
Walking the City: Movement and Space in Peter Abrahams' *Mine Boy*

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During and after World War Two, Johannesburg's cityscape became defined by mass African urbanisation and a stifled but increasingly conscientised black working class.¹ Against state discourses that depicted black identity as rural-based, there were opposing voices that began to assert the right of black South Africans to act within the urban sphere. The Johannesburg-raised writer Peter Abrahams is the first black South African whose fiction argues for an African subjectivity that is located in the urban. Although earlier black writers had affirmed the historical and political claim of Africans to the land, this, as Mphahlele notes, was figured in terms of pastoral, rural landscapes.²

Abrahams' novel *Mine Boy* (1946) represents a turning away from depictions of a rural African consciousness towards an urban proletariat identity. This article situates itself within the debate concerning the liberal and Marxist aspects of *Mine Boy* with particular emphasis on the ways in which ideology in the novel manifests in representations of Johannesburg. Michael Wade reads the text as a "proletarian novel whose plot displays a Marxist perspective"³ while Jean-Philippe Wade argues that the novel displays a liberal humanism reflective of African National Congress (ANC) policy at the time.⁴ This article partly aligns itself with Patrick Hogan's contention that *Mine Boy* is a novel of cross-racial solidarity along class lines and should be understood as "a Marxist narrative of coming into political 'maturity', which is to say, 'class consciousness'".⁵ Concomitantly it maintains there are instances in the text where Marxist class affiliations are actuated through a humanist universalism.

Commentators such as Wade have suggested that Abrahams' vision of Johannesburg in *Mine Boy* stresses the estranging and dehumanising experience of being black in the South African city, and there is certainly evidence in the text that confirms the alienation of the black individual from their urban environment.⁶ While this article acknowledges Abrahams' black characters as exploited and even destroyed by their urban context, it also wishes to emphasise the ways in which he imprints black subjectivity onto the city and thus reconfigures its spaces in a challenge to white dominance. It argues that this is realised through a synthesis of Marxism and liberalism through movement in the street. Although public space was closely regulated, the street was an interface that offered up possibilities for the material and discursive countering of segregationist practice.

Abrahams' representations of the city in *Mine Boy* valuably emphasise the spatiality of black subjectivity and the importance of urban places in the formation of black identities. He makes the places of black subjugation and marginalisation central to the city's definition, giving them and their inhabitants a prominence suppressed by the white state. Movement across Johannesburg discloses the functionalist and separating spaces of colonial capitalism, while simultaneously disassembling it through the realisation of individual potentiality. Forms of movement in the text—walking, dancing, running—reveal the spatial character of social life and its organisation around the demands of production. Simultaneously, movement allows its practitioners to become actors and subjects in the places they inhabit rather than simply passive objects of state oppression.

I will consider Abrahams in relation to two key texts in black writing of the early 20th Century before moving to a historicised close reading of movement in *Mine Boy* and its Marxist and liberal elements.

Abrahams was not the first black writer to publish a novel in English. Sol T. Plaatje's *Mhudi* was written in England around 1917 but only published in 1930. The fiction deals with a period of upheaval during the 1830s, the arrival of Boer trekkers into South Africa's interior and the displacement of large numbers of peoples as a consequence of Matabele expansion in the east of the country.⁷ David Attwell has argued that the novel is an alternate figuring of modernity within the parameters of black culture and identity, a representation of the past that gestures towards a future that is nationalist and Africanist.⁸ However, this statement of black identity takes place against rural backdrops when South Africa, not yet an independent nation, was still defined by the economies and encounters of the countryside.

Neither was Abrahams the first black South African to fictionalise the impact of the urban on African subjectivities. R.R.R. Dhlomo's 1928 novella *An African Tragedy* tracks the downfall of rural schoolteacher Robert Zulu after his move to Johannesburg. Stephen Gray has noted that the policies of the novella's missionary publisher, Lovedale Press, framed the text within a paternalistic Christian discourse that held the city responsible for the degradation of black South Africans.⁹ Indeed the publisher's introduction values the text in terms of its "contribution towards staying the decline of the Native in large towns."¹⁰ What is important for our purposes is that *An African Tragedy* represents the beginning of a shift in black literary engagements with modernity that had previously focussed on the rural towards an emphasis on city forms.¹¹ Its depiction of the city as contaminant reflects other South African writing of the 1920s and 1930s on town and country, particularly Afrikaans writers of the pastoral such as C.M. van den Heever, and a genealogy that can be traced back to the Romantics.¹² It also anticipates Christian representations of the corrupted city present in the work of Alan Paton. The influence of Paton's liberalism on Abrahams is a feature I shall explore later in further detail.

Against Plaatje's rural meditations, the distinguishing characteristic of *Mine Boy* is its insistence on the city as a vehicle for black experience. The protagonist Xuma's beginnings are rural but the narrative ends with his self-realisation as a member of the urban working-class. And in contrast to Dhlomo, the text does not simply engage with the city as a dangerous and destructive 'Other', it makes it central to the terms of black self-definition. The alienating effects of a money-economy, anonymity among faceless crowds and the ungraspable flux of modern existence are elements of the novel that suggest a modernist's perception of the city. But Abrahams' negotiation of modernity is expressed through a realist aesthetic, his style fixing upon the historical specificities and materialities of place as part of a critique of the machinations of a racist capitalist system.

Abrahams attempts to perceive and portray as realistically as possible the social and historical totality of the society in which Xuma must survive while also plotting its development towards socialism. In this regard his writing would seem to commit him to Lukas's claim that social realism is the literary form best able to comprehend and change the structures of modern society, "enabling a more comprehensive and deeper account of man as a social being than any traditional ideology."¹³

Abrahams' depiction of the effects of the country's economic organisation on its social structures and his figuring of Xuma as a representative of his class allies his politics with an aesthetic that finds the typical experiences of class consciousness in the individual condition. As Hogan notes it is an approach "he works out through the common device of recounting the development of revolutionary consciousness in a proletariat hero."¹⁴ Here then is evidence of Marxist strands in Abrahams' thinking that will manifest repeatedly in Xuma's walks through Johannesburg.

