Remains of the Social

Pohlandt-McCormick, Helena, Erasmus, Aidan, Lawless, Annemarie, Barnard-Naude, Jaco, Ruti, Mari, Hook, Derek, Minkley, Gary, Premesh Lalu, Premesh, Truscott, Ross, van Bever Donker, Maurits, Minkley, Gary, Lalu, Premesh, Truscott, Ross, van Bever Donker, Maurits

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Either ethics makes no sense at all, or this is what it means and has nothing else to say: not to be unworthy of what happens to us (Deleuze 149).

Community works. This is not to suggest that community should be taken as a given or, indeed, as that at which we must arrive, as that whose construction presents a redemptive hope for our present. Rather, it is at play, always, whether as a differential that produces racial formations (such as the invocation of ‘the community’ at the centre of apartheid legislation) or as a constitutive limit enabling the thinking of what might come after apartheid. In other words, it is already operative, in each instance perhaps, as a function of enclosure for identity or as an unstable edge that flirts with an expression of the new. This is to suggest that limits, markers of the edge of community, in turn function not only as boundaries or curtailments, but also as openings, unfolding on their motile edges towards the new: the opening of a terrain not enclosed within the particularity of the membrane that the limit implies and, I suggest, on which a postapartheid subjectivity might arrive. This subjectivity, this possible subjectivity, is the living, mutating ground from which a ‘community of the touch’, to use a turn of phrase from Jean-Luc Nancy’s ‘The Inoperative Community’, might emerge: this touch does not penetrate; it knows nothing of being enclosed in a common skin but rather plays on the surface, abiding in a proximity that touches, always. It
is this question of the subject, a sense of subjectivity at its own edge as the constitutive limit for community, which this chapter explores.

It is, however, not simply an abstract question. The question of community and the social is threaded with the persistence of what can be understood as apartheid’s remainders as these cut into the potentialities of life in our present. Indeed, it seems that an urgent demand of the present moment in South Africa is for life to be practised, or at least for such a practice to be learned, in the wake of apartheid. These remainders, the persistence of the limit qua limit and its enclosure of subjectivities within reified expressions of race, ask of us that we think the social in a more conceptual and yet rigorously lived sense. More particularly, I contend that it is through an attempt at thinking the social in this way that it becomes possible to make sense of the demand that life in the postapartheid remains to be learned.

In this chapter I examine this problem in three stages. In the first, I construct a sense of community as a concept that hinges on what Maurice Blanchot names, reading Georges Bataille, as ‘the principle of insufficiency’ (5). Through reading Blanchot’s *The Unavowable Community*, I suggest that the productive edge of community is operative precisely at that point where the subject is not enclosed within subjective certainty. Locating this edge as a gift, in the second stage of this chapter I bring this into relation with Claude Levi-Strauss’s reading of community as it functions in the Oedipus myth. In particular, it is in the character of Antigone that I begin to texture the principle of insufficiency in relation to the weight of everyday life: the constitutive struggle between autochthony and copulation. It is through positing a principle of insufficiency as an organising concept for the self and the social that I suggest a productive and ethical edge is opened for thinking. In the final stage I press this edge further through reading Phaswane Mpe’s intervention on the formation of this concept in his novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*. As such, my reading presses Mpe’s intervention beyond that of a work of mourning, or elegy, or indeed of a reinscription of humanism from an African perspective, as important as all of these are. Rather, I suggest that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* elicits a particular reading from its reader, a reading that sets to
work on the very terrain that structures the terms for a work of mourning or an expression of humanism.

While Blanchot is brilliant in his reading of the lines of community and its relation to the self, and Levi-Strauss’s reading of the role of emergence in the Oedipus myth is instrumental for a refiguring of the problem of indigeneity as this comes to bear on the social, it is, I argue, in Mpe’s intervention that a sense of the ethical adequate to the concept of community and to ‘lived experience’ is formulated. This is not to suggest a simple progression between these texts, or that Mpe’s novel should be reduced to the interpretative framework of the former. Rather, in bringing these into relation with each other I construct a particular weave that enables a sense of the ethical, in line with the epigraph to this chapter, as being ‘adequate to that which happens to us’, an ethical and philosophical point of view that Mpe’s intervention produces in relation to the problem of lived experience in postapartheid South Africa. In short, his novel ‘re-works’, in a Benjaminian sense, the social and ethics so as to offer itself as a practice for the learning of life, of learning to learn, on the terrain of the motile edge of community.

