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# Literature, Planning and Infrastructure: Investigating the Southern City through Postcolonial Texts

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## Abstract

This article explores the ways in which postcolonial literary and other cultural texts navigate, decode and in some cases re-imagine the infrastructures that organize urban life, particularly in the postcolonial cities of Johannesburg, London and Delhi. By considering the constantly shifting relationship between urban planning, the organization of public space, and various other forms of human intervention, including the literary, we argue that the ways in which urban spaces are mapped in creative practice can explore, negotiate and at times disrupt and re-construct that relationship. The selected texts trace a trajectory that begins in the Global South, shifts to the Global North, then turns back to the South again, and all have been selected for their contemporaneity and city focus. We begin by considering how the broken, scattered forms and scatological energies of Soweto poetry and the non-fictional work of Ivan Vladislavić and Mark Gevisser, lay down alternative urban blueprints of Johannesburg. The article then turns to Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) and Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* (2011) to argue that they present London as a "Southern City" in which the fragmented cityspace is perforated by the alternative spaces created by an immigrant experience. Finally, Rana Dasgupta's non-fictional depiction of "hyper-accelerated" Delhi, read alongside the fictional work of Manju Kapur, is used to demonstrate how literary forms not only reflect, but also stimulate different modes of spatial imagining as they ask searching questions of urban infrastructure. Ultimately, the article understands literary texts as playing an active, interventionist role in our understanding of city space, and therefore as exhibiting what might be termed a dynamic, instrumentalist aesthetic.

## Keywords

Literature

Planning

Infrastructure

Postcolonial city

London

Johannesburg

Delhi

Writing as mapping

## Introduction

This collaborative essay explores the ways in which postcolonial literary and other cultural texts navigate, decode and in some cases re-imagine the infrastructures that organize urban life, particularly in the postcolonial cities of Johannesburg, London and Delhi. By considering the constantly shifting relationship between urban planning, the organization of public space, and various forms of human intervention, including the literary, we argue that the ways in which urban spaces are mapped in creative practice can explore and negotiate, and at times disrupt and re-construct that relationship.

The essay's selected texts trace a trajectory that begins, by design, in the Global South, shifts to the Global North, then turns back to the South again. All the texts have been selected for their contemporaneity and their city focus and include fictional, non-fictional and poetic forms. Following a salient opening image supplied by Manju Kapur's layered and linear literary maps of the Southern city of Delhi, the beginning sections consider the broken, scattered forms and scatological energies of Soweto poetry and the work of Ivan Vladislavic and Mark Gevisser, arguing that they lay down alternative urban blueprints of Johannesburg. The article then turns to readings of Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) and Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* (2011) to argue that they present London as a "Southern City" in which the fragmented cityspace is perforated by the alternative spaces created by an immigrant experience. Finally, Rana Dasgupta's non-fictional depiction of "hyper-accelerated" Delhi, read alongside the fictional work of Manju Kapur, is used to demonstrate how literary forms not only reflect, but also stimulate different modes of spatial imagining just as they also ask searching questions of urban infrastructure.

Taking these examples from Johannesburg, London and Delhi as touchstones, the essay asks how literary and other cultural texts might explore and re-imagine the infrastructures that organize urban life. Can creative practices such as literary writing that explicitly engage with cities ask questions of urban space and its infrastructural coordinates, perhaps then stimulating different modes of spatial imagining? In all the examples we investigate here, the texts tack between geographical cityscapes and draw horizontal lines through them, thereby exposing forms of structural violence that exist within and between their urban infrastructures.<sup>1</sup>

Ultimately, the article understands literary texts as active, instrumental contributions to the understanding of city space that exhibit a dynamic interventionist aesthetic. We contend that these postcolonial texts of the Southern city do not merely represent urban space. By mapping routes through the urban landscape—whether by car or on foot—their representations further supply a means of interacting with and making sense of its planned violence, and so of

exercising and expressing agency. In short, postcolonial urban novels, non-fictional writing and poems can be seen to plot resilient conceptual pathways for the reader through, around and beyond the city's delimitations.

### **Indexing infrastructure**

In Manju Kapur's novel *Home* (2006), 21<sup>st</sup>-century Delhi's crowded public spaces perpetually impinge upon family and private life. To escape the crowded streets and pavements clogged with vendors, Kapur's characters have to move upwards. There, already-crowded roof terraces provide space for business extensions, new rooms for newly-weds, and cubby-holes for beleaguered students. Those seeking privacy have repeatedly to do battle with noise, mess, rising piles of rubbish and a host of other individuals battling in similar ways: "pedestrians, rickshaws, scooters, taxis, buses, and cows pick[ing] their way around each other" (Kapur 2006, 109-110).

[Nisha's] new home was above her husband's shop. Its entrance was from the back gully, a dumping place for rubbish. The paving was rutted and uneven, the foot slipped between the debris of eternal construction, loose brick, piles of sand, bajri, and puddles of stagnant water. (322)

As this short quotation demonstrates, *Home* recreates the overriding atmosphere of congestion in part through its verbal devices, most notably, its proliferation of lists—lists that are then further littered with piled-up adjectives. The shape and movement of Kapur's sentences in the novel convey a Delhi that, in the words of urban commentator Rana Dasgupta (2014), is "hyper-accelerated", at one and the same time "already mature", decaying and yet postmodern (439). Significantly, Dasgupta's non-fictional account of the city, to which we will return, is characterised by similar devices. His breathless, sprawling sentences strain at conventional linguistic limits and, as in Kapur, are once again packed full of lists further congested with adjectives. It is as though the capacity of the language has to be stretched in order for readers to make sense of the Southern city, in all its impossible fullness. In both texts, crafted literary structures at once evoke and index the infrastructural proliferation and contingent spiraling chaos of the city.