In South Africa, the ideology of segregation was spatially implemented through the destruction of inner-city slums and living areas, restrictions on black movement in and to the city through the pass system and the removal of black communities to its margins.¹⁵ Abrahams wants to write against this, to reclaim place as empowering rather than merely dehumanising. But in order to reconfigure the role of place in the lives of the city's black inhabitants he must first reveal the dichotomising and even schizophrenic effect of the state's racist ordering of space.

The novel begins with Xuma's night-time arrival in Malay camp, a 'native location' in the west of Johannesburg.

He shifted the little bundle from his right hand to his left, hitched up his pants, and continued up the narrow street. A dark street narrow street full of shadows, he thought. But then this whole Malay camp is full of shadows. I wonder where I am, he thought. He had lost all sense of direction. Still, one street was as good as any other...¹⁶

Abrahams' bare realism picks out the small details of his protagonist's movements in ways that stress his uncertainty and strangeness to the city. In the dark, its spaces and meanings are literally veiled to him. At this early point in the text his understanding of the city is negligible. He is like a man without sight groping his way through the alleys and shadows, the ambiguities and uncertainties of its landscape. He is 'Xuma from the North', a country interloper. Reflecting his ignorance of the urban, Abrahams presents Xuma as a consciousness not yet fully formed. Still no more than a representative of the rural he has left behind, Xuma is too bewildered by the city to perceive the politicality of its spaces. He sees the behaviour of those he encounters in Malay Camp as defined by their rootlessness: "A strange group of people, these, he thought. Nothing tied them down. They seem to believe in nothing."¹⁷ Xuma's interaction with Johannesburg and those who live in it is figured as a rural/urban binary. Its inhabitants are indecipherable to him. Their actions are contradictory and mystifying. Xuma himself is the physical manifestation of rural 'custom' but as such he is merely an echo of a past that seems to have no purchase in the treacherous flux and shift of the city.

Xuma's initial isolation embodies the experience of thousands of black South Africans who migrated from country to city. The novel takes place during a period of large-scale black migration to Johannesburg during and after the Second World War. At the outbreak of the conflict South Africa joined the side of the Allies, its mineral resources and industry providing its factories with brisk business in the production of war materials. The resulting increase in demand for industrial labour, combined with the onset of a severe drought that devastated the countryside, prompted a significant rise in the city's African population, from 229 122 in 1936 to an estimated 455 000 by 1948.¹⁸ Demographically, Johannesburg could no longer claim to be a 'white' city.

Demands for cheap labour on the mines fed exaggerated white fears of being 'swamped' by a rural black population, the consequences of which would prove a factor in ushering the Afrikaner nationalist National Party into power in 1948.¹⁹ The huge influx of immigrants to Johannesburg saw a chronic shortage of living space, absurdly inflated rents for the poorest kinds of accommodation and a further deterioration in living conditions.²⁰ Slums that had formed in the inner city areas throughout the 1920s, which were spaces of heterogeneity and racial integration (and the site from which the vibrant Marabi culture would develop)²¹, were demolished by the early 1930s, and the Africans living there were forced out into locations like Orlando, situated on the city's peripheries. In 1933, the 1923 Urban Areas Act was finally enforced across the entirety of the city under pressure from white labourers, urban landowners, and commercial capital.²² In 1934 the government passed the Slums Act, facilitating more effective slum removals while 1937 saw the intensification of control over African urbanisation with the introduction of Hertzog's Native Laws Amendment Act.²³

Xuma is taken in by Leah, a Basuto woman also originally from the countryside. Leah has been hardened by the city and alienated from her customary past: "I am here you see, I come from my people. It is so in the city and I have been here for many years. And the city makes you strange to the ways of your people, you see?"²⁴ Leah gets by through illegal liquor brewing but her successful survival in the city is attended by personal and cultural estrangement. Her identity has been negatively shaped by the place in which she lives. She has power within the world of the shebeen but it is constrained by the spatial impositions of the state and constant police harassment. Leah is nurtured more as a symbol than as a character—her strengths and weakness are schematically and externally deployed rather than internally developed.

According to Ogunbesan, Abrahams' class oriented perspective and his use of characters as class representatives essentialises them as categories of persons locked into a broader social conflict rather than persons in themselves.²⁵ I argue this is balanced by the depiction of Xuma in terms of a more considered portrayal of individual experience that powerfully connects subjectivity with physical place and social space. For Hogan, Xuma's characterisation emphasises Abrahams' link to the Lukacian notion that literary engagement with the economic is best realised through conditions that are individual and specific.²⁶

Abrahams' achievement is to impress upon the reader how individual or communal connection to place can facilitate class and race consciousness against the city's spatial segregations. Xuma's growing self-awareness is linked to his movement through Johannesburg's public spaces. Nadine Gordimer's 1963 essay, *Great Problems in the Street*, is suggestive of the ways in which the Johannesburg street of the 1940s and 1950s was a site for cross-racial encounters and productive of counter-discourses to state ideology. While acknowledging the "countless laws, prejudices, 'traditions', fallacies and fears" that controlled interactions between black and white and their movement in the city, she also writes,

The great problems are alive in the street, and it is in the street too, that (until now), they have always been debated. The street has been both the flesh and the word. For the meeting halls of African political movements have been the open spaces in the streets, and progressive movements in general have used the City Hall steps in Johannesburg as a platform.²⁷

By the time of Gordimer's essay, three years after the Sharpeville massacre, the ANC and Pan African Congress (PAC) had been declared illegal, and resistance to the apartheid state quashed. Protest in the streets became impossible. But in the period prior to the National Party's win in 1948 and continuing into the early 1950s there was a more hopeful sense of the possibilities for peaceful opposition; a lost potential Gordimer's essay explores. Abrahams shares Gordimer's vision of the street as a subversive space, evoking alternate ways of being in and seeing the city.

