Mapping Texts Differently: A Case for Re-Reading the South African Imaginary

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This essay argues that an overly narrow conception of what constitutes a national or regional literature can skew the way in which literary history is "read" and a national and regional identity is understood. In the African and the South African case, the ongoing production and consumption of performed art in the form of song constitutes a major part of the way in which people imagine themselves in the world, both locally and globally. Such songs often stem from older oral forms and are frequently available through the electronic media. In other cases, classic art forms such as praise poetry are still present as ways of mediating identity and making history. The essay takes particular examples of genres that either cross between print and performance, or, when seen together as a co-presence, provide a much firmer understanding of how the "self-writing" of South Africa is taking place. The essay takes the example of praise poetry, and discusses how the tragic phenomenon of the pandemic of AIDS surfaces first in the contemporary performance tradition of *isicathamiya*, or "nightsong," and secondly in the novel *Welcome to our Hillbrow* by Phaswane Mpe. I argue that if the South African imaginary is to be deeply understood, such cross-readings need to take place. Only when literary scholars find a means of accessing such readings, can we begin to speak of meaningful transcultural literary histories.

If a region's culture is both dynamic and heterogeneous, if its artistic tradition is comprised of a lettered tradition existing alongside diverse and complex forms of orality, how can its critics best serve it? I have in mind a myriad of performance "traditions," which have intersected in diverse ways with a literary hinterland more accessible to those working with a normative notion of literature as written text. While this essay will focus largely on South Africa, I will also take examples from a broader African base in order to argue that an understanding of an "intertwined"

presence of print and performance brings with it a possible reconfiguration of the literary and a reinterpretation of "text" in the African context.

My discussion is set within a wider debate stemming from an anxiety with overly narrow definitions of national and regional literatures and literary histories. The aim of this essay is to engage in some speculative re-mapping of cultural forms in South Africa and to suggest ways of re-examining both the linkages and the disjunctions between the literary on the one hand, and expressive forms usually regarded as outside the domain of literature on the other. The discomfort with normative literary histories which become too easily identified with a rigid national topography has been expressed by a number of the contributors to the recent volume, *Rethinking Literary History*, edited by Linda Hutcheon and Mario Valdés. Yet how to move beyond the safe confines of a canon, albeit one that has undergone quite radical tinkering, is still a site of debate, even contestation. Stephen Greenblatt's eloquent essay in the above volume argues for literary histories that embrace "multiple boundaries and the revolutionary potential of marginalized groups - the impurities of languages and ethnicities ... the daring intersection of multiple identities." He reminds us that "radical transformation, drastic renegotiation and sudden ruptures are at least as essential to literary history as continuity and progress" (61). Yet there are still silences and aporias in Greenblatt's model of a transformed literary history. The "speakers of rhetoric," the "singers of tales," the dancers, who perform and make history, are absent. In other words, the genres of performed rather than literary art, which may hold much of a culture's capital, still seem not to feature in his new script. Nor is it clear where he would situate in his model what Karin Barber (referring to African cultural production) calls "a whole domain of African cultural forms which cross the boundaries between 'written' and 'oral', between 'foreign' and 'indigenous'" ("African-language" 3).

It is the formal enactment of language, its performance in widely differing genres, which often expresses the consciousness of many communities and societies in Africa. And it is this epistemic strand that a transcultural literary history needs to find a way to engage with. The "performance" and the kinds of discourse I have in mind are not the empty "dramaturgy" of the postcolony rightly mocked by Achille Mbembe, but rather forms that allow the modern subject a mode of expression that links him or her both to the present and the past. It is this crucial modern subjectivity, not always captured by the written mode alone, to which postcolonial literary studies has not yet been able to fully relate in critical terms. Since the publication of the influential text on postcolonial literature, *The Empire Writes Back* (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin), written literatures in the non-metropolitan

