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Poetry in Motion

The Taxi and Taxi Poetry as Sites of Mobility and Creativity in Imraan Coovadia's The Institute for Taxi Poetry

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Abstract

This article examines how Imraan Coovadia's *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* uses the taxi industry as a dynamic cultural space to explore intersections of mobility and identity in an alternate post-apartheid South Africa. Drawing on Mary Louise Pratt's concept of contact zones and Mimi Sheller's framework of mobility justice, this article argues that Coovadia reimagines the taxi as a metaphorical and literal space where diverse social and cultural interactions manifest. Through a comparative analysis of two central characters—Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian—the article highlights differing poetic expressions and scales of mobility. While Geromian's cosmopolitan approach embodies global mobility, Greenfields's deeply local focus challenges narrow interpretations of rootedness, reflecting a local scale of mobility and intimate relationship with his environment. The article contends that Coovadia critiques simplistic binaries of local and global by emphasising how these scales coexist and shape individual and collective identities. Ultimately, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* reconfigures the taxi and its associated poetry as sites of cultural connection and negotiation, reflecting broader social dynamics and tensions within a post-apartheid context.

Keywords

Imraan Coovadia – *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* – entanglement – mobility – South African literature – post-transitional literature – speculative fiction – alternate history

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1 Introduction

Imraan Coovadia has, over the past quarter century, become one of South Africa's most prominent and agile writers of both fiction and non-fiction. As I¹ and others² have shown, Coovadia's novels frequently reflect themes of mobility, connection, identity, and cultural hybridity. From his debut novel *The Wedding*,³ which explores the diasporic identities of a couple from India relocating to colonial Durban, to *Green-Eyed Thieves*,⁴ a satirical tale of twin brothers navigating post-apartheid South Africa and the globe by leveraging the flexibility and hybrid nature of identity, Coovadia's work, broadly speaking, engages with the specificities of South African life and identity within a global(ised) context. In *High Low In-Between*,⁵ Coovadia considers the moral ambiguities and personal conflicts in a nation grappling with its political transformations, a theme he continues to explore in *Tales of the Metric System*.⁶ His most recent novel, *A Spy in Time*,⁷ is a foray into time-travelling speculative fiction, (re)presenting South Africa's racialised past and imagined future in creative ways that think through how race shaped, and continues to shape, identity in (post)apartheid South Africa.

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- 1 Alan Muller, "Cultural Entanglement, Displacement and Contemporary Durban in Imraan Coovadia's *High Low In-Between*," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 35.1 (2023): 21–32; Alan Muller, "A Handful of Spaghetti': South/South Migration and the City in Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*," in *Cities in Flux: Metropolitan Spaces in South African Literary and Visual Texts*, ed. Olivier Moreillon, Alan Muller, and Lindy Stiebel (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2017), 171–192; Alan Muller, "Cosmopolitan Criminality: Cultural Entanglements and Globalised Crime in Imraan Coovadia's *Green-Eyed Thieves*," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 28.1 (2016): 50–61.
 - 2 Ronit Frenkel, "Imraan Coovadia's Metonymic Aesthetics and the Idea of Newness in the South African Cultural Imaginary," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 28.1 (2016): 2–11; Rebecca Fasselt, "Towards a 'New Africanity': Southern Connectivities and Lusofonia in Imraan Coovadia's Alternate History in *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 28.1 (2016): 26–39; Mapule Mohulatsi, "The Sea and Underwater Transport in Imraan Coovadia's *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*," *English Studies in Africa* 67.2 (July 2, 2024): 77–92; Margaret Daimond, "Culture Crossing the Ocean: Food and Language in Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001)," *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa* 28.1 (2016): 62–72.
 - 3 Imraan Coovadia, *The Wedding* (New York: Picador USA, 2001).
 - 4 Imraan Coovadia, *Green-eyed Thieves* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2006).
 - 5 Imraan Coovadia, *High Low In-between* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2009).
 - 6 Imraan Coovadia, *Tales of the Metric System* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2014).
 - 7 Imraan Coovadia, *A Spy in Time* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2018).

The themes of mobility extend beyond Coovadia's fictional work and manifest in his non-fiction and scholarly outputs also. *Transformations: Essays*⁸ and *The Poisoners*⁹ continue to reflect his engagement with South Africa's cultural and political landscape while at the same time considering global issues, contexts, and literatures. His critical examination of non-violence in *Revolution and Non-Violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela*¹⁰ further highlight his versatility and intellectual engagement with both the local and the global, presenting both cultural and political flows as unavoidably entangled on a global stage.

