"Welcome to the World of our Humanity": (African) Humanism, *Ubuntu* and Black South African Writing

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Summary

As a concept in Western thought and culture, humanism is a generic term referring to a broad spectrum of beliefs and value systems. It emphasises human potential, in particular man's capacity for reason, and implies the idea of a "core" or shared humanity which is transcultural and transhistorical. However, it lays itself open to criticism that it is in fact culturally specific and that its Eurocentrism has helped legitimate colonialism and its suppression or denigration of other cultures.

This paper considers the continuing resilience of a progressive humanism, and explores this in relation to African humanism or *ubuntu*: to what extent does "African humanism" resemble "humanism" in its Western form? *Ubuntu* is mentioned in the final clause of the interim South African Constitution; it was central to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and is arguably one of the values on which the new South African democratic order is based. The article looks briefly at some of the attempts to apply this protean term to such diverse fields as religion, education, jurisprudence, and business management, and then examines the extent to which the values associated with *ubuntu* are embodied in the work of black South African writers – in particular, Es'kia Mphahlele, who refers to himself as an African humanist. The article concludes with a brief consideration of Phaswane Mpe's recent novel, *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (2001), which foregrounds the xenophobia and divisiveness that seems endemic to contemporary South African society. It concludes that, in the context of the attempt to construct a democratic South African culture built on a respect for human rights, some recourse to the idea of a shared humanity is almost unavoidable.

Opsomming

As 'n konsep in Westerse denke en kultuur is humanisme 'n algemene term wat na 'n wye spektrum oortuigings en waardesisteme verwys. Dit beklemtoon menslike potensiaal en in besonder die mens se redelike vermoë. Humanisme behels die idee van 'n "kern"- of gedeelde menslikheid wat transkultureel en transhistories is. Dit is egter blootgestel aan die kritiek dat dit in werklikheid kultuurspesifiek is en dat die Euro-sentrisme daarvan bygedra het om kolonialisme te legitimeer en om ander kulture te onderdruk of te denigreer.

In hierdie artikel word die voortdurende herstelvermoë van 'n progressiewe humanisme oorweeg en word die verhouding daarvan tot Afrika-humanisme of *ubuntu* ondersoek. Afrikadenkers en politieke leiers het dikwels die waardes van 'n "Afrika

humanisme" beklemtoon: In watter mate kom dit ooreen met "humanisme" in sy Westerse vorm? *Ubuntu* word in die interim Suid-Afrikaanse Grondwet genoem. Dit het sentraal gestaan in die werk van die Waarheids- en Versoeningskommissie en is moontlik een van die waardes waarop die nuwe demokratiese bestel van Suid-Afrika gegrond is. In die artikel word kortliks gekyk na sommige van die pogings om hierdie betekenisryke term toe te pas op diverse terreine soos godsdiens, onderwys, regspraak en sakebestuur en na sommige van die aansprake wat daarvoor gemaak word. Dit lei tot 'n ondersoek na die mate waarin die waardes wat met *ubuntu* geassosieer word in die werk van swart Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers gestalte kry – in besonder die werk van Es'kia Mphahlele, wat na homself verwys as 'n Afrikahumanis. Die artikel word afgesluit met 'n kort oorsig van Phaswane Mpe se nuutste roman *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (2001), waarin die xenofobie en verdeeldheid wat endemies blyk te wees aan die hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse gemeenskap, uitgelig word. Die gevolgtrekking word gemaak dat, in die konteks van die strewe na 'n demokratiese Suid-Afrikaanse kultuur wat op respek vir menseregte gebaseer is, 'n appèl op die idee van 'n gedeelde menslikheid feitlik onvermydelik is.

Humanism as a feature of Western thought can be traced back to the Greeks. Its core idea is that human beings possess a value and dignity in themselves, as human beings. Linked to this is an emphasis on man's rational faculty, and the idea that human beings possess agency – hence their ability to act on and transform their world. Implicit in this is what Soper calls "a notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood" (Soper 1986: 11).