Ivan Vladislavić's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) is set in post-apartheid Johannesburg, the other Southern city under consideration here. The novel's protagonist, the retired proof-reader Aubrey Tearle, again resorts to this similar list-making, specifically focusing on the accumulation of corrigenda as he attempts to come to terms with the end of apartheid. As his familiar urban environment begins to break up, Aubrey finds that the changes he experiences are metonymically reflected in a decline in spelling standards. He begins to move through the city armed with an elaborate master list and the seventh edition of the Concise *OED*, berating fellow urban-dwellers for their misspellings; but to no avail. Johannesburg is in a state of constant flux: "new varieties of dirt" accumulate on the pavements, and "old foundations mark every bit of empty land in this city, as if a reef of disorder lay just below the surface, or a civilization

had gone to ruin here before we even arrived” (Vladislavić 2001, 6, 51, 200). Eventually, the whole city itself seems to be on the move, “becoming fluid to itself”, collapsing into a vast sinkhole for which there seems to be no remedy (Nuttall 2004, 745). Even so, Aubrey, like Vladislavić himself, continues to use literary devices to map and in some sense still or control the drastically changing city. A plenitude of verbs overcomes the more static qualities of Aubrey’s word lists:

A flying building! There was a moment of blank embarrassment, while a cloud of red dust swirled in the gaping socket. Then something crackled in the distance and a shanty town appeared on the horizon, just where the store had diminished to a speck, grew larger with frightening rapidity, and fell with a crash into the hole.

(Vladislavić 2001, 212)

Vladislavić’s depiction of urban infrastructure is invested with, and in turn symbolically enacts, the shifting conditions of post-apartheid Johannesburg with which Aubrey the self-conscious “European” is struggling to come to terms, even as the physical landscape is used to convey the inevitable coming of a new era of socioeconomic turbulence and political change.

### **Producing urban infrastructure: the literary city**

The infrastructural approach to urban narratives that we elaborate in this essay is founded on two main premises. First, we contend that literary representations of urban space, along with other creative cultural mappings of the city, offer a critical purchase on those infrastructures and the planned violence that they initiate and facilitate. In so doing, they have the capacity to imagine alternative city-spaces, or ways of inhabiting those spaces. They also ask disruptive questions of urban infrastructure, including in actual practice, on the ground. As this implies, literature as a mode of conceptualizing the world *and* as a cultural material practice exists in an ongoing dialectic with the infrastructures it represents. Second, we hold that the infrastructures that give shape to urban spaces are far from politically or culturally neutral. They have been used to engineer social divisions that sustain various power hierarchies and economic inequalities. It is our contention that such divisions are perhaps especially evident in cities with strong colonial pasts and postcolonial presents, such as the three we focus on here. In these urban contexts, literary and cultural texts exert an important investigative and diagnostic power.

While the example of the apartheid city of Johannesburg offers perhaps the clearest instances of the planned violence we describe, segregation occurs at various architectural levels within and between different sections of cities all over the world, including in London, the former imperial metropolis. Different types of violence are built not only into broader legal, social and economic structures, but are manifested in and facilitated by the physical infrastructures that give

shape to the landscapes of post/colonial cities—in the breadth and angle of a street; the orientation of an inner city grid relative to its seemingly more unstructured outlying areas; or the juxtaposition of horizontal in relation to vertical housing, of slums against high-rises.

The concept of infrastructural re-imagining *through* literature draws in part from Raymond Williams’s understanding of how structures, including cultural structures, mould social life. He considers:

the study of culture as the study of relations between elements in a whole way of life; [and finds] ways of studying structure, in particular works and periods, which could stay in touch with and illuminate particular art-works and forms, but also forms and relations of more general social life; to replace the formula of base and superstructure with the more active idea of a field of mutually if also unevenly determining forces. (Williams 2005, 20)

These lines point to a dynamic process of re-conceiving social structures—a process in which literary language, with its investigative and transformative possibilities, has an important part to play. The uneven and contentious topographical fields produced in the literary narratives, poems and other cultural texts we are concerned with here, for example, offer ways of imaginatively unraveling and re-knotting the social fabric. This literature intervenes in, and so also provides a point of insight into, the “perceived-conceived-lived triad” that informs Henri Lefebvre’s (1998) foundational notion of “the production of space”. Literary and other cultural texts produce “representational spaces”, “space as directly *lived* through its associated images and symbols”, a process that “overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects”. Within Lefebvre’s formulation, literary and other cultural narratives thus give us moments of intersection into, and a crystallization of, “the dialectical relationship that exists within the triad of the perceived, the conceived, and the lived” that always “grasp[s] the concrete” (Lefebvre 1998, 38-40). As the anthropologist Brian Larkin (2013) has also argued, it is by “being alive to the formal dimensions of infrastructures” that we can best “understand what sort of semiotic objects they are” and analyse “how they address and constitute subjects” (329). To Larkin’s analysis we add the contention that these formal dimensions can be seen as fruitfully embedded within, and at the same time interrogated by, literary representations of urban infrastructure, exemplified in the texts we address here.

