New York based artist, Coco Masuda.

away from India for an extended period of time has endowed them both with a kind of nostalgia that has allowed them to homogenise the socially stratified Indian continent. Vikram is depicted as “particularly susceptible to this [Ismet’s] talk of Indians” and “something of a lighthearted nationalist” (192). Although a nationalist, Vikram does not have in mind a legitimate version of India. His India is a place filled with ‘Indians’; not Memons and Sikhs and innumerable other types of Indian.

Even Khateja, who, at the beginning of the novel, does not fit in with the other inhabitants of her village, begins to experience a kind of nostalgia that has the ability to make her feel ‘Indian’ in the sense of having a ‘homeland’ on the Indian subcontinent. Having been in Durban for some time, she longs for India and feels as though “her heart was breaking inside of her” (208). Coovadia draws attention to the nationalising power of nostalgia as Khateja finds herself

thinking fond thoughts concerning her father, Yusuf, who had at least entertained her with the misery and poverty of his spirit, about her mother and the rapacious uncles and her mentally addled brother, Ahmed, and even, now and again in a flood of charity, about her one-time fiancé Ahmedudu [sic]. She tried to dismiss these thoughts but it was a losing battle.

(ibid.)

While these thoughts are not a total departure from the contempt she felt for her family and Ahmedu while in India, they are considerably more neutral – even affectionate at times. Thoughts about her family and Ahmedu, however, begin to change. This is particularly true of how she begins to see herself and her relationships with both India and South Africa:

In the village, even in Bombay, Khateja was a creature perfectly adapted to the culture and the tempo and the justifications of the land, its vicious assaults and feverish provocations. That she was a master of, as was only natural. Perhaps it was just as natural that here, in South Africa, she was condemned to be a fish out of water her whole life: a misfit, a social joke.

(211)

The above excerpt draws attention to how nostalgia is able to affect the real and perceived relationships between space, place and identity. Khateja ‘remembers’ herself as having being ‘perfectly adapted’ to life in the village. This is, however, not the case as Coovadia, at

the beginning of the novel, points out that she was at odds not only with her family but also with the conservative culture and “regressive society” (47) of the village. Khateja is described by a village woman as “strong, head-stubborn, most obstinate. When her heels are dug in she will defy everybody there is, the *imam*, next-town *moulana*, her own family all including” (24). Juxtaposing the Khateja of the village with the Durban Khateja reveals that her sense of being ‘perfectly adapted’ and ‘at home’ in India is illegitimate. Her affected memories of both herself and her India manifest as a result of what Svetlana Boym refers to as reflective nostalgia, which is a creative nostalgia by which one becomes nostalgic “not for the past the way it was but for the way it could have been” (Boym 2001:351). In the same vein, Italo Calvino’s vignette of the metropolis of Fedora offers an image which, while referring to imagined futures, can be used to understand the affective power of Boym’s reflective nostalgia.

In the center of Fedora, that gray stone metropolis, stands a metal building with a crystal globe in every room. Looking into each globe, you see a blue city, the model of a different Fedora. These are the forms the city could have taken if, for one reason or another it had not become what we see today. In every age, someone, looking at Fedora as it was, imagined a way of making it the ideal city, but while he constructs his miniature model, Fedora was already no longer the same as before, and what has been until yesterday a possible future became only a toy in a glass globe.

(Calvino 1972:31)

Khateja can be considered to be looking into one such crystal ball, within which exists a potential India the way it *could have* been and not necessarily similar to the way it *really* was. While Calvino’s scenario seems to be referring to possible futures, it is perhaps equally applicable to potential pasts which become toys with which romanticising nostalgics pass their time. In addition, by adopting a ‘model’ India as her ‘homeland’, she rejects South Africa, suggesting that she is “condemned to be a fish out of water” (Coovadia 2001:211). This sense of displacement, like her imagined sense of belonging in India, is also illegitimate as she – like Ismet – manages to adjust to living in South Africa and Durban, by pedestrian exploration. The pedestrian modality and Ismet and Khateja’s peregrinations will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

As suggested earlier, nostalgia has not only the power to create illegitimate senses of both belonging and displacement but also has the capacity for homogenising complex groups

of people. This capacity is one of which Coovadia seems well-aware, and uses to critique nationalising or self-isolating nostalgia. He executes his critique through the social trajectory of Ismet, who, in both India and South Africa, is particularly sensitive to the ‘subtleties of the world’ and the complexities of culture. In Durban he notices how different castes and religious groupings of Indians are forced to live together in the Grey Street complex. The block of flats they find is positioned on Queen Street:

Not far from the central business district, the Grey Street mosque, the market. There was a ground-floor tearoom, the stairways were cement blocks painted red, flaking red halls with a knee-high gray band, washing lines stung up on chicken wire, black-eyed children with spades and buckets and dripping noses, the smell of cooking vegetables and evaporated butter, dimpled copper pots left out to dry by the screen doors, large circular women with red dots on their forehead.

(144)

Ismet is immediately aware that the area is inhabited by Indian immigrants of both Muslim (associated with the Grey Street mosque) and Hindu (commonly recognised by the *bindi* or red dot or that was traditionally worn by women⁸) orientation. He is also made aware by Vikram Naidoo that not only are they forced to live together, but also – due to the oppressive nature of the colonial state – that they choose to disregard their cultural differences in order to form a more homogenous group following a ‘power in numbers’ strategy. His sensitivity, however, begins to fade as he ages and realises that, as Margaret Lenta points out, “the Indian community is too small, and their own social needs without family too great, to discriminate between Hindu and Muslim in their friendships”⁹ (2002 unpaginated). Ismet’s sensitivity to cultural difference seems to vanish almost altogether once, much to Khateja’s discontentment, he decides to take a second wife. He decides to have a traditional ‘Indian’ wedding, asking for a *qawali* band to play at his and Yasmin’s *nika’a* ceremony:

“Having them perform for us,” he announced, “it is the little I can contribute to keep our Indian culture alive for all of us. Our Indian culture, that is what really counts at the end of the day. Remember that it is only the beginning at this point. We all of us have a responsibility. So please do not offer me congratulations, that I am not concerned with. Go out and do what is possible with your own creativity and imagination”.

⁸ The *bindi* is now also worn by Hindu men and individuals of other Southeast Asian religious orientations. The *bindi* is, however, discouraged in Islamic religion due to its association with non-Islamic religions.

⁹ This is available online at http://web.uct.ac.za/depts/religion/documents/ARISA/2002_A4_coovadia.pdf

Ismet's request is significant for two reasons. Firstly, he feels a responsibility to "keep *our* Indian culture alive" (own emphasis); embracing Indian culture when it is associated with the "hoary old India" from which he purposely departed. Secondly, he seems to have lost sight of the complexities of 'Indian' culture - referring to it as "*our* Indian culture". The Indian culture he is referring to is a South African Indian (or imagined Indian) culture which he nostalgically embraces, ignoring his youthful disdain of the subcontinent. This kind of nostalgia, markedly different from the kind that Khateja experiences, is what Boym terms restorative nostalgia – a nostalgia that "manifests itself in total reconstructions of the monuments of the past" (2001:41). The reconstructed traditions and monuments, Boym suggests, build on a "sense of loss of community and cohesion and offers a comforting collective script for individual longing" (42). The South African Indian culture he adopts is the one espoused by Vikram Naidoo in his warning to Ismet upon arriving in Durban; one which attempts to ignore the distinctions between a "Bombay-Indian or that one Tamil, [and] one what-what Gujarati-Indian" (Coovadia 2001:150). Coovadia showcases, through the use of irony in the case of Ismet, how nostalgia is able to engender a sense of geographic 'home' or belonging that is partially or even wholly imagined.

Coovadia expands on the idea of an imagined sense of belonging not only through his own protagonists but also obliquely through the nested narrative that his narrator tells about a film in which a Ugandan man, exiled from his country of birth, returns many years later only to find that it is no longer 'home'; "in the twenty years of absence it has put on a face he cannot recognize. The grass has grown up through everything" (280). The grass having "grown up through everything" indicates that the landscape – both physical and cultural – has changed with time, revealing to the man that he has been nostalgic for a place that he is able to revisit only in his imagination and memory. The allegorical significance of the film's plot acts as an oblique and more concise way for Coovadia to make his point that often locations that are – from a distance – considered to be a 'homeland' are only ever imaginary; nostalgically conjured into existence in a manner that is unlike the reality. Ismet, unlike the Ugandan man, is never able to fulfil his initial desire to return to India but, if he were to make it to India, it is probable that he would find an India in which the 'grass had grown up through everything' – presenting to him an altered landscape that is unlike his imagined idyll conjured by nostalgic 'memories'. While the man comes to the realisation that Uganda is no longer

home, his daughter and her lover – described as a “young black shampooer of carpets” – “dance together in a field to the music in their heads and pack their things into the shampooing van and head for California, which is at an infinite distance” (280). I will return later in this chapter to how the narrative of the film lovers mirrors that of Coovadia’s narrator and the implications of these narratives regarding ideas of place and diasporic identity.

Spatial Mapping and the Pedestrian Modality

As indicated, Coovadia writes against the current of nostalgic depictions of place evident in texts such as Hassim’s *The Lotus People* or Nadiou’s *Footprints in Grey Street*. One method of writing against nostalgic depictions of place he employs is by placing his characters within recognisable geographical locations and then describing – in great detail – how things *are* rather than how they *appear* to be (at times he describes places in both these ways in order to juxtapose the nostalgic and ‘realistic’ renditions of the same place). By positioning his protagonists as urban pedestrians, he forces his protagonists to take the Icaran fall described by de Certeau, bringing them down to street level in order to experience a textual Durban through the modality by which it is ‘written’ into being.

It is through walking, exploration and traversing landscapes that maps come into being. Maps, however, need not be in the printed form that is common to mainstream cartography; maps can be hand-drawn, mental or even textual maps. Coovadia, in *The Wedding*, seems to show an awareness of the significance of the role of these kinds of mapping in the process of familiarising oneself with an unknown area. Since much of the focus of this dissertation is on the urban milieu, I will pay more attention to mapping and the pedestrian modality in the urban context of Durban as it occurs in *The Wedding*. Some reference to the mapping and walking of urban areas in India will be made but, due to the nature of the novel, such examples are in considerably shorter supply.

Before Ismet and Khateja begin to familiarise themselves with an unexpectedly urban and cosmopolitan Durban, they acquire a map of a small part of Durban. This map, given to them by Tejpal Reddy is a “pencil sketch map” (143) that guides them to a block of flats on Queen Street. By virtue of it being a sketch-map, made by the hand of a person who had walked its contours, the drawing is a pedestrian map; a map produced by one of the “innumerable singularities” mentioned by de Certeau. It is worth noting not only the kind of

map it is, but also the manner of information that it relays. Tejpal's map is not a tourist map that indicates sites of leisure or interest but is rather one that serves a more practical function. It is an idiosyncratic map that satisfies everyday needs; needs like finding accommodation in an area that –back then – was racially appropriate and would provide the newlyweds with a sense of belonging and Indianness that they would come to require, as nostalgia begins to take hold.

Tejpal's map, however, soon becomes unnecessary as the émigrés begin to explore the city for themselves, engaging with it at street level and progressively writing themselves into the text that is early 20th century Durban. Interestingly, Coovadia uses urban exploration in the cases of Ismet and Khateja for different reasons. The following paragraphs will serve to illustrate how the excursions of the duo differ in both itinerary and ideological purpose. Ismet's excursions into the city help to establish him as a (D)urbanite, depicting him as becoming increasingly immersed in the city, eventually becoming a *wandersmänner* who is at home in the urban milieu. Coovadia describes Ismet's first unguided foray into an unfamiliar Durban:

He wandered over to Queen Street, on the Field Street corner where there were newspaper printing presses, a bottle store with crates of Castle Lager in the window, an off-track tote. He went into the bottle store and bought a packet of Lucky Strikes, a pink-striped licorice¹⁰ box, a glass bottle of orange crush. Then he stood on the street corner, lit a cigarette, and drank from the bottle, which had the name stamped in white around the middle. He examined a newspaper he found lying on the ground, sports events, changes in the environment, but his heart was not in it.

(161-162)

Ismet is depicted as wandering aimlessly in an attempt to “get a fix on the town” (161). The cigarettes, liquorice and juice he purchases are items that are not of everyday importance, suggesting that he has not yet become a *resident* of the city but is instead still a *sojourner* resembling the dandy or flâneur of Benjamin – a man of leisure, engaging with the city for enjoyment, rather than out of necessity. Ismet's initial explorations of an unfamiliar city bring to mind the image of a ‘snorkelling’ girl that Ivan Vladislavić, as both author and narrator, encounters as he “[presses] on into the deep end of the city [Johannesburg]” (2006:96):

¹⁰ I should point out here that the novel uses American as opposed to British spelling conventions.

A perfectly ordinary little girl on her way home from school. Or she would be perfectly ordinary, I mean, if she were not wearing a diving mask and snorkel. Coming towards me, on a spring afternoon in Roberts Avenue, snorkelling through the sunlight. [...] The snorkel tube is transparent, the mask is rimmed with pink rubber, her eyes look out with the astounded, strained expression of a diver who has just sunk below the surface for the first time and discovered a second world.

(95)

The girl featured in Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & what-what* is an exploratory figure that serves as an embodied depiction of the capacity – and perhaps necessity – for one to become immersed in a place to the extent where, even if one is accustomed to it, the familiar becomes unfamiliar. This immersion occurs in *The Wedding*, as it does in *Portrait with Keys*, through the process of walking in the city. As the Bombay clerk more regularly immerses himself in the urban environment of Durban, the more he begins to resemble a resident of the city – one who contributes to writing de Certeau's textual city – rather than a sojourner or passive observer of the city.

While Ismet, once a disinterested observer of the local sports events or changes in the environment mentioned in the newspaper he examines, seems disconnected from the place in which he finds himself, he soon becomes an active user of the city as he begins to find his way around without the use of a map:

On a Friday morning, on an empty stomach, Ismet took his *namaaz* mat under his arm and set off for the Grey Street Mosque. It wasn't far but the streets were busy, men leaning on walls, calling out prices from shop doors, smoking, *paan*-chewing, spitting on the road, since it was two hours out of the day from work.

He went straight past the jewelry stores with necklaces and Elgin and Madix pocket watches on display in red velvet boxes, the *halaal* butchers selling cold meats and sausages, the Butterworth hotel on whose balcony men were drinking from dark green beer bottles. He was starting to feel perfectly at home. [...]

On the corner of Grey and Bond Streets, by the back of the fish market, he saw a man selling *goolab jamus* on a grey blanket, single or six to a tin box that came with. He crossed over in a celebratory mood and bought one and devoured it in three fast bites from between two fingers.

Here Ismet is immediately positioned as stepping onto the street for a defined purpose; heading to the Juma Masjid Mosque. Having a practical purpose in mind, he becomes the *wandersmänner* of de Certeau who begins to write his own map of the city. Ismet's Durban is one that is able to satisfy not only his need for religious devotion (in the form of the mosque) but also for food that satisfies his cultural palate. In learning how to use the city and engage with it in a manner that allows him to live within it, he begins to feel "perfectly at home" (ibid.). Whereas once he wandered into shops aimlessly, he now walks past shops in order to reach his destination. It is important to note, however, that while Ismet does bypass the shops, he still looks around and enjoys the details to be found at street level. Having sighted a man selling *goolab jamus*, he takes the time to enjoy one and crosses the street in a "celebratory mood" (ibid.).

Ismet's sense of belonging steadily strengthens until, instead of being a mere observer of "Indian men out on the pavement, shopkeepers and clothing discounters, smoking and talking, laughing" (ibid.), he becomes one of them:

On his day off from the office, Ismet was to be found on Bond Street sharing a tube of mint humbugs with school-children, one hand in his pocket on the corner of Aliwal and Pine, smoking Bangalor *bedies* under the water gutter, handing around a sampler of guavas to shopkeepers in Salisbury Arcade, a carton of strawberries at the Baker's Biscuit factory-shop off the Old Main Road.

(202)

Here Ismet has become a man of the city – engaging with school children and dealing with shopkeepers who are presumably both friends and customers. In this extract it becomes apparent that Ismet has, although it might not be in a visible form, created his own idiosyncratic pedestrian map that allows him to engage with the city in the way that is distinctly his own. Such a map – to look back at de Certeau's manner of walking in the urban milieu – is created by Ismet's particular pattern of walking; the places that he frequents, be they for leisure or otherwise. Mapped out, Ismet's walking route, his pencil sketch map, might resemble the map labelled Figure 14 on Page 54. His map, however, certainly differs from that of his proto-feminist wife.

From the time that Ismet meets Khateja in her village, Coovadia is careful to portray her as a woman who defies culturally defined gender roles. She is described to Ismet as a “strong, head-stubborn, most obstinate” (24) woman who is willing to defy not only her family but also the *imams* and *moulanas* associated with her faith. It is, however, not only Khateja’s thoughts and actions that reflect her desire for liberation from constraints imposed on her because of her gender; her particular rhetoric of walking, her way of being in the city, also reflects her desire to transgress socially constructed boundaries. It takes her a considerably longer time than Ismet to adjust and find her way around the city. However, when she does, the spaces that she moves through, allow her a certain degree of freedom.