2 The Taxi and Taxi Poetry as Scales of Mobility

The Institute for Taxi Poetry,¹¹ which is the focus of this article, follows ex-taxi poet turned lecturer, Adam Ravens, as he tries to make sense of the death of his poetry mentor, Solly Greenfields. The narrative begins with one of seven 'problems' that are dispersed throughout the novel, the first problem being that Solly's cat, Marmalade, has gone mad and that Solly has been shot dead in his Woodstock home. Divided into five chapters, the novel is set over the course of a week as Ravens tries to unravel Solly's murder while simultaneously trying to uncover the reason for his son's unusual behaviour, continuing with his position of lecturer at the Jose da Silva Perreira Institute for Taxi Poetry at the University of Cape Town, and playing host to the visiting *grand seigneur* of taxi poetry, Gerome Geromian.

The novel, unlike Coovadia's earlier fictions, is not punctuated by numerous (re)locations and itinerant characters, but rather toys with an alternate history in which South Africa has a distinct Lusophone colonial inheritance and in which transport poetry has become a highly respected medium of expression. Transport poetry manifests as verse printed on various modes of transport; taxi poetry thus exists as one subgenre of transport poetry and involves the printing of poetry on the sides of minibus taxis. With this article, I aim to contribute to a small extant body of scholarship on the novel and on Coovadia's oeuvre. While Fasselt¹² reads the novel through a Lusophone lens and considers it as

8 Imraan Coovadia, *Transformations: Essays* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2012).

9 Imraan Coovadia, *The Poisoners* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2021).

10 Imraan Coovadia, *Revolution and Non-Violence in Tolstoy, Gandhi, and Mandela* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

11 Imraan Coovadia, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* (Cape Town: Umuzi, 2012).

12 Fasselt, "New Africanity."

an alternate history, Mohulatsi¹³ considers it in relation to submarine transport and the oceanic humanities. This article approaches the novel from the perspective of mobility studies and focuses specifically on the taxi and taxi poetry as manifestations of scales of mobility. In this article, I show how Coovadia's novel expresses scales of mobility and connectedness—firstly, through the medium of taxi poetry, and through the minibusses on which it is inscribed, and, secondly, through the characters of Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian and their approaches to writing taxi poetry. In doing so, I will draw briefly on other texts set in Cape Town and surrounding areas, namely Richard Rive's *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986)¹⁴ and Tyrone Appollis's *Train to Mitchells Plain* (2008).¹⁵

In this article, I draw on Sheller's *Mobility Justice*¹⁶ and argue that Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian function at different scales of mobility and serve as embodiments of conflicting ideologies within the industry of transport poetry. Before staging this argument, it is important to first explain how Coovadia himself conceptualises taxi poetry—and the taxi industry in general—through the consciousness of the narrator, Adam Ravens. Ravens, by virtue of having once been both a sliding door man and taxi poet, has an intimate understanding of both how the taxi industry works and how the associated poetry functions as a medium. Ronit Frenkel suggests that

Coovadia reveals how an ordinary feature of South African cultural life—in the form of the mini-bus taxi—can be read as both an object of connection and rupture embedded in multiple layers of South African culture.¹⁷

Of interest here is the idea that the minibus taxi exists as an object of connection. The South African taxi industry is responsible for transporting a large portion of the country's citizenry to and from their places of work or even cross-country. In this way, a considerable number of South Africans have found themselves on the inside of such a vehicle. For those unfamiliar with the taxi and its operation, Coovadia sketches a scene of Cape Town's main taxi rank:

13 Mohulatsi, "The Sea and Underwater Transport."

14 Richard Rive, *Buckingham Palace: District Six* (Cape Town: David Philip Publishers, 1986, (2003)).

15 Tyrone Appollis, *Train to Mitchells Plain* (Cape Town: T. Appollis, 2008).

16 Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in the Age of Extremes* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018).

17 Ronit Frenkel, "Imraan Coovadia's *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* and the Idea of Newness in the South African Cultural Imaginary." (Paper presented at the 40th Annual Conference of the African Literature Association. Johannesburg, 2014): 1.