Xuma's first experience of a city crowds comes with a Saturday morning walk through the streets of Malay Camp with Joseph, the brother of Leah's 'man'.²⁸ The scene conveys the disjuncture between Xuma's still rural subjectivity and his urban environment. What he encounters is diametrically opposed to the social and cultural referents that centre him. For the rural Xuma, the city street is in the beginning a rupture. Its codes are alien to him, its forms bewildering, and its language deceptive. He is surrounded by people and yet at the same time is profoundly distanced. We see the crowd both in its diversity and in its conformity. We see the individuals as they form the mass. "It was so in all the streets. One street was as crowded as another. Groups of men and women milled up and down. It was Saturday."²⁹

But the crowd is not undifferentiated. It demands to be recognised on its own terms. "And the men in the streets spoke in loud voices and took out their purses and counted their money for others to see and they wore their best and most colourful clothes..."³⁰ The streets are a space of expression and validation. Problematically, the money the men parade supports an exploitative system in which they themselves are little more than objects. They are both complicit in this system and negated by it. Following on from this negation of self through capital is a high incidence of violence as the only means through which to establish one's authority (this is also a microcosm of wider social practice, 'non-whites' are controlled by the state through the threat and exercise of violence).

Many men have died in these fights, for they fight with sticks and knives and shoes. Even stones. And so on Saturdays they go up and down the streets of Malay Camp and Vrededorp with their chests out and an arrogant light in their eyes.³¹

Women also seek to establish a presence in the street that is independent of the parameters imposed upon them by the demands of white capital.

And on Saturdays too, the young women from The Hill and Berea and Park Town would be in Malay Camp. They would be dressed in the ways of the white folk, only more colourfully, for they like brighter colours. And they would forget that they work on the Hill and in Berea and Park Town, and meet on street corners and talk at the top of their voices.³²

Dress is performance, a parade which inscribes black urban identity onto the landscape of the city.³³ Dress is a means of taking on white cultural norms and deploying them in ways that resist notions of self defined by bodily work. The women forget the spaces that tie them to labour (the white suburbs of The Hill, Berea and Park Town) and meet on 'street corners', liminal spaces in which they can act out roles of their own designation.

They select their men, "Not with their fingers. With their eyes." The courtships are actuated as choices: "They would go to drink in one of the many places. Or they would just walk. Or they would go to the Bioscope. Or they would go looking for a Maraba. Or they would just go..."³⁴ Walking through Malay Camp suggests a freedom of action which allows the couples to reinsert a measure of self-definition into their use of space. They decide where to go and which spaces to occupy. But these choices are not really their own. The Saturday morning excursions and courtships are only temporary claims on the place of the street and are ever vulnerable to police interference. Lacking a collective class consciousness, the inhabitants of the location may perform for each other in public places but they cannot effectively challenge the spatialisation of race and class which keeps them oppressed.

A further example of black performance and presence in the street is Xuma's encounter with a pair of 'swankies' who extend modes of dress and movement into an entire social practice.

Still further up the road two 'swankies' were on their way down the road. They were dressed in violent purple suits with wide-bottomed trousers and long jackets that reached down to their knees, straw hats, red shirts and black ties. And each had a red handkerchief in the left hand and a light cane in the right. And they strutted and danced from one side of the road to the other.³⁵

'Swanking' often accompanied musical competitions. Contestants vied in categories that stressed style and walk and required elaborately clad participants to strut up and down the stage. The performances and dress codes referenced the American vaudeville acts of the late 1800s that had a significant impact upon black popular culture in both the urban and rural areas of South Africa.³⁶ African-American minstrel groups such as Orpheus McAdoo and his 'Jubilee Singers' inspired black South African performers with "positive, black images of the ideal urbanite, the 'coon.'"³⁷ Swanking was a means with which to affirm the sophisticated, urban status of 'the coon'. By taking the performance off the stage and onto the streets of Johannesburg, 'swankies' reformed the rigidly segregated social spaces of the city via an assertion of their belonging and a reclaiming of the body as a locus for meanings separate from the alienating impositions of production.³⁸

The walking of the swankies appropriates and reorganises the social space of the street as a site of performance and in so doing transgresses the functionalist topography of the location. Their actions open up vital possibilities for new notions of black identity and being. And yet it is a space only briefly won. The arrival of the police reasserts state authority over Malay Camp. "People ran in all directions...the two 'swankies' disappeared down the street."³⁹ Popular culture facilitates discursive redefinitions of blackness but while it remains unattached to class mobilisation it cannot act decisively against the real effects of state control. Performance may buy you a means of expression but this is only a breathing space. For Abrahams the social relations that structure the cityscape can only be transformed through an active and conscious overthrow of an old order for a new one. These spatial and cultural practices enable the black inhabitants of Malay Camp to survive the dehumanising effects of the city but they do not represent the politically conscious actions necessary to alter the status quo.

Walking is not the only mode in the novel through which black characters assert presences in the street. Dancing in public places is repeatedly featured as an affirmation of community and identity:

On the corner of the street, under the light of the lamp, a group of men and women formed a ring...And in the centre of the ring a couple would dance and make signs to each other and speak in the language of movement. Then they would step back into the ring and two others would go forward into the centre of the ring. And they would speak with their hands and their feet and their hips and the glances of their eyes. And all the time the ring would call out words of praise and encouragement to them. And all the time one woman would sing words in a clear, beautiful voice and the others would hum and clap and stamp their feet, their faces alight with laughter and joy and their bodies swaying.⁴⁰

Dancing sequences in the text reflect the impact of developing urban cultural forms on black subjectivities. During the 1920s a music and dance style known as 'Marabi' emerged from the 'melting pot' of the urban ghettos. A fusion of African styles with jazz influences imported from black America, Marabi became synonymous with the urban 'underbelly'—illegal alcohol, sex, slumyard parties, and dusk till dawn dancing. Among the middle-class black population whose social advancement depended upon the absorption of white liberal Christian doctrine, it was regarded with dismay. Nevertheless Marabi was a means for many, if not all, in the black community to express commonality in the face of state oppression.⁴¹