Our understanding of violence builds on the 1960s work of pioneering theorist Johan Galtung (1969), the first to draw the important distinction between personal or direct violence—where there is an actor that commits the violence—and *structural* or *indirect* violence, where there is no such actor:

[W]hereas in the first case these consequences can be traced back to concrete persons as actors, in the second case this is no longer meaningful. There may not be any person who directly harms another person in the structure. The violence is built into the structure and shows up as unequal power and consequently as unequal life chances. (170-171)

Moreover, structural or indirect violence is most explicitly expressed in situations where resources are unevenly distributed, a condition that manifests in the unevenly developed infrastructure of postcolonial cities. What is more, however, is that “the *power to decide over the distribution of resources*” is likewise unevenly distributed, a structural condition that is, for Galtung, synonymous with forms of “social injustice” (171).

James Gillingham (1996) and, following him, Slavoj Žižek (2008), usefully develop Galtung’s definition of structural violence, showing how it is written into the make-up of a society so deeply that it is “normally invisible” (Gillingham 1996, 192). Not only is this form of violence distinct from acts of direct or “behavioural violence”, such as homicide and capital punishment: it is, in fact, “the main cause of behavioural violence on a socially [ ... ] significant scale” (196). For Žižek, too, visible and invisible forms of violence are socially distinct, the one being direct and obvious, the other pervasive and insidious. Though neither Galtung nor Žižek discuss the diagnostic effects of the literary, their focus on a perspectival “stepping back” from the moment of direct violence that, say, the position of a social victim allows, can be compared to, and adapted to fit, the reception of and immersion within a cultural text—be it a theatrical production or a literary narrative, a piece of street art or a creative installation. These experiences of reception are akin to stepping back, allowing us “to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible” violence, “performed by a clearly identifiable agent”, so that the broader structural conditions, and the forms of indirect violence that give rise to it, are thrown into relief (Žižek 2008, 1-4). Far from being a purely “deterministic” process, then, the literary is here invested with a capacity to respond to and potentially rewrite urban infrastructures and the planned violence inscribed within their contours, generating alternative ways of viewing, understanding and inhabiting those cityscapes.

In her discussion of the “Literary City” of Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall further elaborates this important connection between city infrastructures, their social effects and writing, when she asks: “What literary ‘infrastructures’ are giving the city imaginary shape?” (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 195) In the essay, she explores “the imaginary infrastructures that surface in fiction, producing writerly, metropolitan maps”, looking in particular at “the street, the cafe, the suburb, and the campus” (200). Novels and other narrative forms, she suggests, corroborating Larkin, map their protagonists’ movements between, through, across and around infrastructural barriers: they narrate the way in which the regulatory



mechanisms of various urban infrastructures work while at the same time speculating about the possibilities of resistance to these processes.

Elaborating on Larkin and Nuttall, we further suggest that literary narratives (amongst others) have the symbolic capacity to demonstrate how the infrastructural borders and divisions—so typical of the layout of the post/colonial city—can be transgressed. Governmental and economic attempts to kettle or direct the spatial movement of their urban citizens, and to engineer social classifications and behavioural habits, can in literary texts be revealed as flimsy, obsolete and evanescent. The implication is that these structures can be ignored, defiled, departed from, reinterpreted and used in alternative and subversive ways. Together with Nuttall, we emphasize not only the way in which these infrastructures surface in the texts, but also how they translate into formal registers. Genre choices, narrative breaks, perspectival shifts and stylistic techniques (such as the lists in Kapur or Vladislavić), all work to map the cityscape while at the same time beginning to produce in subtle, imaginative ways, alternative urban environments.

### **Johannesburg: Transgressing Grids**

In hyper-segregated Johannesburg, the way these ideas of planned violence are interrogated in and through literary texts manifests in particularly vivid ways. This is exemplified in Ivan Vladislavić's prescient *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006), published some five years after *The Restless Supermarket*, already mentioned. Vladislavić's insights are further sharpened when his city 'portrait' is placed in juxtaposition with a reading of Mark Gevisser's autobiography, *Dispatcher: Lost and Found in Johannesburg* (2014), as well as Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe's keynote city-study, the essay collection, *Johannesburg, The Elusive Metropolis* (2008). In their different ways, these three works all betray a self-conscious preoccupation with how the spatial and topographical dimensions of the city might be critically represented.

Vladislavić's text is, after all, a self-proclaimed "portrait"—a word that immediately connotes a frame—and this shape is multiply repeated in the gridded segmentations that constitute the layout of the narrative and recall the grid of the city map. Configuring itself as a map of the city in this way, the text takes on interesting multi-dimensional forms. Its two sections run from "Point A" to "Point B", establishing the movements of both Vladislavić's first-person narrator and the narrative itself as located within, and plotting a route through, Johannesburg's three-dimensional cityscape. Throughout, the linear unfolding of the narrative is broken up into a series of frames or "portraits" comprised mainly of scene- and character-sketches. Indeed, the way in which these compartments insinuate themselves into the narrative could be said to enact on a formal level the infrastructures of segregation that define the cityscape: "Rather than

meeting face to face, the two suburbs turn their backs on one another” (Vladislavić 2007, 20). The repeated interruptions that arise also bring a constant oscillation between, first, a sense of restriction within the late- and post-apartheid infrastructure, and, second, a sense of flow along the multi-directional routes that are always available to the privileged narrator. Importantly, his whiteness and maleness, and the fact that he is often shown driving a car, demonstrates his position of privilege, one that facilitates his relatively free movement (as James Graham has shown: 2007, 72).

