

Reading and Roaming the Racial City: R. R. R. Dhlomo and *The Bantu World*

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ABSTRACT

Scholarship on the literary inscription of urban space in early twentieth-century South Africa has tended to focus on Sophiatown and the writers of the 1950s 'Drum generation'. In this reading, the idea of Johannesburg as it emerges in *Drum* magazine is seen to contrast sharply with earlier literary renditions of the city as a place of vice and moral decay. In this article, I draw attention to an important but little-known precursor to this emergent tradition of writing and claiming the modern city, namely journalist and writer, R. R. R. Dhlomo. As the author of a moralising fable about the depredations of city life, *An African Tragedy* (1928), Dhlomo is conventionally positioned as one of those writers whose reading of the city would inevitably be surpassed. This perspective ignores the significance of his popular satirical column, "R. Roamer Esq." which appeared in the commercial African weekly *The Bantu World* over a period of ten years. Concerned in particular with the urban and peri-urban environments of late 1930s Johannesburg, the column maps out a detailed urban topography. Using the first-person perspective of an observing and observant urban street-walker/roamer, it calls attention to particular sites of engagement and encounter such as the court room, the train station and the street as well as the more intimate spaces encoding black urban marginality such as the backyard servant's room. In this paper I consider what forms of the metropolis emerge from Roamer's verbal mapping as well as what kinds of city figures, topographies, movements and interactions are inscribed. I argue that the column grants particular significance to the experience,

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interpolation and movement of the black body in segregationist-era urban space, offering a striking early reading of the racial city as both a place of constraint and a zone of inventive resistance. The article makes a further claim for the importance of African print cultures as an index of urbanity, of African newspapers as significant but overlooked sites of city inscription and black urban life in which the boundaries between the ‘literary’ and the ‘journalistic’ are frequently breached.

KEYWORDS

R. R. R. Dhlomo, *The Bantu World*, city literature, satire, African print cultures, African literature, South African literature, spatiality

In this paper I explore a little known early example of South African city writing, namely a satirical column “R. Roamer Esq.” which was published between 1933 and 1943 in the multi-language, commercial weekly newspaper, *The Bantu World*. I read this column in relation to conventional understandings of South African literary history; in particular, the growing consensus which locates the earliest forms of vibrant city inscription in the 1950s and, more specifically, in the context of *Drum* magazine. As many scholars have argued, *Drum* writers asserted a precarious claim to the rapidly whitening city of Johannesburg through a defiant city habitation and a range of innovative registers, characters and themes (Nkosi 1983; Chapman 1989; Gready 1990; Nixon 1994; Fenwick 1996). This is extended in arguments that the 1950s ‘Drum era’ represented a watershed moment in the depiction of the city in South African literature, inaugurating hitherto unexplored urban sensibilities and aesthetic styles (Nuttall 2008; Samuelson 2013). The literary history presented as shift or rupture inscribes a particular view of the past – in this case, of pre-1950s city writing – as offering a mostly negative and moralising rendition of the city as a place of vice and moral decay. Thus the ubiquitous ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ trope has come to be understood as the story of a hapless innocent overwhelmed by the wicked city, a plot which can find its only resolution in the return to the rural idyll. Exemplifying this tradition are William Plomer’s *Ula Masondo* (1927), R. R. R. Dhlomo’s *An African Tragedy* (1928) and Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948), all of which end with “a plea to rural integrity” (Chapman 1996, 133).¹ It is against this tradition of city writing, and these ideological concerns, that the *Drum* writers are conventionally positioned.

This reading of South African literary history, I argue, downplays the complexity of urban writing and representation in the early twentieth century. A closer look reveals a much wider range of ‘literary cities’ than can be accommodated by the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ thematic. Contrary to the prevailing view, many of these early forms of city writing offer a more complex and ambiguous reading of the city-countryside dynamic than the story of city vice (and rural integrity) implies, foregrounding forms of urban survival and agency in a place that has become home. Choosing the mode of social critique rather than moralising opprobrium, this writing engages the conventions of realism in order to articulate the complexities of urban life, tracing lines of oppression, negotiation, resistance and constraint. In works such as Douglas Blackburn’s *Leaven* (1908), *I am Black* by J. Grenfell Williams and Henry John May (1936), R. R. R. Dhlomo’s short stories and sketches published in *The Sjobok*,² Wulf Sachs’ *Black Hamlet* (1937), Peter Abraham’s *Mine Boy* (1946) and *Blanket Boy’s Moon* (1953) by Peter Lanham and Mopeli Paulus, the city emerges not as decontextualized moral abyss but as a multifaceted social and material space organised through complex systems of race and class-based exploitation. Even Dhlomo’s *African Tragedy*, the reading of which has to some extent been overdetermined by its mission provenance and its paratextual framing as warning, could also be seen to hint at possibilities other than the bad city morality tale.