On Grand Parade it was business as usual. Business as usual, in this part of the world, was chaos. The same Hi-Aces were queuing at the exit. Others were parked, pounding their big muddy speakers through open doors, Brenda Fassie pop against the same old kwaito against hip-hop and gospel and Sufi devotional music and the presenter on Cape Talk who disappeared and reappeared from different sliding doors as I went along.¹⁸

The taxi rank is filled with a myriad of sonic cultural signifiers. Brenda Fassie alongside Kwaito alongside American Hip-Hop alongside Sufi devotional music and a radio presenter creates a din that caters to all who may pass through the rank, suggesting that a “hundred thousand commuters”¹⁹ from various cultures and levels of education utilise the space as a transport hub. Ronit Frenkel suggests that “the taxi industry is an industry that moves or connects people across the city”.²⁰ In this way the taxi rank, along with the inside of the taxi itself, is a physical and cultural contact zone within which connections are made. Rink, in his consideration of public transport as sites of encounter, similarly considers public transport in Cape Town as “intense sites of encounter, density and proximity”.²¹ While I must note that the taxi industry is also a site of intense violence, both organisationally and even socially within taxis themselves, this aspect is beyond the scope of my argument here as Coovadia (re)imagines the taxi industry as a considerably better version of its lived counterpart.

Coovadia is concerned with not only the commuters who pass through the taxis, but also with those who work for extended periods within them. Two figures to which he gives considerable attention are the driver and the sliding door man. These figures, however, are not treated with equal favour. While Ravens considers the driver to be “autistic”²² due to his lack of social skills, the sliding door man has a “talent for networking and getting on with people”.²³ It is this ‘talent’ for connection and entanglement that sets the sliding door men apart from the rest of the workers within the taxi industry. I use the term ‘entanglement’ throughout this article as Sarah Nuttall develops it in *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid*.²⁴ Entanglement, as she uses

18 Coovadia, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry*, 116.

19 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 205.

20 Frenkel, “Idea of Newness,” 4.

21 Bradley Rink, “Public Space on the Move: Mediating Mobility, Stillness and Encounter on a Cape Town Bus,” *Urban Studies* 60.15 (2023): 3027–3044.

22 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 38.

23 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 38.

24 Sarah Nuttall, *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (Johannesburg: WITS University Press, 2009).

it, emerges from her examination of post-apartheid South Africa, exploring how identities, cultures, and histories are intertwined. This concept challenges conventional understandings of cultural purity and autonomy, proposing that all cultures and identities are, to some extent, products of historical and ongoing interactions.

Coovadia continues to explain that:

Everybody was his china, his mate, his main connection, his brother, his bra. He talked his way past roadblocks when the minibus was stopped and searched, and paid cold-drink money to the sergeants from a brown envelope which he clutched like a purse. Where relevant to his work, he maintained a good relationship with the local Congress Party structures. [...] In sum the sliding-door man was a central agent in the transportation sector. He was a chimera, part politician, part social worker, part investigator and banker, nurse, and first responder.²⁵

As in Coovadia's earlier fictions, various characters in *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* are chameleonic and can adapt to a variety of social *milieux*. The sliding door man is likened to the mythical chimera for his ability to be equally at home among seemingly disparate groups of people. The chimeric sliding door man, along with the rest of the city's commuters, exists as a complex entanglement of identities, but what sets him apart is that he is able to isolate and leverage particular specificities and use them to his advantage so as to make further connections with those who enter the cultural contact zone of the taxi's interior. In a sense, the taxi, while operating within the dense and dynamic social fabric of Cape Town, can be understood as a mobile contact zone. Mary Louise Pratt defines contact zones as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."²⁶ Within this space, passengers and drivers not only exchange stories but also confront and renegotiate social realities, reflecting both connections and disjunctions. Pratt describes how contact zones give rise to "arts of the contact zone," where marginalized individuals creatively engage with dominant cultural narratives.²⁷ Coovadia's sliding door man exemplifies this dynamic, strategically navigating the diverse social and cultural elements within the taxi, transforming it into a space of exchange and adaptation. Gero-

25 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 38–39.

26 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2008): 7.