On the edge of community

In *The Unavowable Community*, Blanchot produces a sense of the concept of community that can be read as resistant to the disciplinary strictures of the state or religion – in other words, as resistant to its figuring in the light of a redemptive notion. As Blanchot phrases it, community is always painted, in the narratives of history, on the background of disaster and is, as such, always turned towards the possibility of a new humanity. Stated differently, political community is always offered as a means through which to overcome, or at least to come to terms with, a particular trauma; a coming to terms that requires, ultimately, a new sense of the human to be effective. This formulation clearly resonates across many attempts to think the transition into the postapartheid, and indeed into what is now understood as the problematic of global apartheid, particularly through a consideration of the connections between ethics, politics and community. What is striking in this formulation is the insistence on the
creation of the new, a refusal to deliver the concept of community into such a straightforwardly redemptive narrative, where community is that which either redeems us or is redeemed through our return to it. Rather, Blanchot wants to preserve the concept of community from the tendency for it to be folded into ‘the state’, and the expressions of the subject and its attendant communities that constitute its terrain. As he argues in his later discussion of Marguerite Duras’s *The Malady of Death*, community and, by extension, the indefinable category of ‘the people … are not the State, not any more than they are the society in person, with its functions, its laws, its determinations, its exigencies which constitute its most proper finality’ (33). The productivity of the concept of community needs to be pressed beyond the confines of a political programme. The key, for Blanchot, is located in the task of thinking what he calls ‘the absence of community’ (3), to think how the unworking of community might, ultimately, be integral to how it works. This, it seems, extends beyond community as such, touching rather on the sense of the subject.

For Blanchot, thinking this absence requires more than an understanding of absence as lack, as though community is that which must be produced so as to make the social whole. Instead, resisting this quasi-Freudian sense through which the subject and community come to be constituted through a lack, Blanchot orients his development of the concept through Bataille’s insistence that there is ‘the principle of insufficiency at the root of all being’ (4). Insufficiency, in this instance, does not imply that being can be understood as an attempt to attain sufficiency. Rather than a principle that seeks to bring itself to completion (that is, to satisfy itself), Blanchot argues that for Bataille insufficiency ‘cannot be derived from a model of sufficiency [as it searches for] the excess of a lack that grows ever deeper even as it fills itself up’ (8). This can perhaps be most easily grasped through the example of the face-to-face encounter. Blanchot argues, in a formulation that discloses his proximity to Emmanuel Levinas, that the individual can only ever know itself as an individual in the moment of an encounter with an other. This is to say that an ‘I’ only ever recognises itself as an ‘I’ in the recognition of an other’s recognition of this. In short, we are only ourselves among
other selves. This, it seems, immediately voids the claim to subjective certainty, as the recognition of this is only ever located in a contest between others. Although Hegel produces a similar conundrum in the assertion of subjective certainty, for him the struggle is to assert the ‘I’ as mine, and thereby to silence the disquieting effect of the insufficiency that echoes at the root of all being. It is in that contest that being takes place, which is to say that the ‘I’ can never assert its individuality as an individuality as such. In Blanchot’s formulation, ‘a being is either alone or knows itself to be alone only when it is not’ (5).

While the principle of insufficiency names the condition whereby, for the subject, being can only take place in the contest with others, this is not equivalent to the assertion of a fusional multiplicity, as though being is simply a holding in common. What distinguishes it from a fusional multiplicity, which Blanchot likens to an existence as a herd, is that insufficiency actually does result in individuation, even if it is only an individuation that is already impossible even as it takes place. As he says of Bataille’s sense of insufficiency: ‘It is however not as easy as all that to understand’ (8).

If this development of the principle of insufficiency is correct, then its most clear instance can be located in the moment in which an ‘I’ witnesses the death of an other who is, for it, the principle of its own recognition as an ‘I’. To state this plainly: it is in the death of the other that my awareness of myself as individual also dies. Only an ‘I’ can witness the other’s death, but this ‘I’, which has been brought into consciousness through that other, precisely in that moment of that other’s death, can no longer witness that death in relation to this I. This is, perhaps, the starkest example of insufficiency, where being takes place, and, in a dramatic shift away from the political uses of community that Blanchot tries to unsettle, it constitutes the disaster on which the concept of community is painted. This concept, in order to be adequate to the principle of insufficiency, needs to acquire a sense of absence.

Produced in the limit-experience of the encounter with an other that is the most adequate expression of being (it is its principle), absence is precisely that to which the concept of community must become adequate.
Community, however, as its name implies, is worked out in collections of persons or groups. Holding onto this difficulty whereby absence would seem to directly contradict community, and recalling the tendency for absence similarly to be located in the production of a master signifier through lack, Blanchot offers a reading of a society associated with Bataille named ‘Acéphale’ – literally, ‘headless’. In it, Blanchot reads the possibility of an offer of the impossible ‘gift’ of community (13). To be clear, the principle of insufficiency, as that to which community must be adequate, implies both that community must be resistant to the production of a sense of subjective certainty and, consequently, that it must resist its production through a programme, as this latter assumes the former as its condition of possibility. Acéphale was to be established as a community through the willing sacrifice of a victim, who was to be sacrificed in the simultaneous suicide of the performer of the ritual. This ritual – which never occurred – would have refused the possibility of either figure in the community being established with the subjective certainty of the agent, or as sovereign, as a figure whose absence unifies the community into One. It is this unity through the sacrifice of the figure which becomes sovereign that structures the quasi-Freudian sense of community which finds its repetition in the centrality of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis. While this ritual, as a principle, would be adequate to the sense of insufficiency through its refusal of the subjective certainty of the self, it would fail precisely through its role as a ritual: it would be a work, a programme, designed to produce community and, as such, would violate the very conditions necessary for a successful expression of community.