In Victoria Arcade, at the center of the commercial district reserved for people of Indian descent, Manilal’s Used Books and Spice Emporium sold used books, religious materials, primers for a shilling, lightbulbs, pots of white glue. There, standing next to a copy of *Moby-Dick* that she latched onto for sentimental reasons, Khateja found a copy of Samuel Richardson’s *Clarissa*. When she pulled out *Moby-Dick*, it came out as well, so she took it on the off chance, as well as a bound copy of Mary Wollstonecraft’s letters.

(216-217)

While the above extract does not exhibit her pedestrian capacity, Manilal’s Used Books – a place that she expressly *chooses* to enter – does feature as a common item on her pedestrian itinerary. It is here that Khateja has access to books. The kind of literary repertoire that Khateja develops becomes an extension of herself in the sense that the books deal with feminism or multiculturalism and oceanic travel. Betty Govinden points out that “for Khateja *Moby Dick* is her link to India” since “she had read it there” (2008:67). While this certainly is the case, I would suggest that her affinity for the novel runs deeper than merely having it act as a trigger for nostalgic memory.

From a young age, Khateja expresses a desire to experience cultural diversity and to travel to unfamiliar places. In Chapter Seven, Coovadia points out that “the truth is that Khateja long intended to widen her horizons. [...] She had plans to see all the countries of the world, piazzas and pyramids and Aztec Temples and the whaling towns of New England” (Coovadia 2001:141). The whaling towns of New England seem to enter her proposed itinerary as a result of the copy of *Moby Dick* she had read as a child. Whether the book appeals to her because of a pre-existing desire for travel and multicultural experience

or whether the book instilled in her such a desire is unclear. At a young age she asks her father, Yusuf:

“Daddy-papa, if it is possible can I come sit by you and uncle Yacoob in the puff-puff train so it is possible for me to see for a few days our Indian city Bombay? Experience does not all come straight from a book, that is a lesson you have taught me yourself. It is also necessary to do a small amount of tourism, yes?”

(141)

Yusuf denies her request for mobility and multicultural experience and I would suggest that Khateja finds both of these things in the pages of Melville’s maritime adventure story. The *Pequod*, captained by Ahab, sails around the Cape of Good Hope in pursuit of the elusive white whale. The journey then takes the ship and its crew across the Indian Ocean and north, into the South China Sea. While the ship does not stop in India, Khateja’s transoceanic journey from southern India to southern Africa does resemble a portion of the *Pequod*’s journey in reverse. This would no doubt resonate with Khateja and her desire for a “small amount of tourism” (this could be particularly true once she has completed the journey herself). It is not only the *Pequod*’s journey across the Indian Ocean that is of significance but also its multinational – and therefore multicultural – crew. Coovadia makes plain not only her desire for travel but also for multicultural interaction:

([...])an afternoon ride on the Ahmadabad-Srinagar train service, one time with her uncle Yacoob to help him carry his tins of evaporated milk for the Hindi shepherds in the mountains – but that was by no means experience of a different culture), no sooner had she said to herself, most unsparingly, “nothing doing, Khateja, it is most unlikely you will have the opportunities for travel”.

(142)

Moby Dick is able to provide, to a minor extent, a sense of exposure to different cultures through the multinational crew aboard the ship. Chapter 40 of the novel, entitled ‘Midnight, Forecastle’, uses theatre-like stage directions to highlight the geographical origin of each sailor mentioned. The sailors are classified, to mention a few, as Maltese, French, Sicilian, Long-Island, Chinese, Portuguese, English, Spanish and Nantucket. In brief summation, I suggest that it is due to both the cosmopolitan crew and the *Pequod*’s transoceanic journey, that resembles her own, that Khateja is drawn to a text such as *Moby Dick*. The copies of

Clarissa and Mary Wollstonecraft's letters resonate with her, a "free, quick-thinking individual" (43), due to the feminist leanings of Wollstonecraft and the strong feminist character of *Clarissa*. While these texts are no less significant in analysing the character of Khateja, they do not fit the thematic scope of this study and, for this reason, will be mentioned no further. Manilal's Used Books, when considered in relation to the emancipatory ideologies that it offers to Khateja, can be seen as contributing to her particularly gendered pedestrian map.

Coovadia points out that her peregrinations around Durban – in addition to a stop at Manilal's Used Books – present themselves as a "motorized expression of her inner liberty" (223). As mentioned in Chapter 1, Nuttall identifies the urban figure of the *flâneuse* as a pedestrian who provides gender-related consciousness that serves as an "exploration of being a woman in a city that is [...] providing spaces in which these women can explore their identities" (2009:229). In a similar vein, Khateja is depicted walking the streets once she has become accustomed to the city:

In Durban now she had eventually begun to adapt herself: she bought a toffee apple from the vendor on the beachfront: she went into the hotels and got kicked out of the back entrance because she had not read the warning signs about which races could be admitted; she spent an afternoon in the Oriental Imperial Carpet Finery Display Exhibition Emporium investigating the patterns and visiting the workshop; she arrived at Manilal's and searched for a used book, turning everything upside down before she was satisfied and agreed to leave...

(Coovadia 2001:223-224)

Khateja's rhetoric of walking – in much the same way as her choice of reading – pushes against social boundaries. As she walks along the beachfront, she enters hotels only to get kicked out of the back entrance since the front entrances are reserved for 'Europeans'. Entering places that are forbidden, in addition to Manilal's book shop, results in Khateja's gender-related rhetoric of walking being one that is characterised by liberation and transgression – be it mental or physical.

Globality and Cosmopolitanism

As Ismet and Khateja engage with and begin to feel at home in Durban, their wanderings at street level reveal to them a version of the city that presents itself to be a polyglot, cosmopolitan space that is porous in the sense that it is in constant flux; allowing people both in and out and resulting in a palimpsestic place that is constantly being written and re-written by an ever-changing multitude of walkers. Being a port-city, Durban has been a place inhabited by traders and travellers since the formal founding of the harbour in either 1839 or 1840 (there are no existing official records from the time) (Web 1). Late 19th and early 20th century Durban – due to the Imperial Project, trade and importing of Indian indentured labourers – became a point of contact between various cultures, also becoming a location that has given rise to new ways of being that can be understood using Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomian model. In addition to the singularities that inhabit it, Durban itself can be understood as a cosmopolitan space while retaining an element of unique cultural specificity due to its particular entanglement of cultures. Coovadia, along with many other writers like Johan van Wyk, Lewis Nkosi, Sifiso Mzobe, and Sally-Ann Murray, has given Durban’s ever fluctuating rhizome of cultures literary expression. Govinden points out that Coovadia’s narrative becomes punctuated by arrivals and departures (2008:58) of people but I would suggest that she has neglected to mention the arrival/departure of items; traveling things that cross borders more freely than people. For example, once Ismet has found employment and begun to consider Durban as home, he learns that his friend and landlord, Vikram, “had only recently become a regional agent for these broomsticks, which were produced in Cairo” (Coovadia 2001:187). The broomsticks are imported as tools for labour by the Indian demographic that were imported by the colonial authorities for much the same purpose. The shrinking globe, as theorised by Harvey, brought about by innovations in both transport and communication technologies, is useful in understanding the multinational rhizome that is Coovadia’s early 20th century Durban. By making it clear that the broomsticks are manufactured in Cairo, Coovadia sets the reader up to begin a chain of associations that highlight transcontinental trade and travel: that Egyptian broomsticks are sold by men from India on the southern tip of Africa.

Coovadia expands on the idea of multinational entanglement in Durban by drawing attention to its port and the sailors associated with it. As Ismet and Vikram take delivery of

their Cairene broomsticks, attention is drawn to the polyglot space associated with the harbour and surrounds:

Their shipments came into Durban at the warehouse on Aliwal Street, next to the beachfront among the cheap seaside hotels and Portuguese bars where people stayed on permanently. Unable to get a truck, they had to pick the goods up by bus, the two of them carting plywood boxes on board while the driver grumbled and spoke in a foreign language and the passengers fiddled in their seats suspiciously.

(193)

Coovadia highlights the Portuguese bars and ‘foreign’ bus driver connected to the space around Aliwal Street. These two elements, in addition to the novel’s colonial context and the importation of Indian indentured labour, provide cultural threads that result in a place that exists as an entanglement of Portuguese, British, Indian, African, and other indistinguishable threads. Roughly a century later, this cultural entanglement still exists, except in presumably more complex forms. Johan van Wyk, in his autobiographical novella, *Man Bitch* (2001), expresses this in a more contemporary setting as he describes a Portuguese bar of the kind mentioned by Coovadia, Lido’s, which he frequents with his Mozambican girlfriend, Luisa, is “full of sailors: Philipino sailors, sailors from Turkey and Sailors from Russia” (van Wyk 2001:25). Similarly, Sally-Ann Murray, in her place-based collection, *Open Season* (2006), shows how Durban’s cultural rhizome finds expression along the promenade, in the vicinity near the harbour:

With vendors cosmopolitan pretenders culture benders
promenading chic chick cherries mamas grannies boeta bessies
boere wors rolls half beans bunnies chunky pineapple spice sticks

(Murray 2006:11)

Mobility of Culture, Items and People

As previously mentioned in Chapter 1 and again in this chapter with reference to Ismet and Vikram’s imported broomsticks, innovations in both transportation and communication technologies have resulted in an ever ‘shrinking’ globe across which people, items and

information can travel ever more quickly. This is evident in *The Wedding* as the novel is driven by movement, whether it is of people or items. Items such as clothing, decorations or food become portable cultural signifiers with a sense of cultural continuity. Coovadia seems well aware of the use of cultural artefacts as he allows his characters to carry some of India with them to their new African context. As Ismet and Khateja unpack, it becomes clear how reliant they are on cultural familiarity even though India was initially a place from which they chose to flee:

India, many-fingered, articulated, cloth covered India issued from their luggage: a Koran in soft cream binding to put on the bookshelf that Pravina brought from down, a red-and-white-checked settee cover, the walking stick that once belonged to Ismet's father, Ebrahim; a collapsible umbrella stand given by the next-door neighbors on hearing of their travel plans; a lace mosquito net from Tejpal and Jairam and Yavani and Roshni [...] Once things were a little clear Ismet took his *namaaz* mat from the bottom of his trunk and rolled it out proudly for them to see. It was worn in places to a translucent dot. Now he could pray in a proper and respectful manner in this new land.

(148)

The Koran in soft cream binding and Ismet's *namaaz* mat are the most culturally specific items that they choose to bring with them. Coovadia continues by pointing out that India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments (157).

As *The Wedding* reaches its closing, Coovadia turns his attention away from the first wave of Indian diaspora and becomes more forward-looking in the sense that his characters continue to move – not only to other parts of Durban but also more globally:

In the next decade Vikram, out-leveraging himself in an import-export deal, would go bust and open up a Chinese restaurant. Ahmedu emigrated to Australia. Charm made a good deal of money from a chain of discount liquor stores, and invested much of it into educating Disraeli at a British boarding school. The government outlawed the Communist Party, sending Joe Slovo and Yusuf Dadoo into exile in London. [...] Jayraj and Tejpal founded a luxury cruise travel liner that went between Cape Town and Ahmadabad.

(265)

While Ahmedu and Disraeli migrate to Australia and England respectively in order to settle there, Jayraj and Tejpal purchase a cruise travel liner that not only allows them to travel but also allows them to capitalise on the planet's 'diminishing size'. As the community of the Grey Street complex is systematically dismantled - and its members are dispersed, the novel more pointedly suggests that 'home' can be anywhere and that it is perhaps best for it to be a cosmopolitan space. Coovadia, by dispersing the characters of his novel in such a way - and giving a glimpse into their future endeavours - seems to suggest that they have substantive continuity not only beyond the pages of his novel but also beyond the 'borders' of the Grey Street complex; in environments that are markedly different from the one in which the reader first encounters them.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the nested narrative about the Indian family from Uganda, told by Coovadia's narrator - the grandson of Ismet and Khateja - mirrors the social and geographical trajectory of the grandson. He, as well as the Ugandan man's daughter, represents the second wave of Indian diaspora; one that - instead of migrating back to India - looks beyond it and moves into the rest of the Western world. This is a significant plot point in the novel because Coovadia, as I have suggested in Chapter 2, is himself part of this second wave of diaspora in that he left South Africa in order to study and work in North America for over a decade. In the third section of the novel - North - as the narrator exits a cinema in New York, he finds himself standing, much like Ismet upon his arrival in Durban, in a cosmopolitan city that is written into being by a polyglot society, forming part of what Coovadia, borrowing from Walt Whitman, refers to as a "teeming nation of nations" (Muller 2013):

Standing there outside the theatre, underneath the awning, on the pavement in Times Square, an eternity after Ismet Nassin saw the most beautiful woman in the world, wondering if uncle Tej had called up our driver sweating about his noseless brother Logan, amid the Hispanic dope dealers and the Jewish daughters, and the Irish cops and Puerto Rican teenagers and the Korean grocers and the Pakistani mothers and the limousine-ferried real-estate magnates and the black rap addicts and the sweated and suede-jacketed students - standing there, for an instant, I imagined I was at home.

(280)

3.2 Durban: *High Low In-between*

Before beginning an analysis of Coovadia's *High Low In-between* (2009), since this thesis focuses on the importance of space and place in his novels and this chapter deals with Durban in particular, it would be of use first to provide a brief examination of the evolution – both spatially and socially – of part of Durban that occurred between the times that *The Wedding* and *High Low In-between* are set. This would be a period spanning roughly 1900 (the year in which much of *The Wedding* is set) to 2009, when *High Low In-between* was published. The primary source of information regarding central Durban's spatial and social development will be *The Making of Place: The Warwick Junction Precinct: 1870s – 1980's* (eds. Hassim, Moodley, Rosenberg, Singh, Vahed 2013) as it documents the evolution of the Grey Street area and the eventual legal relocations of many of its residents – of which Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding* form a part.

Hassim et al., in their study of the Warwick Junction Precinct, outline four distinct periods in the history of the area: the Early Settlement phase (1824s-1870s), the Colonial phase (1870s-1930s), the Pre-apartheid phase (1930s-1950s), and the Apartheid phase (1950s-1980s). Of these four phases, the latter three are of particular interest, for the purpose of this thesis, since they focus on times after the arrival of both indentured Indian labourers and “passenger” Indians (Hassim et al. 2013:18). During the Colonial phase, in which *The Wedding* is largely set, Indian settlements had included areas such as Clairwood, Merebank, Sydenham, Overport, Clare Estate, Mayville, Cato Manor and Riverside (20) – many of which remain populated by a largely Indian demographic. The most well-known and perhaps most written-about of the early residential settlements for Indians is the inner city, which was often referred to as the ‘Coolie Location’ and was located on the “west end of West Street, the northern part of Field Street and bounding the Western vlei” (ibid.). An aerial map of the area would have looked much like the sketched rendition in Figure 14 on page 54.

The succeeding Pre-apartheid phase saw a number of laws that attempted to dismantle the ‘Asiatic Menace’ (19) that had taken root in the area surrounding Grey Street. The Public Health Act No53/1934 and the Slums Act No53 of 1934 both “gave the Durban Town Council authority to clear areas considered to be slums” (28). Hassim et al. point out that white residents became increasingly concerned with the growing Indian population and its spread into traditionally white areas. These concerns came to fruition in the form of the Pegging Act of 1943 and the Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act No28 of 1946 –



FIGURE 14: A MAP OF THE WARWICK JUNCTION PRECINCT DURING THE COLONIAL PHASE

commonly known as the “Ghetto Act” – which were introduced as attempts to forestall the penetration of Indians into white areas. Both of these acts controlled the ownership and occupation of land by Indians, dividing land throughout Natal and the Transvaal into ‘controlled’ and ‘uncontrolled’ areas. Controlled areas were reserved for ownership and occupation for whites only while the uncontrolled areas were not subject to such restrictions. Vahed and Rosenberg point out that “a large portion of Westville leading down to the Umgeni River” (30) was regarded as a controlled area and thus reserved for occupation by whites – by 2009, this would no longer be the case as Nafisa of *High Low In-between* and her family are able to live in Westville.

The Group Areas Act of 1950 ushered in what Hassim et al. identify as the Apartheid phase. Figure 15 indicates an approved racial zoning plan which:

allocated almost the entire ridge, north centre and south, and the Umbilo-Umhlathuzana interfluves to Europeans. All the residential areas on the sea front were also allocated for European habitation, with the exception of Riverside and the extreme southern section of

the bluff, which were allocated to Indians [...] Much of the areas occupied by Indians were allocated and it became necessary for the City Council to compensate Indians by allowing them to retain some of their established settlements on the Bluff, Springfield, Sydenham, Clare Estate and Newlands. Only one new area on the western perimeter of the city was allocated to Indians, the sparsely inhabited area of Reservoir Hills, which was then occupied by about 20 European families.