Here it would seem that Paton’s resonant interpretation of the ‘Jim Comes to Joburg’ theme, coupled with the desire to mythologize ‘the *Drum* decade’ as an exceptional moment, has rendered other forms of city inscription less visible. Also at issue is the way in which the mode of earnest moralising exemplified in Paton’s novel has tended to be conflated with more realist traditions of social and political engagement foregrounding material processes and structures. As such, the differently-inflected genres of social critique and moral condemnation are rendered one and the same. Returning to the more immediate concerns of this article, I suggest that the orthodox narrative of pre-1950s writing also ignores the significance of the world of public print culture, in particular the existence of a vibrant African city press – such as *The Bantu World*, *Inkundla ya Bantu*, *Worker’s Herald* and *Ilanga lase Natal* – which articulated various modes and means of habitation in a decisively urban space. Rolphes Dhlomo’s popular newspaper column entitled “R. Roamer Esq.” is one such example, a column which tells the story of a resolutely urban protagonist and his journeys around the city of Johannesburg. As a text which takes African urbanity, and not city vice, as its starting point, it

offers yet another compelling example of a heterogeneous tradition of South African city writing, thus confirming continuities with later enunciations rather than emphasising rupture or break.

In approaching the ephemeral form of the newspaper column as an important instance of African urban inscription, I reiterate arguments made elsewhere about the significance of African print cultures for a proper understanding of the rich history, continuities and contexts of popular African authorship and literary production; in short, of the newspaper as an important early arena (in the absence of other platforms) of African literary-cultural expression (Couzens 1974, 1985; Newell 2002, 2013; Barber, 2012, 2016; Peterson, Newell & Hunter 2016; Askew 2016; Sandwith 2019). As suggested above, this includes a claim for the newspaper as an important index of urbanity and the corresponding argument that local African print cultures constitute a significant, although frequently overlooked, arena for the inscription of both city life and the life of the city.

Aside from South African literary history, my reading of “R. Roamer Esq.” draws some of its logic from debates in the field of urban scholarship; in particular, an ongoing tension between those perspectives in which the city is imagined as a place of constraint and inequality and those which privilege agency and resistance. Tensions are also evident in the location and purview of the gaze, between those which seek to understand “the structuring of the city as a whole” focusing on “the political economy of the urban process” and those studies which, drawing on the work of Michel de Certeau, give epistemological privilege to the viewpoint of the urban street walker and the “micro-worlds of everyday life” (Soja 2002, 189). Urban theorist Edward Soja has expressed concerns about “the degree to which such micro-level theorizing has been unproductively polarising critical urban studies, romancing agency and the view from below to the point of labelling all macro-level perspectives taboo, off-limits, politically incorrect” (189–90). Against the reductive dualism of celebration and pessimism – agency and structure – he calls for “a creative combination of micro and macro perspectives, views from above and below, a new critical synthesis that rejects the rigidities of either/or choices for the radical openness of the both/also” (190).

Similar tensions are played out within South African scholarship on the city. This scholarship comprises a rich body of work going back to the 1970s and 80s which reads urban space through an economic-infrastructural lens focusing on processes of industrialisation, urbanisation, slum cultures, inequality, forced removals, informal economic activity and township struggles. Lamenting the absence of

attention in this scholarship to “city form and city life”, Sarah Nutall and Achille Mbembe dismiss this body of work as a kind of puritanical “loathing”, nothing more than a species of anti-urbanism in which the immoral city must be condemned (2008, 11). In the conflation of moral repugnance and social critique, the gestures of literary scholarship are replicated in the domain of urban theorising.

Dhlomo’s satirical column which appeared every week over a period of ten years in the early 1930s and 40s competed for space in the cacophonous mix of adverts, images, editorials, letters, stories, poems and articles that made up *The Bantu World*. The generic, stylistic and ideological eclecticism of *The Bantu World* is echoed in other contemporary South African newspapers (*Inkundla ya Bantu*, *Umteteli wa Bantu*) as well as those emanating from other African locales (Newell 2013; Barber 2016). As I discuss elsewhere, Dhlomo’s arch, irreverent and often ambiguous satire of South African life in the segregationist years was at odds with the arguably more conservative tenor of the (white-owned, black-edited) newspaper in which it appeared, one which tended to restrain its political critique within the bounds of an acceptable Capitalist-Christianity.³ In its relentless parody of segregationist Johannesburg, “R. Roamer Esq.” provides one instance of the ways in which the consensual editorial structure could be breached and undone (Sandwith 2019).

Over the ten years of its existence, the column gathered a loyal following amongst *The Bantu World* readers, many of whom were prepared to put pen to paper in defence of its wry representations of city life “as the best truth available in the market place of truth” (‘The Eagle’, *The Bantu World* 6 May 1933, 10).⁴ Other sellers in the market place of truth included the Communist newspapers, *Umsebenzi* and *Umvikele Thebe*, the mining industry-linked paper *Umteteli wa Bantu*, established in 1921 as a counter to black radicalism and a brace of commercial black newspapers controlled by the Argus Printing and Publishing Company, of which *The Bantu World* was one. As scholars have noted, the period saw the demise of many independent, African-owned papers as these came under the increasing sway of more powerful commercial interests (Couzens 1976; Switzer 1988). In the absence of independent alternatives, the black commercial press became an important focus for urban African elites, taken up for the purposes of public debate, political engagement, moral education and social gossip. They were also spaces in which African journalists such as Herbert and Rolphes Dhlomo, Jordan Ngubane, R. V. Selophe Thema and Godfrey Khuzwayo would begin to record their (often vivacious and idiosyncratic) impressions of black urban life and thereby establish a popular following. Also gaining a presence in

the writing of the city – and, in particular, in emergent debates about gendered modernity – were African women journalists, many of whom – like Johannah ‘Giddy’ Phahlane, Gladys Ramokoena, Rossie Khabela, and Mary Mabel Mpulo – first established a name for themselves in the popular genre of the Letter to the Editor.⁵