Blanchot, however, reads this failure as a gift, as the condition of possibility of the new. Rather than producing a community structured around the death of the father, what is produced in the failure of Acéphale is the gift of ‘infinite abandonment’ to insufficiency, the unworking work of community (16). This is not, however, a gift that can be grasped through its retention in some form of ‘intimate’ ‘inner experience’ that could potentially accommodate the absence of the other (16). Rather, what most clearly emerges from Bataille’s sense of insufficiency is that
the self emerges as such only in the movement to the outside that is produced in the moment of encounter with an other. This is to say that that which is most intimate, namely the knowledge of the insufficiency that is primarily one’s own but that one can never adequately know except in the death of the other, which both reveals it and makes it impossible, is always located in the site where being takes place. While it is clear that this ‘ecstasy’ always ‘runs the risk’ of being marked as ‘the individual’ – a risk that is most often realised – Blanchot suggests that it is precisely this movement to the outside that enables a different thinking of community, one offered in ‘the paradoxical form of the book’ (17). Paradoxical, precisely, as it always works in multiple directions.

Writing, as a form of communication rather than an act of communion, not only mimics the movement towards the outside that is co-constitutive with the principle of being, but in fact operates as precisely such a movement. It is in reading, understood as a form of literary community, a community produced through what Nancy names as ‘touch’, that the communication of writing is grasped, as Blanchot phrases it: ‘Reading – the unworking labour of the work – is not absent from [the friendship of the encounter with the other], though it belongs at times to the vertigo of drunkenness’ (22, emphasis added). What this metaphor of drunken vertigo offers is the sense in which the friend, in its moment of enunciation (the friend reads the text), ‘absents itself’ much like a drunk friend who passes out, ensuring that communication does not slide into communion (25). The touch that occurs in the moment of reading (which is an entirely passive work in the sense that it does not produce a text) holds out the potential through which an adequate sense of the subject and of community might emerge: a touch of the absent and yet destined-to-be-repeated communication of the writer and the reader. It is in this realisation that Blanchot locates a sense of community as ‘unavowable’ – it cannot be declared, or claimed, in advance (46). In contrast with a sense of community that comes to be associated with the language of autochthony, with ‘earth’, ‘blood’ and ‘race’, in other words with homogeneity, Blanchot offers a sense of community ‘gathered around a choice’, which both makes it possible and immediately denies
its possibility (46), a choice not unlike Antigone’s affirmation of the right to bury her brother. In the absence of the potential to build community through a sovereign act of the will, what such an elective community might offer is the capacity to think new concepts in relation to the always present and yet already absent community of the touch.

**Between autochthony and copulation**

Perhaps one of the clearest articulations of the potentialities of such an ‘elective community’ can be found in *Antigone*, the first play by the Greek playwright Sophocles that deals with questions surrounding the myth of Oedipus. As is well known, the character of Antigone constitutes the central node through which the problematic of justice is expressed in relation to the state, the law, gender and deity. Stated differently, Antigone presents the very sense of community that Blanchot resists as a problem for thought and that I intimated above as a limit for the thinking of the postapartheid. It is for this reason, especially Antigone’s explicit foregrounding of the tension between these two different concepts of community, as well as the centrality of the Oedipus myth in Western thought and the manner in which its terms haunt *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, that I seek to both abide by and trouble a reading of this myth offered by Lévi-Strauss.

Inasmuch as Antigone’s role in the myth as a monster (of a peculiar type due to incest) enables her to function in the manner that she does, it is worth elucidating the role of the monster with some care, especially as this figure repeats, persistently, in Mpe’s troubling of community. There are two conventional monsters in the myth: the Dragon and the Sphinx. The Dragon is the first to appear and is that which would prevent the founding of Thebes (the slaughtering of Cadmus’ men) and, consequently, is killed by Cadmus. It is, however, from the cultivation of the Dragon’s teeth that the Spartoi emerge from the ground and assist in the city’s founding. Quite clearly, as Lévi-Strauss argues, the Dragon symbolises an autochthonous sense of becoming: the founders of the city emerge from the earth, a sense of becoming that is similarly signalled by the Sphinx as a chthonic creature. However, both these creatures are killed by men.
As such, Lévi-Strauss argues that their structural role in the myth is to signal the ‘denial of the autochthonous origin of man’ (215). It is in the names of *men* that Lévi-Strauss suggests the opposite function to these creatures is to be located, as the names of Oedipus (swollen foot), his father Laios (left-sided) and his grandfather Labdacos (lame), all indicate difficulty with walking or lameness. Their names, he suggests, indicate a persistence of the ‘autochthonous origin of man’, to the extent that this difficulty in walking marks them as ‘born from the earth’ (216). Walking, quite literally, is a function of standing upright, of becoming bipedal and extending oneself away from the earth. These characters slaughter the most evident expressions of autochthonous origin, and yet carry in their names the very unravelling of that act of separation.