(34)

In 1969, the Department of Planning announced that it was examining the possibility of reserving the Grey Street complex for occupation by white residents. It was, however, decided – in 1973 – that the area was to be proclaimed as an Indian Group Area. This decision allowed for trading and light industry but stipulated that the vicinity was not to be used for residential purposes. Rosenberg and Vahed, in Hassim et al., point out that “[t]his

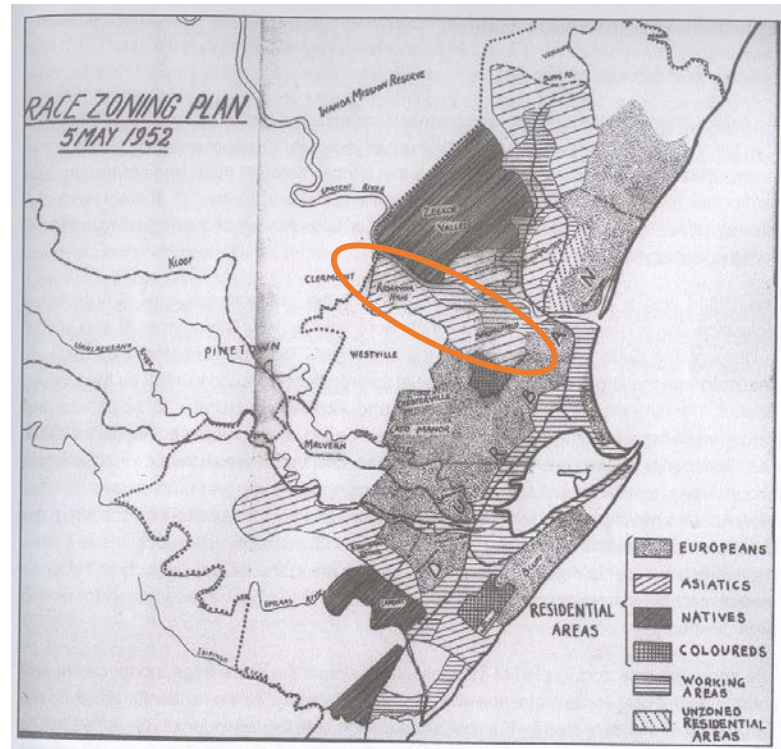


FIGURE 15: THE AREA OF RESERVOIR HILLS

proclamation meant that approximately 12 000 residents had to vacate the area” (ibid.). It is after this proclamation that the two main protagonists of *The Wedding* move to the ‘new’ Indian area of Reservoir Hills – indicated by the oval in Figure 15 above. Other residents of the area, however, were not as compliant and, as such, the Warwick Avenue Triangle “had still not been fully cleared of non-Europeans [...] after more than 20 years of pressure to relocate” (36). As apartheid infrastructures came under increasing pressure, the Group Areas Act was repealed in June of 1991, giving all citizens, regardless of racial classification, the freedom to inhabit any area they chose. It is at this time that Nafisa of *High Low In-between* and her family are able to take up residence in the previously white area of Westville. Coovadia, in *High Low In-between*, however, suggests that “[i]n Westville whites and Indians with some money had lived side by side before the laws officially changed” (2009:36). In

addition, the repeal of the Group Areas Act allowed black citizens to take up residence in the previously white and Indian parts of the city centre. This is of significance as I will return later in this chapter to Nafisa's sense of displacement in an area of Durban that would once have been 'hers'.

The sections that follow will initiate discussion of *High Low In-between* by first examining Coovadia's joint protagonists, Nafisa and Shakeer. Despite being mother and son, they present two disparate subjectivities that engage with both the urban milieu of contemporary Durban and a globalised world in very different ways. Coovadia's narrative arcs for both characters entail different forms of personal growth as the novel nears its denouement: Nafisa learns to engage with the city through walking its streets whereas Shakeer discovers his ability to notice the local specificity of places, people, and cultures by adopting something akin to Massey's 'global sense of place'. I will then move on to matters of space and place by examining contemporary Durban as it appears in the novel. This will be done by paying attention to, firstly, how Durban exists as a cosmopolitan and transnational entanglement of people and cultures, and secondly, to how Durban fits into a wider network of connections to the rest of the globe. It is through Durban's connectedness to global networks that I will address the last facet of this discussion: globalised crime and how illegal organ trade is of particular significance when considered in relation to hybridity and entanglement at the level of the individual.

Nafisa

One of Coovadia's dual protagonists, Nafisa, works as a doctor at both her private practice on Beatrice Street in the city centre and at King Edward Hospital. While she has offices in what was once known as the Indian sector of the Grey Street precinct (outlined earlier in this chapter), she feels a profound sense of alienation in the area. Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding* had lived within the precinct and traversed its streets – and Beatrice Street in particular – whereas Nafisa is unable to bring herself to the point of engaging with the area via a pedestrian modality. Her practice, by virtue of being on the 7th floor of the Durban Medical Centre, removes her from the grasp of the city so that she is unable to form any intimate or meaningful attachment with the place around/below her. Coovadia describes the panoramic view that Nafisa is granted by her elevated vantage point:

From her office she could look out of Beatrice Street and the surroundings, from the racecourse to the Hindu temple, cellphone shops, and the hospital where ambulances were deployed at right angles to the gate. [...]

When, on rare occasions, Nafisa walked out of Medical Centre she was struck by the smells of wet paper and urine hanging over the gutters. [...]

Below her surgery window the kombis sped through traffic, stopping instantaneously between robots to take on new passengers, shouting at pedestrians. She could almost hear them although she was too high up, on the seventh floor, for sound to travel.

On the corner the China New Territories fireworks importer had moved crates onto the pavement. The green and white tubes of Catherine wheels, the gunpowder rockets bound in their dozens and sparklers in their wire cages were visible from the seventh floor.

(81-82)

While the seventh floor of the Durban Medical Centre is considerably less elevated than the 110th floor of the World Trade Centre mentioned by de Certeau, the effect of the elevation remains pertinent. From her office, Nafisa can *almost* hear the taxis on the street below her but Coovadia points out that “she [is] too high up, on the seventh floor, for sound to travel” (ibid.). While she might be able to see the tableau on the street below, it has been stripped of an aural dimension, resulting in a less comprehensive understanding thereof than she would have if she were to experience this from the ground. Furthermore, her elevation strips the scene of the olfactory element – “the smells of wet paper and urine hanging over the gutters” (ibid.) – she would have been unable to escape had she been walking on the pavement below. Nafisa’s one-dimensional bird’s-eye view of her surroundings results in her resembling one of de Certeau’s voyeurs who observe the city without actively engaging with it. Nafisa’s lack of understanding of what she sees results in her passive observation of the cityscape being reduced to a passing glance that lasts “only a minute” (ibid.) – a moment that is too short to engage with the scene and examine its less obvious details.

Nafisa’s lack of insight into everyday life in the city below her office spawns a particular way of thinking about the city. She feels unsafe in an unfamiliar Durban that is strikingly dissimilar to the one in which she had lived before the new government had come into power. It is important to note, however, that the senses of disquiet and danger are not confined to Nafisa alone. Said’s notion of the particular poetics associated with a space is of

particular use when examining how numerous characters throughout the novel perceive the city and its imagined threats. Nafisa, during a rare trip out onto the street, observes how the city had changed and how she feels alienated from a space in which she had once felt comfortable:

It was unusual to be outside in the midst of Durban. In common with the other doctors in the building, Nafisa didn't often set foot on the street. It was too dangerous, too disordered, too African.

(88)

Without going into any detail with regard to the poetics associated with the city, the narration – at this point, focalised by Nafisa – makes her opinion of the city and its relative danger abundantly clear. This brief observation of the city is followed by a recollection of bygone times during which Nafisa had once been at ease in the city centre:

Twenty years ago it had been safe to do errands around the town. She'd paid in cash for mains at the municipality and deposited the receipts from her practice at the Barclays branch without fear of interception.

(ibid.)

This halcyon time, however, is immediately juxtaposed to a contemporary Durban that is less accommodating and safe:

Today the reality was larger, more sour, more unpredictable. Reality was likely to push a knife between your ribs.

Things were bad. They were very bad in Durban. Equally there was always someone worse off than you, in Durban, in Africa, not a stone's throw from your present location [...] some someone without legs, hands, a face, someone without a minute of life remaining.

(ibid.)

Durban, for Nafisa, has become large, sour, and unpredictable; a place where one is under constant threat, be it real or imagined. Having mentioned previously the smells of wet paper and urine Nafisa would smell below her practice, the two descriptions share a similar poetics with regard to language use – Durban has become a place to be avoided due to dirt, disease, and danger. Said's poetics of space, mentioned in Chapter One, is of further importance here as the linguistic representation associated with the same area in *The Wedding* is significantly different. While Ismet and Khateja were comfortable in a city centre populated by a largely Indian demographic among which they felt a sense of safety and community, Nafisa now feels

that the area has become “too African” (ibid.). The movement of black residents into the city had displaced the Indian population, alienating people like Nafisa from a place which would have been once considered ‘hers’. This displacement is made apparent as Nafisa, later in the novel, walks through the Warwick Market:

Nafisa hadn’t been to the market since it had moved to its present location. Ten years ago, when she had gone to buy fruit and vegetables on a Saturday morning, the owners of all the stalls had been Indian.

(189)

The Indian shopkeepers that populated 19th Century Durban of *The Wedding* have been displaced by black African shopkeepers. The displacement, however, need not be seen as a contentious territorialisation on the part of the black residents and shopkeepers. Like the Pakistanis mentioned earlier in this chapter, the black shopkeepers form part of an ever-changing mass of de Certeauan singularities that (re)write the city. Cities, by virtue of having a constantly fluctuating citizenry, are in constant flux as a cultural construct – both including and excluding different groups at different periods in time.

For most of the novel, Nafisa makes a conscious effort to exclude herself from the pedestrians of the city but, in a spirited attempt to see her brother, Nawaz, at the Warwick Market, she walks through the city, adopting a pedestrian modality that affords her a point of view that disrupts her preconceived views of the city and its imagined dangers.

Beatrice Street, outside her surgery, was already crowded with buses and taxis. Passengers got on holding their shopping which they were taking back to the township. Nafisa went past the Islamic high school and the Catholic hospital, wondering about their coexistence.

(190)

The idea of cultural coexistence within a cosmopolitan space may be unfamiliar to her due to her previous unwillingness to engage with the city in an attempt to understand it. While the relationship between these two institutions may not be immediately apparent, considering them as separate roots of a Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizome reveals how they create a culturally heterogeneous space. Independently, both the school and the hospital retain their religious identities but, when considered together, the specificity of the area in which they are located

becomes one characterised by diversity – a specificity that can only exist as long as both cultural institutions remain in existence.

A little further down and the roads were exclusively African: motorcyclists standing on the kerb, truants in school uniform with their shirts untucked, a Jockey from the Greyville track who strode stiffly in narrow white trousers into a café. [...]

The names on the signs were familiar while the roads were as strange as could be. They had become African since her previous life. She didn't recognise any of the shops or shopkeepers. She could as well be in Rio de Janeiro as in Durban, in Brazzaville, or at the bottom of the ocean. [...]

She was so deep in the city, far beneath its surface, that, to look up and see where she had come from, she couldn't reckon the depth between herself and the surface.

(190-191)

Coovadia again points out how the city has changed with regard to its racial demographic, suggesting that it has become “African” and thus unfamiliar. Nafisa, much like Vladislavić's girl mentioned in *Portrait with Keys* (2006), immerses herself in the city to an extent where the familiar becomes unfamiliar due to a barrage of finer details that were unavailable to her from her office. The seven-floor distance between her and the street while she is in her office has vanished and she is unable to catch a glimpse of her former elevated and superficial view of the city, creating a defamiliarised space with which Nafisa must engage in order to reach her destination.

While on her foray into a defamiliarised city, Nafisa walks through the Victoria Street Market, observing how people “[move] in every direction, as if they were particles in Brownian motion” (192). While Nafisa's view from her office removed the olfactory sense from her observations of the city, she now notices an “unexpected clean smell, air freshener, coming off the counters” (193). The unexpected smell – as opposed to the earlier smells of wet paper and urine – that she encounters can be considered a moment of epiphany during which she realises that her expectations of the city and its perceived threats had been misinformed. She reaches her brother, Nawaz, safely and, in doing so, encounters a city that is unexpectedly ‘clean’ and unthreatening. Nafisa's journey through the city's commercial centre transforms her into an example of de Certeau's *wandersmänner* who engages with the city out of necessity. It is worth pointing out here that Nafisa's engagement with the city

differs from that of Khateja from *The Wedding* in that Khateja does so for pleasure rather than for a defined purpose.

Before moving on to her son, Shakeer, it is worth examining Nafisa's sense of (non)belonging more generally. Although born on the African continent, Nafisa's cultural rhizome extends well beyond a narrowly South African form of reference. Coovadia points out that her family was:

from Botswana, originally from Probandar in India, Memons, a designation derived from the Arabic term for the faithful. Nafisa has been the beneficiary of a scholarship to medical school in Bombay, courtesy of the richest Indian family in Gaborone.

(48)

Her personal history and links to Durban, Gaborone, Probandar, and Bombay (now Mumbai) create a complex entanglement that seems to set Nafisa adrift on an ocean of difference. Nafisa, throughout the novel, is aware of this difference; an awareness that becomes the source of her feelings of displacement. She observes how:

[...] the Zulus and the Indians, two cultures side by side in Natal and once governed by the British, were deaf to each other. In this province, KZN, they were neighbours, their lives were entangled, yet they were as far apart as any two points on the globe.

(68)

She wishes to but is unable to position herself as an African because she sees such interconnectedness and complexity that she seems unable to position herself at a particular locus. Of interest here is Coovadia's own use of the notion of entanglement. The Zulu and Indian communities exist in a state of geographical and historical entanglement via the shared histories of colonialism and apartheid but Nafisa cannot imagine any social integration between the two. As the novel progresses, her sense of (non)belonging intensifies as she begins to feel that the Zulu community is actively attempting to displace her:

It perplexed Nafisa to live among nine million beings, to treat them, to pay and be paid by them, to be buried in ground they claimed for their own, yet never to see how they should be so certain of their own place, and of hers. Yet they were certain and she was not.

(178-179)

Her sense of uncertainty regarding 'home' in a country where "[e]ach person was a puzzle piece drawn from a different set" (244) begins to dissipate as the novel draws to a close. After

Govin Mackey confesses to having killed Arif because he had planned to expose Mackey's and Gerson's (il)legal organ trade, Nafisa returns home. Upon her arrival, she confronts her maid, Estella, and invites her to go to work with her the following day to be tested for HIV. Up to this point, the relationship between the two women has been strained due to Nafisa's awareness of the difference between them. This caring gesture comes about due to her personal growth and newly developed "sympathy with every creature in the universe" (248). While the novel begins with Nafisa being adrift on an ocean of difference, it concludes with her feeling a profound sense of connectedness and belonging in a country characterised by cultural and historical entanglements.

Shakeer

Having discussed Nafisa, her distancing of herself from the city, and her eventual process of engaging with it, I will now turn to Coovadia's second protagonist, Shakeer. Nafisa's son is a photographer, born in Durban but living in Los Angeles. He returns to South Africa to attend his father's retirement party but his time in the country is complicated by his father's murder and his own inability to understand the country of his birth. Although based in North America, Shakeer is a seasoned traveller and Coovadia, throughout the novel, pinpoints the numerous places that his character has been to on assignment. Some of the places mentioned include Papua New Guinea, Antananarivo (28), Shanghai (49), St. Petersburg (97), Guadeloupe, Mauritius, Mexico City, and Santa Fe (103). Shakeer's travels are depicted as beneficial since he has the ability to both travel and make a living by capitalising on a globe that makes travel easy. His travels, however, are not without disadvantages. Upon his return 'home' after many years, he seems unable to relate to the cosmopolitan space that is contemporary Durban. While he has experienced numerous other contemporary cities, he seems to be unable to understand Durban's particular hybrid specificity. Nafisa, upon collecting him from the airport, notices how he lacks the physical attributes that he once had. "America had taken Sharky and made him fat, thick, uncomfortable. America had swallowed up her son" (35). What she notices is his possible inability to understand hybrid existences, particularly in relation to himself. He has shed his South African specificities; becoming instead an 'American'.

Shakeer's misunderstanding of cultural hybridity that is able to maintain a sense of local specificity further manifests in his difficulty in taking pictures of Durban. Shakeer,

unlike Ismet of *The Wedding*, is insensitive to the subtleties of Durban's cultural rhizome. Where there is hybridity and subtle yet specific newness, he sees only generic homogeneity. He interprets hybridity as a cultural whitewashing that lacks Massey's conception of uniqueness of place due to its particular combination of entanglements:

In the Indian quarter, Sharky said, Durban had the feeling of a souk. He had once tried to take photographs of this section of town but he couldn't make them specific. The shots resembled nothing so much as Tunis or the black and Arab marketplace in Zanzibar.

(91)

Here, while Shakeer is able to identify cultural influences from outside of Durban, he is unable to observe any form of newness that may arise from the meeting of cultures. When taking pictures of Durban and seeing the Muslim influences, the culturally specific elements become synecdochic in the sense that they conjure in his mind images of souks elsewhere – in Tunis or Zanzibar. The synecdochic relationship for Shakeer is so strong that the mental images subjugate the perhaps more subtle specificities associated with Durban. Shakeer's insensitivity to the *international* space of contemporary Durban infringes on his ability to photograph the city as he “had never taken an interesting photograph at home” because he “could never quite understand what he was looking at in Durban, what he was supposed to make of it” (208).