Abrahams' earlier novel on Johannesburg, *Song of the City* (1943) is set in 1939 during a period when the 1923 Urban Areas Act and tightened municipal control over black urban life had precipitated Marabi's decline. Despite these strictures the genre features in the text as a motif for self-definition and the transgression of rigid social categories. We are introduced to Marabi through the character of Nduli or as the white administration names him, Dick, a young black man from the countryside who prefigures Xuma in *Mine Boy*. Working as a servant in a 'liberal' household, an outing to a 'Maraba' dance is the primary instance in which Nduli's subjectivity is developed sufficiently for him to perceive himself in relation to society at large.

From the bowels of the earth came the song of the city, and on it, the lesser song of the Maraba...The tom-tom beat of the Maraba was like a stream through which flowed the pent up emotions of a repressed people. In it they danced away the seething bitterness that is attendant with repression. And like a stream the two-point rhythm washed away those nameless volcanoes so that on the morrow the house-boy would be a good and humble house-boy! And the kitchen-maid too. And the mine boy. And the riksha-boy.⁴²

The dance takes place in Malay Camp. The 'song of the city' to which Abrahams refers is the hum of the gold mining industry constructing its reality and that of its inhabitants. What is interesting is that the dancing operates not only as a form of catharsis but also as an act of physical story-telling. It may allow the 'humble house-boy' to play the part of obedient servant but the very 'play' of this role suggests that it can also be cast aside, that the 'bitterness attendant with repression' will not always be quelled. The segregationist structures which determine Malay Camp as 'location' are traversed through a collective 'freeing up' of emotion and identity through dance. In the space of the dance hall, individuals are able to narrate and express their histories in a counter-assertion to the definitions imposed upon them as 'mine boy', 'kitchen-maid' or 'riksha boy'.

As the novel progresses, Nduli is gradually exposed to the overtly political culture of the trade unions. Yet he does not himself act as an agent for political or social change. Xuma's character develops the potential only superficially present in Nduli, both as a conscientised representative of the working class and as an individual who transcends the limitations of his material circumstances. I have briefly considered the ways in which Abrahams uses the form of Marabi as a means to suggest the possibility for self-affirming, counter-hegemonic spaces to operate within the delineations of state segregation. The vulnerability of Marabi to state control in the form of police raids and forced removals is linked to its inability to

express an identity that allows oppressed individuals to assert a class as well as a cultural solidarity.

Let us return to the significance of walking in the city. On his first Monday in Johannesburg, Xuma walks from Malay Camp and through the empty inner city towards his first day of work at the mines. He is accompanied by Johannes, a 'coloured' man and mine worker who suffers from alcoholism.

And again they walked in silence for a long time. Up the empty streets with tall sleeping buildings on either side and goods and clothes in the shop windows. But not a car and not a person anywhere. The city of gold sleeping and they were the only two waking, walking things in it. It is like a dead place, Johannes thought, and I do not like dead places. It is beautiful like this, Xuma thought, beautiful and peaceful.⁴³

Johannes and Xuma's differing responses to the quiet of the still sleeping city can be read as reflections of their knowledge of the system of production. Johannes' experiences in the mines lead him to unconsciously figure the city he walks through in terms of the alienating effects of the mine space. Johannes thus connects the glamour and affluence of down-town Johannesburg with the oppression of the labour system that sustains it. The trajectory of the men's walk from the peripheral location of Malay Camp through the city and out again towards the mines stresses the linkages between the marginalised spaces they socially and politically occupy and the centralised power locus that depends upon them. This in turn has the effect of decentralising the importance of the inner city as merely a sign of the wealth that is produced elsewhere. The 'tall sleeping buildings' are the architecture through which the dominance of white capital is expressed and maintained, the goods and clothes in the shops are signifiers of a consumption which the work of the miner provides but from which he is barred. Xuma and Johannes can pass the shops but they would not be able to purchase anything from them. The deathly reality of the mine exposes the true nature of the 'city of gold' as entirely destructive, a 'dead place.' Johannes and Xuma are described as 'waking, walking things', a reference to their actual objectification by a system which regards them as nothing more than labouring bodies.

For Xuma, as yet uninitiated in the work of the city, the empty streets hold no echo of the mines. The absence of the crowd as a motif for the strangeness and unfamiliarity of his new urban context allows him to overlay the quiet spaces with an almost rural appreciation for its peacefulness. "I like it. I do not like it when it is so crowded and there are people around, like on Saturday."⁴⁴ Xuma's consciousness is still divorced from the masses who share his fate; he has yet to develop an awareness of the social relations which govern his movement.

But the reality of the control capital has over the bodies of its workers is starkly shown through the marching action of the migrant hostel dwellers to and from the mines. "In front of the long column marched an induna, a mine policeman, whose duty it was to keep order among the boys. And flanking the column on either side, ten yards from each other, walked others. The indunas all carried knob-kerries and assegais."⁴⁵ As Johannes and Xuma watch the approaching line of men Johannes explains,

They are not of the city, they come from the farms and some are from the land of the Portuguese and others are from Rhodesia. The white man fetched them. And those that are fetched must live in the compounds. It is the law here. But I came to the city like you and I am the boss boy for the white man so I do not stay in the compounds. They do not take many boys from the city for they do not like them.⁴⁶

The passage is attentive to the flow of capital (both human and monetary) between the country and the city. The labour of the country, defined by the unequal relations of the farms, supplies the labour for the industry of the city. The web of the migrant labour system organises the movement of the men physically and socially. The supervised march between the compound and the mine is a microcosm of the march between the farms and reserves and the city. The assegais and knob-kerries of the indunas are the immediate and tangible embodiments of an overarching ideological structure in which space is a weapon in the armoury of political control. Once in the city, the

migrants are managed and monitored within the confines of the hostel. But Johannes is mistaken if he imagines that his presence in the city is based on greater freedom of choice simply because he was not 'fetched' from the country and does not live in the hostels. He and Xuma are as captive to the manipulations of capital as the marching migrants. They too have been 'fetched' by a system which has forced them into the city by limiting their means of survival outside it.