The tension between these two functions is reinforced, according to Lévi-Strauss, through a resonant pair of functions, namely the ‘overvaluing of blood relations’ (that is, community as constituted through family) and the ‘undervaluing’ of the same that is evidenced, on the one hand, in the search for Europa, Oedipus’ marriage to Jacosta and the burial of Polynices and, on the other, by the killing of Laios and the mutual killing of the brothers Polynices and Eteocles (214–215). As such, Lévi-Strauss contends that it is the scaffolding of this tension (a tension that he suggests similarly structures the Freudian iteration of the myth) that forms the function of myth more generally. Myth, it would seem, operates as a stage on which the tension between these two understandings of community and the social can be held. To support the claim that it is the question of emergence, particularly as it pertains to emergence from the one (autochthony) or the two (copulation; that is, being as emerging from community and enclosed within its skin), that is held in the structure of myth, Lévi-Strauss turns to a series of myths from the Americas to highlight, through a discussion of cultivation and its relation to autochthony, how the same structure can be located in them.

That this question of emergence has to do with the question of the subjective certainty of Man becomes apparent through the Sphinx’s riddle. It is not simply due to the fact that the answer to the riddle is ‘man’, but rather to a sketching of a trajectory in relation to the earth. The Sphinx
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asks, ‘What has four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?’ On this trajectory, one that Oedipus affirms through his answer, Man emerges in close proximity to earth, distances itself from earth and then, ultimately, enlist the assistance of a prosthetic so as to resist the return to earth through the failure of its body. Myth, as a narrative form, might be read as fulfilling such a role of prosthetic to the extent that it resists a resolution of the problem. The struggle that defines Man, it seems, is a struggle to stand and remain standing, to enforce some form of separation from autochthony. It is interesting how this question comes to be troubled in the character of Antigone.10

While Lévi-Strauss argues that Antigone is an integral element in the myth only when it comes to the question of the ‘overvaluation’ of blood (which he reads as resonant with the question of autochthony), I suggest that, in reading, Antigone – particularly through her name, which can be read as signifying opposition to birth – becomes available as a singularity that exceeds the demands of the Symbolic Order of the Law, the demand of institutionalised difference.11 To make this argument, it is necessary to read Antigone, to grapple with her character, at the level of the name, action and existence. Antigone’s name, which Lévi-Strauss chooses not to read, situates her as being against her blood, opposed to the marker of her birth. However, in a reading that can be taken as contesting this, Paul Allen Miller argues through his detailed analysis of the opening lines of the play, which he describes as ‘a text that constantly escapes itself’ (5), that it is Antigone’s desire for the singularity of ‘same-wombedness [the term with which she addresses her sister Ismene in the opening line] that is at the heart of the Oedipal family romance’ (4). This desire, which he reads as an affirmation of birth as it is an invocation of the mother, comes to be expressed in Antigone’s desire to be united with her brother in death through flouting the law of the tyrant. In this formulation Antigone’s actions work against her name in a very similar manner to how the action of Oedipus with regard to the Sphinx works against the operation of his name. However, Antigone’s claim to same-wombedness, a claim that positions her as a monster due to the implicit affirmation of incest, also enables her to respond to the attempt to resolve the
dislocation inherent in the myth (the dislocation brought about by the tension between autochthony and copulation). In this reading Creon (the tyrant who is also her uncle, the brother of Jacosta) signifies the realm of the Symbolic Order of the Third, of the institutionalisation of difference, while Antigone signifies a desire for sameness, of immanence, that resists the injunction of this Third.

Antigone emerges in this moment as a potential mediator in the struggle that lies at the heart of the myth. However, Antigone is significantly unlike Creon, who first attempts to secure the return of Oedipus and, failing this, following the battle between Polynices and Eteocles, issues a decree that was designed to situate the sovereign as the source of right in Thebes (that is, to resolve the problem of emergence through subsuming it within societal structure, a reduction of the social to One). Instead, Antigone responds to the event of her brother’s death through maintaining the disjunction that structures the myth. To phrase this a little more pointedly so as to draw it in line with the understanding of ethics that emerges in my reading of Blanchot, Antigone’s freedom is articulated in her attempt at communication, which would entrench a particular understanding of the condition of Man as universal as it is materialised through the lived experience of her actions. What is entrenched, I suggest, is the principle of insufficiency as the root of being: the irresolvable tension between autochthony and copulation. The resistance to the Symbolic Order of the Law that is signified by Antigone enables a glimpse of the ‘embrace of Being’ (Miller 12), perceived in a flash as she articulates the impossibility of not choosing death so as to bury her brother. This choice is not simply one of blood over society, understood as the State; rather, Antigone accepts the authority of Creon to put her to death for flouting his decree even as she declares it to be unjust in relation to the law of the gods. As such, Antigone affirms both senses of right, obeying both as sources of authority even as she rejects the expression of Creon’s own affirmation of his authority (which would resolve the tension between these two laws). Critically, her ‘action’ in this moment is articulated as a double passivity: she fulfils her responsibility to the death of her
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brother as well as to Creon. Her capacity to produce such a statement of justice as an expression of the ethical – I think particularly of her refusal of Creon’s edict in lines 391–409, and the subsequent perception of its consequences in lines 730–736 and 788–796 (see Sophocles) – is, however, dependent on her particular monstrosity: Antigone’s desire for her brother, expressed in the metaphor of same-wombedness and her consequent actions and statements, recalls precisely that which Creon’s decree sought to repress, namely the disjuncture that is held in the structure of the myth, the problem of Man as it comes to be worked out in the actions of Oedipus and his sons. Antigone, then, can be read as a nodal point, one produced through her action, which is revealed immediately also as a passivity, an unworking work, at which the myth of Oedipus – and any resolution of it through repression or the law and the attendant socius brought into existence through this – begins to unravel itself, to shift towards a potential understanding of the social through its remains: the unavowable community, realised here in death.