Throughout the novel, Shakeer, expresses feelings of alienation by virtue of not living “in the country” (147). He does, however, come to the realisation that he “had never been truly at his ease anywhere else on the planet ... in Guadalupe [sic], Mauritius, Mexico City, in Santa Fe, wherever else his assignments had taken him” (103). In a sense, he is set adrift on an ocean of formless homogeneity which he cannot understand. Shakeer represents the second wave of diaspora moving outwards from South Africa but also serves as a warning of sorts about the absence of cultural awareness. Coovadia does not argue for what Bhabha refers to as ‘cultural whitewashing’ but rather seems to suggest that one should adopt both an identity and awareness that is open to cultural hybridity and entanglement. His disbelief in cultural entanglements that retain an element of specificity does not, however, exempt him from being a complex cultural rhizome himself. His friend and previous almost-lover, Leila, observes his cultural complexity. When she meets him at a *mawlud* celebration in Stanger with his mother, she tells him:

I thought you would be completely American by now. But you hardly sound American at all. On the other hand you never sounded completely South African either, even when we were on campus already.

(114)

While Leila does seem to notice a kind of cultural change in Shakeer, it is not one that has any identifiable influences. Despite being based in North America, he ‘doesn’t sound American at all’, suggesting that Shakeer undergoes a cultural whitewashing, resulting in an acultural international entity rather than a culturally entangled *international* one. His aculturality is evident early on in the novel at his father’s funeral:

He was told where to stand, when to join the procession, and asked to read the Arabic text on a stained photostat page. He could pronounce the words but not understand what he was saying.

(54)

Despite coming from a Muslim background, Shakeer has little understanding of the culture and its ceremonies, transforming his father’s funeral into an empty tradition. In addition to this incident, while at the *mawlud* with Nafisa, he asks a man what the celebration is for. The man explains that “it is the Prophet’s birthday” (111) and continues by criticising him, saying “if you are here, you should know the basics of the religion” (112).

Like his mother, Shakeer undergoes a personal transformation that changes his outlook on cultural difference, hybridity, and entanglement. Despite his difficulty in taking photographs in Durban, the final scene of the novel sees him going to a *taziya* ceremony near the old Sufi mosque in Riverside in order to photograph the proceedings. Despite arriving late, Shakeer finds himself moving “first closer to the centre of the crowd and then along with them towards the river” (268) in which the ceremonial tomb would be placed. This scene is a marked departure from the preceding religious ceremonies mentioned above as Shakeer is no longer on the margins of the ritual but is instead actively engaged in it. Within the crowd, he seems to discover a sense of connectedness and community that he had lacked throughout the novel:

After a while Sharky forgot himself and felt the heat rising at the back of his head. The men holding the tomb had set it alight before they could place it in the river. He felt the silent flames flicker on the back of his neck. The heat went to his head. So long as he didn’t turn back to look the flames would never go out.

(ibid.)

Contemporary Durban

Moving now to matters of space and place, the following paragraphs will focus on the kind of Durban in which Coovadia's protagonists find themselves. As mentioned earlier, the contemporary Durban of *High Low In-between* is a one that is markedly different from that of *The Wedding*. Although the city is no longer racially segregated by law, social segregation remains between the black and Indian communities. This is evident in Nafisa's inability to engage with the city and her strained relationship with Estella. Durban is now more cosmopolitan as the globe has continued to 'shrink' due to technological advances, resulting in a rhizomian entanglement that has connections to countries both within and beyond Africa. Colonial Durban of *The Wedding* features almost no black figures whereas the city is now populated by figures from postcolonial African countries. Nafisa observes how this is true of not only Durban but of South African cities more generally:

Since the advent of the new government nobody had enforced the rules on immigration. Unending blocks of Johannesburg were dominated by the Nigerians who moved heroin and morphine from Lagos to Los Angeles. The Senegalese and Congolese were established in Cape Town. There were groups of Zimbabweans, Mozambicans, others from the Horn of Africa who had served in battalions in Eritrea.

(17)

The coming chapters on *Green-Eyed Thieves* and *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* will examine how Coovadia populates his literary cities of Johannesburg and Cape Town with precisely these kinds of characters. Focusing on Durban, however, the city is populated by Pakistanis, described as "tough new characters, recent arrivals from the subcontinent" (ibid.). When collecting the catering for Arif's retirement party, Nafisa and Jadwat go to the Pakistani-owned Karachi delights. Arif insists that this eater does the catering due to what he considers to be "their preservation of the old ways" (ibid.). It is worth noting, however, the preceding paragraph mentions that cricket is "a Pakistani religion" (ibid.). The combination of 'old' Pakistani cuisine and the colonial connotations of cricket position the new subcontinental arrivals as cultural entanglements that are not as 'pure' as what Arif may like to imagine. The Pakistani residents, however, have not limited their entrepreneurial prospects to food only. Examining the heels of her shoes, Nafisa considers having Estella take them to the "Greek

shop in Davenport Centre next time she was in town” (64). While the existence of a Greek shop is in itself evidence of international cultural threads in the fabric of Durban, the entanglement becomes even more complicated:

The shop was presently run by a Pakistani man. *The name people used had remained the same, as it was a buoy held in place in changing water.* The Greek had returned to Cyprus, Nicosia, after independence in 1994.

(64, own emphasis)

By people referring to the shop by its old name, the shop retains a superficial tie to its previous Greek owner while simultaneously becoming a Pakistani enterprise. In this way, Durban is depicted as a place of cultural flows and one that is constantly (re)written by those who live within it.

While Coovadia does not go to great lengths to populate the Durban of *High Low In-between* with people with origins outside South Africa, his Durban does fit into a broader global network that allows for the transport of people, items, information, and culture. The following paragraphs will examine how Coovadia’s contemporary coastal city functions as a hub for global industry and exchange. Nafisa’s brother, Nawaz, supports his family by buying and selling clothing from the boot of his car. He sources his wares from “factory stores on the South Coast, not far from Scottburgh, where there were barracks of young women armed with Singer sewing machines” (48). Coovadia, however, points out that:

Nawaz was a figure from the past, almost of the eighteenth century. His days as a clothing salesman were numbered. The garment business throughout Africa was going extinct because of Chinese competition. China was the future, the world’s workshop.

(49)

Harvey’s notion of time-space compression, outlined in Chapter One, has resulted in an increasingly interconnected globe, allowing for international trade at relatively low cost. Coovadia seems well-aware that globalisation is a modern phenomenon by suggesting that Nawaz’s tactic of sourcing local textile products is an out-dated way of doing business. Durban, in this example, has become a gateway to Asia, but its potential extends beyond cheap Asian products. As Shakeer ventures onto the Howard College Campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, he does not expect to see any familiar faces as:

His friends from those days were in Johannesburg, or in Melbourne, Swakopmund, Pondicherry.

The professors who had once taught him had also relocated. Bernard Shumaker had retired to Milton Keynes, outside London, [...] Turner, the Latinist, had gone further afield.

(165-166)

Here, people have become commodities that are able to cross the globe with relative ease. While this example is indicative of what has been termed South Africa's 'brain drain', Coovadia offers an example that shows talented individuals coming *into* the country: Shakeer observes foreign medical practitioners at his mother's home:

Whether it was by chance or design, several of the guests on this particular evening belonged to international organisations. Their groups were based either in Basel or Geneva, or across the Atlantic in Bethesda or Maryland.

(150)

The groups that he encounters in his mother's home have connections to both North America and Europe. While these individuals contribute cultural threads to Durban's rich tapestry, their actions are further indicative of a technological age that allows for the creation and maintenance of relationships around the world. Shakeer notices that they are "bent painfully over their telephones typing messages to contacts in other time zones" (151). If these communications were to be given a visual component, the result would look something like Massey's suggested view from an orbiting satellite mentioned in Chapter One (Figure 3 on Page 9).

Globalised Crime

Before concluding discussion of *High Low In-between*, I would like to make brief mention of the notion of globalised crime in an age characterised by time-space compression. Although the novel is not a true crime thriller in the sense of having a 'real' detective, both Nafisa and Shakeer fill this role to an extent by actively trying to uncover the truth behind Arif's death. It is due to this similarity that I will turn to the notion of the globalisation of crime in the 'krimi' novel. Nicol, Pulman and McNulty suggest that Criminality does not merely mirror or shadow modernity; arguably, modern culture shapes or even produces forms

of criminality” (Nicol et al:3). Similarly, Eva Erdman suggests that “[i]n literature, the spread of crime has taken on topographic proportions that reflect the globalization process of the late twentieth century” (Erdman 2009:13). When considered together, these statements suggest that globalisation has given rise to global crime which is in turn reflected in contemporary literature. I suggest that Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* is an example of such a text. Surgeons Govin Mackey and David Gerson are charged with more than a hundred counts of organ trafficking with *The Sunday Times* reporting that “[i]n a private hospital in Durban they had removed kidneys from Brazilian donors and placed them in Israeli recipients” (161). The effective modes of transport and ‘shrinking globe’ of the 21st Century have made this kind of crime not only possible but also lucrative.

Illicit organ trade in the novel is significant not only due to its globalised context but also due to the notion of entanglement. Nuttall points out that DNA research has revealed “‘ancestral maps’ charting the geographical location of ancestors closer to us in time” (2009:8). These findings, by revealing global genetic entanglements, have the potential to undercut the “rigid conceptions of racial identity in which both colonial rule and apartheid were based” (ibid.). The organ trafficking conducted by Mackey and Gerson results in hybrid identities that consist of unseen genetic ties to places beyond the borders of South Africa. Mackey, although not disclosing where he had located a kidney for Arif, tells Nafisa that he had called “Malawi, Botswana, Egypt, [and] the UK, desperate to find a kidney” (240), revealing that any country or continent could be a potential resource for this kind of cosmopolitan criminality. Near the novel’s denouement, superintendent Gumede – a man who Nafisa would consider to have a legitimate sense of belonging to the African continent – reveals to Shakeer that he is himself a recipient of one of Mackey’s and Gerson’s illicit kidneys. Given how far afield the surgeons are prepared to search for a matching organ, it stands to reason that Gumede may be genetically hybridised by virtue of carrying a kidney from outside Africa.

In conclusion, I argue that Coovadia’s novel, by virtue of its characters, its depiction of contemporary Durban, and the type of crime upon which the plot depends, reflects an era of globalization and time-space compression as theorised by Harvey. Despite the resulting complex entanglements, Coovadia eschews any notion of entropic homogeneity by maintaining a local specificity by crafting characters and a city that exist as rhizomian entanglements that exhibit identifiable yet inextricable cultural threads linking Durban and its inhabitants to the rest of the world.

3.3 Johannesburg & Beyond: *Green-Eyed Thieves*

Coovadia's second novel, the transcontinental crime story titled *Green-Eyed Thieves*, is told from the perspective of Firoze Peer. Firoze's twin, Ashraf, is a talented counterfeiter while Firoze has aspirations to become a philosopher. Born into a family where crime in any manifestation is a constant, it is not long before the young brothers become involved in shoplifting with their mother. Shoplifting, however, develops into a heist at Sol Kerzner's Sun City leisure complex, producing counterfeit licenses and identity documents; a trade that results brothers frequently changing their identities as they travel across the globe. The beginning of the novel sees the brothers and their extended family living in Fordsburg, a predominantly Indian district of Johannesburg. Their family, however, begins to disassemble once their father, Haji Dawood, learns that his wife is an accomplished shoplifter and she learns that he, along with his sons, planned and executed a robbery at Sun City. When the narrator's mother accepts a junior lectureship at Monash University in Australia, the family splits and Firoze accompanies his father and brother to Peshawar, Pakistan and eventually to Brooklyn in the United States.

Given the number of different locations and characters in *Green-eyed Thieves*, I have opted to keep the cursory introduction of the novel brief in favour of arranging the analysis of the novel into more extended but more manageable portions. Given the novel's focus on both the plasticity and hybridity of identity, the following analysis will focus in turn on various characters, namely Ashraf Peer, his father Haji, Felix Corvalho Villaverde, Fazila Khan, and – lastly – Firoze Peer. Coovadia endows each of his characters with different ideas about culture and cultural identities and they are all of interest due to the manner in which they are able to adapt to the spaces around them whether they are aware of it or not. The analysis of *Green-eyed Thieves* will then turn to the various settings of the novel: Johannesburg, Peshawar, and Brooklyn. Each of these literary spaces will be examined not only in terms of their similarities by virtue of being modern cosmopolitan cities but also in terms of their differences and cultural specificities. I will conclude discussion of the novel by focusing on global travel and the relative ease with which Coovadia's characters are able to engage in transnational relocation and global communication, trade and crime. This section will draw heavily on Harvey's notion on the 'shrinking globe' mentioned in Chapter One.

Cultural Plasticity and Rhizomian Hybridity

Zubeida Choonara has suggested that *Green-eyed Thieves* and *The Wedding* function primarily as “migrant novels” (Choonara 2010:19). While this most certainly is the case for *The Wedding*, I, like Claudia Perner, would suggest that *Green-eyed Thieves* cannot be similarly labelled. Perner suggests that “migrant fiction frequently portrays processes of settling in, of (sometimes failed) assimilation and of nostalgia for a geographical point of origin. It negotiates the loss or absence of home as a dilemma or at least a challenge to its migrant characters” (2011:123). She, however, posits a brief description of cosmopolitan fiction which is a more accurate descriptor for *Green-eyed Thieves*:

cosmopolitan fiction may be said to construct a perception of the individual as situated in and linked to the world at large. In a narrower sense, the term is often used to imply a state of geographical flexibility and (more often than not) a type of privilege that – at least temporally – transcends national borders.

(ibid.).

What sets *Green-eyed Thieves* apart from Coovadia’s debut offering is the absence of longing associated with migrant literature. The process of ‘fitting in’ in a new environment is also often accompanied by difficulties and even failure to adjust. While Ismet and Khateja do succeed in settling in Durban, it is not without struggle and longing for India – especially on the part of Khateja. The characters of *Green-eyed Thieves*, however, have no such difficulties and seem to fit in anywhere they choose. In addition, Ashraf’s trade in counterfeit identity documents facilitates their movements, making them even more geographically mobile.

The following analysis of Coovadia’s characters in terms of their geographical flexibility, cultural plasticity and hybridity will be informed by Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the rhizome as applied to culture. This application will demonstrate how each of the characters, whether conscious thereof or not, are complex cultural rhizomes that exist as – to use Bhabha’s term – *international entanglements of various cultures*.

Ashraf

Ashraf Peer is described by his green-eyed twin, Firoze, as having “originated from the black hole of greater Johannesburg” (Coovadia 2006:13). Firoze, here, is quick to point out that his brother *originated* from Johannesburg but soon begins to describe how his sibling,

even at a young age, was able to adjust his identity in such a way that it mimicked a culture that was unlike the one in which he was geographically situated:

Since we were teenagers he had sweet tooth for the B-movie side, the flaky grandeur, of this country's [the United States] culture. He was fixated from afar on a plebeian flavour of television star, starting with Telly Savalas in *Kojak*. In standard five, Ashraf walked like Kojak, pestered his Chappies bubblegum like Kojak, drawled like him, spat, cursed, and patted an imaginary holster. My brother does a splendid impersonation of Telly, raising eyebrows and buttonholing me with his fist. The apparition is strange to behold in Jo'burg but in dog-eat-dog Brooklyn, in Crooklyn, where intimidation is the local speciality, the dude fits right in.

(14)

The significance of this passage is twofold. Firstly, Coovadia soon points out that specific locales produce idiosyncratic behaviour patterns and cultural specificities. Secondly, he points out that Ashraf is culturally flexible and can adjust in order to fit in with other locations – even remotely. Ashraf is able to adjust his South African cultural identity in such a way that he becomes incongruous and out-of-place in Johannesburg, South Africa. Firoze then points out that his brother's facsimile of Kojak would 'fit right in' in Brooklyn. Another aspect worth noting is that Ashraf comes into contact with Telly Savalas via television, a technological innovation that has aided in the dissemination of information across distances in very little time. Via television, Ashraf gains a cultural thread that may otherwise have been inaccessible to him. Such an example is not uncommon and easily demonstrates how a 'shrunk globe' has enabled the high-speed transport of not only goods and information but also of cultures. Just a few pages later, Coovadia reveals that Ashraf's penchant for roleplay is not confined to Telly Savalas only and that, even before they arrived in Brooklyn, he "wanted to sound like a Chicago gangster, how he imagines stand-up guys like Dutch Schulz and Potatoes Kaufman conversed" (20). Coovadia makes it increasingly clear that Ashraf's "chameleon's tongue and kaleidoscope soul" (ibid.) provide him with a repertoire that consists of more than just American roles:

In Jo'burg he sounds like the born-and-bred Johannesburger that he is. In Pakistan, in the desert he swears and talks and mounts a camel like a proper nomad. In Brooklyn he's Brooklyn to the bone. Ashraf is something of a Zelig figure. Nowadays (a reader asks) who isn't a Zelig figure?

(ibid.)