Segregation similarly preoccupies Mark Gevisser (2014) in the opening chapter of his autobiography, *Dispatcher*, in which he describes a childhood game that first stimulated his imaginary engagement with Johannesburg’s segregated city-space. As a young boy, Gevisser would open the *Johannesburg Telephone Directory* “at random and settle on a name”, find it on his “parent’s street guide, *Holmsden’s Register of Johannesburg*”, and then “dispatch an imaginary courier” from his own house to the random address, plotting and imagining a route through the city, a game that he retrospectively, and titularly, calls “dispatcher” (7-8). Playing this game in the segregated Johannesburg of the 1970s revealed to the young Gevisser the way in which the depiction of urban space, with its infrastructural continuities and discontinuities, could be complicit with, in this case, the ideology of apartheid, a structural system of racial discrimination etched into the city’s urban planning. Attempting to dispatch his imaginary courier to “Mr Mphahlele”, who “lived only two pages away from us”, Gevisser suddenly realises that

there was no possible way of steering him from page 77 across into page 75. Sandton simply ended at its eastern boundary, with no indication of how one might cross it, or even that page 75 was just on the other side. [ ... ]

Thus began, cartographically, the dawning of my political consciousness. (12)

Gevisser’s political awakening occurs “cartographically” in response to the manipulation of mapped urban infrastructure because he has attempted to transgress, if only by chance, the ideological boundaries of the apartheid state as they are expressed through the contours of its urban planning. Turning to later editions of *Holmsden’s* maps of Johannesburg, Gevisser charts a long tradition of “Soweto-denial in Johannesburg’s cartography” and the tactics used by cartographers to facilitate this (15-16). Often, the enlarged insets of the dense “Central City Area” or “the downtown area” would be placed over “the space where Soweto should have been”, literally erasing it from the urban environment. As Gevisser describes it, Soweto was transformed into “a leering dark underside to the city, its evening shadow” (16).

Of special structural interest is the shape followed by Gevisser's narrative, which strikingly resembles Vladislavić's. Written as part-autobiography, part literary non-fiction, Gevisser's book collates archival, factual and anecdotal materials before plotting a route through them that is derived from his own memory maps and personal experience, from walks and drives both real and imagined. City spaces in transition, Nuttall also writes, are all about "movement, change, crossings" (Nuttall 2004, 747). From these and other examples we can offer a more generic observation about 21<sup>st</sup> century urban representation and the question of "who represents?". In the literary articulation of 21<sup>st</sup>-century post/colonial urban space, including of Delhi, as our final focus on the work of Rana Dasgupta will also show, it is often a linear individual journey-narrative (or life narrative) that is used to cut through and forensically explore the restrictions and closure of gridded city space. Reinforcing this contradistinction of lived linear narrative and rigid and planned segregation, the opening pages of Gevisser's memoir are interspersed with numerous facsimiles of historical urban plans and maps, shedding further light on the way in which the separate areas and townships of apartheid and post-apartheid Johannesburg were turned away from one another in ways that made it impossible for other than imagined cross-city journeys to take place.

As this suggests, formal experimentation using mixed genres and idioms has allowed writers in the post-apartheid city to investigate and re-inhabit particularly repressive urban infrastructures. Yet, interestingly, as early as the 1970s, at the height of apartheid, the so-called Soweto poetry of Mongane Serote, Mafika Gwala, Oswald Mtshali and others, interrogated apartheid divides in comparable ways. Soweto poetry used scatter-shot verbal techniques, smashed forms and scatological energies to break up symbolically the township's stifling restrictions, as was reflected in the repeat-patterning of its infrastructures, the rows upon rows of tiny houses, with their shared outdoor toilets (Chapman, 2007). This writing not only critically investigated the lines of the urban landscape by reiterating and retracing them, therefore; it also on some levels sought to imagine, if not actually to trigger, their collapse from within. Here we might think, for example, of how the refrain-like invocation of the "match-box" houses of the township in Serote's *Yakhal'inkomo* (1972), with its connotations of imaginative and physical subjection, gives way in Gwala's *Jol'iinkomo* (1978) to slogan- or graffiti-like forms. Even as the broken and staggered layout of the words on the page resists the imposed anonymity in Serote, the mix of cultural reference points in Gwala (jazz, civil rights, gangster films) calls up other kinds of imaginative possibility and other possible worlds. As Loren Kruger has convincingly shown in her discussion of Johannesburg as an "edgy city", "narrative fiction" and other kinds of literary performance, have "shaped the ordinary perception of place in the world outside the fiction", and in so doing enables "the reconstruction of performances that inhabited, shaped, and contested those structures and, I would argue, those that imagine future alternatives" (2013, 11, 12). This clearly bears comparison with the structural and formal crossings of Vladislavić and Gevisser, as they not only contravene apartheid's spatial rulings but also endeavour, in comparable and radical ways, to

reach out spatially to those areas of the city that had previously been rendered invisible or obscure, and that remain hazy, just out of reach, or “elusive”—a term that Gevisser borrows from Nuttall and Mbembe.