Of scripts and insufficiency
If abiding by Blanchot’s reading of Bataille and Duras enables a sense of community that might be adequate to a notion of the subject indelibly marked by insufficiency rather than certainty or lack, it is in the brief reading of the Oedipus myth that the ethical potential of this sense of community is produced for thinking. At stake here is not simply an attempt to dismiss a quasi-Freudian concept of community as carrying a redemptive potential for the postapartheid. Rather, as will become clear in my reading of Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow, the refiguring of community and subjectivity that I am unfolding here is reworked in Mpe’s novel so as to take account of the weight of lived experience. As I begin to show in the remainder of this chapter, such a practice of reading hinges on a sense of the ethical as an attempt to adequately respond to the principle of being as insufficiency. I suggest in my reading of the concept of community in Welcome to Our Hillbrow that it might enable us to posit an adequate sense of the ethical, one that asks us ‘not to be unworthy of that which happens to us’; in other words, to posit a sense of the ethical
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that is capable of abiding by insufficiency into the midst of the dominant concerns that mark the postapartheid.

It has, however, become commonplace to read Mpe’s novel as a ‘work of mourning’, as a literary instance in which community might be redeemed through attending to the loss of being African in the world (whether this is understood through the lens of slavery, colonialism or apartheid) and, in the case of Neville Hoad’s reading, for example, maintaining this as a constitutive lost object into our present: melancholia, in this case, as an ethical relation.\textsuperscript{13} While this figuring of Mpe’s novel enables Hoad to read it as producing an ‘insurgent and rooted, yet open, cosmopolitanism’ (113), his reading does not take account of what, precisely, is mourned (neither does it bother to theorise cosmopolitanism, treating this rather as a simple good). It is not death, nor is it an African sense of cosmopolitanism, but rather the hoped-for potential of what could have been if the community of writing, one adequate to ‘not owning life’, adequate, in other words, to insufficiency as the principle of being, had been constitutive of lived experience. It is, I will argue below, this failure of exiting the script of autochthony that is worked out throughout the pages of Mpe’s novel.

\textit{Welcome to Our Hillbrow} is striking both for its use of narrative voice and for the manner in which it works through indigeneity (the question of autochthony and copulation) as a problematic that must be reckoned with. The majority of the novel, what we might call its first part – which circles the character of Refentše and his suicide through narrating the different strands that intertwine around this event – unfolds through an omniscient narrator that is not easily locatable within the contours of the narrative. The narrator is not, however, disinterested in the unfolding of the novel, occupying rather the place of a companion to Refentše (the main character in the novel), who is himself also removed from the story that is told. While it is tempting to locate the narrator as a voice emerging from the television set that, in its own way, narrates elements of the story from its vantage point in heaven, it is perhaps most accurate to speculate, given the centrality of writing in the novel, that the narrator emerges from the stories that the characters propose to write now that
they are dead. While the narrator is rigorously maintained as a voice from nowhere in the first part of the novel, there are three moments in which the narrative voice slips from one that is almost extradiegetic to one that is explicitly placed inside the narrative. In these instances, which all have to do with the insufficiency of existence and a particular monstrosity (through being marked as foreign, as impoverished or as unfaithful to an ideal), the narrator joins with Refentše through the use of the plural pronoun ‘we’ (8, 67) and the possessive ‘our’ (23). The effect of this slippage is to render the narrator as omniscient but not pure – it loses its sovereignty in the realisation that the narrator is itself complicit with the story that is told. In the final two chapters of the novel, where the reader discovers Refilwe’s impending death from Aids, the narrative voice again shifts, this time towards that of a straightforward third-person narrator that addresses, for the most part, the reader directly. The force of this shift is to place the reader suddenly in the position of a character in the novel, as spoken to, and has to do with the ethical potential of the concept of community that is developed in it.