Able to blend into almost any cultural landscape, whether Johannesburg, Pakistan or Brooklyn, Firoze refers to his brother as a Zelig figure – a term that is later used with reference to his father, Haji. Zelig is the eponymous character of Woody Allen’s film in which the writer and director plays a man who, driven by his desire to fit in, assimilates characteristics of people around him, constantly (re)adjusting his identity in relation to his social context. The prison memoirist, Firoze, continues by asking “nowadays [...] who isn’t a Zelig figure?” (ibid.). This seems a valid question since people do (re)define themselves based on context, whether social, cultural or political.

What adds to Ashraf’s noteworthiness is his ability to modify not only his own identity but also that of others. By honing his craft as a manufacturer of counterfeit licences, green cards, passports, and other legal documents, Ashraf is able to capitalise on the plasticity of identity. Furthermore, as Firoze notices, by selling licenses in a new country he “was doggishly making this part of Brooklyn his territory” (104). By plying his trade, he carves out a niche for himself, at once both working himself into the cosmopolitan citizenry of Brooklyn and becoming part Brooklynite. In this way, both Ashraf’s personal rhizome and the cultural rhizome of Brooklyn gain new threads, adding to the cultural entanglement that Sarah Nuttall associates with modern cities and mobile and cosmopolitan citizenry.

Haji Dawood

Haji, the father of the sticky-fingered siblings, orchestrator of the Sun City heist and founder of the Farewell Insurance Company, bears a chameleonic flexibility similar to that of Ashraf. He is, however, different in the sense that he seems more keenly aware of his ability to fit in anywhere and of the profits that are to be made in global crime. Firoze, near the beginning of the novel, describes an Interpol dossier that concerns “a certain Suleiman, or Solly, Zacharia” (52) who is a suspect in numerous offences. He continues by outlining Interpol’s attempted description of the man:

Zacharia is of uncertain provenance, given the number of his false identities and the geographical sweep of his crimes. The report speculates that he is of a Levantine upbringing from the counterfeiting centre of Lebanon’s Bekaa valley. Perhaps he was born on the wrong side of the bed of a mixed Arab parentage, with a Bedouin mother and a wealthy Saudi for a father. Zacharia was born in Buenos Aires, perhaps, and perhaps in Mexico City, perhaps in Birmingham. Zacharia’s last known address, a bedbuggy

flophouse in Karachi, was checked out by officers from the French embassy and is considered a dead end. Perhaps.

(ibid.)

The following paragraphs of the novel make it clear to the reader that the man being described is Haji Dawood yet the description above shows how adept he is at shifting identities. His ability to mislead the authorities with regard to his identity, parentage and country of origin leads Firoze to question if he is “a type of Zelig or human chameleon?” (54). The title of ‘human chameleon’ is significant here since it is the same term used to refer to Leonard Zelig in the Woody Allen’s 1983 film, *Zelig*. Uncertainties regarding his place of origin imply that he may be able to fit in perfectly in the Bekaa valley, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Birmingham or even Karachi. While it may be nearly impossible to extricate fact from fiction, it seems to be of little consequence since Haji might pass for a native of almost anywhere. Like his son, his cultural knowledge may come from forms of mass media that have taken advantage of faster communication technologies in the digital age. While the vehicle of cultural exchange in this case is not specified, Haji has become not a culturally ambiguous international rhizome but rather an *international* rhizome that consists of numerous culturally specific ‘roots’ that allow him to change ‘nationalities’.

This is an ability of which Haji seems well aware, judging by the advice he gives Firoze before the group decides to move to New York:

We can fit in anywhere, Firoze. So let’s try the big time for a change. Let’s try New York. I’ve been talking to Mohammed here about the matter. It’s astonishingly easy to change identities in the United States.

(101)

While the novel shows that this most certainly is the case, I would suggest that it would be possible anywhere; not just in the United States. As the novel progresses, Firoze’s observations reveal more about his father’s particularly visual brand of cultural camouflage:

Dad’s so finicky about his appearance, particularly after the divorce, that I see him rather as a peacock. Mirza Dawood, Suleiman Zacharia, Leo Connery Goldstone and innumerable trousers, jackets, coats, and ties are a form of spiritual plumage. I got so far as to say that my father possesses a completely superficial yet infinitely various soul.

(85)

Haji's 'spiritual plumage', as Firoze indicates, consists of trousers, jackets, coats, ties and even entire alter egos, replete with idiosyncratic speech patterns and dress codes. He takes particular pride in a wardrobe of designer suits that he managed to steal from the Aga Khan; a collection that he cherishes until forced to leave them behind during a hurried escape from Brigadier Zafirullah Khan's compound outside Peshawar, Pakistan. While Firoze, Ashraf, and Haji fit Sarah Nuttall's definition of the *sâpeur*, it is Haji who has a visual flare akin to the *sâpeurs* of the Congo documented by Daniele Tamagni.

Fazila Khan

While the trio of cosmopolitan criminals is aware of their ability to manipulate identities, certain characters are less aware of their multicultural status. One such character is Brigadier Khan's daughter, Fazila. Upon receiving Firoze and Haji at his home, Brigadier Khan proceeds to tell Firoze about his daughter:

Brigadier Khan lost his wife many years ago and has mutated into a supremely proud father. He cherishes Fazila's piano playing, he tells me in the jeep, her love of French films and Angeleno hip-hop, her way of dressing, without understanding any of it.

(89)

Fazila's interests in western classical music, French cinema and American hip-hop seem to be in stark contrast with the nationalist aspirations of her brigadier father. Her cultural interests span continents and cultures, making an intricate cosmopolitan rhizome that consists of numerous cultural threads of which she may not even be acutely aware. In addition, Fazila's cosmopolitan choice of entertainment extends to her choice of films as she cites the Russian-Italian *Nostalgia*, American *The Lady Eve*, and Bengali *Pather Pachali* as her favourites. While Fazila's high-brow and multilingual film taste may come across as heavy-handed on Coovadia's part, it does highlight the degree to which Fazila's cosmopolitan interests extend. Furthermore, Brigadier Khan has opted to send her to school in London; a move that provides his daughter with a geographical mobility that would expose her to various cultures and interests. Throughout the novel, Fazila literally flies in and out of the narrative as her social and political needs require.

Felix Corvalho Villaverde

Upon arriving in Brooklyn, Haji and his two sons take up residence in an apartment block that was “part of the great wishbone in downtown Brooklyn formed by Atlantic Avenue and Flatbush” (103). The “skinny-as-a-rake lounge” (104) Felix is the nephew of the building’s superintendent. After finding Firoze a job as cashier at the local 7-11, the two become close friends. Firoze in his characteristically perceptive fashion observes that:

Felix’s name was the most conventional thing about him except for his mind. Part Jewish and part Japanese with slightly tightened eyelids, as if the screws holding everything in place were given an extra turn [...].

(105)

Felix is immediately presented as a character with a hybrid heritage; being part Jewish and part Japanese. This simple dichotomy is, however, complicated by his Latin-American names and – to an even further degree – by his grandmother, Gitta, “whose place was curiously preserved from the Budapest of her childhood” (129). Despite his mixed – and seemingly untraceable – lineage, Felix, along with Ashraf and Firoze, considers himself a local of both the United States generally and New York specifically. Felix’s relationship with the United States is, however, not as simple as being considered local. While he labels the thieving twins and their father as “visitors to [his] country” (113) and Firoze refers to him as one of the “natives” (115), he decides to take up Spanish lessons as a “way of getting back to his heritage” (113). In addition to taking Spanish classes, Felix further traces his Hispanic ‘roots’ by joining the Latin Kings; an infamous street gang formed during the 1940s in Chicago. Firoze notices how his friend adjusts his national identity when associating himself with the gang: ““when you ask a Latin King, my friends’ he explained, his accent perceptively thickening, ‘you get the royal treatment’” (114). While Felix is able to associate himself with and distance himself from the United States as it suits him, he seems blissfully unaware of the capability. The various cultural threads that make up Felix’s complex cultural rhizome enable him to shift between identities in such a manner but they seem inextricable one from the other in that he will still consider, above all else, the United States to be ‘his’ country.

Felix’s desire to learn Spanish in order to regain a perceived loss of rootedness points to the suggestion that cultural specificities or traditions are not inherent and that they can be (un)learned. Processes of learning or unlearning languages and traditions have the capacity to modify Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomes at the level of personal identity. Teju Cole, in his debut

novel, *Open City* (2011), presents a scenario that bears similar implications. The novel, set in New York City, is of particular relevance here due to the geographical overlap with Coovadia's *Green-eyed Thieves*. Even more specifically, Cole's scene plays out in a Brooklyn café – also the district where Firoze, Ashraf and Felix live. Cole depicts a white man providing tutelage to Asian woman:

He seemed to be presenting his credentials, addressing not her alone, but anyone within earshot who might pause for a moment at the sight of a white man teaching Chinese to an Asian woman.

(Cole 2011:217)

The Asian woman has supposedly unlearned 'her' language while the white man has appropriated it. Both learning and unlearning of cultures here suggests that a cultural identity is plastic and by no means genetically inherent to a particular group. That the scenarios of both Cole and Coovadia find expression in literary representations of Brooklyn stands testament to the cosmopolitan nature of modern cities that exist as cultural entanglements in an era in which the world has become effectively 'smaller' due to the ease of global trade, travel, and communication.

Firoze

Firoze, in much the same way as his brother and father, is a chameleon or Zelig figure who is able to adjust to most cultural landscapes in which he finds himself. From a young age he is aware of cultural specificities and differences – even within the same geographic space and race group. While still living in Fordsburg he is able to identify in his Cypriot mathematics tutor, Elena, the “Capetonian habit of holding hands with everyone” (31). He is also acutely aware of his brother's ability to adapt to new cultural milieux. In addition, unlike Shakeer of *High Low In-between*, he seems aware of how cosmopolitanism and *internationality* have the potential to give rise to newness instead of resulting in cultural whitewashing. This being said, it can be argued that Firoze recognises the necessity for Massey's postmodern global sense of place. In addition to his awareness of cultural plasticity, he is conscious that there is no inherent sense of belonging based in geographic origin or genetic lineage. When Firoze accompanies his father to Pakistan in order to meet with Brigadier Khan, he ponders his own emotional response to returning to his 'motherland':

It's my first time on the subcontinent and I'm bewildered; is this our homeland? Did our black loins spring from this patch of ground?

(84)

Although never having been to the subcontinent before, Firoze comments on his lack of immediate sense of belonging. While he does suggest to his father that they “can have a life in this part of the world without sticking out” (100), he does not acknowledge a sense of inherent belonging. He understands that they will be able to learn the customs and culture of the place and fit in more comfortably than they would in South Africa.

Also while in Pakistan, Firoze contemplates his own “lunar religion” that involves the “nearby moon who loves all the world's people and their sacred places, is astonishingly low, broad and orange” (ibid.). His ‘religion’ seems an appropriate paradigm for use in what Harvey refers to as the postmodern era, associated with “time-space compression” (1989:240). The ‘shrinking’ world has allowed for greater ease of travel and communication, resulting in people being able to sustain connections across continents, resulting in a global network of cultures. Claudia Perner has suggested that such a ‘lunar religion’, allows him to “[connect] all the world's tribal peoples and their sacred places” (2011:133), forming what Manuel Castells has termed the “network society” (Castells 2010:1). In explaining Firoze's philosophy further, I will once again draw on Teju Cole's *Open City* as a frame of reference since both works are set in the contemporary and cosmopolitan urban milieux. Due to the settings, both novels have characters who have similar sentiments with regard to the movement and connectedness of people and cultures. Student and internet café clerk, Farouq, notices how individuals are able to sustain relationships over great distances and has formulated a strikingly similar philosophy based on the microcosm that the café provides him:

I strongly believe this, that people can live together, and I want to understand how that can happen. It happens here, on this small scale, in this shop, and I want to understand how it can happen on a bigger scale.

(Cole 2011:113)

Both Farouq and Firoze's beliefs rely on the axiom that cultural difference is beneficial as long as one acknowledges a connectedness that stems from a shared humanity. I will return to the example of Farouq and the internet café when discussing the cosmopolitan nature of New York City as it appears in both *Green-eyed Thieves* and *Open City*.

Having covered Firoze's awareness of cultural difference and hybridity in others, it is worth pointing out that he does not always identify it in himself. As I have already discussed, Firoze identifies in his brother aspirations of being American. Once the siblings arrive in Brooklyn, Firoze watches as his brother immerses himself in American culture to the extent where he begins to blame his best friend for "being a cotton-picking cultural seducer" (Coovadia 2006:127). Ironically, Firoze does not notice the Americanisms that have begun to pepper his own speech. Beginning with terms like "cotton-picking", he becomes progressively more Americanised himself until he reaches a point where he becomes seemingly aware of his growing attachment to the place. As the novel reaches its denouement, Firoze identifies himself as part of the American reading demographic, stating: "We in the United States tend toward the practical, the how to, and whodunit" (171). By including himself in the American reading demographic, he seems to be staking a claim to a position perhaps not *as* an American but rather as being *in* America. Soon after, however, he labels himself a "semi-hemi-demi-American¹¹ and slavish americophile" (199). In acknowledging his status as now one sixty-fourth American, and an americophile, he becomes more 'native' to the United States. The sixty three unidentified portions of Firoze, however, can be considered as cultural threads that lend complexity and specificity to his personal cultural rhizome, making him a character that Bhabha might consider *international*.

Cosmopolitan Criminality

Having discussed how various characters in Coovadia's cosmopolitan crime narrative manifest as hybrid and flexible entities able to exist in multicultural environments, the following section will examine how – as a consequence of modernisation and globalisation – the nature of crime has become globalised also. At the novel's outset, it is made abundantly clear that Firoze and Ashraf's family is involved in numerous forms of criminal activity, whether it be shoplifting on the part of their mother, their father's larger scale heists, or their uncle, Ten Percent Farouq's diamond smuggling. Firoze describes the nature of his uncle's diamond trade:

I knew that Farouq's diamonds were contraband. Truant diamonds from Sierra Leone, picked by light fingers at the Diagonal Street diamond exchange, and those from stolen

¹¹ This illustration is borrowed from the conventions of European classical music notation. This example of 'semi-hemi-demi' defies the conventional ordering of the prefixes so I have assumed that the intended form is 'hemi-demi-semi'. A hemidemisemiquaver is a note that occupies one sixty-fourth of a full bar of music.

rings and watches made their way to our factory on Sandra Boulevard. Amid the piles of rings and Rolex face plates was kept a Zeiss microscope.

(24)

Farouq's diamonds are described as either truant from Sierra Leone in West Africa, from the diamond exchange in Johannesburg or from the face plates of Rolex watches. The sources of the stones are far afield, spanning between Johannesburg, Sierra Leone and Europe. Furthermore, the Zeiss microscope used to inspect the diamonds is manufactured in Germany. Tracing each element of Farouq's diamond dealings back to its origin reveals that it is made possible only by complex networks of global trade. These networks are, in turn, able to function only through the infrastructure provided by technological innovations that have led to the relative 'shrinking' of the world and globalisation.

Globalisation as suggested by Harvey has changed not only how crime works but also what kinds of commodities it takes advantage of. While Farouq's diamonds are an ostensibly more 'traditional' commodity, Ashraf begins to dabble in more abstract commodities that owe their existence to globalisation and the mobility of people. While he also creates counterfeit licenses, his two most notable items are passports and American green cards. While there is an exchange of a physical item, Ashraf's real commodity functions on a more conceptual level. He is able to supply national identities – through his work he is able to facilitate the (il)legal 'transplant' of an individual from one geographical locale to another. By selling passports and green cards, Ashraf supplies a new national identity but is not able to erase the prior one, so creating hyphenated or hybrid identities. Since such examples are frequent in the text, I will limit my illustration to only one. By copying a "British passport for an Indian from Uganda" (44), Ashraf weaves a British thread into an already culturally complex personal rhizome.

Globalisation has given rise to not only conceptual criminality in the form of identities but to an industry of counterfeit goods produced at a fraction of the price of the original¹². One such item that Coovadia presents is the Redstone computer that Firoze's mother promises him. Firoze explains:

¹² Walter Benjamin's landmark essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" (1982), sheds light on the low price of such counterfeit products produced in a globalised age driven by mechanical production as he suggests that the possibility to reproduce things necessarily changes their value both their monetary value and our attitudes toward them.

Redstones belong to the realm of fabulous foreign commodities, like Maseratis and Dom Perignon. Assembled in Taiwan, counterfeits of the IBM originals, they are carted through Johannesburg customs by those many South Africans whose natural love for the phoney, in my experience, is equalled only by the men of the old Confederacy.

(66)

Posing as counterfeits of the IBM machines, Redstones are essentially a criminal commodity that is able to travel around the world via global networks that function in the same manner as those used by Farouq in his diamond trade.

More evidence of the globalisation of crime is supplied by the people Firoze meets during his time in prison in New York. Here Firoze meets Yaponchik – “a muscular Murmansk Russian by way of Brighton Beach, with damaged Asiatic features and a knifer’s reputation” (184). Firoze provides the reader with some background on Yaponchik and his origins, stating that he is:

a former associate of the once-upon-a-time mob boss Joseph Kobzon, singer of old Russian ballads by appointment to Brezhnev, and a big wheel in the organised-crime circles of the Soviet era.