Nuttall’s and Mbembe’s *Elusive Metropolis* highlights the tricky evasiveness of the “Afropolis” of Johannesburg by itself “[pointing] to the gap between the way things actually are and the way they appear in theory and discourse”, highlighting how cities “always outpace the capacity of analysts to name them” (2008, 25). Addressing this belatedness, the co-writers’ own critical language seeks to capture the multi-dimensional spaces of the city by using, once again, listing and concatenation; in this particular example, by stringing together a row of binaries: “an intricate entanglement of éclat and somberness, lightness and darkness, comprehension and bewilderment, polis and necropolis, desegregation and resegregation” (30). This once again suggests a Lefebvrian dialectics, a constant oscillation between opposite states of reality. Taken in its entirety, the text of *Elusive Metropolis* blends and juxtaposes different generic and disciplinary mediums, from its opening sociological and historical essays through to the less formal, semi-fictional and more personal articles and interviews that comprise the book’s second section, “Voice Lines”. Unilinear narrative, the editors imply, is not a sufficient medium through which to convey the complex topography of Johannesburg’s city space. The “voice lines” they evoke, by contrast, are configured as multiple routes that can once again be traced through and across the apparent rigidity of the city’s infrastructure.

As Kruger has argued, spatial disruptions and contraventions are found not only in “narrative fiction” but also in “visual depiction”, another form of cultural production relating to the elusive city (and other cities besides). Zafrica Cabral’s *Gold in Graphite, Jozi Sketchbook* (2010), comprised of the stark and elaborate sketches the artist has made of the city since 2005, is a prime example of such visual re-imaginings of urban space. Here, too, a creative cultural text opens out and critically interrogates the urban status quo, as Stephen Walter will do, for his part, in respect of London in the next section. Despite the interconnectedness of architecture and other city structures that Cabral emphasizes through the detail of his work, at the same time, like Gevisser or Vladislavić, his collection of drawings quite explicitly rejects any linear or overarching narrative. The textual segments accompanying the sketches remain isolated from one another, limiting their description to the history of the specific building represented in the image, operating more like a guidebook than a fictional narrative. The consequent alienation effect is further compounded by the fact that every sketch is eerily devoid of human inhabitants, with the occasional figures that do appear evoked by way of a few, casually sketched lines. The text’s protagonist is, quite clearly, not a human agent, but rather the city itself. If there is a “key” to these numerous “portraits”—to invoke Vladislavić’s terminology once more—it is the artist’s own omniscient gaze, who has the ability to inhabit a number of urban locations for extensive periods as he sketches them. His own

prolonged access to the city unlocks it for his reader/viewer, who can in turn gaze upon those infrastructures without the threat of violence—be it structural or physical—that might otherwise be lurking within, behind or around them.

### **London: A Southern City**

Two recent novels about the British immigrant experience in London, Brian Chikwava's *Harare North* (2009) and Selma Dabbagh's *Out of It* (2011), map the cityscapes of the old metropolis through the investigative eyes of their immigrant protagonists, Zimbabwean and Palestinian respectively, in ways that relate to the Southern city mappings outlined above. Tracing a trajectory from the Global South to the post-imperial metropolis, the two narratives, though different in both style and content, imagine London as itself a part-fragmented "Southern city" perforated with the alternative spaces inhabited by migrants. Migrant urban spaces in the two novels are dislocated and dislocating, inflected with memories from elsewhere—processes that merit comparison with Johannesburg or Delhi. Through memory, characters simultaneously inhabit both London and distant, more explicitly violent cityscapes: the urban present becomes, paradoxically, both immediate and alienated. Read in this way, we submit, these accounts of the city begin imaginatively and conceptually to resist the spatial control and social engineering that political and legal infrastructures are designed to instate, as was seen also in the examples taken from Johannesburg.

The subversive re-interpretation of London as an idealized and desirable metropolitan location is recorded in the very title of Brian Chikwava's novel, *Harare North*, which re-positions the city, through its relational geographies, on a global map. The number of Zimbabweans seeking in London an escape from the political oppression of the Mugabe regime from 1999 was such that almost every person in Zimbabwe knew someone, or was in contact with someone, living in London.<sup>11</sup> Within the geographical and spatial imagination of Zimbabweans—*not only* those who sought asylum in and immigrated to London, *but also* those who were still in Harare—the city became a kind of northern extension, or district, of the Zimbabwean capital: "Harare North". In this new configuration, the southern city of Harare proper is turned into the implied global centre, a move that clearly subverts outright the economic and cultural hierarchies that shape relations between the cities.

A comparable perspectival shift in *Harare North* manifests at the level of narrative diction, encouraging readers to re-imagine the more intricate details of London's infrastructural cityscape from an amalgamated or underspecified immigrant's point of view. The unnamed first-person narrator's perceptions of London are related in a non-Standard English confection, a complex linguistic mesh that breaks grammatical rules even as the immigrant flâneur tracks his unregulated way through the city. Take one of the novel's climactic scenes:

In the sky one big mama cloud is gathering all its children around sheself. I look at she and she look at me with she big face. My feeties, they take off again. Out of the park. The air hold still, something shift but I am still among the living and I breeze through them Brixton streets like the winds as darkness fall down like dust on Harare North. I can walk. I can't smile. I get hungry. My feeties is vex, my stomach is crying and I am walking into them mental backstreets; I want Marks & Spencer's food.