27 Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession*, 1991, 33–40: 33.

mian, without directly referring to the taxi or taxi industry as contact zones, reflects on exactly this during his lecture at the Jose da Silva Perreira Institute as he remembers that:

In the space between the old colonial regimes and revolutionary movements like the Congress Party, between the state and the guerrillas, the taxi companies arose. With them came the possibility of taxi poetry [...].²⁸

Geromian here points out that the taxi industry—and the taxi itself, I argue—is characterised by an interstitial position, and that taxi poetry came along with the rise of the taxi companies. Significantly, Pratt also considers literature itself as a form of contact zone—a site where different voices, perspectives, and power dynamics interact and negotiate meaning.²⁹ I argue then that taxi poetry itself, by such close association, functions as a literary contact zone inscribed up an existing physical contact zone, capturing the interactions and exchanges within the taxi while reflecting broader social tensions and connections.

Adam Ravens, at the end of the novel, asserts that taxi poetry is “but one configuration of the travelling mind”.³⁰ The ‘travelling mind’ possessed by taxi poets appears a number of times throughout the novel and is more than once referred to as the “travelling soul” (100; 175). Significantly, Coovadia identifies the ‘travelling soul’ that makes transport poetry possible. Furthermore, it is highlighted that this kind of soul is a benefit to the individual—for example, Ravens points out that Gill Etteh, a fellow lecturer at the Institute, “taught taxi poetry without the benefit of a travelling soul” (83). Gill teaches students in a purely academic capacity at the Institute and, according to Ravens, the students “bumped into [the lecturers] rather than a hundred thousand commuters and thereby their existence was impoverished” (205). By engaging with taxi poetry in a decontextualised environment, the students have what he considers to be “limited experience of human difference and no practice at tolerating the variety of people’s souls” (205). Coovadia alludes to what is to be gained by immersing oneself in an environment and its various contact zones—such as the taxi.

²⁸ Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 180.

²⁹ Pratt, “Contact Zone,” 35.

³⁰ Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 217. Further page references are in the main text.

Ravens repeatedly posits that good taxi poetry is impossible to produce without the benefit of such a soul that perpetually creates connections between people and places. As a taxi poet

you would want to talk to everybody who crossed your path, like the electrician soldering behind the building, or the mountain man who was washing his trousers in Molteno reservoir in a mattress of soapy bubbles, or the hairdresser in her thirties with the red nails who went to Clubland and weighed down her head with earrings, or the man with a breathing tube on the taxi and, behind him, the truant in his private-school blazer bound for Newlands to see the test match.

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What the reader sees here is a profession that actively encourages connection and entanglement with different people from different places and classes, one that creates poetry that

[connects] to all the world, the pebble underfoot and the silver tree on Table Mountain and the old woman hunched over her grocery bag from Shoprite, by rays of sympathy and interest.

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While taxi poetry ostensibly connects ‘to all the world’, not all poets in the pages of *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* strive to connect equally far from home. I will now turn to Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian, and how their approaches to taxi poetry differ, greatly impacting their success as poets both locally and globally.

3 Taxi Poets and the ‘Travelling Soul’

Although both Solly and Gerome are taxi poets and have known each other for a considerable amount of time, the novel positions “the spirits of these two taxi poets [as] fatally opposed. Solly Greenfields was the chunk of kryptonite to Gerome Geromian’s superman” (52). They are opposed in numerous ways when it comes to ideologies concerning the production of transport poetry and maintaining a sense of home and belonging in a globalised world that is becoming increasingly connected to and entangled with other places. Turning first to Solly and then to Geromian, the following paragraphs will examine the different approaches of these two bards to poetry in a globalising age associ-

ated either with urban/local or global mobilities. The central argument in this regard is that Adam Ravens misreads Solly Greenfields as lacking a travelling soul. Instead, I suggest that Solly and Gerome have different *kinds* of travelling souls that require a nuanced consideration of what it means to be mobile and what it means to travel—more nuanced than Ravens' interpretation.