As Kevin McNamara has argued, city literature has an important value in exploring the interplay between urban environments and human behaviour; “literary city-texts” make the city legible not only in the sense of a documentary record but also in the ways in which they “selectively compose, deform and thereby defamiliarize the known in order to stage the process of making sense of the city, whether it is perceived from above or within” (2014, 5). In this reading of Dhlomo’s column, I pay attention not only to its value as a representation of the city and modes of city being but also to the ways it disassembles and recomposes the orthodox city in various acts of estrangement that mirror the condition of the urban black inhabitant him/herself. Dhlomo’s column was written during a period spanning the earliest slum removal programmes and the Second World War. It was witness to the consolidation of the segregated city through the removal of ‘black spots’, the erosion of African political and economic rights and various protest movements against pass laws, wages and working conditions (Roux 1948; Walshe, 1970; Lodge 1983). It underwent several changes in title in the ten years of its existence – from “What Roamer Sees About Town” to “What Roamer Hears about Town” to “R. Roamer Speaks to the People” and finally “R. Roamer Esq.”. The titles allude to particular urban modalities – sight, hearing and speaking, encompassing observation and witness, gossip and hearsay as well as the sharing and telling of stories and anecdotes. The final moniker “Roamer Esq.” – fusing urban wanderer and man of status – asserts a claim to respectability in defiance of racist nomenclatures.⁶

As the title of the column also suggests, Dhlomo’s literary city gives central place to the tropes of movement, wandering and journeying both as habitual urban practices and as enactments of citizenship. In this sense, Dhlomo’s column invokes both the pleasures (and provocation) of aimless city roaming and the associated metropolitan ideal of possessing the city through wandering and looking. The use of the word “roaming” could also be seen as a calculated riposte to prevailing white anxieties about escalating African urbanisation, often encapsulated in the threat of Africans ‘roaming’ the streets. Also pertinent is the historical prohibition, in Johannesburg and other Transvaal towns, on Africans using the sidewalks (Roux 1948, 122). The stories and anecdotes collected on his various city journeys provide the material for Roamer’s column. As the

narrator-protagonist Roamer repeatedly affirms, his various “peregrinations” around Johannesburg – by bus, train and taxi and on foot – lead to a proliferation of urban stories (*BW* 24 June 1933, 8).

Dhlomo’s column employs two central discursive formats: first, the conventional opinion piece or dramatic monologue (using the first-person plural ‘we’ and addressing a narrowly-defined, ‘in-group’ audience described as ‘members’) and second the mode of the dramatic dialogue between two characters named ‘Joshua’ and ‘Jeremiah’. The question of form is important for an understanding of the particular city experience that is inscribed. Characterised by repetition, elision, textual ‘roaming’ and meandering, Dhlomo’s city stories are incomplete, provisional and often ambiguous; they have no proper beginning (often starting in medias res) and resolution is always deferred. The fractured, unstable form of Dhlomo’s city inscription is an important part of its defamiliarizing effects. In addition, the serial nature of the column, the weekly shifts in subject matter and the inclusion of multiple vantage points result in a fragmented, truncated and elliptical rather than all-encompassing or immediately legible view of the city, one which mirrors the micro-level, anti-totalising strand of much city theorising in the present. As a form which can be attentive to its audience it was also necessarily shaped and provoked by the readers themselves.

The nexus of story-telling and city journeying bears a close resemblance to the European flâneur tradition – a “strolling spectator” on “leisurely city walks” who scans the streets and records his observations in the form of “feuilleton sketches and witty essays” in the daily press (Lauster 2014, 140). This is the “passionate, invisible, male observer” (Nesci 2014, 72) who “takes pleasure in abandoning himself to the artificial world of high capitalist civilization” (Lauster 2014, 140) and whose accounts of city scenes, vignettes and characters vividly encode the nineteenth-century city street as both rich sensorium and alluring/threatening phantasmagoria. In the work of cultural theorist Walter Benjamin, as Lyndsay Bremner argues, the flâneur is inscribed as a central “trope of the metropolitan consciousness”, one who disregards the official city in favour of “fashioning an alternative aesthetic out of the trivial, the marginal and fragmentary aspects of street life” (2010, 35–6).

As in the European tradition, the city of Johannesburg in Dhlomo’s column is presented at street level, from the perspective of the mobile traveller-observer. Archiving a compendium of city movements and city stories, the column both inscribes a detailed “rhetoric of walking” (de Certeau 1984, 99) and complicates the nineteenth-century European ideal by drawing attention to the ways in which this mobility is curtailed by the regulating norms and material-legal practices of 1930s segregationist

South Africa. In this sense, Dhlomo's Johannesburg marks certain affinities with the unidentified, abstracted city of de Certeau's late twentieth-century reflections, cast as a grid-like, repressive or at least intolerant space demanding a certain kind of conformity which must be negotiated by its users. As is well-known, De Certeau's reading of the formal city as characterised by "an ensemble of possibilities *and* interdictions" (1984, 98 my emphasis) tends to grant greater significance to the individualist and quotidian practices of improvisation, insinuation and subversive 'rewriting'. By contrast, Dhlomo's meticulous realist mapping of segregationist-era Johannesburg – the apartheid city-in-the-making – places emphasis on the various forms of interdiction, prohibition and surveillance which face the would-be flâneur, thus foregrounding an urban topography of regulation and constraint. Dhlomo's city inscription documents (and satirises) both the formal interdictions that compose the racial city (fences, signage, police surveillance, force and legal decree) as well as the more informal or unofficial means of social control articulated through habit and customary practice. In this sense, it gives an account of what Bremner has described as "the countless mechanisms of control and humiliation" (2010, 37) which mark the racial city, thus giving privilege not to the city figure of urbane detachment but rather to "the colonised subject's striving against the odds" (Titlestad 2012, 29). As Catherine Herbert has argued, this is also true of African novels written in the postcolonial period, many of which consider "some of the limits of modernist flânerie as a universally available subject position" (2014, 203).