Xuma's confusion during his first day at the mines and the meaninglessness of his work evidences his alienation from the means of production.⁴⁷

He worked feverishly. Straining his strength behind the loaded truck and running behind the empty truck and looking carefully to see if the dump had grown any bigger, and watching the sand from the earth to see if it had grown less. But it was the same. The same all the time. No change.⁴⁸

Xuma's fearful, frenzied movements juxtaposed against the static and unchanging mine dump explicitly reveal the entrapment of his identity in the fixed spaces of labour. He is beginning to be urbanised through the experience of mine work but his consciousness has yet to progress beyond its individual orientation to a vision of his role as part of a collective.

The first intimations of a decisive shift in Xuma's worldview become clear in a walk through the centre of Johannesburg on a winter's night three months after his arrival. He is involved with a teacher called Eliza, a young black woman tormented by dissatisfaction with her race and her aspirations for the trappings of white wealth. Her internalisation of white norms is destroying her and their relationship, a situation Xuma attempts to come to terms with as he walks.

Initially, he suffers disaffection from his Malay Camp surroundings, "But even those whose eyes showed how cold they were not alone. Most of them walked with a woman. Others had men friends. Only he walked alone."⁴⁹ The rift with Eliza is no ordinary lover's quarrel—her internal conflict predicts Fanon's critique of the destructive dependency of black subjectivity on white categories of identity.⁵⁰ The reasons for Xuma's walk through the city at night are thus from the outset linked to an oppressive social order. The personal and the political cannot be separated.

He neared the heart of Johannesburg and the people grew fewer. There were more white people now and they were different. They did not walk or look like his people and it was as if they were not really there. He stepped aside for them to pass and he heard their voices, but they were strangers. He did not look at them or watch them carefully to see what they said and how their eyes looked and whether there was love in the eyes of the woman who hung on the arm of the man. They were not his people and he did not care.⁵¹

For the first time in the novel, Xuma aligns himself with the city's black inhabitants, they are 'his people'. By contrast the whites move through the cityscape like ghosts. This is the world Eliza longs for and is denied. But in a reversal of the negation of the black self it is whites who are unreal, non-existent. They are defined in terms of the negative, of the actions Xuma does not take that would recognise their subjectivity. Xuma's walking reveals the binary zones of the 'settler's town' and the 'native's town'—the white inner city is prosperous and well-kept, the peripheral black location crowded and weary. Fanon writes, "The settler's town is a town of white people, of foreigners."⁵² Xuma's figuring of the whites as 'strangers' stresses their alien presence and undermines their monopolisation of the city space.

Standing outside the cake shop, he is asked for his pass by a policeman, "The policeman looked at it, looked him up and down, and returned the pass to him... 'Where are you going, Xuma?' 'I'm just walking.'" ⁵³ The simple reply ironically points to the politicality of movement on a number of levels. Firstly, Xuma's actions are determined by state policies that prohibit black people from being able to 'just walk'. Moreover, his walking exposes the polarisation of city space as it maintains these policies. Perhaps most importantly he begins to align himself with the black urban collective, an identification that becomes more apparent the longer he walks.

Xuma's passage through the city is unconsciously subversive. Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* tracks the ways in which ordinary citizens, commonly assumed to be passively guided by rules imposed on them by external authority, evade systems of external control through practices of the 'everyday'.⁵⁴ Daily activities such as reading, talking and cooking contain within them the unconscious means of escaping expected patterns of behaviour. For example, the inhabitants of the city reinvent its spaces at ground level through trajectories of walking. By selecting or discarding routes across the city, by seeking out shortcuts, scenic detours or simply alternative avenues between place A and place B, walkers articulate patterns of movement that constantly open up new spaces, close others and subvert the authoritarian strategies of spatial dominance. "The long poem of walking manipulates spatial organizations, no matter how panoptic they may be: it is neither foreign to them...nor in conformity with them...it creates shadows and ambiguities within them."⁵⁵ The city is subject to *strategies* of administration which attempt to limit the number of variables in any given environment and therefore to render it predictable. *Tactics* are those everyday practices that strategy has not been able to domesticate and thus represent the partiality of its control.⁵⁶ Walkers in the city unconsciously deploy tactics in ways that make its spaces less predictable and less orderly.

Xuma's walking may be described as a reinterpretation of the cityspace according to his own way of seeing—his movement through the city tactical in the ways suggested by de Certeau. He is beginning to understand himself as urban, but his resistance to the spatial impositions of the city are not yet consciously realised. Rather they represent an unconscious practice that creates slippages of meaning between the organisational imperatives of the city, rendering it open to variable interpretations that elude order. He stops where he is not supposed to, he steps aside but out of contempt rather than obedience, he chooses to perceive and engage with the city in ways that cannot be mapped out by the strategies of those in authority.

There are still aspects of Xuma's consciousness which limit and trap him within white paradigms. "The only place he was completely free was underground in the mines. There he was master and knew his way. There he did not even fear his white man, for his white man depended on him. He was the boss boy."⁵⁷ Although the mine may seem to offer Xuma more authority over the terms of his self-definition its very existence supports the system which consistently seeks to control him. It is inextricably linked to the spatialised dichotomy of the city and of society as a whole.