Humanism has been under attack for some time: the idea that there is a "core" or shared humanity which is common to humankind (and which by implication is transhistorical and transcultural) lays itself open to the criticism that it is in fact culturally specific, and to the accusation that its Eurocentrism has in fact helped to legitimate colonial expansion and conquest. In other words, Enlightenment man took his norms and values as universal. Fanon's critique is a classic instance of the refusal of these norms and values by the colonised. For Fanon, the mere mention of

> "Western values" is enough to induce in the native "a sort of stiffening or muscular lockjaw .... The native laughs in mockery when Western values are mentioned in front of him .... In the period of decolonisation, the colonised masses mock at these very values, insult them, and vomit them up".
>
> (Fanon 1963: 33-34)

He concludes:

> Leave this Europe where they are never done talking of Man, yet murder men everywhere they find them, at the corner of every one of their own streets, in all the corners of the globe .... The European game has finally ended.
>
> (Fanon 1963: 251)

The impact of this critique on European intellectuals can be seen in Sartre's Preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*, and it provided a stimulus for the interrogation by the French poststructuralists of the Enlightenment view of the human subject. According to Young, for example, "the French critique of humanism was conducted from the first as a part of the political critique of colonialism" (Young 1990: 123).

The aim of this paper is not to revisit this argument, but to look at the continuing resilience of the category of "the human", and to explore its meaning in relation to what is often referred to as "African humanism" or sometimes (in South Africa) as *ubuntu.* Its resilience can be seen in the work of Said, who, although deeply indebted to Foucault, nevertheless continues to appeal to the values of "humanism". He argues that Orientalism's failure was

> a human as much as an intellectual one; for in having to take up a position of irreducible opposition to a region of the world it considered alien to its own, Orientalism failed to identify with human experience, failed also to see it as human experience.

> (Said 1978: 328)

In South Africa, where apartheid constituted a systematic and deliberate denial of the humanity of black South Africans, moral, intellectual and political opposition to that system was based in part on an affirmation of the humanity of black South Africans. The hope of constructing a democratic and caring society in South Africa depends in part on a belief in a common or shared humanity to which one can appeal. The very concept of human rights implies that human beings (by virtue of being human) have dignity and value and (flowing from this) certain inalienable rights which need to be protected from arbitrary authority or tyranny. The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards each other in a spirit of brotherhood" (www.un.-org/rights/50/decla.htm). These concepts (arguably part of the "common sense" – if not common practice – of Western societies) have been embraced by the architects of the new South Africa, and are enshrined in our constitution.

In seeking to construct an alternative value system to that imposed on them through colonialism, African thinkers and political leaders have asserted or appealed to an African humanism in one form or another – Nkrumah's "Conscientism", Nyerere's "Ujamaa", Kaunda's "African Humanism", Biko's "Black Consciousness". This article seeks to explore the basis of these claims, and the questions which arise from them: to what extent (if at all) does African humanism resemble humanism in its Western form? What problems are

attached to this attempt to assert a common African humanism – and (since my interests are primarily literary) to what extent is African humanism embodied or reflected in fictional texts by particular black South African writers?

In his discussion of postcolonial African philosophy, Bell points out that for the postwar generation of African leaders and theorists (Senghor, Nkrumah, Nyerere, Kuanda) "African humanism" was more or less synonymous with "African socialism". These leaders were attempting to reconcile the humanist principles of traditional African societies with the needs of a modernising economy. In their organisation and ethos traditional societies were seen as communal rather than individualist, and as affirming a spiritual rather than a secular or materialist view of man. In the words of Senghor:

> Our Negro-African society is a ... community-based society, in which the hierarchy ... is founded on spiritual and democratic values: on the law of primogeniture and election; in which decisions of all kinds are deliberated in a *palaver*, after the ancestral gods have been consulted.
>
> (Senghor quoted in Bell 2002: 38)