So as to adequately address the ethical potential of the novel, it is necessary to first offer a reading of two themes that thread it, namely, that of autochthony and that of writing. After the epigraph, which prepares the reader for a battle that will take place through words, a battle that carries weight for our present, the novel immediately offers what it calls ‘Hillbrow: the Map’. This map, which is presented in relation to the particularities of Hillbrow but which can be read as a map for the entire novel, is constituted through tracking Refentše’s first movements through Hillbrow on his way to register for a degree at the University of the Witwatersrand. What emerges in this chapter is a sense of life as constituted through a question of ‘routes’ and ‘roots’ (2). In other words, it has to do with the way life is negotiated as well as from where it is negotiated, or, to phrase it in the terms of my reading of the Oedipus myth, it has to do with a distinction between autochthony and copulation. This distinction will come to structure the entire novel, and is expressed in the disagreements Refentše has with his cousin over xenophobia, crime, disease and the responsibility of those who name themselves as South Africans, and is perhaps most
starkly articulated in a relationship that Refentše develops with a local ‘beggar’. While Refentše’s cousin simply ignores the elderly man as ‘a beggar’, Refentše decides to return his greeting, a decision that will be repeated continuously for five years as he walks past the old man on his way to and from the university. This interaction between Refentše and the beggar is read by Hoad as an exemplary instance, particularly in the moment of that character’s death, of the ‘shared vulnerability’ (121) that marks all humans in the novel. It is this that Hoad reads as carrying the potential of an African universalism, a humanism that enables a sense of a rooted cosmopolitanism as the ethical weight of Mpe’s novel. I suggest, however, that what is at stake in this decision to greet is an orientation in existence away from the sufficiency of the self (which almost everyone in the novel fights for) and towards a responsibility to the other, an orientation that leads Refentše to the desire to write on the problems of ‘our Hillbrow’ (Hoad 30). Critically, as the reader rapidly realises through the unfolding of the novel, Refentše is not capable of simply walking, or writing, his way out of the script that produces him. This lack of the capacity to simply walk away is reinforced through the becoming absent of punctuation in the final passages of all the chapters – an absence that can be read as a textual performance of the inescapable flux in which all the narratives and characters in the novel are, to some extent, lodged.

This script from which it is not easy to escape is that of autochthony or, rather, indigeneity and its concomitant claims to a moral order of purity, and it is marked through a disjuncture between not knowing and the certainty of knowing too well. While the narrator consistently troubles the certainty of knowledge in which the characters of the novel act – instructing them in how they would have acted if they had known more – the voices of ‘the community’, initially that of Refentše’s home village of Tiragalong but, as the novel progresses, also Hillbrow, Alexandra, South Africa and London, always speak from a perspective of absolute certainty. However, given the broader perspective that the narrator brings to the events on which these voices speak, the often repeated phrases of ‘everyone knows’ (44), ‘it is known’ (82), ‘as [the local people] well knew’ (54), come to take on a measure of irony in that they mark precisely the
limit at which this emplotment of events should fail. Yet, as the narration of Refilwe’s response to Refentše’s death makes clear, these emplotments are what persist in the social precisely because they conform, as ‘valid testimony’, to the scripts along which the social is produced. This is not a scripting that is unique either to the postapartheid or to the encounters between the rural and the urban. Rather, as the narrator explicitly points out, these are held in common with apartheid rationality, where people were fixed in place through land (bantustans) and ‘any criticism of Apartheid thinking became a threat to public morals; where love across racial boundaries became mental instability …’ (57). The manner in which the narrator does not finish the comparison but rather trails off into an ellipsis draws attention to the resonance that these formulations have with the emplotments that affirm autochthony as the basis of morality – it is not necessary to specify the remainder of the list; it functions here as an echo. This scripting is also, through the movements of Refilwe, expanded into a global phenomenon, what we today refer to perhaps as ‘global apartheid’, which is premised both on race and, as Refilwe discovers upon her entry to the United Kingdom, on a perceived rootedness to a political perspective or agenda, a perspective described as ‘white civilisation’, a civilisation that includes South Africa as an emblem of liberalism.

It is precisely because it is not possible simply to walk out of a script, not even through hard work, that Refentše decides to begin to write. However, what emerges in this moment is not a revolutionary, or even an adequate, text in relation to that which constitutes the contours of community in postapartheid South Africa, but, rather, insufficiency, since ‘to have these answers would be to know the secrets of life itself’ (61). This knowledge, which the narrator suggests would amount to ‘owning life’, reducing it to a calculable One, is precisely what Refentše is unable to achieve:

I do not own life, you often said when you tried to laugh your difficulties away.

Many people could not see that you were not merely throwing jokes around. You did not own life when you were alive. Now that you are
alive in a different realm, you know for sure that you do not own life. You have watched God and Devil, gods and Ancestors, wondering whether they owned it, this thing called life (67).

This question of owning life, with the implication that such ownership would grant a semblance of control over life, to specify its outcomes (the passage occurs in the midst of Refentše being told that he is not able to intervene in the world of the living), is not necessarily posed as an instance of regret. Whereas ownership, the transformation of life into an object that is yours, enables a programmatic relation to life, the lack of ownership requires that the subject, in this case Refentše, must respond adequately to the life that takes place. In other words, the lack of ownership asks for an ethical relationship defined by not being unworthy of what happens to us: a demand to resist the reduction of life to an object, to something defined through autochthony.