languages, let alone performance genres, have not been included, except perhaps as shadows, in the sometimes brilliant and innovative critical and literary-historical interventions of the new wave of postcolonial critics and theorists. Even Elleke Boehmer's path-breaking study, *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature, Migrant Metaphors*, has little to say on the subject of expressive modes that fall outside the written script. It has largely been scholars writing from within knowledge of the performed and literary corpus of a particular language group who have demonstrated the porousness and interconnectedness of the written and the oral. In the African context, Graham Furniss' *Poetry, Prose and Popular Culture in Hausa* is particularly noteworthy. Indeed it is work by Furniss and by Karin Barber (1991) that has been most insistent in questioning the notion of the recuperative colonial subject (captured in the title of *The Empire Writes Back*) and the "silent" figure of the subaltern. The play of the imagination of a particular region or the way cultures - in all their social differentiation - see themselves in history can often take on a very different configuration if a range of literary modes, and the (sometimes) multiple languages of a region, are brought into view. Thus, as Furniss remarks, in his discussion of five early Hausa novellas from what is now northern Nigeria, the imagination of writers of Hausa in the 1930s was largely

> [n]ot facing West; if they face anywhere they face East, to India, Ceylon, Egypt and the Red Sea, and the lands where famous warriors travel on elephants into battle. It is there that the popular imagination goes, transported by these stories, not as allegories of 'nation,' but as extensions of and challenges to the notion of community. ("Hausa Creative Writing" 102)

Is it possible to create a new topography or a taxonomy of genres that enables an inclusive understanding of a region's literary history and provides us with the tools to move across domains of language as well as different kinds of textualities - the scripted and the performed? In the African, and more specifically for this paper, the South African context, it is crucial to address the question of how one can devise a map of literary history that does more than gesture towards such inclusivity. A challenge for the literary scholar is to fashion a critical language which enables moves across the written and performed text, and which points to both commonalities and contrasts, and in some instances to a rich intertextuality. Reading across texts of the written and the performed at a particular historical moment can sometimes reveal striking similarities of focus: the trope of death, the phenomenon of rapid regional and global change, a concern with power and

its misuse are just three such topics which might reveal more complex configurations of an era if this "cross-reading" applies.

Alongside such "reading across" there is the need to recognise that certain genres act as enabling devices for the expression and circulation of anxieties, aspirations, states of being by those who exist outside the elite, or those served by the literary text. Thus, while in earlier eras (and even now, though to a lesser extent) the dense and elaborate poetic rhetoric of praise poetry mediated images of power and defined "the powerful," other more hidden genres enabled a broader range of voices to air themselves. Indeed, the popular forms of the modern colonial and postcolonial era that often sprang from the older poetry and song of the powerless frequently mediated and shaped modern consciousness. As Johannes Fabian noted in 1978:

> In our inquiries into African culture, we must stress that the emerging forms of expression, reflecting the life-experience and consciousness of the masses, deserve our fullest attention as evidence for cultural independence and creativity...we must proceed to a fuller appreciation of the new mass cultures. (316)

The contemporary South African genre first given a global face by Paul Simon and Ladysmith Black Mambazo in the recording *Graceland* in 1986, and known variously as "nightsong" [*ingoma yobusuku*], *isicathamiya* [soft cat-walk] or *imbube*, is one that has huge appeal to those outside the middle classes, (and to international audiences as well) (Erlmann; Gunner, "Dying Generations"). As Lara Allen has recently argued, music in Africa is a hugely influential political force difficult to control and slippery to analyse (15). And in some cases, as the Kenyan popular song "Unbwogable" showed in 2002, a popular form coming from the margins has the capacity to assume center stage, play a key part in the fortunes of a modern political party and capture the aspirations of almost an entire electorate (Nyairo and Ogude).