Dhlomo's urban topography places emphasis on division, boundary, compartment and obstacle; in this reading, Johannesburg emerges as a disjunctive, non-synchronous and non-cohesive space comprising freehold township, inner-city slum, municipal location, white suburb and criss-crossing city streets. Dhlomo's hodgepodge city of limits and discontinuities anticipates contemporary readings of the Johannesburg space as "edgy" and uncoordinated, a city "developed through speculation" rather than "orderly planning, leading to a layout of oddly shaped and unevenly developed districts" (Kruger 2004, 3). A key emblem of spatial division in Dhlomo's column is the fictional world of 'Timbuctoo', a multi-valent, shifting topos signifying both a remote and mysterious African 'world apart' and the absurdity of legislated racial segregation. Alongside Timbuctoo are other fictional spaces mapping various aspects of the socio-political condition such as "Dakwastad" (Drunk City) and "Spukpukfontein" (a spoof on colonial naming). The column thus evinces a tension between realist city

mapping and documentation through meticulous naming (streets, tramways, bus routes, landmarks) and a representation of the city as fantastical, parodic, even nightmarish, space characterised by sealed-off spaces, “pickup vans” and the “myrmidons of law” (*BW* 25 March 1933, 8).

The central spatial categories articulated in Dhlomo’s rendition of 1930s Johannesburg are the magistrate’s court, the police station and the Native Affairs Department (where passes and exemptions are processed) as well as various arenas of segregated use such as the train station, the post-office, the park, the elevator and the bus or tram stop. Other spaces encoding black urban marginality are the out-of-town location and the back yard suburban room. As many examples of post-colonial and post-apartheid city writing attest (Nuttall 2008; Herbert 2014), the street emerges as a particularly resonant space in the urban topography. In Dhlomo’s reading, the street is alternately inscribed as a place of possibility and encounter as well as an environment of anxiety and fear in which unequal social relations are enacted through verbal and physical abuse and where the social co-ordinates of control and ownership are demonstrated and enforced. A column entitled “Gesien”, for example, presents the spectacle of the free agent walking through the city who is repeatedly stopped by ‘Law and Order’ and asked to show his pass:

It is only those who have been “gesien” ten or twelve times a day on Sundays by members of Law and Order who will say “hear! Hear!” to us today. Last Sunday, April 14 1940 if we were “gesien” five time for our special pass we were “gesien” ten times. And what actually made this business almost humorous was that on one occasion we were “gesien” twice by the same people on the same spot!

(*BW* 20 April 1940, 4)

“Called by a finger of the right hand, with a ‘Hey, Kaffer!’”, the African on the street has no choice but to “run like blazes to them.” What ensues is a public display of power and control where policemen, who strut about like “peacocks” (25 March 1933), elicit the requisite gestures of black abjection and servility before the subject of surveillance can pass on. In a textual portrait that anticipates Mongani Wally Serote’s rendition of a man looking for his pass in the poem “City Johannesburg”, Dhlomo’s column gives attention to the ways in which the body of the less-than-citizen is disciplined and distorted into the frantic postures of servility and compliance. The use of the trope of

seeing raises an important dimension of Dhlomo's treatment of the racial city – 'Roamer' is 'gesien' as in hailed or interpellated by the law in routine, everyday rituals of public debasement. In this way, he is made both visible and invisible as interloper, offender or at least one who must justify his presence in the city. The notion of 'gesien' also gestures towards the condition of being set apart or marked by the possession of black skin, of the black human body as inevitable provocation whose presence in, and passage through, the city must be sanctioned by the law. Aligning this practice with the Nazi persecution of Jewish people, Dhlomo makes the ironic proposal that those who have been "gesien" are identified as such "by a blue-coloured flower or pin pinned on your coat lapel" (*BW* 20 April 1940, 4).

Elaborating on the minutiae of the regulated city, Dhlomo presents a litany of city interdictions including segregated transport, prohibited entrances and proscribed public spaces such as Joubert Park in central Johannesburg which Africans may not cross on their "way from King George Street to Twist Street or from Twist Street to King George Street" unless they are walking their white employer's dog (*BW* 11 July 1942, 4). In another instance, the informal prohibition on blacks entering white suburban homes via the front door is rendered in comical terms through the parody of 'white boss' speech: "wena ikona come in lapa front door. Wena come in lapa back door...never mind your nice clothes you wear" (*BW* 22 November 1941, 4). Dhlomo's reading of the city of Johannesburg pays attention to the ideological ramifications of spatial distinctions – the ways in which spatial exclusion encodes white supremacy by distinguishing between the "chosen" and the "despised" (*BW* 25 October 1941). In this city, Roamer reveals, we are "always made to feel our cheapness, our Nothingness and our utter voicelessness"; "the feeling of Nothingness grips us even in such places set apart solely for our use" (*BW* 1 November 1941, 4). As Mbembe argues, "the physical distances that separated the races were largely understood to consecrate moral ones" (2008, 47). In Roamer's reading, this moralised spatial order in which privilege is determined by race is disguised by the disingenuous rhetoric of black autonomy and 'retribalisation' which ensures that Africans will be "allowed to enjoy freedom and to live their lives far from Europeans" (*BW* 18 January 1941, 4).