(185)

He continues by suggesting that he mentions Yaponchik “because his presence suggests the theme of the globalisation of crime” (ibid.). While this is undoubtedly true, he seems to overlook the identical suggestion made by his own presence there. It is due to both the expanding criminal horizons and the transformation in criminal commodities afforded by globalisation that Yaponchik and Firoze find themselves in an American jail, far from the locations in which they began their respective criminal careers.

Multinational and Cosmopolitan Spaces: Johannesburg and Abroad

Johannesburg

Having analysed a number of Coovadia’s characters and the cosmopolitan criminality that some of them are involved in, I will now turn to depictions of the cities of Johannesburg and New York City as they appear in *Green-eyed Thieves*. As I have suggested earlier in this chapter, Coovadia’s central characters all have hybrid and flexible cultural identities of which they may or may not be aware. Harvey’s concept of global ‘shrinkage’ and Massey’s

suggested paradigm of a global sense of place will be of particular use in examining how these two metropolises exist as cosmopolitan spaces that are written into being by multinational demographics.

Seeing that the protagonist and his sibling find their genesis in Johannesburg, it seems like a fitting place to begin discussion. Growing up in the historically Indian part of Johannesburg – Fordsburg – Firoze manages nevertheless to see a large portion of the city under his uncle’s influence. Farouq manages to find a “Cypriot maths tutor” (29) for Firoze. While her name, Elena Lagadapopolos, is decidedly (and even stereotypically) Greek, Coovadia’s protagonist notices that she was “as vivacious as a Capetonian” and “had the Capetonian habit of holding hands with everyone” (31) as mentioned before. Even at a young age he is able to identify that particular locales influence their inhabitants, resulting in geographically specific cultural idiosyncrasies – be they linguistic or behavioural. By being in Johannesburg, Elena brings with her a constellation of influences that includes Greek and, perhaps purely coincidentally, Capetonian. In this way, her existence there adds elements of cultural *internationality* to the rhizome of Johannesburg.

As Firoze gets to see more of Johannesburg, the more he realises that it is a cosmopolitan metropolis made up of an “innumerable collection of singularities” (de Certeau 1993:131), each with their own culturally specific rhizome that informs their identity. He recounts an episode when Farouq took him and Ashraf into Hillbrow, to Balanski’s Picture Palace, to kill Sol Tarnofsky:

It was my first chance to look at Hillbrow through the window of Farouk’s Mercedes. Hillbrow, at Jo’burg’s heart, was a Petri dish of every kind of life and the first example of positive anarchy since the Paris Commune, with its children of a thousand streams of mingled blood, its churches and street philosophers, Anglican clergy and gang members in two-tone leather shoes, its *Drum* magazine poets, strive and weekend stabbings.

(Coovadia 2006:44)

Coovadia’s depiction here is worth noting for numerous reasons. By referring to it as a “Petri dish of every kind of life” and an example of “positive anarchy” (ibid.), he is able to highlight two aspects of the city. Firstly, consisting of ‘every kind of life’ makes it clear that Hillbrow is a location in which one will find a multitude of nationalities, races, and cultures. And secondly, existing as an example of positive anarchy, it suggests an uncontrollable vitality. Bearing in mind Said’s poetics of space, Hillbrow’s particular poetic suggests a sense of

optimism but also potential chaos¹³. A potential that is evidenced by “its children of a thousand streams of mingled blood” (ibid.). The idea of mingled blood takes hybridity to a level beyond that of culture, implying that Hillbrow is a hybrid and cosmopolitan space at the genetic level. Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* (2001) presents a similarly cosmopolitan Hillbrow filled with life from across the African continent:

[...] and *Makwerekwere* drifting into and out of Hillbrow and Berea having spilt into Berea from Hillbrow according to many xenophobic South Africans [...] and the streets overflowing with *Makwerekwere* come to pursue green pastures after hearing that new president Rolihlahla Mandela welcomes visitors [...] from Mozambique Zaïre Nigeria Congo Ivory Coast Zimbabwe Angola Zambia from all over Africa [...]

(Mpe 2001:26)

This is an alternative version of the scene that Firoze would have witnessed from the window of Farouq’s Mercedes; one that lacks the potential and optimism that Coovadia provides. Mpe, however, provides some specifics as to where Coovadia’s streams of blood may come from. These streams add further to the cosmopolitan nature of the modern metropolis but it is worth noting that, due to the origins of many of Mpe’s Hillbrowans, Johannesburg is a decidedly African city – one that retains a sense of African specificity of which Massey would no doubt approve.

New York

Roughly half-way through the novel, the brothers and their father arrive in New York with the intent to make it their new home. While the city, by virtue of being in the United States, is specifically American when compared to Johannesburg, it is similarly cosmopolitan in the sense that the city is populated primarily by foreigners. Firoze points out that their apartment building stood “between a panel beater and a Mexican hole in the wall run by a mob of Chinese” and formed part of the “great wishbone in downtown Brooklyn formed by Atlantic Avenue and Flatbush” (Coovadia 2006:103). The placement of their building next to a Mexican eatery owned by Chinese immigrants is reminiscent of the Pakistani man in *High Low In-Between* who takes ownership of a Greek shop. Cosmopolitanism as it manifests in

¹³ Other ‘Hillbrow novels’ that deal with the suburb in a similar way are Kgebetli Moele’s *Room 207* (2006), Lauren Beukes’ *Zoo City*, (2010) Ivan Vladislavic’s *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), and Perfect Hlongwane’s *Jozi: a novel* (2013). It is worth noting here that this selection of novels, including *Green-Eyed Thieves*, presents an interesting cross-section of urban subjectivities.

this example shows that no particular nationality has exclusive rights to its ‘native culture’. Once a culture is introduced into a space like the city, the culture becomes free to be appropriated by any group or individual who may find them beneficial – resulting in culturally entangled spaces and personal identities.

Felix, in taking care of the trio soon after their arrival in the city, makes the observation that “[we’re] all immigrants to New York at some stage” (106). As Firoze finds his feet in the city and accompanies his brother to a mosque, he notices how this is quite literally the case for a large portion of New York’s burgeoning demographic:

The worshippers, I guessed, were from the practical and technical economy: taxi drivers and dispatchers, electricians, engineers, garment cutters. They must have been Pakistanis, Palestinians, Somalis, Malays, Egyptians, Jordanians. They were fearful, quiet. They were one mishap away from deportation, as we would have been had Ashraf not created our counterfeit green cards.

(109)

The Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African immigrants have managed to establish a mosque in order to observe their religious edicts, effectively creating a miniature nation of Islam within New York. Teju Cole’s protagonist, Julius, while walking through Harlem, observes a similar constellation of characters:

I saw the brisk trade of sidewalk salesmen: the Senegalese cloth merchants, the young men selling bootleg DVDs, the Nation of Islam stalls.”

(Cole 2011:18)

New York, with its mosques, cloth merchants, Nation of Islam stalls, and diverse range of immigrants, is a place that is not only porous in the sense that it allows people both in and out, but is also a place that takes on a particular kind of cultural specificity due its inherent diversity.

It is, however, not only Islamic groups that seek new beginnings in the United States. Coovadia furnishes the Long Island Jewish Medical Centre in New Hyde Park with a multicultural body of staff: a Jamaican nurse and the presumably German Dr. Böhrendorf (Coovadia 2006:116). These two characters lend Caribbean and German threads to the already complex rhizome that is New York. The Caribbean demographic also finds expression in Cole’s *Open City* – curiously also the healthcare profession – in the form of

Professor Saito's nurse aid, Mary: "a tall, strongly built, middle aged woman from St. Lucia" (Cole 2011:12). Coovadia, in addition, gives New York's cosmopolitanism a culinary expression. One such example is one which I have already mentioned in the form of the Mexican eatery owned by Chinese immigrants. An example which has not yet been mentioned is the Damascus pastry shop to which Moulana Abbas takes both Firoze and Ashraf. This shop is similar to the Karachi delights of *High Low In-between* in that it is named after its country of origin. Such naming implies that a part of the country of origin has been relocated along with the cuisine, suggesting that there is a functioning piece of Damascus in New York. Examples such as this provide an almost visual representation of Massey's global sense of place in that a pedestrian might be able to 'see' Damascus, Mexico, or even Karachi while standing on a New York sidewalk.

Toward the end of the novel, as Firoze comes to feel more at home in New York with its mosques, diverse variety of immigrants, geographically named eateries, and the "Korean massage parlour out in Red Hook" (Coovadia 2006:120), he recognises the "perpetually mobile and radiating character of the metropolis" (204-205) which is at once cosmopolitan and culturally specific. After drugging Ashraf with Largactyl, exchanging clothes and escaping his incarceration posed as a South African delegate, he walks over Brooklyn Bridge while contemplating the nature of human connectedness in the globalised world:

I wondered about the endless generations of bridge crossers, jail breakers, bail jumpers, brothers in arms, who were to follow. These Ecuadorians, Hungarians, Pathans, Han Chinese, would they pursue the cycle of three generations from hard scrabble to professional to ethereal and back again? Will they love the music of the bullet? Would they have any cause to remember me by? It was improbable. America's kaleidoscopic thoughts, like mine, are perpetually on the future. Ah, this leopardine, leopardistical America which constantly changes its spots!

(206)

Coovadia's protagonist is here acutely aware of America's constantly changing demographic and cultural landscape. America's cosmopolitan cities like New York are spaces that are constantly in flux as people depart and arrive, carrying with them, their own set of cultural influences that will eventually influence the space around them. Both Johannesburg and New York, as depicted by Coovadia, are modern cosmopolitan cities influenced by globalisation; spaces that exist as complex Deleuzo-Guattarian rhizomes consisting of innumerable cultural roots. These rhizomes, however, avoid cultural whitewashing by maintaining cultural

specificities lent by the particular blend of cultures in that particular place. In this way, the cities maintain a global sense of place as espoused by Massey.

3.4 Cape Town: *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*

Coovadia's 2012 novel, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, is an imaginative tale that follows ex-taxi poet turned lecturer, Adam Ravens, as he tries to make sense of the death of his poetry mentor, Solly Greenfields. The narrative begins with one of seven 'problems' that are dispersed throughout the novel, the problem being that Solly's cat, Marmalade, has gone mad and that Solly has been shot dead in his Woodstock home. Divided into five chapters, the novel is set over the course of a week as Ravens tries to unravel Solly's murder while simultaneously trying to uncover the reason for his son's unusual behaviour, continuing with his position of lecturer at the Jose da Silva Perreira Institute for Taxi Poetry at the University of Cape Town, and playing host to the visiting *grand seigneur* of taxi poetry, Gerome Geromian.

The novel, unlike Coovadia's earlier fictions, is not punctuated by numerous (re)locations and itinerant characters, but rather toys with a more abstract 'what-if'¹⁴ scenario where transport poetry has become a respected medium of expression. Transport poetry manifests as poetry printed on the sides specifically of various modes of transport such as ships, aeroplanes, and trains. Taxi poetry thus exists as one subgenre of transport poetry and involves the printing of poetry on the sides of mini-bus taxis. This chapter will examine how Coovadia's novel expresses ideas of mobility, connectedness, and globality firstly, through the medium of taxi poetry as an expression of mobility, and hybridity; and the mini-busses on which it is inscribed, and secondly through the characters of Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian and in terms of their approaches to the medium of taxi poetry. Thirdly, while Coovadia's novel is set in an identifiable Cape Town, this chapter will examine what *kind* of Cape Town reveals itself between its pages. In doing so, I will draw, although only obliquely, given the limits of this thesis, on other texts set in Cape Town and surrounding areas, namely Richard Rive's *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986), Tyrone Appollis' anthology entitled *Train to Mitchells Plain* (2008), K. Sello Duiker's *Thirteen Cents* (2000), and Lauren Beukes' *Moxyland* (2008).

¹⁴ 'What-if' scenarios are usually associated with alternative histories or science fiction narratives sketching an imagined future. Coovadia's 'what-if', however, concerns an alternative present where poets are venerated and extensive transport has given rise to an idiosyncratic form of poetry.

Transport Poetry and the Taxi as Expressions of Mobility and Entanglement

In order to understand how Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian function as embodiments of conflicting ideologies within the industry of transport poetry, it is of paramount importance to understand how Coovadia himself conceptualises it – and the taxi industry in general – through the consciousness of the narrator, Adam Ravens. Ravens, by virtue of having once been both a sliding door man and taxi poet, has an intimate understanding of both how the taxi industry works and how the arising poetry functions as a medium. Ronit Frenkel suggests that:

Coovadia reveals how an ordinary feature of South African cultural life – in the form of the mini-bus taxi – can be read as both an object of connection and rupture embedded in multiple layers of South African culture.

(Frenkel 2014:1)

What is of interest for the purpose of this dissertation is the idea that the mini-bus taxi exists as an object of connection. The South African taxi industry is responsible for transporting a large portion of the country's citizenry to and from their places of work or even cross-country. In this way, a considerable number of South Africans have found themselves on the inside of such a vehicle. Coovadia sketches a scene of Cape Town's main taxi rank:

On Grand Parade it was business as usual. Business as usual, in this part of the world, was chaos. The same Hi-Aces were queuing at the exit. Others were parked, pounding their big muddy speakers through open doors, Brenda Fassie pop against the same old kwaito against hip-hop and gospel and Sufi devotional music and the presenter on Cape Talk who disappeared and reappeared from different sliding doors as I went along.

(Coovadia 2012a:116)

The taxi rank is filled with a myriad of sonic cultural signifiers. Brenda Fassie alongside Kwaito alongside American Hip-Hop alongside Sufi devotional music and a radio presenter creates a din that caters to all who may pass through the rank, suggesting that a “hundred thousand commuters” (205) from various cultures and levels of education utilise the space as a transport hub. Ronit Frenkel suggests that “the taxi industry is an industry that moves or connects people across the city” (Frenkel 2014:4). In this way the taxi rank, along with the inside of the taxi itself, is a physical and cultural contact zone within which connections are made and rhizomian threads entangled. Put another way, one might consider the taxis to be

needles that sew together a diverse selection of rhizomian threads at almost innumerable points of contact in the fabric of society.

Coovadia, however, is concerned with not only the commuters who pass through the taxi interiors, but also with those who work within them. Two figures to which he gives a considerable amount of attention are the driver and the sliding door man. These figures, however, are not treated with equal favour. While the driver is considered by Ravens to be “autistic” (Coovadia 2012a:38) due to his lack of social skills, the sliding door man has a “talent for networking and getting on with people” (ibid.). It is this ‘talent’ for connection and entanglement that sets the sliding door men apart from the rest of the workers within the taxi industry. Coovadia continues to explain that:

Everybody was his china, his mate, his main connection, his brother, his bra. He talked his way past roadblocks and the minibus was stopped and searched, and paid cold-drink money to the sergeants from a brown envelope which he clutched like a purse. Where relevant to his work, he maintained a good relationship with the local Congress Party structures. [...] In sum the sliding-door man was a central agent in the transportation sector. He was a chimera, part politician, part social worker, part investigator and banker, nurse, and first responder.

(38-39)

As in Coovadia’s earlier fictions, some characters of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* are chameleonic and can adapt to a variety of social *milieux*. The sliding door man is likened to the mythical chimera¹⁵ for his ability to be equally at home among seemingly disparate groups of people. The chimeric sliding door man, along with the rest of the city’s commuters, exists as a complex entanglement of rhizomian threads but what sets him apart is that he is able to identify individual threads and use them to his advantage so as to make further connections with those who enter the cultural contact zone of the taxi’s interior. In a sense, the taxi, while operating in the interstices within the city of Cape Town, might be considered to be a mobile form of Bhabha’s Third Space outlined in Chapter 1. The sliding door man is thus emblematic of a “willingness to descend into that alien territory” (Bhabha 1994:38) that is associated with the productive capacity of the Third Space. Geromian testifies to this during his lecture at the Jose da Silva Perreira Institute as he remembers that:

¹⁵ The chimera is a hybrid beast from Greek mythology that simultaneously has identifiable characteristics of a lion, a goat, and a snake.

In the space between the old colonial regimes and revolutionary movements like the Congress Party, between the state and the guerrillas, the taxi companies arose. With them came the possibility of taxi poetry [...].

(Coovadia 2012a:180)

Geromian here points out that the taxi industry is one characterised by interstitiality and that taxi poetry came along with the rise of the taxi companies. It stands to reason, then, that taxi poetry would be characterised by the same mobility, interstitiality, and hybridity associated with the taxis upon which it becomes inscribed.

Adam Ravens, at the end of the novel, asserts that taxi poetry is “but one configuration of the travelling mind” (217). The idea of the ‘travelling mind’ possessed by taxi poets appears a number of times throughout the novel and is repeatedly referred to as the “travelling soul” (100, 175). What is of significance here is that Coovadia identifies the ‘travelling soul’ that makes transport poetry possible. Furthermore, it is highlighted that this kind of soul is a benefit to the individual as Ravens points out that Gill Etteh, a fellow lecturer at the Institute, “taught taxi poetry without the benefit of a travelling soul” (83). Gill teaches students in a purely academic capacity at the Institute and, according to Ravens, they “bumped into us rather than a hundred thousand commuters and thereby their existence was impoverished” (205). By engaging with taxi poetry in a decontextualised environment the students have what he considers to be “limited experience of human difference and no practice at tolerating the variety of people’s souls” (ibid.). Coovadia alludes to what is to gain by way of immersing oneself in an environment and its various contact zones – such as the transport sector. While the inside of a taxi might not be directly comparable to the experience of de Certeau’s *wandersmänner*, it is a form of engaging with the city and its heterogeneous citizenry at ‘ground level’.