Beyond the Exotic: Orality and the Modern

Africa has often been cast in the western mind as a "heart of darkness," and beyond that, a place of the exotic, where dance, drums and rhythmic bodies signal a time before a rational modern era. With this stereotype in mind, I wish to revisit a different past and sketch briefly the role of forms of rhetoric in premodern African states. David Damrosch has reminded us that to limit one's investigations of what constitutes "world literature" to the last 500 years runs the risk of "*presentism*," namely an erasing of the past

as a serious factor and "one of the least appealing features of modern American and global capital" (17). New mappings of intellectual and demographic histories of the African continent are showing that we can make no grand claims for the intersections of script and orality outside a detailed and nuanced knowledge of the region's history. Current work linked to archaeological excavations in modern Mali in the Niger Bend suggests evidence of an "urbanism as dense and expansive as those of Mesopotamia or the Nile Valley - and apparently owing nothing to those urban cradles for the birth of a citied landscape" (Macintosh 2). In the comparatively recent Islamic period, the city of Timbuktu in Mali, on the Middle Niger, is linked with the name of the city's most famous scholar, Ahmed Baba (1556-1627). Africa's deep past and its more recent past is imaged in script through the writings of the scholars of Timbuktu and Walata (Cleveland), in stone engravings (Farias), or in the sung and verbal art of the epic of *Sunjata*, first king of the ancient kingdom of Mali (Austen; Suso and Kanute); the complexities of this past will unfold more clearly as comparative work across the disciplines and regions continues.

Besides the evidence from Timbuktu and Walata of a long tradition of statecraft using script on either paper or parchment, there are recorded instances of the use of verbal art to regulate the business of the state, make its history and enact its identity. To take one example, to the east of Timbuktu, the kingdom of Rwanda had in the 18th and 19th centuries, and possibly earlier, an elaborate system of poetry as part of its state practice. Alexis Kagame has meticulously documented this "specialized and learned artistic tradition" (Finnegan 87; Kagame; Coupez and Kamanzi). He has outlined the privileged position of the association of royal poets who were split between those who performed the works of others and those who composed new work. A "long and rigorous period of apprenticeship" (Finnegan 89) by young members of the families of poets ensured mastery of existing poems and of the "vocabulary, imagery and subject-matter which formed the traditional basis of any future composition" (Finnegan 89). This genre of court poetry, plus the secret ritual texts, the *ibwwiru*, and other genres from Rwanda, are among the best documented on the continent and provide an indication of how orality could operate at the heart of the state. As the increasingly beleaguered kings of the nineteenth-century kingdom of Rwanda fended off their hostile neighbours, and then had to contend with the incoming colonial powers of Germany and Belgium, the royal poetic tradition was also affected, first taking the patina of the colonial overlords' voice and then reflecting the counterviews of a dissident group of poets who sought out "anti-dynastic histories in their own past" (Hertefelt; Feierman

60). If this body of poetry has disappeared from the cultural currency of modern Rwanda as the institutions that supported it vanished, other more popular genres have replaced it and addressed different constituencies.

Genres which carry the weight of the modern and which have been forged in this way include the Somali short poems known as *heello* (Johnson), and the Sotho *lifela*, chanted poems wrought by Basotho miners, performed both at home in Lesotho and in the compounds of the gold mines of the Rand in South Africa (Coplan). There are some oral genres that exist vigorously in the contemporary era, either operating within a new global culture or as parts of a local cosmopolitanism. Thomas Turino, in a recent study of Zimbabwean music, analyses an additional zone of "*indigenous*" (his italics) culture that derives its meaning from "people and lifeways that are part of cultural trajectories with roots predating the colonial period or that, in terms of ethos and practice, provide local alternatives to cosmopolitanism" (Turino 18). These categories of indigenous and cosmopolitan are not mutually exclusive; instead they can be seen as shifting, porous, capable of changing in importance and influence depending on the cultural economy of the time and the politics of culture at a given moment. Moreover, particular performance genres can move between categories. In Zimbabwe, the music of the *mbira*, the thumb piano, is that most closely associated in Shona culture with the calling up of the ancestral spirits. While it still has that function, it has also moved into a wider arena of popular song and has become a vehicle for deep and wide ranging social and political commentary (Berliner).