The South African writer, Es'kia Mphahlele, argues that, in contrast to Western individualism,

> the African begins with the community and then determines what the individual's place and role should be in relation to the community .... Man finds fulfilment not as a separate individual but within family and community.
>
> (Mphahlele 2002a: 147)

Thus for him African humanism is "a communal concept". Bell concludes that whereas Western humanism characteristically emphasises individual freedom and civil rights, African humanism is "quite different":

> African humanism, on the other hand, is rooted in traditional values of mutual respect for one's fellow kinsman and a sense of position and place in the larger order of things: one's *social* order, the *natural* order, and the *cosmic* order. African humanism is rooted in *lived dependencies*.
>
> (Bell 2002: 40)

The classic statement of this position is to be found in Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophies*:

> [The individual] owes his existence to other people .... He is simply part of the whole .... Whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the whole group happens to the individual. The individual can only say, "I am because we are; and since we are, I am". *This is the cardinal*

One illustration of this in literature is the vivid image used by Achebe to describe Okonkwo's reaction to his expulsion from his clan: his determination to succeed and become "one of the lords of the clan" had been his "life-spring"; now he is "caste out of his clan like a fish onto a dry, sandy beach, panting" (Achebe 1958: 119). The clan was the element in which he swam; life outside of it seems inconceivable.

The idea that one's identity is conferred by the group – "I am because we are" – is what the Ghanaian philosopher Kwame Gyekye calls "radical communitarianism": it conceives of identity or personhood as "*wholly* constituted" by the community or group to which one belongs (Gyekye 1997: 37). He defines his own position as "moderate communitarianism" – a view which also recognises "individuality, individual responsibility and effort" (p. 40). In other words, a person is constituted only *partly* by the community or by the social relationships into which he or she necessarily enters. This view recognises the claims of both communality and individuality and acknowledges what he calls the "intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual" (p. 40). An individual possesses "rationality and moral sense" and a capacity for "evaluating and making moral judgements" (p. 53).

To return to Achebe: this capacity is illustrated in the debate that takes place between Okonkwo and his friend Obierika after the killing of Ikemefuna – a killing which has been decreed by the oracle. "If the oracle had said my son should be killed I would neither dispute it nor be the one to do it," says Obierika (Achebe 1958: 61). Obierika possesses a capacity for reflection, and arrives at an individual position which he defends on rational grounds. Okonkwo's choice is also a personal choice for which he must take responsibility.[1] According to Gyekye it is the exercise by individuals of this capacity for self-assertion that makes possible the creation and historical development of human culture (Gyekye 1997: 54).

One may wonder how different this view is from the Enlightenment view of man as a morally responsible individual characterised by rationality and possessing a degree of autonomy. The difference is perhaps a matter of emphasis. While post-Enlightenment thinkers tend to emphasise the autonomy of the individual, African thinkers place the stress on his or her communal responsibilities and obligations. Gyekye is still a "communitarian", albeit a "moderate" one, and this is how he describes the "community society":

> Communitarianism ... sees the individual as an inherently communal being, embedded in a context of social relationships and interdependence, never as an isolated individual. Consequently it sees the community as a reality in itself – not

as a mere association based on a contract of individuals whose interests and ends are contingently congruent, but as a group of persons linked by interpersonal bonds ... who share common goals, values and interests .... Members of a community society are expected to show concern for the well-being of one another, to do what they can to advance the common good, and generally to participate in the community life.

(Gyekye 1997: 41-42)

Gyekye articulates a view or outlook that seems to be common to many traditional African societies. In South Africa, the term *ubuntu* (in the Nguni languages) or *botho* (in Sesotho, Setswana or Sepedi) is used to characterise the norms and values which supposedly inhere in traditional African society. Variants of the term exist in many sub-Saharan African languages.[2] Linguistically, the term *ubuntu* comprises the pre-prefix *u-*, the abstract noun prefix *bu-* and the noun stem *–ntu*, meaning "person" (hence *umuntu*, *abantu* – a person, people) (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25). Kamwangamalu translates the term as "personhood" or "humanness" (p. 25) and goes on to explain:

Sociolinguistically, *ubuntu* is a multidimensional concept which represents the core values of African ontologies: respect for any human being, for human dignity and for human life, collective sharedness, obedience, humility, solidarity, caring, hospitality, interdependence, communalism, to list but a few.