While it could be argued that Xuma's 'mastery' of the mine space unmasks the real material dependency of whites on black labour, his use of the term 'boss boy' registers an internalisation of demeaning white representations. The 'white man' may ask for his opinion underground but this is an empty gesture relative to the silence forced upon black South Africans in the socio-political realm. Xuma's freedom in the mine is a fallacy. Before he can understand this he must make another step, both physical and ideological, towards the emancipation of his subjectivity from essentialising notions of race. For Abrahams this means more than an identification based on class, it means knowing oneself as human being. The categories of the economic are also insufficient if they do not allow for what Abrahams describes in *Tell Freedom* as "the human heart"⁵⁸ that is, a humanism which is individual and universal.

It is necessary here to acknowledge once more the tension and overlap in *Mine Boy* between Marxist and liberal aspects of Abrahams' thinking. Consider for example his admiration for Alan Paton. Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* (1948) was published two years after *Mine Boy* and shares its rural to urban theme. The mass urbanisation of black South Africans that informs *Mine Boy* also compelled Paton to write black encounters with the city as invariably tragic. Yet Abrahams' travelogue *Return to Goli* (1953) describes him as the single white writer who has represented black South Africans with any authenticity, "Only Alan Paton, out of a great compassionate love had got beyond scratching at the surface of the black skin."⁵⁹

But as Coetzee observes, Paton's liberalism relied on discourses of paternalism and white trusteeship of black interests.⁶⁰ His protagonist in *Cry, The Beloved Country*, the Reverend Stephen Kumalo, travels from rural Natal to Johannesburg to find a son lost to the vices of the city. Although the text deals sympathetically with Kumalo it constructs him in terms of a simple,

almost archaic consciousness while other black South Africans in the book are assessed according to their acceptance of (white) Christian norms and rendered childlike and dependent on white guidance.⁶¹

For Paton the increasing contact between the urban and rural black communities is inevitable but regrettable. Conversely, Abrahams is insistent on the necessity of black South Africa's urbanisation and its entry into modernity. And whereas Paton's novel chooses not to engage with popular urban black culture, Abrahams understands it as vital to the working out of a collective identity embedded in class consciousness. For Abrahams, the city is the only space in which an awareness of class and consequently a drive for social and political change can be realised.

Abrahams' own experiences provide some insight into the conflicting aspects of his politics and his rejection of Marxism by the early 1950s. In his autobiography *Tell Freedom*, he documents his poverty-stricken childhood in the Johannesburg slum of Vrededorp during the 1920s and his belated access to an education that exposed him to the 'canon' of English literature, of which the Romantics would prove the most significant. As a teenager Abrahams worked for a period in the Bantu Men's Social Centre (BMSC), one of a number of institutions set up during the twenties as part of a liberal reform movement directed at Johannesburg's vibrant 'slumyard culture'.⁶²

At the BMSC Abrahams encountered W.E.B. Du Bois', *The Souls of Black Folk*. The imperatives of Du Bois' message of freedom across the colour bar shapes all of Abrahams' work but even more influential would be the lyrical imaginings of the Romantics, "The call of Harlem, Negro colleges, and the 'New Negro' writers was compelling. But Charles Lamb, Elia, John Keats, Shelley, and the glorious host they led, made a counter-call. And my mind's eye saw a peaceful land that offered peace to a poet."⁶³ The poetic vision of a 'peaceful land' dominates *Tell Freedom* and points to Abrahams' politics as humanist.

Set against the liberal discourses of his early education, Abrahams' was exposed to socialism during his studies at the teaching college, St. Peter's Secondary School in Johannesburg, where he came into contact with (predominantly white) Marxists. Through these connections he also spent time in Cape Town with the socially and politically prominent Gool family, who were part of a tiny number of 'coloured' elites. The waning influence of Marxism on Abrahams is recorded in *Tell Freedom*, "I had again marvelled unhappily at the ruthlessness with which the comrades seemed determined to herald in the New Future. I wanted to believe in that New Future that promised the equality and security of all men. If only they had room for pity, compassion and mercy...if only they allowed for the human heart."⁶⁴

Abrahams left South Africa in 1939 at a time when opposition to white hegemony was beginning to take on a more radical aspect. War-time inflation, increasingly repressive state intervention, and the Johannesburg municipality's failure to provide housing for an ever expanding immigrant population resulted in militant action. The location riots of 1937, 1942 and 1944, the police shootings of 1942, the bus boycotts of 1940-1944 and the squatter movements of the early 1940s were evidence of a growing consciousness of and organised resistance to state practice across class and ethnic divisions.⁶⁵ The ANC entered a new period of revitalisation and consolidation, and in 1944 its Youth League was formed. In August 1946, the year in which *Mine Boy* was published, the African Mineworkers Union staged a mass strike across the Witwatersrand.⁶⁶

What exists in Abrahams is a sensibility conscious of these changing responses to the dominant white state encapsulated in a movement away from liberalism towards an Africanist, socialist, and more militant politics. However, his work is also concerned with the humanist ideals to which he was first exposed in the liberal funded Bantu Men's Social Centre and which influenced his thinking throughout his life.

And yet the Marxist and liberalist aspects of Abrahams' writing in *Mine Boy* are not so incommensurate as Hogan and Jean-Phillipe Wade have argued. As I shall examine below the text establishes the authority of black action over white immobility by constructing movement through Johannesburg in terms of a class-awareness that is centred in the specificities of

individual, human experience and which combines the Marxist/liberal facets of Abrahams' thinking.

Xuma and Eliza's walk through the city's white suburbs is evidence of this fusion:

The streets grew broader and there were no people on them. On the side-walk was beautifully tended grass. And trees grew on the side-walk. The houses had big bay windows and through the windows they could see white people eating and drinking. And they could hear music floating out and the happy laughter of the white people.⁶⁷

The empty streets are signifiers of white leisure and private ownership, nobody needs to be outside because they have all the material and social space they require within the walls of their property. The suburbs are spaces that Xuma and Eliza traverse and yet the very act of walking defines them as a class which is economically and politically denied access to them. Concomitantly, their 'stroll' differs from Xuma's earlier pacing. It is more akin to the 'stroll' of Baudelaire's *flâneur* in its leisurely taking in of the suburban landscape. By extension the narrative of walking reworks the divided sites of the city through asserting an alternative mapping. White activity is caught within the gaze of the black walkers. The dual actions of moving and perceiving insist upon the agency of the black subject to transgress spatial partitions while the whites, safe but static inside their houses, become the viewed objects.