Popular song, often drawing its energies from older genres and from transatlantic and diasporic sources, marketed commercially on disc or audiocassette and played over the air waves, is constantly referred to as a source of artistic and political energy which often comments critically on power in the postcolony, and on the tensions of modern African life. Forms of orality have in some cases powered the new technologies of mass communication by influencing their direction; the extensive presence of live performances and recordings of tied and freelance singers and poets on Hausa television and radio stations in northern Nigeria is one example of this (Furniss, *Poetry* 126-27). Literacy, too, has impacted in myriad ways on oral modes of communication and has often produced brilliant hybrid forms such as the hymns composed in the early decades of the twentieth century by the South African prophet, Isaiah Shembe (Brown; Gerard; Gunner, *Man of Heaven*). But in addition, the book itself, in terms of written literature from the continent, has been profoundly influenced by orality. It could be argued that the directions taken by contemporary written African

literature have largely been shaped by the presence of a substantial and established body of rhetoric holding deep knowledge with which writers have often felt compelled to engage, even when moving from the African language/s in which the poetry or narrative is expressed to writing in English, French, or Portuguese. Given all this, I maintain that in the African context, the inability to include established and emergent performance genres in an evolving model of literary history could be seen as an act of wilful blindness or negligence. How to do so is where the challenge lies; one way is to search for "windows" of text where a co-presence of script and orality is consciously foregrounded. Another is to note how the angst, or structure of feeling, of a particular historical moment is mediated in song and script, in say, the novel, and in a range of performed genres. Then there is the need to demonstrate how acknowledging this co-presence enlarges one's understanding of the whole imaginary of a nation, or even a region. This marking of co-presences provides a means of accepting both rupture and inclusivity, and it addresses Greenblatt's call for literary histories that embrace "multiple boundaries and the revolutionary potential of marginalized groups" (61). In the first example below I discuss how the praise poet, or *imbongi*, created history through his (or less often her) craft and then how the figure of the *imbongi* is given a key voice in the work of two early and influential black writers of the twentieth century in South Africa.

History and its Signifiers: *Imbongi and izibongo*

The long praise poems/*izibongo* of the Zulu kings of the nineteenth century constantly created and recreated history and were recognised as doing so by the communities in which they flourished. Although in the case of *izibongo*, in the hands of a professional or semiprofessional poet/*imbongi*, it may seem as if it is the view from above that dominates, the long poems, with their use of parallelisms and richly metaphoric language, contain many moments which capture and often obliquely comment on a ruler or leader's interaction with his subjects. For instance, King Cetshwayo, chastised by one of his praise poets for spurning advice, is named (and "praised") as "*Usalakutshelwa, usalakunyenyezelwa* - He who refuses to be told, he who refuses to be warned" (Cope 225-6).

When his praises are performed, the inclusion of this praise name serves as a reminder of the voice of the ruled, and the independence, to some degree, of the poet. The *imbongi*/praise poet, still active as a figure of authority in defining both present and past, can be seen as a repository of history and also as part of it, a signifier of the process of history making.

He re-performs history with each performance, allowing the past to constantly re-form the present. He is thus far more than a residual figure, and more than a representative of the dead voice of tradition. He can be seen as one among many sites of the making of history, one of its "lineages," as Foucault would put it. If, as Terdimann has claimed, "the semantics of a social history is carried by a culture's language" (45), one could also say it is carried by a culture's expressive art, its performance.

The importance of the *imbongi*/praise poet not only as a historical figure, but also as a maker of history, was recognised by two of the key black writers of the early years of the twentieth century, H.I.E. Dhlomo and Sol Plaatje. Herbert Dhlomo wrote as a critic and cultural commentator on *izibongo*/praise poetry and other forms of what, in the title of an article, he called "Zulu Folk Poetry" (1947-8). In addition, in his two unpublished plays on the Zulu kings, "Dingane" and "Cetshwayo," he frequently inserts the voice of "the bard" (the *imbongi*) and his presence. In the play "Cetshwayo" Dhlomo's "bard" speaks in stilted epic-pastoral verse as Dhlomo strives, in a typically difficult moment of transculturation, to recreate the *imbongi* style across cultures and languages, and instill it with an added democratic edge. He cries out after the 1879 Battle of Isandlwana when the Zulu army unexpectedly defeated the British:

> Your mighty song of battle you have sung;
> Your song of freedom still you have to sing
> And sing it well. (*Collected* 158)

The dramatic role given to the *imbongi*/praise poet, his importance as commentator on a historical moment of great significance for the nation, and his *public* status as recorder, are all quite marked. Also noteworthy is the role of prophetic commentator: Dhlomo, with his writerly gaze fixed mainly on his own primary audience of the aspirant black bourgeoisie in the racially oppressive era of the 1940s, allows the bard to gesture to the future, and an era of freedom to come.[1] Dhlomo has the figure of the "bard"/*imbongi* appear again in Scene 6 where Cetshwayo is in council, and the play ends with the defeated Cetshwayo prophetically evoking a moment of future victory at odds with his actual predicament of death and defeat:

> Black Kings shall watch over vast domains
> Black Bulls! Black Bulls!

1. As part of its recuperative project to write the experience of the South African Indian community into South Africans' present sense of history, Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* includes a section on Indian resistance in the mid-1940s where "a poet and playwright by the name of Dhlomo took the speaker's stand" (93).

No power their rush can stem!
No power can conquer them! (*Collected* 176)

In its triumphalist note, its use of a key praise name (Black Bulls) used for men in general as well as royalty, in the extravagant boldness of its language, the scene represents one aspect of the art of the *imbongi*/praise poet: even in defeat, he must point out strength and success elsewhere.

Dhlomo's play "Dingane" was performed by the drama students of the Durban Medical School of the University of Natal in 1954. The play is densely packed with different forms of poetic rhetoric, as if needing to demonstrate that such forms drive home social and historical meanings and are not mere embellishments. Dingane, spurred on by his aunt, Mnkabayi, was one of the assassins of his half-brother Shaka. Another royal aunt, Mawa, a renowned herbalist/doctor, is praised; cattle are praised; the feared kingmaker, Mnkabayi, is praised as " *Nkosazana! Mbali ephuphuzela amakha egazi* (glossed as "Royal Princess! Flower that froths over with the scent of blood"). Also active as a character is the famed *imbongi*/praise poet, Magolwana, who is critical of Dingane's excesses. And at the end of the play, as Dingane is dying, abandoned by his troops and defeated in Swaziland, Dhlomo has two bards, one loyal to Dingane and the other to the murdered Shaka, face it out and fight. It is impossible to read this play without being aware of poetry/song as the part of the process of history, its active maker.

Dhlomo's bards/*izimbongi* in both "Cetshwayo" and "Dingane, in their sheer capacity to generate social meaning, can thus be seen as standing in stark opposition to what Laura Chrisman, writing of Rider Haggard's *Nada the Lily*, calls the "monotonous essentialising simulation of Zulu orality" (172). She sets in contrast to this the approach of Plaatje in *Mhudi*, writing of "the protean modalities of a narrator who marries the collective authority of oral history and the individual authority of modern fiction" (172). In *Mhudi*, the figure of the *imbongi*/praise poet is always linked to the Matabele ruler, Mzilikazi, whom Plaatje uses as a means of exploring various kinds of nationalist models for the free South Africa he believed would one day come into being. Although in the text the *imbongi*/praise poet always appears when Mzilikazi is affirmed rather than questioned or criticised, and fades away in his moment of defeat - when his stature is most noble - it is clear that Plaatje understood their larger role. The early pages of the novel capture a side of the praise poets not mentioned later - their irreverent, marginal, carnivalesque quality: "The court jesters sang and leaped, bedecked in all manner of fantastic headdresses, till the cats' tails around their loins literally

whirled in the air" (50). Later in the same passage, capturing their role as chroniclers and praise-namers, and eliding the difference between "jester" and "imbongi," Plaatje writes:

> The crowd stood breathless and at high tension, while court jesters and imbongis were lauding the greatness of Mzilikazi and reciting the prowess and deeds of valour associated with his ancestry. (50)

I would argue that what Plaatje does at this moment is invest the *imbongi*/praise poet with a carnivalesque instability, a certain dialogism. The praise poet as a maker of rhetoric, questioner, and oral historian becomes an overall part of the novel' s engagement with the modern dilemma of how to meld an African state built on a past of race exploitation and of black as well as white imperialist dreams. The praise poet/*imbongi* is thus a figure in history and in black modernity. This, it seems to me, is what both Dhlomo and Plaatje say to the reader/viewer in their representation of the figure. Just as, in the texts by each writer, prophecy and the prophetic voice are claimed as part of an African modernity (in the case of Dhlomo I am thinking particularly of "Cetshwayo"), so too is the praise poet/*imbongi*.