(Kamwangamalu 1999: 25-26)

In other words it stands for a cluster of concepts which has as its core a respect for other human beings, or what he calls "the humanistic experience of treating all people with respect, granting them their human dignity" (p. 26). He identifies its "core values" as "communalism" and "interdependence" – and from what he says at one point Kamwangamalu sounds a bit like a radical communitarian: "It is a value according to which the interest of the individual is subordinate to the interests of the group" (p. 27). The proverb which best expresses this core value is (in Sesotho), *Motho ke motho ka motho yo mongwe* or (in isiZulu) *Umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye abantu* (a person is a person through other people). For Kuzwayo, "this one proverb lays down the principles and values of 'human' interaction for all African inhabitants of Southern Africa" (Kuzwayo 1998: 15). According to her, it is through proverbs such as this that "we can return to our culture, the culture of *Botho*, of *Ubuntu* – the spirit of mutual respect and recognition" (p. 56).

What the proverb seems to express is the radical recognition that our humanness (our sense of ourselves as human beings possessing dignity and value) depends on our both giving this recognition to others and receiving it from them. This is the ontological foundation for a society which recognises and respects the rights and dignity of others. The contrast between African cultures

and Western cultures, according to Kamwangamalu, is that in African societies "interdependence is valued highly", whereas in the West "independence ... is the norm" (p. 30). This does not mean that *ubuntu* or the values associated with it ("warmth, forgiveness, compassion, respect, dignity, empathy, supportiveness, cooperation, mutual understanding" (Kamwangamalu 1999: 33)) are not also regarded as important in Western societies – but they are not emphasised to the same extent, and in terms of social organisation they are not encouraged.[3] The values associated with *ubuntu* are more likely to take root in communities where face-to-face interaction between people is still possible. However, respect for human dignity and the rights of others is, arguably, a core value of Western humanism, and this would constitute a link or common ground between these two apparently contrasted "humanisms" (the African and the Western). Indeed, for Kamwangamalu, "*ubuntu* can be encoded in English as *humanism*. Put differently, *ubuntu* means humanism, the art of being human" (Kamwangamalu 1999: 37).[4]

According to one view, the qualities associated with *ubuntu* are in fact inborn or intrinsic to any person, are part of what makes us human. A more defensible view is that while these qualities exist as a potential in all human beings, they are acquired or realised through the process of socialisation. Hence Gyekye argues that in African societies "personhood" is a normative term. He points out that "when an individual's conduct consistently appears cruel, wicked, selfish or ungenerous, the Akan would say of that individual that "he is not a person" (*onnye onipa*)" (Gyekye 1997: 49). Gyekye concludes that "there are certain basic norms and ideals to which the behaviour of an individual, *if he is to be a person*, ought to conform" (p. 50). These qualities include "kindness, generosity, compassion, benevolence and respect and concern for others" (p. 50) – the same qualities which were listed above in relation to *ubuntu*.

This moral conception of personhood is of course also present in Western thought, and is in fact implied by the closely related terms "human" and "humane". The distinction between the two words only became established in the early eighteenth century. According to Williams,

> [b]efore this "humane" was the normal spelling for the main range of meanings which can be summarized as the characteristic or distinct elements of *men*, in the general sense of the human species.
>
> (Williams 1988: 148)

This gradually evolved into its modern meaning: "characterised by sympathy with or consideration for others; compassionate; benevolent" (*New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary on CD Rom* 1996). The idea that these are (or should be) the defining qualities of man is deeply rooted in Western culture.