A similar attention to the micro-politics of the racial city is evident in Dhlomo's attention to naming as regulatory, racist practice. As Roamer sardonically asserts after an encounter with police, "Kafir" was "our new name given to us at that moment by Law and Order." Also

pertinent are the ways in which the African in the city is made generic and infantilised through appellations of 'Jim', 'Mary' and 'boy', an order of naming which also makes it possible to circumvent the social respect implied by 'Madam' and 'Sir'. As Roamer remarks, "This sort of baptism is a recognised practice in this country where every nigger looks like the other nigger" (*BW* 10 May 1941, 4). As in another contemporary rendition of the racial city – namely Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* – the act of naming renders the black city dweller invisible. The use of the word 'nigger' indicates an awareness of the larger diaspora of racial violence which was a commonplace of the black press in South Africa in this period. In "Roamer", the importance of naming is also extended to the practice of racial classification and official nomenclature. In an early spoof on a contemporary debate on South African naming practices ('non-European', 'African', 'native', 'black'), Joshua and Jeremiah lose their way in the post-office because they can neither agree on, nor articulate, their official designation (*BW* 20 Jan 1934, 8).

As in *Invisible Man*'s New York city, the African worker is a ubiquitous city figure, running errands, performing manual labour, obeying commands (*BW* 2 September 1939, 4). More unorthodox or non-sanctioned forms of city habitation, improvisation and engagement are hinted at in the image of Africans in the city "bent on other pursuits" as well as in scenes of informal and illicit commercial transactions such as illegal beer-brewing, food vending and the circulation of stolen goods. In the set-apart world of Timbuctoo, the column references a more autonomous world of school, church and university, political meetings (*BW* 24 May 1941, 4) and the ubiquitous African store (or "Tandabantu"), the only formal, white-managed space in which an African is greeted with the pseudo-bonhomie reserved for the potential customer. Also encoded in various fragments across the column are spaces of leisure and entertainment: tea-rooms, shebeens, parties, concerts, cinemas and forms of social practice such as drinking, dancing and dagga-smoking. That these spaces are nevertheless subject to intrusion by the state is evidenced in details of black cinemas divided into African and Indian sections, of township shebeens routinely raided by police and of the impact of municipal African beerhalls on African drinking cultures.

Further destabilising the segregationist ideal in Dhlomo's column is a running romantic sub-plot involving the romantic escapades of Jeremiah and Joshua and their girlfriends, Betty Bettina and Nurse Jane Maplank. In this way, the column excavates a hidden transcript of African city pleasures, entertainment and eroticism. It also gives space to the emergent city figure of the independent black working woman as

both troubling and desirable emblem of a city-based modernity.⁷ In this respect, the column exploits the humorous potential of misogynistic, satirical caricature in numerous stories of female jealousy, infidelity, laziness, hyper-consumption and poor house-keeping. As such, it articulates a pervasive anxiety about the erosion of traditional norms of courtship, marriage, feminine decorum and the duties of domestic life.⁸ Dhlomo's attention to the lives of women in the city also includes an appreciation for the unwanted forms of intimacy incurred by the arrangement of servants' backyard rooms, in which female domestic workers were frequently placed in uncomfortable proximity to "the rooms of the houseboy and the garden boy" (*BW* 4 January 1941, 4).

Much of the content of Roamer's city ramblings concern the dichotomous city space divided between black enclaves and zones of white pleasure which are inevitably arranged in close spatial proximity. In Roamer's satirical lexicon, these are "little heavens", a phrase that invokes the name of a famous Johannesburg shebeen (*BW* 25 February 1939, 4).⁹ In this respect, the column anticipates Frantz Fanon's diagnosis of the Manichean colonial city as the "hungry town, starved of bread, of meat, of shoes, of coal, of light" sitting side by side with the white city – a space of abundance, pleasure and plenitude inspiring jealousy, admiration and "dreams of possession" (Fanon, 1991, 30). In his attention to the representatives of 'law and order' in segregation-era Johannesburg, Dhlomo also delineates the "lines of force" upon which this compartmentalisation depends (29). In Dhlomo's column too the question of possession is parodically inscribed via the image of the domestic worker's husband or boyfriend sleeping illegally in the suburban backyard room. In this story, Dhlomo further unravels the norms of racial distinction by entertaining the spectacle of the black interloper usurping the place of the master, drinking tea before their masters, using his shoe polish to shine his shoes and being the first to open and read the morning paper: in this way, "the master's property becomes his." In a further ironic gesture, the presence of unwanted black bodies in the space of the white suburb effects an unsettling reversal as white people's "yards [begin to] look like locations" (*BW* 12 July 1941, 4).