Ongoing Conversations: Song and Fiction; Death and Disease

> "A funeral is not a wedding, my friends!"
> The "Kentucky" song, Skhumbuzo Mhlongo.

Skhumbuzo Mhlongo, leader and main composer of the Durban group, "Zulu Messangers" - the new spelling captures its enunciation by performers and followers alike and is used on the group's T-shirts and CD labels and so on - composed his song urging people to respect the fact of death and to stop turning funerals into parties in 2002. Although the downtown halls of Durban where *isicathamiya* was regularly sung over weekends echoed with songs on AIDS at the time, there was something so startling and direct about "Kentucky" (as it became known) that the song soon attained the status of a sign. It became *the* song that spoke to the state of death - from AIDS - which gripped the country with increasing swiftness from about 2001. It may have been the indirection yet clarity of the song - as well as its mimetic appeal and its appropriation of the "Kentucky Fried Chicken" image with its multiple associations of new plenty, globalization, the new postapartheid era - that helped give it this status. The song became a travelling text, sung as the front item in Zulu Messangers' repertoire, discussed, half-remembered, quoted, played on the Zulu-language radio, uKhozi FM, in the slots

saved for the genre, eagerly anticipated, and marked by devotees as a bold new style in the genre. Most of all, it enabled people who followed *isicathamiya* to confront the space of death, the fact of a mortality that was the result of a pandemic and not the usual passing away from old age, or even simply poverty and a harsh life. The song's concentrated narrative opens with the figure of the impoverished orphan who has to arrange his parents' funeral and then bear the harsh comments of the mourners who complain that there is "no Kentucky," "no jelly and custard" and "no beer." It ends with the voice and figure of the singer, who has enacted orphan, chicken with its wings flapping, and community moralist, exhorting the community to re- turn to its core values of respect in the face of death, and compassion for the poor in a time of intense social strain. The song has captured the ex- treme contradictions of wealth and poverty, opportunity and disaster, of the new era, widely termed *uhlel' olusha* (literally "the new arrangement") in Zulu, and it has enabled audiences to confront them, as if seeing their true selves in a mirror. Even in 2005, with no real let up in the grip of the disease, the effect of "Kentucky" on its audiences seems as fresh and powerful as when it was first performed. It may even have gathered a momentum of impact as its shape and sound became a part of people's social consciousness.

"Kentucky" circulated as a complex verbal and visual text on the topic of death and AIDS, largely amongst those employed in the most vulnerable sections of the economy, or not employed at all and earning some small money from their singing. You could say that it reverberated most amongst those living in the hostels for migrant workers, the women who were sellers of sweets and fruit at makeshift stalls, or domestic workers; but it also moved out to an ever larger audience of school leavers, those in work or dreaming of work, hawkers, factory workers and some blue collar workers. It did not, however, reach the black middle classes or those of any race who devoted much time to the reading of fiction.

It was a novel by Phaswane Mpe, *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001), which grappled with the devastation caused by AIDS among the aspirant young black elite. Set largely in the decaying inner Johannesburg suburb of Hillbrow, but moving back to a distant rural area called Tiragolong, in the north, and outward to Europe, the novel tracks the lives and deaths of five young protagonists and focuses most chillingly on the young woman Refilwe, who realises that she has AIDS while she is with her Nigerian student lover in Oxford and returns home to die. Mpe's novel is so far the only postapartheid text to set this tragic feature of South Africa's present in the new millennium at the center of its narrative