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Danby points out that "the idea of nature, in orthodox Elizabethan thought, is always something normative for human beings" (Danby 1956: 21), and he goes on to illustrate this by reference to *King Lear*. We can take, as one example, the concentration of meaning suggested by Lady Macbeth's remarks on her husband:

> ... Yet do I fear thy nature:
> It is too full of the milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way.

<div align="right">(Macbeth I. 5: 14-16)</div>

Here the words "human kindness" refer to those qualities which are regarded as natural to man (or "humankind"), which make one "human" or "humane" (in the sense of kind, caring, compassionate) and which one apparently imbibes along with one's mother's milk. Arguably these qualities depend on nurture for their realisation – but the implication is that they are the qualities that are proper to mankind. This is close to the concept of "personhood" in African thought, where this is also a normative term – something to be attained or achieved through participation in the human community.[5] This helps to explain why an African philosopher like Gyekye can refer unproblematically to "our common humanity" when discussing what he calls the "universalist thesis" that philosophical ideas and insights can operate transculturally and trans-historically. "Our common humanity", he says, "grounds the adoption and acceptance of some ideas, values and perceptions" (Gyekye 1997: 30). An example is Kant's "categorical imperative", which Gyekye cites in his discussion of the question of individual or human rights.[6] He regards this as a concept which is universally applicable.

The post-1994 vogue for *ubuntu* in the "new" South Africa can be attributed in part to its ability to appeal to South Africans anxious to bridge the cultural and racial divides of the past. The concept is arguably central to the nation-building project on which South Africans have embarked. *Ubuntu* is mentioned in the final clause of the interim new South African Constitution of 1993 and is one of the values on which a new democratic dispensation with its human rights culture is based.[7] It has informed the approach of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presided over by Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with his "*ubuntu* theology".[8] *Ubuntu* has in fact become a protean term: it has been promoted or invoked in such diverse fields as religion, education, ethics, jurisprudence and business management. There is an "Ubuntu School of Philosophy" based in Pretoria, and a number of businesses have incorporated the word *ubuntu* into their names – thus one finds Ubuntu Food Distributors, Ubuntu Cash Loans, Ubuntu Training and Management Consultants, and so on (Deacon 1999: 29). One must wonder whether the concept does not in the

process become devalued as it is turned into what Deacon calls "a reified cultural object" (p. 30) – an instrument to increase productivity or promote a particular company. Marx is alarmed at the way in which the concept has been coopted to serve the interests of a new cultural nationalism which promotes conformity and stifles dissent. He argues that *ubuntu* is in fact "an invented tradition" that appeals to an "idealised, ahistorical, precolonial Africa" and attempts to paper over "historical chasms and fractures" (Marx 2002: 59). These reservations need to be taken seriously, but it is beyond the scope of this article to explore contemporary uses or abuses of the concept in more detail or depth.

What interests me, as a literary scholar, is the influence of *ubuntu* (or, more generally, indigenous value systems) on the writings in English of black South Africans – and in particular its influence on the two strongest genres of black South African writing, the autobiography and the short story. Es'kia Mphahlele, perhaps the most influential of these writers, describes himself as an African humanist: "As a humanist myself, I endorse most of what Huxley, Blackham and Maritain say, but insist further that I am an *African* humanist" (Mphahlele 1986: 7). A recent monograph on him is entitled *Es'kia Mphahlele: Themes of Alienation and African Humanism* (Obee 1999). His autobiography, *Down Second Avenue* (1959), is still one of the most widely read texts by a black South African writer. Together with the sequence of short stories that he published in *Drum* magazine in the 1950s, it reveals his insight into and understanding of the dynamics of black urban life in South Africa in these formative years.