Ravens repeatedly posits that good taxi poetry is impossible to produce without the benefit of such a soul that perpetually creates connections between people and places. As a taxi poet:

you would want to talk to everybody who crossed your path, like the electrician soldering behind the building, or the mountain man who was washing his trousers in Molteno reservoir in a mattress of soapy bubbles, or the hairdresser in her thirties with the red nails who went to Clubland and weighed down her head with earrings, or the man with a

breathing tube on the taxi and, behind him, the truant in his private-school blazer bound for Newlands to see the test match.

(144)

What the reader sees here is a profession that actively encourages connection and entanglement with different people from different places and classes, one that creates poetry that:

[connects] to all the world, the pebble underfoot and the silver tree on Table Mountain and the old woman hunched over her grocery bag from Shoprite, by rays of sympathy and interest.

(100)

While taxi poetry ostensibly connects ‘to all the world’, not all poets in the pages of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* strive to connect equally far from home. This chapter will now turn to Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian, and how their approaches to taxi poetry differ, greatly impacting their success as poets both locally and globally.

Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian

Although both Solly and Gerome are taxi poets and have known each other for a considerable amount of time, Coovadia is quick to point out that “the spirits of these two taxi poets were fatally opposed. Solly Greenfields was the chunk of kryptonite to Gerome Geromian’s superman” (52). They are opposed in numerous ways when it comes to ideologies concerning the production of transport poetry and maintaining a sense of home and belonging in a globalised world that is becoming increasingly connected and entangled. Turning first to Solly and then to Geromian, the following paragraphs will examine the different approaches of these two bards to poetry in a globalising age associated either with the potential for newness, or anxieties regarding home and belonging.

Solly Greenfields lives in Woodstock and has worked as both a taxi poet and founder of the Road Safety Council, casting him at odds with many of the taxi companies in the area. Like many of Coovadia’s fictitious figures, Solly is able to transform various facets of his identity at will as he had once been “a taxi poet, and then a Buddhist, once a Muslim, once a Jew, once a lowly cook in a grease-sprayed apron in the room-service kitchen at the Mount Nelson, on other occasions a guest in the very same hotel” (12). In addition to his

involvement in the Road Safety Council, Solly is also a member of the Garment Union; a group that “fights against Chinese imports” (13) in an effort to stimulate the local textile industry. This may seem like a trifling detail at this point in the novel but, as the narrative unfolds, the reader becomes aware that Solly, despite ostensibly being in possession of a taxi poet’s ‘travelling soul’, is reluctant to transcend borders. I therefore suggest that he is emblematic of what Massey refers to as a “defensive and reactionary” (1994:147) response to globalisation and a ‘shrinking globe’ during what Harvey terms an era of “time-space compression” (Harvey 1989: 284). Solly, in life, death, and poetry has an umbilicus that is firmly connected to the Western Cape. Adam Ravens notices the disparity between the ostensibly ‘traveling soul’ of a taxi poet and Solly’s wishes for his burial:

Solly had very much wanted to be buried here – I mean if he had to be buried at all, and if not on the dingy margins of Parow, then in the general area, somewhere between the Hottentots-Holland mountains and the Sea Point Pick n Pay, the most hospitable place for the species, he believed, and not, coincidentally, the best place to be a transport poet who expressed the travelling character of humanity.

(Coovadia 201a2:24)

It was Solly’s wish to be buried in Woodstock, in the same area where he lived and was born. This seems an odd request for a person who is part of a profession characterised by travel and references to some kind of ‘elsewhere’. While his burial may indicate a return to ‘native soil’, it is in life where Greenfields’ closeness to the Cape is most sharply articulated. Ravens points out that Solly “wouldn’t tolerate a cliché on the side of a taxi” but “adored the clichés of daily life” (25). These clichés range from:

cheap snoek, wrapped in newspaper like an engine part, to the Cape Town mebos, dried and sugared fruit available from the corner cafés in Rylands, as well as the no-name-brand Chenin Blanc he found in the bargain bin at the Sea Point Pick n Pay, off-flow from the best vineyards.

(ibid.)

These clichés are uniquely Capetonian and serve to further position Solly as a ‘native’. Ravens observes that these things were “the common subjects of his transport poems, as much as the rust-ridden Toyotas and Tata trucks and buses” (ibid.). Coovadia interestingly refers to them as Solly’s “empire” (ibid.) because he named them in his poetry. By not only living the various clichés but also writing about them, Greenfields creates an intimately Capetonian

‘empire’ from which he – both physically and creatively – is reluctant to stray. This dynamic also demonstrates the intimate link between place, identity, and writing. Solly defines himself in relation to his clichéd Cape milieu and in turn defines the place in his poetry according to the clichés that he considers to be most ‘native’. It is these numerous clichés that invade Solly’s poetry that set him apart from the likes of Geromian. Ravens, near the denouement of the novel, becomes aware of his mentor’s numerous shortcomings as both person and poet. He describes Greenfields’ *oeuvre*:

In his taxi poems, each like a seashell, you heard the sounds of another world, an ideal in which taxi poets were honoured and where the lady at Woodstock Public Library, across from the Kentucky Chicken, was more familiar with Solly Greenfields the transport poet than the other Greenfields, who ran the discount clothing store in Salt River. There were mermaids in those seashells of Solly’s, flying on the foam, but you found salt water in your ears.

(194)

Adam comes to the realisation that Solly’s poetry, while ostensibly reflecting an ‘authentic’ Cape Town, reflects only one side of a Janiform city. In addition, Solly’s poetry is what Massey might term ‘reactionary’ in its sense of looking inwards and creating a world which has no external references and connections with places beyond its own borders – be they physical or psychological. The ‘mermaids’ in Solly’s poetry are the romanticised and nostalgic depictions of a Cape Town and associated citizenry that does not exist beyond his own affected imagination.

While Solly’s approach does give rise to stimulating and seductive verse, it results in textual representations of places and people that are one-dimensional. In this particular instance, his poetry is of the sort that ignores the connections being made by globalisation and the ‘travelling soul’ of a taxi poet, and creates a self-isolating locale that refuses to look beyond its own borders and to acknowledge the diversity of human existence. In addition to looking within his own borders, Solly appears to deny the rhizomian connections made between people and imagines that a connection is only possible if physically maintained. Greenfields tells Adam that “you must accept that the current united you with some people while dividing you from others just as a boat was carried along and passed different points along the bank” (14). Solly here does not seem to take into account the lasting connections between people and cultures as the globe becomes ever smaller and more entangled. Coovadia’s “particles in Brownian motion” (2009:192) mentioned in *High Low In-between*

may come to mind here. In much the same way as Shakeer, Solly is aware of the constant jostling and contact of people but seems to imagine that one is able to achieve a clean break from people and their influences.

Turning now to Gerome Geromian and his particular brand of taxi poetry, the following paragraphs will examine how both his personality and poetry craft connections and take advantage of the mobility of people and information in a globalising age. Gerome might be considered to be a rock star of taxi poetry and has achieved far greater success than Solly Greenfields. This is pointed out by Ravens as he reflects on Gerome's poetry shortly before his arrival in Cape Town from Brazil:

Gerome's taxi poems were licensed by the Brazilian companies, reprinted in established São Paulo and Paris journals, and soon enshrined in the standard Academy of Brazil Press editions [...] In São Paulo, Manaus, Berlin, they knew about Geromian. Whereas Solly Greenfields' compositions could be seen either on the side of Parker's taxis or perused in mimeograph copies, stapled at the top and bottom, and available in Observatory, Mitchell's Plain, and Paarl [...].

(46)

This particular example juxtaposes both Solly and Geromian in a way that it becomes clear where their respective taxi poems have been published. While Gerome's poems are known in São Paulo, Manaus, and Berlin, Solly's poetry has not garnered a readership anywhere beyond Cape Town and immediate surrounds. It is immediately evident that Gerome's poetry is associated with global reach and an international readership. Furthermore, Adam draws the conclusion that "language had something to do with their difference in popularity" (48). While this certainly is part of the reason, it is not the only one. He observes that "Solly used the usual mixture of dialects, from minibus Fanagalo to tsotsitaal, including his own kitchen Dutch and high Cape Afrikaans" (ibid.) whereas Gerome uses the supple and passionate Brazilian Portuguese. Geromian's choice of language affords him a greater readership since the Portuguese language is associated with a history of extensive colonisation whereas Solly's mixture of local pidgins and dialects does not reach beyond South Africa's borders. It is worth noting that Gerome's current position as jet-setting transport poet germinated in a far smaller context: "For nothing more than a boy from the Orange Free State, Gerome had a natural affinity with Brazilian-Portuguese culture" (ibid.). Gerome, like many of the characters in Coovadia's fictions, is able to adjust to and assimilate cultures that are entirely unlike the one in which he grew up. His poetry – with all its "pretension and continental

grandeur, its uninhibited invocations of melancholy, soulfulness, cheap spirituality, and sensuality” (ibid.) lent by the Brazilian-Portuguese language – is afforded greater global reach even though it is written in a tongue and about places that were once unfamiliar to him.

Gerome, as opposed to Solly, does possess the ‘travelling soul’ of a taxi poet. This is evident in the summary that Adam offers of his speech at the Institute:

In the newly independent states, about the same time Solly was travelling on the municipal bus to Mowbray to cash in his coupons, Geromian mixed with people of all climates and adherents of all the revolutionary ideologies. He hid in safe houses owned by Lebanese traders and Somali merchants, slept with black and brown and white men and women, boys and girls, combined the accents of Portuguese Angola and Mozambique, and Tswana, mountain Sotho, truck driver’s Dutch, and a thousand dialects never remembered to paper.

(180)

Again juxtaposed with Geromian, it becomes clear that Solly lacked the mobile sensibility that is necessary for the production of good taxi poetry. While Gerome was crafting connections with “people of all climates” and crossing both physical, sexual, and even moral boundaries (ibid.), Solly was in Mowbray, living well-within the confines of his introspective ‘empire’. This is not to say that Solly’s poetry is of any less value but it does not embody the ideals of taxi poetry as articulated by Ravens. As mentioned earlier, the taxi industry – and taxi poetry by association – is one of connection and this is reflected in Gerome’s work. Ravens suggests that it “spoke to you as a friend who wished only to share his love of the stars in the sky and the trucks on the road and the burning passions in the Brazilian soul” (164). His is a poetry of entanglement, one that speaks directly to people and ties an inextricable thread into their being. Solly’s taxi poems, however, are not like this:

Solly’s taxi poems were different. They never stood waiting for you and only you, hoping to steal something from your heart on behalf of their creator. Solly’s taxi poetry might sting you, or burn you around the heart, or switch from sweet to sour depending on where you placed them on your tongue, but never for a moment were they solicitous.

Geromian solicited the feelings of other persons.

(ibid.)

While Greenfields’ poetry does elicit an emotional response from the reader, Ravens suggests that it never gave the impression of being connected to other people or places. Gerome’s way

of engaging with a globalised world thus spills over into his poetry, creating a poetic of connection and one that looks beyond its own borders, seeking entanglements with places and people far removed from its context of origin. Whereas Solly Greenfields creates an ‘island’ on which he can isolate himself from the uncertainties regarding place and belonging, Gerome embraces these uncertainties and manages to harness the potential for newness and hybridity that globalisation that rhizomian entanglement provides.

In contextualising the response of Solly Greenfields to the ‘threat’ of entropic globalisation, I will draw on Richard Rive’s *Buckingham Palace, District Six* as it depicts the district as a self-isolating island to which the residents escape in an attempt to create a ‘home’ in the face of the threat of forced removal and subsequent displacement. While spending New Year’s Day on the beach at Kalk Bay, Pretty-Boy was involved in an altercation with a white beach constable after wandering onto a whites-only beach. Before returning home, Zoot expresses feelings of reactionary isolation within District Six:

“You know, it’s a funny thing, but it’s only in the District that I feel safe. District Six is like an Island, if you follow me, an island in a sea of apartheid. The whole of District Six is one big apartheid, so we can’t see it. We only see it when the white man forces it on us, when he makes us see it – when the police come, and the council people and so on – or when we leave the district, when we leave our island and go into Cape Town or to Sea Point or to come here to Kalk Bay. Then we again see apartheid. I know the District is dirty and poor and a slum, as the newspapers always remind us, but it’s our own and we have never put up notices which say ‘Slegs blankes’ or ‘Whites only’.

(Rive 1986:96)

While the apartheid government instituted acts to segregate groups of people, ideologies of seclusion and exclusion were also internalised by many. The District becomes an island to its inhabitants. The island is the result of reactionary forces that seek to establish boundaries in order to delineate realms of *inside* and *outside*. While Zoot points out that the community never put up their own signs, their actions belie their ‘open-door’ policy. In much the same way – but on a more global scale – Solly Greenfields’ membership with the Garment Union that seeks to stop the import of textiles from China functions as a gesture to create his own ‘island’. Solly’s island, however, is cut off from global forces, immigrants and importation. His lack of a ‘travelling soul’ prevents him from looking beyond the shores of his own island. In a manner similar to Solly, Mary of Rive’s narrative expresses a reactionary mindset that is

characterised by an unrelenting situatedness as she denies the possibility of forming a new community beyond the confines of her beloved District:

“One place might be like another, but one community is never like another. A community is not just a place where you live. It is not just another locality like Hanover Park or Bonteheuwel. It is much more than that. It is alive. A community is our home. It is the place any of us were born and spent out lives. It is a place where, before this wicked law was passed, most of us also hoped to die.”

(159)

Of particular relevance here is that Mary mentions that the District is a place where many of the inhabitants had hoped to die. This echoes Solly’s wishes to be buried in Woodstock, negating the premise that he, as a taxi poet, has a soul that is inclined to travel.

Before moving to depictions of the city and what *kind* of Cape Town reveals itself between the pages of Coovadia’s novel, brief mention will be made of the work of Capetonian poet and artist, Tyrone Appollis as manifestations of the relentless situatedness that Solly expresses through his life and poetry. Brian O’Connell suggests that, in Appollis’ anthology, *Train to Mitchells Plain* (2008) Appollis “speaks Cape Flats” (Appollis 2008:i) and conjures the pain “of living and commuting cheek by jowl [...]” (ibid.). Appollis is of interest because his collection approximates a form of transport poetry but has ‘weaknesses’ similar to that of Greenfields. While addressing transport and contact in his works, the transportation that Appollis considers is on a scale that does not consider anything beyond the Cape. A piece entitled “The Cape Flats Goema” shows a deep-rooted preoccupation with Cape Town and its associated cultural artefacts as it opens with the lines: “my own free will is too occupied/with the Cape Flats” (4). Nearer the end of the piece it becomes apparent that the speaker is part of a goema band and is eager to point out that his guitar is “noggal made in South Africa too” (5). This seems to share sentiments with Solly’s rejection of Chinese textiles in favour of locally manufactured ones. In addition, Appollis’ poetry is peppered with clichés that Solly supposedly would not have tolerated in his poetry but cherished in day-to-day life. From the “darling stoney ginger beer” (ibid.) and memories of youthful fishing at “Zandt Vlei” (44) near Muizenburg, to the skilful yet stereotypical painted depictions of the Cape landscape and its peoples, Appollis’ work can be read – in a manner similar to that of the fictional Solly Greenfields – as a resounding reactionary response to uncertainties of place. Such works serve to create a ‘home’ that becomes a conservative, expected, and enclosed space that lacks reference to places or people external to itself.

Appollis' painting, much like Solly's everyday living, revolves around places, people and



FIGURE 16: HOUT BAY II



FIGURE 17: UNTITLED

objects that are instantly recognisable as ‘Capetonian’ in that they have become metonymic of the Cape region. A Hout Bay landscape portrait replete with hillside homes and fishing boats (Figure 16), and a Cape-coloured man complete with bottle of brandy (Figure 17) and are things with which Solly would have been well-acquainted due to his penchant for ‘Cape’ nostalgia.

Adam Ravens, while being well-acquainted with Greenfields’ poetry, near the beginning of Coovadia’s novel, does not seem unaware of Solly’s lack of a traveling soul:

In Solly’s work, as in a shell you picked up on the beach through which to audit the cosmos, you heard the fisherman voices of the sliding-door men, choked on the brassy engine fumes of a Hi-Ace, and hid in the back of the train to Mitchell’s Plain as the brown sidings rattled back to town and the water towers and railway warehouses approached.

(94)

He considers Solly’s work to be a medium through which one is able to “audit the cosmos” even though it contains intensely localised figures and places, the likes of which can be seen in both Appollis’ poetry and painting.

In summation, Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian are seen to have contrasting approaches to the medium of taxi poetry and transport poetry more generally. While Solly’s poetry might be considered a form of Macro-photography (Figure 18 on Page 97) that focuses on minute detail at the expense of detail beyond its intended subject, stripping it of its broader context, Geromian’s poetry can be likened to Wide-Angle photography (Figure 19 on Page 97) that is able to capture a subject in slightly less detail while also capturing its context more

generally. In this way Geromian’s work is able to simultaneously focus on its subject while also looking beyond it.