Solly Greenfields lives in Woodstock and has worked as both a taxi poet and the founder of the Road Safety Council, casting him at odds with many of the taxi companies in the area. Like many of Coovadia's fictitious figures, Solly is able to transform various facets of his identity at will as he had once been "a taxi poet, and then a Buddhist, once a Muslim, once a Jew, once a lowly cook in a grease-sprayed apron in the room-service kitchen at the Mount Nelson, on other occasions a guest in the very same hotel" (12). In addition to his involvement in the Road Safety Council, Solly is a member of the Garment Union; a group that "fights against Chinese imports" (13) in an effort to stimulate the local textile industry. This may seem like a trifling detail at this point in the novel but, as the narrative unfolds, the reader becomes aware that Solly, despite ostensibly being in possession of a taxi poet's 'travelling soul', is reluctant to travel or engage globally. Ravens, I suggest, misreads Solly as being emblematic of what Massey³¹ refers to as a "defensive and reactionary"³² response to globalisation. I, instead, read Solly as being mobile on an urban/local scale and as exercising his 'right to the city'.³³ Solly, in life, death, and poetry has an umbilicus that is firmly connected to the Western Cape. Adam Ravens notices the disparity between the ostensibly 'travelling soul' of a taxi poet and Solly's wishes for his burial:

Solly had very much wanted to be buried here—I mean if he had to be buried at all, and if not on the dingy margins of Parow, then in the general area, somewhere between the Hottentots-Holland mountains and the Sea Point Pick n Pay, the most hospitable place for the species, he believed, and not, coincidentally, the best place to be a transport poet who expressed the travelling character of humanity.³⁴

31 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

32 Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*, 147.

33 Mimi Sheller, *Mobility Justice: The Politics of Movement in the Age of Extremes* (London and Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2018).

34 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 24. Further page references are in the main text.

It was Solly's wish to be buried in Woodstock, in the same area where was born and had lived his entire life. This seems an odd request for a person who is part of a profession characterised by travel and references to various kinds of 'elsewhere'. While his death and burial indicate his attachment to 'native soil', it is in life where Greenfields' closeness to the Cape is most sharply articulated. Ravens points out that Solly "wouldn't tolerate a cliché on the side of a taxi" but "adored the clichés of daily life" (25). These clichés range from

cheap snoek, wrapped in newspaper like an engine part, to the Cape Town mebos, dried and sugared fruit available from the corner cafés in Rylands, as well as the no-name-brand Chenin Blanc he found in the bargain bin at the Sea Point Pick n Pay, off-flow from the best vineyards.

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These uniquely Capetonian clichés further position Solly as a 'native'. Ravens observes that these things were "the common subjects of his transport poems, as much as the rust-ridden Toyotas and Tata trucks and buses" (25). Coovadia interestingly refers to them as Solly's "empire" (25) because he named them in his poetry. By not only living the various clichés but also writing about them, Greenfields creates an intimately Capetonian 'empire' from which he—both physically and creatively—is reluctant to stray, but within which he is still locally mobile. This dynamic also demonstrates the intimate link between place, identity, and writing. Solly defines himself in relation to his 'clichéd' Cape milieu and in turn defines the place in his poetry according to the clichés that he considers to be most 'native'. It is these numerous clichés that invade Solly's poetry, and his decidedly local mobility, which set him apart from the likes of Geromian. Ravens, near the denouement of the novel, becomes aware of his mentor's numerous 'shortcomings' as both person and poet. He describes Greenfields' oeuvre:

In his taxi poems, each like a seashell, you heard the sounds of another world, an ideal in which taxi poets were honoured and where the lady at Woodstock Public Library, across from the Kentucky Chicken, was more familiar with Solly Greenfields the transport poet than the other Greenfields, who ran the discount clothing store in Salt River. There were mermaids in those seashells of Solly's, flying on the foam, but you found salt water in your ears.

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Ravens misinterprets Solly's poetry as reflecting only one side of a Janiform city, overlooking the more nuanced engagement with local-scale mobility that Solly embodies. What Ravens perceives as Solly's shortcomings—an inward-looking focus and a lack of external connections—stems from his misunderstanding of mobility itself. Sheller's concept of scales of mobility helps reframe Solly's work as not merely reactionary but rather as an exploration of the local scale. By emphasising the everyday and seemingly mundane aspects of Cape Town life, Solly captures the deep entanglements and rootedness that characterise local mobility. His poetry is not meant to transcend or reject these connections, but rather to express the lived experiences and cultural textures of his immediate environment.

In this way, the 'mermaids' in Solly's poetry are not just romanticised nostalgia, but manifestations of the 'magic' that comes with a complex relationship with place, revealing a more grounded form of mobility tied to local identity and belonging. Ravens's critique of his old mentor, therefore, fails to appreciate that Solly's focus on the local is not an avoidance of broader connections, but a deliberate engagement with the specificities of his world. By dismissing Solly's rootedness as a lack of ambition or vision, Ravens misreads what it means to be mobile at the local scale, where mobility is not about outward expansion but about deepening one's connection with place.