To the left of Marks & Spencer's bins, some distressed cry for help rip through unlit air. [ ... ] I have not even take a dozen steps but I know that the winds have already rip the sky open; two drops of rain have already find my face on them backstreets of Harare North.

[ ... ] Above us a big mama cloud throw down one of she children—some big bale that come down crashing onto the streets like great water sachet soaking everything. I get glimpse of Shingi ahead and call his name; water run down my face and go inside my mouth. Big mama o' she throw sheself down at them pointy roofs and church spires—they rip through she and she splash into tatters on the streets of Harare North. (184-186).

As the lengthy quotation demonstrates, the stylized syntax melds together different strands of Nigerian pidgin and Jamaican patois, along with elements of Cockney and other London slangs, to give the Zimbabwean character a distinctly cosmopolitan idiolect that is itself invested with his own cross-border movements and hybrid cultural identity. Chikwava cumulatively develops his protagonist's linguistic idiosyncrasies across the novel, as the narrator searches for his "graft", repeatedly worries about his "feeties", and walks through and inhabits "them mental backstreets"—streets that, though in London, are reinterpreted through his experiences of Harare.

This development of a glossary that readers are forced to learn as they read, slowly acclimatizing to the nuances of the language, encourages them to interpret the city through unfamiliar channels, even as the narrator himself navigates his way through the peripheral sections of the city, undercutting with movements its formal economic and governmental circuitries. The paragraph gap that jumps from the comment, "I want Marks & Spencer's food", and then immediately locates the protagonist "To the left of Marks & Spencer's bins", not only points to his contraventions of the rules of trespass pertaining to private property, but also to how he flouts economic niceties by taking advantage of an international corporation and its upmarket food brand through stealing leftover food (binned not necessarily because it has gone bad, but because of health regulations). The trespassing movements traced by the reading eye, therefore, conceptually follow the acts of contravention the protagonist has already committed, and, arguably, by tracing the possibility, encourage an identification with such acts.

Selma Dabbagh's novel, *Out of It*, initiates similar geographical superimpositions and alternative mappings both on a textual level and through its broader narrative structures. As the title suggests, this is a self-consciously spatial text that questions the inter-relationship between the contrasting spaces of London and Palestine's urban areas. As Dabbagh has explained, her depiction of Palestine rises out of an imaginative amalgamation of its different urban spaces, rather than being located in a specific part of Gaza or the West Bank.<sup>iii</sup> In an interview with Lindsey Moore, published in a recent edition of the *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, Dabbagh explained that she used the novel to explore a "linkage between Palestinians everywhere", one rooted in their "political consciousness as the connector" and "the position of international underdog, of being non-people and the unwanted in society" (2014, 8). The novel's depiction and superimposition of contrasting urban spaces is central to facilitating the cross-national relationship Dabbagh describes here. London is imaginatively inflected with Gaza's more overtly violent topographies and its mainstream population is critiqued for their failed "political consciousness", in direct contrast to the Palestinian protagonists who come into contact with them.

The novel is split into five parts, bearing titles oriented towards specific geographic areas: "Gazan Skies", "London Views", "Gulf Interiors", "London Crowds" and "The Gazan Sea". As is clear, these sections are further organized so as to sandwich London, the metropolitan capital, between Palestine's own urban spaces. This juxtaposition, combined with the movement of the novel's characters as they traverse these two geographical zones, forces the reader to keep intercutting between and contrasting the two places: the reading process itself once again commits a series of contraventions. The friction that results generates a sense of cross-border political responsibility between the two main geographical spaces that the novel's characters inhabit. As Imam, one of Dabbagh's Palestinian characters, walks through the "allocated channels" of London's urban space, she observes how the city's inhabitants "moved along the grooves cut out for them", concatenating this movement along the prescribed infrastructural coordinates of the city spatially with their unquestioning political consciousness:

The news became so terrible: an onslaught on a West Bank town, rumours of a massacre, of mass graves, and yet the chattering did not ease up for a second, there was no pause. The humanitarian organisations were being refused entry. The dead were rotting in the streets.

*...it was bliss, it really was. Sailing on Thursday? ...*

*...no one's going to go near you when you're breastfeeding...*

*...she does it to wind me up, every morning...*

Food could not get into the town and the water was dirty; medical professionals spoke of the spread of cholera and typhoid.

*...if I were single and could still get it up...*

*...he has the same land but better money...*

The UN monitors still were not allowed to enter. The numbers of dead flew between the tens to the thousands. Day after day the town was pounded by missiles, hit by tank shells, mowed down by bulldozers.

*...are you taking your camera on holiday?...*

*...you are always in my heart...*

*...the most amazing curtains...*

The chatterers that filled the streets became complicit with each missile that blasted the town, each sheet-wrapped body thrown into a mass grave, each child screaming outside a demolished home. As soon as Imam had the satellite wired up to bring sympathetic commentators to her, she no longer felt any desire to be out there, in streets delirious with inanities. (Dabbagh 2011, 185-186; italics in the original)

The passage powerfully epitomises the geographical slippage at work throughout the novel. It is through the juxtaposition of such contrasting fragments that *Out of It* forges, indeed forces, a connection between the banality of the apparently depoliticized everyday life of London's citizens, and the violent horrors faced by the population of Gaza.<sup>iv</sup> Like Chikwava in *Harare North*, Dabbagh works out these processes through the intersecting pathways traced by her different characters as they negotiate London's urban space, thereby allowing her reader to share in the novel's perspectival shifts and to contemplate the political connections between the violence of Gaza and the rigidly unmoving—and metaphorically infused—urban infrastructure of the post-imperial metropolis.