The idea of the colonial cityscape of fulsome white city and poor Native settlement is amplified in Roamer's satirical treatment of the Native settlement as rough-hewn, parodic replica of the ideal city of western imagination, a comic facsimile imitation of "funny", "forlorn" houses and "kerbless, unstreet-like streets" whose failure to approximate the standard model becomes further proof of black inferiority (*BW* 1 April 1933, 8). Dhlomo resists the public media promotion of the newly-developed African township of Orlando as the new 'Bantu Parktown' (a

prestigious white suburb in Johannesburg) – and thus the illusion of sameness – by describing these “roofless”, “lightless, two, three-roomed structures”, “minus flooring boards” and “with no doors between” where “at the touch of a nail, walls voice protests” (*BW* 24 May 1941, 4).

More overt or violent forms of the racial city, hinted at in the spectacle of law and order are articulated in a pervasive topos of the fenced location and the associated township raid. Roamer’s stories of Johannesburg pay persistent, satirical attention to these zoo-like, militarised enclosures, “fenced right round with gates at certain points which are all guarded. Just like the barracks of soldiers.” The story also emphasises the indignity of having to acquire a permit from location offices in order to be granted the “rare privilege of visiting your friends.” Aside from the regimes of surveillance, Dhlomo also describes the insinuation of ‘law and order’ into the intimate space of the home when in the early hours of the morning “policemen armed with revolvers” and “kerries” demand to see the pass of everyone present in the house (*BW* 18 January 1941, 4). Also pertinent to the rendering of the violent city is the spectre of township removal, particularly the case of Alexandra township which faced this threat on several occasions (Nauright 1998). In Dhlomo’s ironic treatment the debate about relocation is revised in terms of the competition for air and “breathing space”: Roamer asks, is it the fault of Alex “that it was built on a space that would be required for breathing purposes by suffocating people?” (*BW* 26 September 1942, 4). Using the trope of respiration, the city space is rendered as the scene of agonistic struggle in which white urban dwellers become the privileged consumers of scarce city resources.

Working against the view of the city as totalising constraint, the column also engages with the various ways in which the city of interdiction is resisted. Apposite here is Roamer’s detailed attention to the various ways in which township fences and restrictions are breached and broken, an ongoing process that amounts to a veritable “war on the fence.” As Roamer explains, aside from the official gates around Western Native Township there are a number of “unofficial gates made by the people themselves.” These “unofficial gates are opened at night or in the evening by the simple process of forcing open the iron bars that make the fence [. . .]. Early the next morning you find many people squeezing in and out of these openings” because the “official gates are too far apart.” Just as soon as the fences are fixed, so they are again broken, and you find them “lying hopelessly on the ground” (*BW* 31 August 1940, 4). If the township fence accrues metonymic significance as a representation of state violence, then the image of the hole in the

fence works as a corresponding figure for the ways in which an inherently unstable racial order is continually undone.

As mentioned earlier, Dhlomo's literary city includes an important scopic dimension, one which foregrounds the act of looking as an important aspect of city life. In the first place, tropes of looking and non-seeing provide ways of detailing the more informal practices of spatial interdiction and distinction in the racial city. This is evident in the column's foregrounding of the language of the look in various scenes of personal encounter: inside the office, they "eye you lazily" or make you wait without acknowledging your presence; at the train station, the ticket officer "looks you up and down as though you were the latest specimen of grotesque humanity" (*BW* 8 April 1933, 8). In these and other examples, Dhlomo draws attention to the racial gaze as a regulatory social practice, of looking or not seeing as a means of controlling and dividing space, authorising certain bodies and excluding others. In this unusual reading of the city as criss-crossed by various lines of sight, the column draws attention to questions of blindness and invisibility – the ways in which the black city inhabitant is both scrutinised and barely acknowledged; is both hyper-visible in white contexts such as offices and shops and rendered invisible by being ignored or pre-emptively assigned to pre-existing categories.

Dhlomo's interest in the importance of city seeing and looking extends to a satirical treatment of white 'black peril' anxieties, of black men as sexual threat to white women. In this sense, the dangers and attractions of city conglomeration – the unruly proximities and erotic encounters engendered by the urban space – are registered in the threat of what might be seen; as well as in the sheer impossibility of controlling the gaze. Apposite here are a number of Roamer stories that pour scorn on a series of flurries in the white middle-class press about the dangers of the black male gaze, an issue which garners anxious attention in the modernising city in which white women's bodies are increasingly on display. This is a result of changing street fashions (women wearing shorts on city streets), a new liberalism in cinematic and commercial representation and the emergence of large-format advertising. In this regard, Roamer points to the concern expressed in white quarters about "posters displayed on hoardings on the sidewalks [showing] women stretching their legs in order to show their silk hose or some fine underwear" and an incident when black men were seen looking and "grinning" at a "display of corsets in shop windows" (*BW* 7 December 1940, 4). In this way, Dhlomo's column presents an unusual early view of the city of Johannesburg as an erotic, sexualised space

leading to modes of apprehension, seeing and pleasure which undermine and destabilise the separatist racial ideal.