The power of the gaze is consolidated in their elevated view of the city a few paragraphs on. "Xuma turned and looked. He gasped, for below him lay the city, Malay Camp, Vrededorp, the mine dumps-everything. And it was strange to see it like that, as though he were above it, bigger than it. He knew it was all there but he didn't quite know where."⁶⁸ This scene is crucial to Xuma's transition from a labouring object fixed within spatial categories to a seeing, self-defining subject.

De Certeau argues for elevation above the city as transforming, "the bewitching world by which one was 'possessed' into a text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it."⁶⁹ From his position above the city, Xuma can interpret the 'text' of Johannesburg in ways that exceed its ground level dichotomies. It becomes an amalgam, a crossing over and entanglement of space. Its social and physical disparities are fused and indistinguishable. If, as de Certeau asserts, the city produces its own rational space as a means with which to repress resistant discourses, then Xuma perceives this space in terms of his particular subjectivity.⁷⁰ Standing on the hillside, Xuma is 'bigger than it.' He is empowered to see and name the sites of Johannesburg and by describing it as like 'a big farm'⁷¹ frames it within the country, pointing to the force and relevance of the referents of his rural past. Although Xuma's identity is increasingly rooted in the struggles of the black working class, he is simultaneously more than his class or race.

Xuma is represented as able to transcend the space of the city but Eliza is trapped. Eliza stared down intently. Time and again her eyes swept it from horizon to horizon. And there was a touch of hunger and loneliness in her stare. It was intense when she looked at the long winding road that climbed over the far hill and disappeared behind the horizon.⁷²

When Eliza views the city, she sees what she cannot have. Unable to psychologically escape its impositions her only solution is to physically leave. The question remains as to whether this will be enough to allow her some kind of peace. It seems unlikely that fleeing the city will quell the conflicting desires that plague her.

At this point it is important to emphasise that the humanist aspects realised through scenes of movement do not render the text politically unaware or negate Abrahams' recognition of the materialist aspects of oppression. Eliza's flight confirms the power of the state over the terms of black identity. Once she has gone, Xuma finds that the familiar sites which connect him to his arrival in the city are changed. Leah has been arrested for illegal liquor selling and her home has new occupants, "a house of strangers".⁷³ Xuma's points of reference in the city are shown as ultimately controlled by the white state.

I have considered four instances of black movement in the streets of Johannesburg. The performative encounters (both walking and dancing) of the men and women in Malay Camp which assert public presences but cannot lastingly alter spatial dictates; Xuma and Johannes' walk towards the mines and the march of the miners, which discloses the city's organisation around exploitative labour structures; Xuma's lonely excursion through the city at night, which emphasises the racist ordering of the cityscape but which also affirms black occupancy of place; and finally his stroll with Eliza through the white suburbs, which establishes black mobility over white immanence. These moments of movement in the text combine to form Xuma's identity as black and urban. And as Xuma's parameters of self-definition shift, so the spaces of the city are delineated not by white industry or leisure but by black labour, black relationships, black ways of being.

Mine Boy writes black South Africans into the city but this is not sufficient to mark its spaces as socialist. Because in *Mine Boy*, Abrahams understands the realisation of a universal humanism in the context of class, the encounter that propels Xuma towards consciousness and steers the city towards a socialist identity must encompass both.

Xuma's relationship with Paddy or 'Red', an Irish foreman on the mines and Xuma's overseer, is the final catalyst for his 'becoming human' and a signifier for cross-racial co-operation within a socialist paradigm. Red's name both references his hair colour and suggests his politics. He is the fictional equivalent of white socialists involved in African trade unionism, specifically the white Trotskyist Max Gordon.⁷⁴ Abrahams' admiration of Gordon⁷⁵ and his use of Red as a conduit through which Xuma comes into consciousness in class and human terms elides the paternalistic realities of white involvement in black politics.⁷⁶ However in the context of the novel's ambitions it demarcates the city's future as socialist, rather than simply white or black. The race binaries that characterise the city are to be rendered entirely obsolete.

After Leah's arrest, Xuma meets Red on a hill overlooking the city. Against the latter's claim to understand him, he reacts with an uncharacteristic anger that discloses a very real awareness of how his movement and existence are managed.

'You say you understand,' Xuma said, 'but how can you? You are a white man. You do not carry a pass. You do not know how it feels to be stopped by a policeman in the street. You go where you like. You do not know how it feels when they say, 'Get out! White people only!'⁷⁷

Red's response is to urge Xuma to identify himself as a man rather than just a black man. "When you understand that you will be a man with freedom inside your breast. It is only those who are free inside who can help free those around them."⁷⁸ His words summarise Abrahams' own philosophy and bear out its socialist and liberal elements. On the one hand, a fully developed consciousness will lead Xuma away from a race based identity towards mobilisation against capitalism along class lines. On the other, personal freedom is stressed as the only avenue through which action is possible. In order to be individually free Xuma must transcend the limitations of segregated space. He must think beyond the categorical.

To be a man first, think like a man first, and then a black man...It would mean people are without colour...He walked through the empty streets and his brain buzzed...he felt light and free and gay. People were people. Not black and white people...*The vision carried him along*. Man the individual, strong and free and happy, and without colour...Man in his grandeur.⁷⁹ (My emphasis)

He wakes the next morning to the bitter realisation that nothing has changed. The poverty of his situation is absolute and the rigid binaries between 'white' and 'black' space seemingly impermeable. Sitting in a squalid and overcrowded eating house he cannot help but compare it to "the places where white people went. White people did not have to crowd into the place and sit on top of each other...They had nice eating houses in almost every street of the city."⁸⁰ The paradigms of white dominance are confirmed and Xuma is left alienated and lonely, unable to escape its spatial impositions.