As a gesture towards the ethical, then, the short story that Refentše writes in the novel, a story that mimics the novel into which it is laid, actually fails: Refentše commits suicide. His suicide, the reader learns by (in a sense) listening in on the narrator’s speech to Refentše, has more to do with his own sense of shame and guilt than with the act of infidelity performed by Lerato and Sammy (Refentše comes home one afternoon to find his girlfriend, Lerato, and his best friend, Sammy, in the midst of an intimate sexual encounter). In the months after his death, the facts of his act have, through the careful work of Refilwe, become produced along the lines of a morality tale: if you have sexual relations with a ‘makwerekwere’ (a derogatory term for a foreigner), then you too will plummet to your death. This tale is not limited to sexual relations, as through it Refentše’s mother is accused of witchcraft and subsequently murdered, and Lerato also takes her own life, as a result of the emplotments that seek to apportion blame anywhere outside Tiragalong, outside the zone of autochthonous belonging. The reader, of course, knows that this emplotment of events is entirely specious, as Lerato is, as a matter of empirical reality in the novel, a descendant of a man from Tiragalong, Tshepo’s father, and thus an element of the exact
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eexpression of the social that considers her an outsider. In addition to this empirical objection is the sense of life that Refentše tries to produce through his short story – a sense of life not reducible to its stamping into a reified sense of the self as sovereign. Even with such an intention, the narrator is clear that failing in the demand of the ethical has real effects for which the subject is always responsible: the narrator names Refentše as ‘a killer’, not because of his suicide, but because that event provided the kernel around which the other stories were spun, stories that resulted in the death of his mother and Lerato, as well as the madness of Sammy.

Despite her role in manufacturing the stories about Refentše’s death, it is the character of Refilwe that undergoes the most dramatic shift in the novel. Hers is a movement away from the subjective certainty ordered on a sense of autochthony (that is, the sovereign self, what Creon tries to protect as a possibility in the Oedipus myth) and towards an understanding of the self as rooted in insufficiency – an insufficiency that is made real to her through the death of Refentše and the continued effect of his writing. Through reading Refentše’s fiction, Refilwe comes to realise the severely limited and unethical expression of existence that marks her life; she comes to understand the ethical weight of her actions:

It was because of these frustrations, because she had come to value so greatly the importance of literary honesty and risk-taking, that Refilwe appreciated Refentše’s story so much… She had read the story many times, and each time it made her weep anew. Partly because of the memories it brought of Refentše. And partly because it made her see herself and her own prejudices in a different light (95–96).

The transition that is marked in this passage, from an identity premised on place (autochthony) to a sense of the self derivative from a series of encounters with the other, is not sufficient to enable Refilwe to walk out of the script that has produced her. Although Refilwe does leave South Africa to study at Oxford Brookes University and, while studying abroad, meets and falls in love with a Nigerian man, her existence in the United Kingdom is an ambiguous one, for her South African identity as
a marker of liberalism guarantees her the treatment of a ‘white’ person as she moves through passport control and, later, through society, while all other Africans are made to wait and are examined for markers of disease. This ambiguity is accentuated when Refilwe is diagnosed, along with her lover, as having contracted Aids.

The disease did not come, as Tiragalong would expect, from her Nigerian lover, just as it also, in his case, did not originate with Refilwe. In both cases they had been living with the disease for over ten years, which, for Refilwe, means that she contracted the disease while she was still a student in her home village of Tiragalong. This medical fact does not, however, result in Refilwe escaping the emplotment that works to reify the autochthonous claims to morality that structure the social in Tiragalong, Johannesburg and the world: these ‘gods and devils of Tiragalong’, the narrator informs the reader, relentlessly transform Refilwe’s lived experience, where she wastes away into ‘the scarecrow figure of Refentše’s fiction’, into a morality tale (112, 120). This emplotment is presented, in these final pages of the novel, as an expression of welcoming that seeks to affirm that to which the one being welcomed arrives, rather than as openness to the other’s arrival. As the returnee, Refilwe recognises and understands the emplotments that take place even as she grasps through the instruction of the narrator that she too is ‘a Hillbrowan. An Alexandran. A Johannesburger. An Oxfordian. A Lekwerekwere, just like those you once held in such contempt’ (123). Refilwe attains this status as an expansion of the grounds for her ethical existence, an existence premised on the insufficiency of being structured on the contingency of encounter, while from the perspective of Tiragalong she attains this status as she is now marked by the disease of the other. It is owing to the extent of this disjuncture that Refilwe realises that she, too, will die within the emplotments of Tiragalong, and that no amount of reasoned argumentation in itself will order her escape from these scripts.

In the wake of this narrative of emplotment through a reduction to homogeneity, to the claim to autochthony that structures the world, the reader is brought to the final page of the novel where its ethical
injunction becomes plain. The narrator, who is both in the story and separate from it, and who is instrumental in the development of a sense of the self marked by insufficiency and the ethical expressions that this might give rise to in contradiction with the social order of homogeneity and its attendant morality, speaks from a non-place in the novel. On the final page, as Refilwe dies, the narrator reflects on ‘our continuing existence’ in the zone that it names as ‘heaven’, which it argues is located in the memory and consciousness [which, throughout the novel, is synonymous with ‘script’] who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone held the real and true version. Just as you, Refilwe, tried to reconfigure the story of Refentše; just as Tiragalong now is going to do the same to you. Heaven can also be Hell, depending on the nature of our continuing existence in the memory and consciousness of the living (124).