project.[2] Mpe, who died in 2005 at the young age of 34, was as a writer, critic and university teacher, intensely aware of the ways in which the country's memory and cumulative experience in history was carried through its oral traditions. It was surely for that reason that he chose to foreground the narrative, *speaking* voice in the novel, as if wanting the story to be in some way understood as spoken, and as part of a wider network of circulating community narratives. On one level, this is, of course, a narrative device. On another level, though, it links the text, as a story of AIDS and death, to those other circulating song texts such as "Kentucky" and the hundreds of others that singers of *isicathamiya* have pressed on their audiences in the new millennium (Gunner, "Dying Generations"). If we were to consider South Africa's literary texts (in the sense of printed and published) alone, we would confront a surprising silence in the literary imagination on the AIDS pandemic that has dominated the post-1994 decade. It is only when one reads across texts and textualities and includes both older performance genres and popular song and genres like *isicathamiya* that a different configuration shows itself. When this happens, Mpe's novel with its narrator who speaks to the dead Refilwe as if intent on voicing this narrative of the city and the distant but linked rural space, seems a companion document to a song like "Kentucky." You can hear several levels of speaking voices in the following decription of Refilwe's return from London to Johannesburg:

> Refilwe....You felt sorry for those who loved you so much and expressed it so openly. You knew it was not intentional that they should depress you. They spoke no words to express their muddy whirlpools of feeling. But as you walked into the parking lot, where your younger brother had parked your car, which he had been taking care of in your absence, you heard a voice whispering:
> But she is so thin! Look at how the clothes are simply hanging on her bony shoulders. And look at those sticks of legs! (120)

Mpe's novel is a co-presence of imaginings, and part of the layers of cultural and political discourse on AIDS, death and disease in the public sphere. Moreover, I argue, the use of direct address, so marked a device in *Welcome to our Hillbrow*, is a conscious linkage to the oral style of narrator to a group or an individual, the address of singer to community in a song such as Mhlongo's where the solo voice urges and cajoles:

2. The only other postapartheid novel that features AIDS, but without affording it the centrality it has in Mpe's text, is Rayda Jacobs' *Confessions of a Gambler*, published in 2003.

Umngcwabo, bantu bakithi
Awufani nomshado.
Asiyeke ukuya emngcwabeni
Ngoba sihambela amaKentucky
Kodwa asiye ngoba siyoduduza abafelwe

A funeral, people of ours
Is not like a wedding.
We must stop going to funerals
Because we're after pieces of Kentucky,
But let's go to comfort the bereaved.
(Mhlongo 2005)

The song, and Mpe's novelistic "voice", circulated connectedly in the public sphere and became a part of what Habermas terms "a culturally transmitted and linguistically organized set of interpretive patterns" (qtd. in Outhwaite 86). As texts coming both from the margins and from the literary center, they played a role in challenging the official silence around the causes of AIDS and the possibilities of its cure that marked the official government position, led by President Thabo Mbeki himself, until his reluctant shift in 2002 (Gumede). Together, along with the growing body of song on the topic, they challenge any easy separation of script and performance, or delineation of literary margins and centers. To think of a body of song and fiction as forming part of a single response to a region's moment of crisis is one way of embracing "multiple boundaries" and achieving the goal of a deeper understanding of kinds of creativity which remain separated yet single in their focus.

In each of the two brief studies I have presented here, the performed and the printed text in some way interlink, and a reading across in each case, I argue, provides a deeper understanding of the imaginative process and, in the broadest sense, the making of the literary. The journey of the discourse on AIDS jumps from city to country, and from one genre to another in a response to the borderless transmission of the disease itself. So too, the literary imagination moves across boundaries. The makers of lyrics on AIDS, the fiction on disease and the local and global migrant, the voice of the praise poet/*imbongi* on war, memory and the future - all these are important figures in what Valdés terms "the symbolic process of self-invention" for a community or region (70). What they represent is a kind of widened idea of literary art. It is one that could be replicated in other cultural/regional

maps which need to be re-drawn if we are to work as global, transcultural scholars both with micro- and macro-literary configurations.

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