Turning now to Gerome Geromian and his particular brand of taxi poetry, the following paragraphs will examine how both his personality and poetry craft connections and take advantage of the mobility of people and information on a global scale. Gerome might be considered to be a rock star of taxi poetry and has achieved far greater success than Solly Greenfields. This is pointed out by Ravens as he reflects on Gerome's poetry shortly before his arrival in Cape Town from Brazil:

Gerome's taxi poems were licensed by the Brazilian companies, reprinted in established São Paulo and Paris journals, and soon enshrined in the standard Academy of Brazil Press editions. [...] In São Paulo, Manaus, Berlin, they knew about Geromian. Whereas Solly Greenfields' compositions could be seen either on the side of Parker's taxis or perused in mimeograph copies, stapled at the top and bottom, and available in Observatory, Mitchell's Plain, and Paarl [...].

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This particular example juxtaposes Solly and Geromian in a way that it becomes clear where their respective taxi poems have been published. While Gerome's poems are known in São Paulo, Manaus, and Berlin, Solly's poetry

has not garnered a readership anywhere beyond Cape Town and its immediate surrounds. It is immediately evident that Gerome's poetry is associated with global reach and an international readership. Furthermore, Ravens draws the conclusion that "language had something to do with their difference in popularity" (48). While this certainly is part of the reason, it is not the only one. He observes that "Solly used the usual mixture of dialects, from minibus Fanagalo to tsotsitaal, including his own kitchen Dutch and high Cape Afrikaans" (48) whereas Gerome uses the supple and passionate Brazilian Portuguese. Geromian's choice of language affords him a greater readership since the Portuguese language is associated with a history of extensive colonisation whereas Solly's mixture of local pidgins and dialects does not reach beyond South Africa's borders. It is worth noting that Gerome's current position as jet-setting transport poet germinated in a far smaller context: "For nothing more than a boy from the Orange Free State, Gerome had a natural affinity with Brazilian-Portuguese culture" (48). Gerome, like many of the characters in Coovadia's fictions, is able to adjust to and assimilate to cultures that are entirely unlike the one in which he grew up. His poetry—with all its "pretension and continental grandeur, its uninhibited invocations of melancholy, soulfulness, cheap spirituality, and sensuality" (48) lent by the Brazilian-Portuguese language—is afforded greater global reach even though it is written in a tongue and about places that were once unfamiliar to him.

Gerome, as opposed to Solly, possesses a 'travelling soul' that operates on a global scale. This is evident in the summary that Adam offers of his speech at the Institute:

In the newly independent states, about the same time Solly was travelling on the municipal bus to Mowbray to cash in his coupons, Geromian mixed with people of all climates and adherents of all the revolutionary ideologies. He hid in safe houses owned by Lebanese traders and Somali merchants, slept with black and brown and white men and women, boys and girls, combined the accents of Portuguese Angola and Mozambique, and Tswana, mountain Sotho, truck driver's Dutch, and a thousand dialects never remembered on paper.

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When juxtaposed with Geromian, it becomes clear that Solly operates on a local scale of mobility that informs his taxi poetry. While Gerome was crafting connections with "people of all climates" (180) and crossing both physical, sexual, and even moral boundaries, Solly was in Mowbray, living well-within his more local 'empire'. This is not to say that Solly's poetry is of any less value,

but it does not embody the ideals of taxi poetry as articulated by Ravens. As mentioned earlier, the taxi industry—and taxi poetry by association—is one of connection, and this is reflected in Gerome's work. Ravens suggests that it “spoke to you as a friend who wished only to share his love of the stars in the sky and the trucks on the road and the burning passions in the Brazilian soul” (164). His is a poetry of entanglement, one that speaks directly to people and ties an inextricable thread into their being. Solly's taxi poems, however, are not like this:

Solly's taxi poems were different. They never stood waiting for you and only you, hoping to steal something from your heart on behalf of their creator. Solly's taxi poetry might sting you, or burn you around the heart, or switch from sweet to sour depending on where you placed them on your tongue, but never for a moment were they solicitous.

Gerome solicited the feelings of other persons.