Dabbagh's formal and generic exploration of these multiple dimensions of Palestinian-cum-London life works to reclaim in particular the realm of the private, those spaces of individual and family life that are not defined by political circumstances. One of the novel's overarching political points is that these are spaces taken for granted in London, but rare and difficult to come by in Palestine. The placing of the "Gulf Interiors" section in the middle of the geographically-oriented sections, and so at the heart of the novel as a whole, is therefore significant. It is through its evocation of these personal interiors—those parts of the city and of people's lives not seen from the street,



unrepresented in the media—that the novel is able to deconstruct stereotypes and assumptions that have been attached to Palestine in the Global North. At the same time, the narrative demands a new engagement with the politics of occupation, dispossession and displacement at both individual and global levels. London’s urban infrastructure, juxtaposed with and opened up by the colonial environments of 21<sup>st</sup>-century Palestine, becomes a way through which to articulate political concerns concerning historical responsibility and ongoing social and economic complicity.

We once again conclude this city section by turning, as before, to a set of visual representations that complement our written examples: the artist Stephen Walter’s depictions of London. In work including *The Island* (2006-8), *Hub* (2007) and *London Subterranea* (2012), Walter seeks out alternative ways of viewing London through tactics that strikingly resemble those of Chikwava and Dabbagh (Walter 2014). Just as *Harare North* subtly recasts different segments of Brixton through its estranging language, Walter’s depictions of the city and its arterial routes, that from afar appear like any normal map, are in fact made up of thousands of words. These words are then boxed into the infrastructural demarcations and architectural lines of the cityscape. Through these proliferating words, sometimes framed as comedic bubble writing, the subjective histories and personal experiences of different sections of the city are insinuated into London’s urban infrastructure.

In Walter’s *London Subterranea*, for example, the arterial routes and words are drawn in white on a black background, a device that contrasts with the colouring of conventional maps and so emphasizes the “underground” nature of the work’s contents. Walter fleshes out the cityscape with inset stories of the violent crimes that took place in the various different areas: Euston Square is engraved with the words “1885 -- Irish Nationalist Bomb Attack”; a street near to Elephant and Castle with “Oct 19 1917 Zeppelin Bomb Attack Kills 10”; and, of course, Russell Square with “7/7 Bombing”. Reminiscent of Vladislavić’s or Cabral’s projects, this mapping is constantly in the process of storying the city and reinterpreting the (here Northern) metropolis, demanding that its observers look at familiar urban infrastructures in different, more historically informed, ways.

Chikwava, Dabbagh and also Walter “write” alternative experiences of London’s urban space not simply to re-present or “map” an often voiceless or unarticulated perspective -- though this is of course a politically imperative and important task. Like Gevisser above, or Dasgupta in the next section, they also show how texts of different kinds create alternative imaginative pathways through the city’s complex infrastructural and legal grids, and so provide new ways of engaging with its divisions, occlusions and obstructions.

## **Delhi: Concatenated Modernity**

This final section circles back to post-imperial and post-millennium Delhi, as evocatively described in Rana Dasgupta's non-fictional urban travelogue, *Capital: A Portrait of Twenty-First Century Delhi* (2014), and Manju Kapur's Delhi-based fiction *A Married Woman* (2003). The two texts, though generically quite distinct, are joined in their recognition that the crowded, hyper-accelerated, intensively globalizing Indian capital outlines the shape not only of the subcontinent's 21st century, but of the disjointed unfolding of the world city into the future: it inscribes "the normal story of our age" (Dasgupta 2014, 444, 446). Both authors' readings of the city therefore also trace the marked (dis)continuities that Delhi shares with postcolonial counterparts such as Johannesburg, as well as with London in its Southern incarnation. In their different prose media, both writers also give confirmatory exemplification of the case that has been made throughout, that literary texts provide diagnostic tools through which violent impositions of urban planning and economic segregation can be conceptualized, decoded and, to an extent, questioned.

*A Married Woman*, like all of Manju Kapur's Delhi-based novels, present a congested, agitated city forged out of the pain of Partition, that violent rupture that gave birth to both India and Pakistan. After 1947, as both she and Dasgupta are aware, hundreds of thousands of displaced people eventually made a home in the city. 21<sup>st</sup>- century Delhi consequently remains scored through with the startling divisions and bizarre juxtapositions associated with the history of Partition. Temporality is layered and divisive; cultural and national values are in flux; spaces are concatenated. Everywhere, the potholed roads resemble the dirt roads of villages (Kapur, 2003, 17-18; Dasgupta 2014, 23). Property prices sky-rocket even as construction is piece-meal due to a shortage of building supplies (Kapur 2003, 64-65).