FIGURE 18: MACROPHOTOGRAPHY FOCUSING ON DETAILED SUBJECT STRIPPED OF CONTEXT



FIGURE 19: WIDE-ANGLE PHOTOGRAPHY FOCUSING ON DETAILED SUBJECT IN CONTEXT

Coovadia’s Wide-Angle Cape Town

Having discussed the significance of the taxi and taxi poetry in the context of both Cape Town (through Solly Greenfields) and more globally (through Gerome Geromian), I will now turn to depictions of Cape Town as Coovadia presents them in *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* through the consciousness of narrator Adam Ravens. The following section will demonstrate how Coovadia employs his own kind of Wide-Angle technique to depict Cape Town as a type of what Ronit Frenkel terms “situated transnationalism where the local and the global exist as coeval discourses of signification” (Frenkel 2013:25). In crafting a Cape Town that is at once local and global in nature, Coovadia describes his characters both commuting and peregrinating through a recognisable Cape Town that retains its local specificity through its landmarks while revealing its rhizomian threads that contextualise the city within a globalising world. A Cape Town of this sort is granted Massey’s ‘global sense of place’. To facilitate this discussion, I will briefly contextualise Coovadia’s novel among other contemporary fictions set in Cape Town, namely K. Sello Duiker’s *Thirteen Cents* (2000) and Lauren Beukes’ *Moxyland* (2008).

Adam Ravens is in a unique position as narrator of this novel since he has been both a sliding door man and taxi poet. Both professions, as suggested earlier in this chapter, are characterised by mobility and hybridity. Ravens has first-hand contact with the culturally heterogeneous and productive ‘Third Space’ of a taxi’s interior while also having the ‘travelling soul’ of a taxi poet. As he travels around the city, he is acutely aware of cultural

difference but it is not a difference that separates via binaries of *us* and *them* but rather one that embraces heterogeneity and recognises Cape Town's situated transnationalism.

Ravens, in his capacity as lecturer at the Jose da Silva Perreira Institute for Taxi Poetry, takes a third-term seminar group to Grand West and onto a Golden Arrow bus from Claremont, encouraging them to "listen to the different people and their different hearts and tongues that could change as quickly as the symbols on a lottery machine on the thinly carpeted floor of a casino" (Coovadia 2012a:74-75). As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the transport sector functions as a cultural contact zone through which a large portion of Cape Town's citizenry must pass so it is here that Ravens is most likely to encounter a representative cross-section of the city's population. Coovadia's focus here is on language and the kaleidoscopic and plastic nature of identity, mentioning that the commuters have a variety of identities and languages that they are able to change at will. This seems to suggest that there is a feedback loop that occurs in which de Certeau's 'innumerable singularities' write a polyglot city into being which in turn influences newcomers to become polyglot themselves. It is, however, not clear here whether the commuters are South African or from further afield so the languages may be any of the 11 official languages of South Africa. If this is the case, the transport sector is still representative of a heterogeneous nation. Later in the novel, Ravens shares his observations as he walks through the airport in order to meet Geromian:

Inside the foyer were taxi touts, Somalis and Congolese and Zimbabweans, middle-aged men in tracksuits, who were unattached to the Taxi Owners Association because of their outside origins and had to work in secret. They whispered just as you came through the doors and followed you for a minute until they gave up.

(53)

The taxi touts here reveal that the transport industry, and Cape Town by association, is host to individuals from beyond South African borders whose 'outside' origins further complicate the cultural rhizome of Cape Town. Individuals such as these add threads that connect Cape Town to the rest of the African continent, creating what is at once a local and more global space. It is worth noting that the presence of African immigrants in Cape Town has not gone unnoticed by other contemporary authors. K. Sello Duiker, in his debut novel *Thirteen Cents*, identifies the *makwerekwere* as Vincent tells Azure to "try and be a little more like them" (Duiker 2000:36) in an attempt to be more 'black' so as to avoid Allen's violent hand. While

Duiker's Cape Town is not as obviously cosmopolitan, the *makwerekwere*¹⁶ contribute to a polyglot Cape Town that has become increasingly connected to the rest of the globe. Ravens notices that the *makwerekwere* do not just work in the city but also *own* parts of it as he feeds Solly's cat, Marmalade, "a red tin of Lucky Star sardines, or pilchards in tomato sauce picked up from the Somali shop" (Coovadia 2012a:109). Lauren Beukes, in her debut steampunk crime-fiction novel, *Moxyland* (2008) also acknowledges the presence and retail capacity of African immigrants in Cape Town. As Toby, one of her joint narrators, takes a "shortcut through Little Angola" he is "hit a double blow by the smell of assorted loxion delicacies and the chatter of warez in the overbridge tunnel makt¹⁷" (Beukes 2008:10).

In addition, it is worth noting how the immigrants are able to maintain relationships with people from their places of origin. Harvey's shrinking globe owes its 'shrinking' to advancements in transport and communication technologies. Coovadia's Cape Town is electronically connected to the rest of the globe and its inhabitants readily take advantage of this as

[...] nameless foreign men sat at the computers and telephones and tried to make difficult connections to Congo and Central African Republic and Chad [...]. They used those telephone cards where you scratched off the back to reveal the coupon number. After an hour of calling their nails were thick with gold paint.

(Coovadia 2012a:159)

The Institute for Taxi Poetry seems a slight deviation from Coovadia's earlier fictions – with the exception of *High Low In-between*) in that it is set exclusively in South Africa and is not punctuated by global relocations of its chief protagonists. Having outlined the ways in which his Cape Town is a hybrid and polyglot space that has connections to the rest of the African continent, it is important to point out that Coovadia's novel gains its local specificity from its numerous references to recognisable landmarks throughout the city such as "Woodstock", the "Molteno reservoir and the primary-coloured changing huts on Muizenburg beach" (98). In addition to these elements, Frenkel points out that he utilises an "ordinary feature of South African cultural life – in the form of a mini-bus taxi" to locate his fiction firmly within a South African context. By maintaining focus on both the local and the global,

¹⁶ This term is used to denote foreigners by Duiker in the same context as Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hilbrow* (mentioned on Page 87 in relation to Coovadia's *Green-Eyed Thieves*).

¹⁷ Worth noting here is how Beukes chooses to let Toby express himself. Terms like "warez" and "makt" are part of an internet dialect known as Leetspeak; a hybrid form of writing that incorporates both ASCII code and Latin characters. Leetspeak is most common on the internet and is used globally.

Coovadia's fiction takes on a wide-angle approach in that it is able to incorporate details of Cape Town while maintaining focus on the city in the context of not only the African context but also the globalised world more generally.

CHAPTER 4: Conclusion

The preceding chapter, through close reading of four of Coovadia's five existing fictions, has explored the literary cities of Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and, to a lesser extent, New York as they exist in his novels. In addition to a close spatial reading of these novels, the theoretical models expounded in Chapter One include a focus on identity and by this I mean the identities of characters who exist within Coovadia's (re)imagined cities. Sarah Nuttall has suggested that contemporary South African life offers new and varied cultural configurations that cannot be analysed through an old "lens of 'difference' embedded squarely in the apartheid past" (2009:19) because it overlooks their complexity. It is precisely a monofocal lens of this nature that the theoretical models outlined in Chapter One aims to dismantle. While Coovadia's fictions do acknowledge difference, it is not a divisive force that has roots in South Africa's apartheid past but instead has a potential for connection; one that recognises the value in cosmopolitanism and *internationality*.

The cosmopolitanism exhibited in Coovadia's fictions manifests in two ways; namely in the city-spaces about which he writes and in the protagonists who exist within them. The literary cities in the pages of his novels are sites of situated transnationalism as they play host to inhabitants from all over the world. The ease and speed of transportation of information, goods, and people has resulted in what Harvey terms the era of 'time-space compression'; a period that has also given rise to various anxieties regarding home and belonging. British geographer Doreen Massey has suggested that, in order to avoid reactionary nationalist responses to these anxieties, it is necessary to adopt what she refers to as a 'global sense of place'. I would argue that through the texts under discussion, Coovadia adopts precisely such an approach, resulting in cities that are at once decidedly cosmopolitan while maintaining their sense of local specificity. The Durban, Johannesburg, Cape Town, and New York of his fictions exist as complex entanglements of innumerable individuals who in turn consist of

rhizomian threads that link them to both people and places across the world. When asked about how important a role he considers space and place to play in his writing, he suggests:

I suppose quite a lot. I think you have some technical choices if you want to leave out very dense involvements with space and location. I think it pushes you in the direction of allegory or other kinds of abstraction which for some reason I don't like. I like some writers who write in that way but I never find my way into that kind of writing myself.

(Coovadia 2014b)

It is this dense involvement with space and location in his works that this project has sought to examine. I would argue that the *kinds* of locations that appear in his novels, however, come about not due to a purely technical choice but owe their creation to the link between writers and place. Mike Robinson, in *Literature and Tourism*, describes the complex relationship that exists between literature and place:

Works of literature are recognized as expressive of economic, cultural and political change, replete with intimate and revealing perspectives on the relationships between people and place at various space scales.

(Robinson and Anderson 2002:3)

While Robinson's assertion is applicable in a number of ways, I suggest that Coovadia's cosmopolitan literary cities manifest as an expression of the cultural change. The cultural change that is of most importance here is that of globalisation and the connections it fosters between both places and people. In this way, his novels provide a record of social exchanges that take place not only in South African cities but international cities more generally.

In addition to his cities being sites of what Ronit Frenkel has referred to as situated transnationalism (Frenkel 2013:25), I argue that Coovadia's cities are sites with a potential for growth, newness and creativity. As suggested in the previous chapter, Khateja finds emancipation in the urban milieu. She escapes her domestic confines and takes advantage of the physical and intellectual freedom that Durban has to offer. As a similar example, the brothers Peer are able to be whoever they like within the numerous cities they inhabit throughout *Green-Eyed Thieves*. Modern cosmopolitanism offers them the potential for chameleonic change. *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, however, approaches the ideas of newness and creativity somewhat differently in that the city offers not only new identities but also new professions. Much like Toloki of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying* (1995), Coovadia's taxi poets recognise the inherent creativity of the urban space and decide to take advantage of it. The

medium of taxi poetry itself reflects the potential of the modern cosmopolitan city. Coovadia's own observations regarding space and place in fiction suggest that a spatial reading of his works may be fruitful. He comments that:

It is interesting to me how dematerialised space is in a lot of novels, South African novels particularly. [...] Cities are often imagined as just this place and that place and maybe one other place. You know, often there are three places that you imagine in a city. I guess it seems to me that South African novels were too abstract in that way and there was interesting stuff to be done with them.

(Coovadia 2014b)

Coovadia has indeed done 'interesting stuff' with the cities in his novels by reflecting the present *internationality*, entanglement of people and cultures, and creative potential of the contemporary urban milieu.

In addition to literary spaces, similarities can be drawn between the novels with regard to the protagonists and the identities. From his debut novel, *The Wedding* (2001) to *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (2012), Coovadia's chief protagonists – and many of his peripheral characters – are able to change their identities with ease: Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding* are able to adjust to living in a 19th century Durban that is initially alien to them, the brothers Peer are able to shed old identities and don new ones in order to conduct crime on a global scale, and Solly Greenfields is able to change religion, social class, and political loyalties a number of times throughout his life. In addition to being able to change identities at will, Coovadia's characters are also able to *blend* them to create new ways of being in a world with constantly fluctuating spaces that require new ways of existing within them. The most striking example of 'newness' within the globalised urban milieu about which Coovadia writes is the figure of the taxi poet. Of particular relevance are Adam Ravens and Gerome Geromian as they owe their existence as poets to the mobility of cultures, ideas and people. Ravens frequently mentions that taxi poets have a 'travelling soul' that allows them to connect with anybody they come into contact with. The flexibility they are afforded by their 'travelling souls' also allows them to create a new profession that hinges on multicultural contact that gives rise to newness and creativity. Similarly, although not to a degree as striking as this, I would argue that all of Coovadia's protagonists exhibit a kind of newness of character in the sense that they exist as a unique entanglement of rhizomian threads that creates what Bhabha terms an *international hybrid*; a hybrid that, rather than existing as a homogeneous acultural mix, finds expression as a rhizome of unique and identifiable yet

inextricable threads that connect to an person or place across the street, the country and even the globe.

In addition to being in possession of hybrid identities, many of Coovadia's characters are physically mobile; a facet that has become characteristic of globalisation. His characters are able to (re)locate themselves in a seemingly boundless number of locales without much difficulty in calling it 'home'. From Ismet and Khateja of *The Wedding*, the brothers Peer of *Green-Eyed Thieves*, and Shakeer of the *High Low In-between* to Geromian of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, his characters are able to call anywhere 'home'. It is worth pointing out that this process is less easy for some than others but they do all adjust successfully and adopt new ways of living in a 'shrinking' and ever more intricately entangled world. Coovadia, in conversation, has suggested that:

I think characters in movement are more interesting than characters who are still. Some characters are still. They are defined by being still, like Miss Havisham is very still but I think more interesting characters are just always moving mentally or physically and I think the physical movement makes them more interesting to read about.

(Coovadia 2014b)

Being characterised by movement certainly has made his characters interesting to read about but I would suggest that the significance of their mobility extends beyond just spinning a good yarn. It may be true that some individuals – both fictional and real – are defined by being still. In an era of time-space compression due to technological advancement, people are seldom characterised by being stationary. As the world's population begins to be characterised by movement, so too must fictional populations be.

Throughout this dissertation I have argued that Coovadia's fictions, when read through the theoretical lens proposed in Chapter One, can be seen as artefacts of connectedness; texts that reflect the complex entanglements that we create between places and people in an age of globalisation and time-space compression; an era during which it is easier to communicate and travel across great distances than ever before. It is because of the numerous connections and hybridities between the pages of Coovadia's fictions that I argue that Meg Samuelson's labelling of *Green-Eyed Thieves* (2006) as a post-transitional¹⁸ text to be particularly

¹⁸ As mentioned on Chapter One, some defining aspects of 'post-transitional' literature, Meg Samuelson suggests, are the "drawing of spatial connections, or connections with other worlds" (2010:114).

appropriate. I would, however, extend this periodising label to all of his existing novels as they extend their frames of reference beyond South Africa. By scripting connections beyond local boundaries, Coovadia is able to write beyond what Es'kia Mphahlele has referred to as the “tyranny of place; the kind of unrelenting hold a place has on a person that gives him the motivation to write and a style” (Web 2). As mentioned before, Coovadia has responded to the labelling of his novels as post-transitional texts by suggesting that:

it sounds right. I guess all periodising labels are kind of slightly inaccurate or at least they represent the attempt to kind of create a framework to understand something. Before I started writing it was already clear that South Africa would be changing and stuff so there was no need to write the kinds of books that were being written before.

(Coovadia 2014b)

I argue that the framework offered by a post-transitional reading – if one can refer to it as such – is fruitful in examining the place of South Africa, its cities and its citizens within an international network society.

I have thus far focused on four of Coovadia's five existing fictions. His fifth and most recent offering, *Tales of the Metric System* (2014), was launched a few weeks before the submission of this dissertation, thus too late for any in depth consideration. I will, however, offer a brief summary of the new work while maintaining focus on the thematic concerns of this project.

Coovadia's newest fiction consists of ten chapters or 'parts' that focus on intervals spanning four decades – from 1970 to 2010. The parts focus on three characters that exist in a similar geographical space – Durban – at different times. Coovadia attributes the inspiration for adopting the structure ten sections to both the theme of decimalisation and the *The Decalogue* (1989), a film by polish director Krzysztof Kieślowski consisting of ten one-hour films (ibid.). The multiple narratives of wife and Mother Anne, hostel resident Victor, and rock guitarist Yash exhibit a kind of temporal entanglement in which all the protagonists are connected to each other without being aware of it. While some characters do embark on international travel in the novel, it has a decidedly more local and political focus than his earlier fictions. Bongani Kona, in his recent review of *Tales of the Metric System*, suggests that it:

marches across geographies and crisscrosses gender, race and class divides. The book encompasses a wide cross section of South African society — from leftist intellectuals in

the 1970s to an Aids patient on his deathbed in the early 2000s. And the personalities that have shaped the country's history in ways both major and minor drift in and out of the narrative.

(2014:12)

The novel, while being more local in focus, examines the complex demographic of South Africa and how individuals impact on each other's lives in a country defined by difference.

While Coovadia's fictions do fit the theoretical models elaborated on in Chapter One, and allow for debate regarding space, place and identity in his works, this study is by no means exhaustive. Other research directions could be followed, such as the debate on issues regarding AIDS denialism, the artifice of fiction and writing, and the crime fiction genre. In conclusion, I suggest that Coovadia, by virtue of the cosmopolitan literary cities and hybrid, globe-trotting characters of his fictions, can be seen as part of a new generation of South African Indian writers specifically and a wider South African grouping more generally. This new generation of writers, while drawing from local influences, is not limited to any particular place, becoming transnational and *international* in their scope.

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