If the city is a space in which the bodies of strangers are thrown together, these issues take on a particular resonance in the proto-apartheid city. Roamer engages with the particular anxieties of the racialised social space by directing attention to the ways in which the physical intimacies of the city-suburban space are both necessary and studiously disavowed. In this sense, the column explores the unstated, customary rules of proximity and contact in 1930s Johannesburg and the ways in which bodies are allocated in space. The contradiction is exposed in a series of stories in which Roamer describes an unsuccessful attempt to enter an office elevator in breach of an informal but widespread social interdiction. As Roamer explains, these lifts which “are guarded against the visitations of people with dark skins” are places where white people “can feel safe from coming into close and unwelcome contact with you and ourself.” A measure of the value placed on the protection of white enclaves is to be found in the levels of defence: “Dare you go as far as to try to get inside, oh ‘mayebabo’ for your daring. You will be told in a language you would never associate with the refinements of a civilisation of 2999 years to go up the steps.” This even though he intends “to squeeze [himself] at the back without touching lo Master and lo Missus.” Roamer reveals the symbolic importance of racialised spatial division by contrasting the proximity of bodies in the lift with the intimacies of the suburban home: “While you dare not put your black foot inside this little upstairs downstairs affair you are allowed to touch the food and clothing of the owners of the said Heaven.” The person who refuses to stand next to you in the lift will “take a cup of tea made by you (‘a black soul’) and drink it.” If “they don’t want to stand next to ‘dirty kaffirs’”, then “why allow them to make your tea and buy your food. Do they suddenly become unbearably dirty only when they want to use the lifts?” (*BW* 18 October 1941, 4).

By tracing the innumerable forms of social intimacy that characterise the racial city, Dhlomo exposes the lie of the segregationist ideal. What the above passage also alludes to is Dhlomo’s engagement with the historical figuring of the black body as dirty and diseased. It was this logic which informed a vigorous slum clearance programme in inner-city Johannesburg in the 1930s after an outbreak of influenza, one that was also elaborated as a moral panic about unregulated female sexual behaviour arising from the spectre of the unattached woman coming into town (Parnell 1988, 1991; Eales 1987). Dhlomo engages with these issues with a characteristic irreverence, offering a satirical

spoof on “the futile and increasingly violent pursuit of binary purity” (West-Pavlov 2015, 80) through a meditation on the lives of flies, mosquitoes and germs who, in the imagined separatist universe, must also obey the laws of the segregated city and confine themselves to the ‘black spots’ of African habitation. Confronted with the problem of “those Natives, who come close to you as servants, delivery boys etc”, an unnamed white character replies, “we shall amend the amended law so that the germs leave our servants alone when they are near us”; they will attack “only Africans in the locations and not [menace] those Africans who live cheek by fowl with Europeans.” What is also striking is Roamer’s (part) tongue-in-cheek discomfort with the physical proximities of public transport in which he must share a space with commuters in dirty, oily overalls. In this sense the reading of city space also includes anxiety about the maintenance of class distinction and social respectability (*BW* 30 December 1939, 4).

Also important as subversive, destabilising practice in Dhlomo’s text is the rhetorical device of meticulous naming and identification – of street names, tram, train and bus routes, buildings, landmarks and junctions. Eloff Street, Diagonal Street, Market Street, “the corner of Plein and Eloff Streets” (*BW* 3 Feb 1941, 4), Georg Goch Station, Park Station, Joubert Park and Marshall Square. Through the use of proper names, Dhlomo articulates a knowledge and experience of the city which translates into a form of claiming, an act of possession and an assertion of belonging. Central to Dhlomo’s technique is the rhetorical re-enactment of city routes actually taken, either on foot or using public transport. By revising the city journey as text, Dhlomo draws attention to the many indignities and abuses of the racial city, particularly those experienced by black commuters – overcrowding, rude and impatient bus drivers, arbitrary and non-sensical routes and “shelterless” and “benchless” bus and tram stops:

If you wish to go to Rosebangi, or Rosebank, all you have to do is go to the starting place of the Buses in Sauer Street. Here you will be surprised to see one bench provided for you. Having actually satisfied yourself that it is for ‘Naturelle Alleen’ or ikona blankes you sit down – if the driver and the conductor are not using it at the same time [. . .]. Presently a double-decker tumbles up and stops. You board it nicely here for it will stop decently until the starting off-time [. . .]. The first crowded stop is at Wanderers Street close to the Wanderers Ground gate. Here the bus stops sufficiently long to pick up those who are sure-footed and who can cling to it like a creeper on the wall. For no sooner does its stop than it

is moving on again. You will see men and women running vainly after it. It swings into Smit Street at the corner of Hospital Street as if the seven demons were behind it.

(*BW* 27 April 1940, 4)

Through the re-enactment of commuter routes and the telling of city anecdotes, Dhlomo both documents and critiques a city experience that is defined by injustice and proscription. His detailed, realist account of city travels produces not so much a map of the urban complex (a line drawn from ‘a’ to ‘b’) as a record of passage and habitation – what de Certeau names “passing by” – an intimate knowledge of the city derived from having moved along its streets. In this sense, the column enacts Lefebvre’s notion of “representational space”, producing a form of ‘citiness’ and therefore ownership through the various practices of walking through, of “knowing with the feet” (Bremner 2010, 45). In this “pedestrian enunciation” (Nuttall 2008, 200), what is also at work is a re-coding of space in which familiar names and landmarks become invested with new and unanticipated meanings. This re-coding occurs not only through the translation of place names into a local idiom (‘Rosebank’ to ‘Rosebangi’) but also through the telling of multiple city stories. Johannesburg streets, both marked and revised by the encounters and experiences of its various city dwellers, become haunted by a profusion of stories and therefore liveable (de Certeau 1984, 106).