Kapur's central characters in the novel, the eponymous married woman Astha and her husband Hemant, devote many of their meagre conversations to tracking the ever-rising value of their plot of land. Hemant's own constantly expanding business deals move in tandem with the economic fortunes of the chaotically inflating, self-replicating city. Violent, materialistic, populated by individuals obsessed with "getting on", this urban space particularly difficult and frustrating for women to inhabit, held up as they still are as icons of social and national harmony. To escape from these restrictions and obsessions, Astha seeks out clandestine affairs and other alternative interests, in her case painting, and tries to find ways of leaving the city entirely. Yet these journeys of escape in *A Married Woman* always ultimately return them to mashed, congested and concatenated Delhi—a return facilitated in a literal, infrastructural sense given that the city constitutes India's largest traffic nexus, albeit one set in a near-permanent state of gridlock (Kapur 2003, 295). It is a fact on which Dasgupta, too, frequently dwells.

Another city “portrait”, as the sub-title suggests, *Capital* is Rana Dasgupta’s love-hate song to Delhi and its singular brand of modernity—uneven, riotous, savage, exhilarating. Delhi, Dasgupta observes, is a place of entrenched feudal inequalities, incoherently meshed with a globalised mass-culture, and (again) born out of conflict and partition; a ceaselessly developing conurbation where the brand-new is always already old and decaying. Mirroring the experience of inhabiting the city, the book’s mostly untitled chapters rocket the reader through a series of formative post-1991 Delhi experiences which include outsourcing, Americanization, corruption, urban violence, and the accumulation of rubbish, to name a few. These are then interspersed with chapters that dwell on equally formative moments in the city’s history and which simply bear the year as their title: 1857, 1911, 1947, and so on. As with Nuttall and Mbembe’s “Voice Lines”, these socio-economic and historical case studies are threaded through with the interviews Dasgupta conducted with prototypical “Delhi-ites”, in which the flavour of their speech and emotion is pungently captured despite the Standard English that is used (a self-conscious decision, explained by the author in his prefatory note). By interspersing his movement through, and stoppages in, Delhi’s clogged motor-way system with the individual stories of his various interviewees, Dasgupta lays out the city’s chaotic street infrastructure before then plotting these individual routes through it.

By capturing the characteristic experience of another postcolonial city of the car (like Johannesburg), Dasgupta’s narrative prose creates something of the effect of sitting in a traffic jam with the car windows open. He hears the street voices and other noises that swirl in; he observes (and the reader along with him) the random movements of pedestrians as they thread their way through the vehicular throng. Harmonizing with these gridlock effects, his sentences are animated, elongated, inflated with clauses, spiked with strong adjectives and equally strong contrastive binaries. As with Vladislavić or Chikwava, this is an urban language that pushes readers to step back critically from the experience of the city even as it immerses them in its chaotic, pell-mell effects.

In these several ways, *Capital*—like Kapur’s two novels cited in this essay, or the urban non-fictions of Gevisser and Vladislavić—is a text that relentlessly follows the contours of the infrastructure through which a postcolonial urban violence is propagated, exposing its exclusions and restrictions, as well as its enticements. In a troubling but powerful metaphor, Dasgupta paints a portrait of the city as a living organism, expanding, contracting, and then expanding again, breathing and spluttering on the fumes of its incessant traffic. The physical manifestations of cyclical capital accumulation resemble a kind of relentlessly multiplying bacterium as seen through a microscope. Informal housing is constructed on the city’s outskirts by the arrival of rural Indians desperate for work. As the city grows and that land becomes valuable, the slum dwellers are dispossessed and their housing demolished to be replaced by new high-rise deluxe flats and malls. The slum dwellers move further outwards, to areas where new rural Indians are also arriving.

Soon these plots of land become valuable, and the brutal process begins all over again. The appetites of capitalism, and the Capital, are insatiable. Indeed, for Dasgupta, Delhi the physical city becomes the infrastructural manifestation of capital accumulation. His prose (both the commentary, and its form) astutely captures the way in which the infiltration of a ruthless neoliberal ethic into 21<sup>st</sup>- century India gives shape to its cities, and how the physical layout of these cities in turn perpetuates, through the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and poverty, the individualist ideology of a hyper-capitalist society.

Yet, though Dasgupta's response to the postcolonial city may be among the most adrenalin-fuelled of those considered in this essay, all of the writings discussed can be taken as investigative approaches to city space. They are joined in how they mingle linearity and concatenation, in different proportions, to forge cognitive links between the violently contrasting aspects of the city: its banality and its horror, its immense wealth and abject poverty, its individual stories and collective responsibilities. These are juxtapositions to which a globalised city life may desensitize us, yet to which the texts re-alert the reader, bringing us up close to its stark clashes of experience and forcing us to look again. In the midst of all this uncontrolled energy and unevenly distributed chaos, the works in their different ways also then repeatedly ask whether it is possible to imagine other forms of urban being. Are there other ways of writing on the postcolonial city's walls?

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<sup>ii</sup> Chikwava explained his choice of title at the first "Planned Violence" Workshop on January 30-31, 2013, at King's College London and entitled "Empire and Post-Empire in the Global City": <http://plannedviolence.org/brian-chikwava-reading/>

<sup>iii</sup> <http://plannedviolence.org/selma-dabbagh/>

<sup>iv</sup> A political point that now carries even greater resonance after Israel's "Operation Protective Edge" that dominated western media through the Spring and Summer of 2014.