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While Greenfields' poetry does elicit an emotional response from the reader, Ravens suggests that it never gives the impression of being connected to other people or places. Gerome's way of engaging with a globalised world spills over into his poetry, creating a poetics of connection and one that looks beyond South Africa's borders, seeking entanglements with places and people far removed from its context of origin.

4 Local Mobility and Literary Cape Town

In contextualising Solly Greenfields' local scale of mobility situated in the Cape, I will draw on Richard Rive's *Buckingham Palace, District Six* as it depicts residents who function, like Solly, at local scales of mobility to create a 'home' in the face of the threat of forced removal and subsequent displacement. While spending New Year's Day on the beach at Kalk Bay, Rive's character Pretty-Boy is involved in an altercation with a white beach constable after wandering onto a whites-only beach. Before returning home, Zoot, Rive's slick suit-wearing resident of District Six, expresses feelings of reactionary isolation within District Six:

You know, it's a funny thing, but it's only in the District that I feel safe. District Six is like an island, if you follow me, an island in a sea of apartheid. The whole of District Six is one big apartheid, so we can't see it. We only

see it when the white man forces it on us, when he makes us see it—when the police come, and the council people and so on—or when we leave the district, when we leave our island and go into Cape Town or to Sea Point or to come here to Kalk Bay. Then we again see apartheid. I know the District is dirty and poor and a slum, as the newspapers always remind us, but it's our own and we have never put up notices which say 'Slegs blankes' or 'Whites only'.³⁵

While the apartheid government instituted acts to segregate groups of people, ideologies of seclusion and exclusion were also internalised by many. The District becomes an island to its inhabitants. The island is the result of forces that seek to establish boundaries in order to delineate realms of *inside* and *outside*. While Zoot points out that the community never put up their own signs, their actions belie their 'open-door' policy. In much the same way—but on a more global scale—Solly Greenfields' membership with the Garment Union that seeks to stop the import of textiles from China functions as a gesture to protect his home and sense of place.

In a manner similar to Solly, Mary of Rive's narrative expresses a situatedness as she is reluctant to form a new community and be mobile beyond of her beloved District:

One place might be like another, but one community is never like another. A community is not just a place where you live. It is not just another locality like Hanover Park or Bonteheuvel. It is much more than that. It is alive. A community is our home. It is the place any of us were born and spent our lives. It is a place where, before this wicked law was passed, most of us also hoped to die.³⁶

Of particular relevance here is that Mary mentions that the District is a place where many of the inhabitants had hoped to die. This echoes Solly's wishes to be buried in Woodstock, showing that Rive's characters operate at similar local scale of mobility.

Before moving to depictions of the city and what *kind* of city Cape Town reveals itself to be between the pages of Coovadia's novel, brief mention will be made of the work of Capetonian poet and artist Tyrone Appollis as manifestations of the relentless situatedness that Solly expresses through his life and

35 Rive, *Buckingham Palace*, 96.

36 Rive, *Buckingham Palace*, 159.

poetry. Brian O'Connell suggests that, in Appollis's anthology, *Train to Mitchells Plain* (2008),³⁷ Appollis "speaks Cape Flats"³⁸ and conjures the pain "of living and commuting cheek by jowl [...]" (i). Appollis is of interest because his collection approximates a form of transport poetry but has 'weaknesses' similar to that of Greenfields. While addressing transport and contact in his works, the transportation that Appollis considers is on a scale that does not consider anything beyond the Cape. A piece entitled "The Cape Flats Goema" shows a deep-rooted preoccupation with Cape Town and its associated cultural artefacts as it opens with the lines: "my own free will is too occupied/with the Cape Flats" (i). Nearer the end of the piece, it becomes apparent that the speaker is part of a goema band and is eager to point out that his guitar is "noggal made in South Africa too" (5). This seems to share sentiments with Solly's rejection of Chinese textiles in favour of locally manufactured ones. In addition, Appollis's poetry is peppered with clichés that Solly supposedly would not have tolerated in his poetry but cherished in day-to-day life. From the "darling stoney ginger beer" (5) and memories of youthful fishing at "Zandt Vlei" (44) near Muizenburg to the skilful yet stereotypical painted depictions of the Cape landscape and its peoples, Appollis's work can be read—in a manner similar to that of the fictional Solly Greenfields—as a deliberate response to the uncertainties and unevennesses of global mobility; such works seek to create a 'home' rooted in the familiar and the local. Rather than being, at first glance, conservative or enclosed, this engagement with place reflects a deep entanglement with local-scale mobility, emphasising the connections and cultural textures that shape lived experiences. These works do not aim to reject external influences but instead focus on the meaningful connections and specificities of their immediate environment, cultivating a sense of belonging that is anchored in local relationships and identities.