As suggested in the numerous examples above, Dhlomo’s satirical sketches produce an intimate city geography of humiliating and often violent racial encounters. In Dhlomo’s city depiction, the African city dweller, walker and observer, who registers the daily “pinpricks” (*BW* 8 April 1933, 8) of the racial order, is engaged in an ongoing struggle to “inhabit the urban topography as citizen rather than subject” (Graebner 2014, 193). In this sense, the itinerant flâneur of the Johannesburg cityscape is recast as one who both witnesses the humiliation of others and suffers repeated humiliation himself, thus presenting Roamer as a would-be flâneur whose mobility is constantly curtailed and whose claims to the city are repeatedly called into question. In this way, Dhlomo’s city rendition focuses on the banalities of racial oppression, the “daily acts and rituals” of discrimination “that accumulated into an omnipresent violence in everyday life” (Bremner 2010, 166). In his testaments to black humiliation and the informal mechanisms of social control, Dhlomo gives credence to the affective dimensions of city life, one which has close affinities with the work of city theorist Georg Simmel. In this version, the metropolis is defined not only by density and the flow of people and commodities but also by the impact of the racial city on psychic life.

As many of the examples also indicate, the revelation of humiliating and abusive encounters is off-set by the protagonist's pose of insouciance and ironic detachment so that scenes of fear, indignity and trauma are also mined for their comedic, ironic effects. In this sense, the city of boundaries, fences and constraint is to some extent undone by the pervasive posture of satirical irreverence. Central to this are the subversive deformations of linguistic hybridity, irreverent code-switching and the subversion of white mastery through parodic renditions of the languages and gestures of dominance.¹⁰ Other forms of verbal undoing and dis-assemblage are to be found in the foregrounding of African city pleasures, the naming and claiming of the city through stories and anecdotes, the incessant ridicule of racial interdiction and exclusion and the revelation of an unruly urban topography of mingling bodies and errant lines of sight, one in which official decree is always in tension with an artful, hidden resistance. In this sense, Dhlomo's reading of the city goes beyond a simplistic dualism of loathing and celebration, opting instead for the oscillating, unstable optic of the both/and. If this is a moral critique of the city, it is one with a very sharp political edge.

Dhlomo's column must be understood as a very particular reaction to the specific historical context of 1930s Johannesburg, a period which saw the steady erosion of African claims to the city via forced removals, the extension of out-of-town municipal locations and the passing of the Hertzog Bills which took away existing voting rights of Cape-based Africans. As Bremner has observed, "By 1933, the whole of the city of Johannesburg had been proclaimed white and by 1938 most of its former black population had been moved South" (2010, 176). Focused in particular on the figure of the 'New African', Dhlomo's column thus explores the dissonance between the expectations encouraged by an assimilationist mission education and the experience of the African urbanite in a city in which an existing order of always precarious racial mixing is about to give way to the apartheid dream. This is evident in a persistent preoccupation with the city that does not deliver the promise of sophisticated urbanity to its respectable, educated black inhabitants. As such, it tends to take shape as a liberal-humanist critique of the limits of Western humanism, evidenced in an oft-repeated rhetorical gesture in which the pretensions of Western civilizational advance are held up against the threat of violence and the absence of everyday civility. In this regard, Dhlomo amplifies the 'minor' (the look of contempt, the rude remark, the refusal to see and the raised hand) into a measure of the humane society and a civilised culture. If it were necessary to draw a distinction between the urban registers of 1930s writers and the later *Drum* generation it would be in this: Dhlomo's melancholy city tinged

with longing for a proximate but unattainable object versus the laconic defiance of those who are claiming a city which has already eluded their grasp.

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NOTES

1. William Sculley’s *Daniel Vananda* (1923), Frank Brownlee’s *Ntsukumbini’s Cattle Thief*, and R. Hernekin Baptist’s *Wild Deer* (1934) offer minor variations on the theme. See Gray (1985).
2. Some of these stories are collected in *English in Africa* 2.1 (1975), a special issue edited by Tim Couzens.
3. See Sandwith (2019) for more on the satirical tradition and Dhlomo’s awareness of the politics of style. Other studies of *The Bantu World* include Couzens (1976), Switzer and Switzer (1979), Switzer (1997), Peterson (2006), Thomas (2006) and Healy-Clancy (2014).
4. *The Bantu World* will hereafter be referenced as *BW*.
5. See Tsitsi Jali for a reading of the journalism of “Lady Porcupine”, pen-name of the well-known singer Johannah Phahlane, leader of the Merry Makers vaudevillians of Bloemfontein. “Lady Porcupine”, a regular contributor to *The Bantu World* in the 1930s, attempted a tricky negotiation of the demands of feminine domesticity and “women’s accomplishments outside the home” (2014, 125).
6. For an indispensable study of the uses of pseudonymity and anonymity in African newspapers, see Stephanie Newell’s *The Power to Name* (2013).
7. For a related discussion of this phenomenon in *Drum* magazine, see Driver (2005).
8. For a discussion of “the modern girl” and the way in which this idea was negotiated in *The Bantu World*, see Lynn M. Thomas (2006).
9. “Little Heaven” is described by Can Themba (1982, 80) as Johannesburg’s poshest shebeen.
10. For more details on the languages of resistance in Dhlomo’s column, see Sandwith (2018).

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