Abrahams' solution is to reorient Xuma's humanism in terms of class consciousness embodied in the mine space. It is through a claiming of this space that he is able to affirm his identity both as a member of an oppressed class and as an individual. Arriving at work he discovers that Johannes and his white boss Chris have been killed by a beam collapse deep within the mine. He and Red retrieve the bodies together and in the face of management's refusal to take responsibility for the accident, assert solidarity through a call to strike. "Xuma felt good suddenly. Strong and free. A man. 'We are men!' he shouted. 'It does not matter if our skins are black! We are not cattle to throw away our lives! We are men!'"⁸¹

The didacticism of the scene is not difficult to interpret. The deaths of Johannes and Chris, the bringing up to ground of the corpses by Xuma and Paddy, and Paddy's choice to side with the black workers over the white management are all clear statements about the nature of a shared humanity that rises above race barriers. "Xuma smiled. Now he understood...One can be a person first. A man first and then a black man or a white man."⁸²

What is significant is Xuma's reaction to the violence of the arriving police. He runs.

Then Paddy's voice drifted to him. 'Do not run away, Zuma!' But the feet were pounding behind him and the desire to be free was strong, so he ran...After a time no one followed him. Still he ran. And he could still hear Paddy shouting: 'Do not run away, Zuma!' Around him the streets were empty. He was alone in the world. He ran through empty street after empty street. Through Malay Camp, past Park Station.⁸³

Xuma's flight is not cowardly. It represents his final interior movement towards a politicised consciousness, a progression manifested through his running. Xuma's walks through the city have been avenues for an increasing self-reflexivity and enlightenment. The moment has arrived for his thoughts to be actualised. He is not running away from state coercion, he is running towards a future in which its dictates will be challenged. The emptiness of the streets may signify the loneliness of the leadership role he has taken on for himself but he cannot achieve personal freedom outside the framework of class solidarity. His decision to return to the police station is the culmination of months spent traversing the spaces of the city and his own subjectivity. It represents a full coming into awareness in class and individual terms.

I must go. The Red One is there. He is not a black man but he is going to jail for our people, how can I not go? And there are many things I want to say too. I want to tell them how I feel and how the black people feel.⁸⁴

Xuma's proclamation will occur from a context where his movement will be severely restricted, from the prison cell. If the prison is the ultimate weapon of state control over the occupation of space, Abrahams' ending of the novel with Xuma's willing incarceration overturns this dominance. The prison is a place from which black subjectivities can be spoken, not suppressed. The need for movement as an avenue for consciousness has served its purpose and been surpassed.

Abrahams is the first black South African writer to insist upon the city as a primary source for black self-definition and in so doing constructs Johannesburg as a locus for the working out and expression of black modernities. *Mine Boy* wants to insert black urbanisms into the cityscape and offers a counter-statement to earlier white writing on the city that marginalised black occupancy of its spaces. Partly, this is a real reflection of the city's changing demographic and the marked increase in its black population during and after the Second World War. But it is also a need to assert the value of black places such as Malay Camp against the spatialised racial binaries of Johannesburg in the 1940s, which figured sites of black habitation and labour in terms of their aberrance or their potential for exploitation.

At the same time, Abrahams' aim is to confirm black identity within the paradigm of a universalised humanity and equality. In *Mine Boy* at least, this must be framed by a socialism that transcends classifications of race and their spatial polarisations and attends to individual

potentiality and enlightenment. Class consciousness is the catalyst for the city's transformation, and in this regard the formal qualities of the text emphasise its socialist imperative. Abrahams deploys the street as a site for encounters and performances that publicly validate black identity. Movement through the streets, particularly walking, reveal Johannesburg's organisation around capitalist means of production but simultaneously allow for individual freedom. Ultimately, Abrahams' vision for the city seeks to wholly transcend race and to actualise a society centred on individual and class affiliations. *Mine Boy* is neither entirely Marxist nor humanist. It is an ideological hybrid that maps out alternate spaces in the segregated city through the confirmation of marginalised places and those who inhabit them.

Notes

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³ Michael Wade, "South Africa's First Proletarian Writer," in *The South African Novel in English*, Kenneth Parker (eds) (London: The MacMillan Press, 1978), p. 96.

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See also Sally-Anne Jackson, "Peter Abrahams' 'Mine Boy': a study of colonial diseases in South Africa," in *Research in African Literatures*, 38. (2) 2007, p. 153-169, in which Jackson argues that 'somatic, psychological and psychosomatic' diseases were the consequence of the unequal social structures of colonial capitalism.

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- ³⁴ *Mine Boy*, p. 15.
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- ³⁶ *Ballantine*, p. 4.
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- ⁴⁶ *Mine Boy*, p. 34.
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- ⁴⁸ *Mine Boy*, p. 42.
- ⁴⁹ *Mine Boy*, p. 62.
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- ⁶⁷ *Mine Boy*, p. 147.
- ⁶⁸ *Mine Boy*, p. 148.
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- ⁷⁰ De Certeau, p. 94.
- ⁷¹ *Mine Boy*, p. 148.
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⁷⁴ B. Hirson, *Yours For the Union- Class and Community Struggles in South Africa* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1989).

⁷⁵ In *Tell Freedom*, Abrahams (1956: 258) writes, “it was not until Max Gordon appeared on the Rand that black trade unions were formed that really served the interests of its members and that were run along business- like trade union lines.”

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⁷⁷ *Mine Boy*, p. 172.

⁷⁸ *Mine Boy*, p. 173.

⁷⁹ *Mine Boy*, p. 174.

⁸⁰ *Mine Boy*, p. 177.

⁸¹ *Mine Boy*, p. 181.

⁸² *Mine Boy*, p. 182.

⁸³ *Mine Boy*, p. 182.

⁸⁴ *Mine Boy*, p. 183.