The novel ends by welcoming Refilwe to ‘our heaven’, to the site of continued existence in the modes through which those who persist beyond the novel (that is, its readers) respond to the emplotments encountered through the characters. As such, the reader is placed in the position of Refilwe after she read Refentše’s fiction. Confronted with the modes through which our consciousness, as an expression of the postapartheid as a condition is produced along the lines of its scripts, and confronted with the possibility of an ethics that could perhaps be adequate to a sense of the self premised on insufficiency, the narrator poses a question for the reader: in what way will the reader respond to the remains of the social, to this heaven? However, the overall force of Welcome to Our Hillbrow does not carry a utopic resolution of this question: every instance of the realisation of an ethics falls short precisely on the script that it attempts to evade. The edge of community, it would seem, falls back on its limit, enclosing a terrain rather than opening it up to its outside. However, its offer functions in a similar mode to that of the impossible ritual that
establishes Acéphale as a potential community adequate to insufficiency, or of the passive obedience that leads Antigone to her death: in its failure it maintains an openness to a future. It is this openness, coupled with an insistence on the weightiness of lived experience, which is offered for thinking in Mpe’s novel. Indeed, in his consideration of this problematic, it is in the decidedly unstable configuration of writing that an expression of community adequate to this weight and structured on the principle of insufficiency might be realised. However, the expression of community as always enclosed within its own limit – in its own skin, so to speak – consistently resurfaces as a claim that seeks to undo the potentiality of this community of the touch found in writing. Regardless of whether the difficulty is resolved materially or ideally, through bodily flesh or through philosophical thought, the attending concept stumbles on the tension of this claim. This limit, however, is also an abiding by the openness of the touch, a duration in which a difference might yet still be produced. As Mpe’s Welcome to Our Hillbrow makes clear in its re-working of the principle of insufficiency as this slices through the script of autochthony, the weight of lived experience demands that such an opening be consistently produced, even in its failure, as a possible opening onto the future.

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NOTES
1. See the central role that community plays in the recognition of racial categories in Section 2 of the Group Areas Act (No. 41 of 1950).
2. On the question of a practice of life that remains to be learned, see Jacques Derrida and Gayatri C. Spivak.
3. For influential readings of Mpe’s novel along these lines, see Neville Hoad and Rob Gaylard.

4. For Walter Benjamin’s understanding of the work of re-working, see his ‘Theory of Distraction’.

5. I think particularly of Sam Durrant’s *Postcolonial Narrative and the Work of Mourning* and Mark Sanders’s *Ambiguities ofWitnessing*. For a reading of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) that ‘troubles’ Sanders’s rendering of it through drawing attention to the weight of the TRCs genealogical precursors in both colonialism and apartheid, see Adam Sitze.

6. This sense of insufficiency is very similar to that of ‘need’ in the thinking of Levinas, especially in his early essay *On Escape*.

7. For a thorough discussion of Hegel’s recognition of this problem and his attempts to work around it through a consideration of *Aesthetics*, see Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida.

8. As Frantz Fanon phrases it in his introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, investment in a sense of ‘fusional multiplicity’ deserves the diagnosis of ‘idiocy’ as it maintains the very structure from which it is necessary to escape (xi).

9. For a discussion of how this risk generally comes to be resolved through an assertion of particular individuality, see Jacques Lacan.

10. *The Theban Plays* have received an immense amount of attention, which I do not have the space to replicate here. Perhaps one of the most sustained discussions of the problem of ethics as it pertains to the relation between two rights is offered by Hegel through his reading of ‘Antigone’ in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly in his discussion of the unity of self-consciousness and the self in its relation to ‘the ethical order’ and the realisation of morality.

11. See ‘Antigone’ in Patrick Hanks, Kate Hardcastle and Flavia Hodges, where it is argued that the two terms that constitute her name, namely ‘anti’ (meaning ‘opposed’) and ‘gen’ or ‘gon’ (meaning ‘birth’), signify opposition or contrariness to birth.

12. Although the figure of the mediator forms a central component in the structure of myths originating in the Americas, it is not mentioned by Lévi-Strauss in relation to Oedipus.

13. On *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a work of mourning, see Sam Durrant’s ‘The Invention of Mourning’, as well as Hoad, especially pp. 114, 123 and 125. Hoad’s
intervention is useful both in terms of how it figures Welcome to Our Hillbrow in relation to a potential queer politics and its situating of the novel within the broader contours of South African literature. For the former, however, I would suggest that its potentiality can be pressed further through attending to the disembodiment that structures many of the descriptions of sex acts, not as a marker of alienation but rather as a refusal of the markers of autochthony. For the latter, it is still the case that the intricacies of this intertextuality remain to be read.

14. For a reading of Mpe as producing a plea for a reconstituted African sense of humanism in the midst of a dystopian postapartheid, see Rob Gaylard.

REFERENCES