Appollis's painting, much like Solly's everyday living, revolves around places, people, and objects that are instantly recognisable as 'Capetonian' in that they have become metonymic of the Cape region. A Hout Bay landscape portrait replete with hillside homes and fishing boats, and a coloured man complete with a bottle of brandy are things with which Solly would have been well-acquainted due to his penchant for 'Cape' nostalgia.

Adam Ravens, while being well acquainted with and somewhat dismissive of the 'clichés' in Solly's poetry, does see real value in his old mentor's work:

37 Appollis, *Train to Mitchells Plain*.

38 Appollis, *Train*, i. Further page references are in the main text.

In Solly's work, as in a shell you picked up on the beach through which to audit the cosmos, you heard the fisherman voices of the sliding-door men, choked on the brassy engine fumes of a Hi-Ace, and hid in the back of the train to Mitchell's Plain as the brown sidings rattled back to town and the water towers and railway warehouses approached.³⁹

He considers Solly's work to be a medium through which one is able to "audit the cosmos" through the intensely localised figures and places, the likes of which can be seen in both Appollis's poetry and painting.

In summation, Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian are seen to have contrasting approaches to the medium of taxi poetry and transport poetry more generally. While Solly's poetry focuses on minutia at the expense of detail beyond its intended subject, stripping it of its broader context, Geromian's poetry captures its subject in slightly less detail while also capturing its context more generally. In this way Geromian's work is able to simultaneously focus on its subject while also looking beyond it. While the examples given here are limited for the sake of brevity, I point out that they are not limited to Coovadia, Rive, and Appollis only. South African literature and art more broadly often draws on local scales of mobility to leverage the specificity of place(s).

5 Conclusion

Coovadia's *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* explores the complex intersections of mobility, identity, and cultural production within an alternate vision of South Africa. The novel situates the minibus taxi industry not merely as a mode of transportation but as a dynamic cultural space—a contact zone—where diverse identities and experiences converge. Through the narrative lens of Adam Ravens and the contrasting figures of Solly Greenfields and Gerome Geromian, Coovadia examines how local and global scales of mobility interact and conflict, revealing the tensions embedded within different conceptions of movement and identity.

By contrasting Solly's deeply localised poetry, rooted in Cape Town's everyday experiences, with Gerome's globally resonant verse, the novel highlights the varied scales of mobility that define these poets' work. Ravens, however, misinterprets Solly's focus on local contexts as an indication of immobility, failing to recognise that Solly's poetry expresses a different scale of movement—

39 Coovadia, *Taxi Poetry*, 94.

one deeply engaged with place-specific experiences and cultural textures. Both Solly and Gerome possess a ‘travelling soul,’ but their poetic expressions manifest differently: Solly’s poetry reflects an attachment to the local, emphasising entanglement with his immediate surroundings, while Gerome’s verse embraces a cosmopolitan sensibility, traversing diverse cultures and languages.

The concept of the ‘travelling soul’ becomes a pivotal motif in Coovadia’s narrative, symbolising the capacity for connection and adaptability in a world increasingly defined by movement and interaction. However, the novel also challenges a simplistic valorisation of global mobility by highlighting the significance of local rootedness and intimate engagement with one’s immediate environment. Coovadia reimagines the taxi as both a literal and metaphorical contact zone—an embodied space where cultural encounters, power dynamics, and negotiations of identity occur across different scales of mobility.

Ultimately, *The Institute for Taxi Poetry* invites readers to reflect on how literature can serve as a means of exploring the complexities of mobility and cultural entanglement in a post-apartheid South African context. By juxtaposing the poetic practices of Solly and Gerome, Coovadia emphasises the ongoing negotiations between local and global influences, encouraging a reconsideration of how rootedness and cosmopolitanism shape individual and collective identities. In doing so, the novel challenges reductive understandings of mobility and immobility, revealing how different scales of movement can coexist within the same cultural landscape.

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