In a 1984 public lecture entitled "Poetry and Humanism: Oral Beginnings", Mphahlele quotes Jacques Maritain to the effect that humanism "aims to render man more truly human" (Maritian quoted by Mphahlele 1986: 7). For Mphahlele, African humanism is "a way of life" which is "embedded in our proverbs and aphorisms and oral poetry, and in the way our elders spoke to us" (Mphahlele 1986: 10). Its ethic is built on a respect for and acknowledgement of other human beings:

> Right and wrong depend on what you have done for or to your fellow-being, not on any abstract notion of sin against God .... When you have wronged someone ... you talk to the wronged person, often through a mediator. You ask the ancestors to restore harmony.
>
> (Mphahlele 1986: 9)[9]

African humanism may have been "challenged, fragmented, even devastated" in South Africa (1986: 8) – but for Mphahlele it still survives – even in the very untraditional context of the urban ghetto or township. There is, he asserts, "a collective memory, or collective unconscious, among blacks. Without being

able to articulate the concept, the working class can, at the cognitive level, tune into African humanism" (2002b: 128).[10] It is this sense of community that, he suggests, has enabled people to survive (at least to some degree) the twin impacts of apartheid and modernisation.

As a young boy of 12 or 13 Mphahlele himself made the transition from the rural village of Maupaneng to Marabastad on the fringes of Pretoria. In Maupaneng the communal fireplace had been the focal point for the transmission of cultural traditions and values: "We learned a great deal at the fireplace, even before we were aware of it: history, tradition and custom, code of behaviour, communal responsibility, social living and so on" (1959: 15). Marabastad – "an organised rubble of tin cans" (p. 31) – is a far cry from the rural village community, and Mphahlele gives a vivid picture of the squalor, poverty, overcrowding and the struggle to subsist. The young boy is initially bewildered:

> Avenues and streets were new to us. Now why would people go and build houses all in a straight line? Why would people go to a bucket in a small building to relieve themselves? Why would people want to be cut off from one another by putting up fences? It wasn't so at Maupaneng. Houses didn't stand in any order and we visited one another and could sit round the communal fire and tell one another stories until the cock crowed. Not in Second Avenue. And yet, although people didn't seem interested in one another, they spoke with a subdued unity of voice. They still behaved as a community.
>
> (Mphahlele 1959: 34)

Despite the differences, *Down Second Avenue* reveals the extent to which people still relate to one another as members of a community. An early chapter describes the kind of interaction that takes place around the communal water tap. On this occasion speculation is triggered by Ma-Janeware's report that a tortoise has been spotted in Ma-Legodi's yard – "lying restfully against the wall as if it was laying an egg of mischief" (1959: 29). This is taken by some to be a sign that Ma-Legodi practises witchcraft – a suspicion harboured also by the narrator's Aunt Dora. This kind of everyday exchange and gossip helps create a sense of shared communal life. Particular characters, like Ma-Lebona, stand out as distinctive individuals, but they are presented dramatically, through their interactions with others, and through the perspective provided by the (often colourful) comments of the narrator's Aunt Dora. When Ma-Lebona's daughter-in-law does the unthinkable and slaps her on the cheek, we are told: "Everybody down Second Avenue was shocked. Tongues were let loose. Some nodded their heads and said, 'It's good for Ma-Lebona. She's met her match'" (1959: 65).

The use of dialogue and scenic presentation helps account for the unusual

interest and vitality of the writing in *Down Second Avenue*, and its successful evocation of "felt life". These qualities are also evident in the short stories which Mphahlele published in *Drum* magazine in 1956 and 1957. These are set in the freehold township of Newclare, adjacent to Sophiatown, and centre on Nadia Street and the Lesane family.[11] There is the same detailed realism in the evocation of place, and the same foregrounding of communal life. In these stories, as in *Down Second Avenue*, we have an insider's distinctly unromantic view of ghetto life, based on first-hand observation and experience. One finds the same use of dialogue and conversation to reveal the reactions of the residents of Nadia Street to the events around them. Certain characters (Old Mbata, the two washerwomen) act as a kind of chorus, providing a terse and often witty commentary on these events. In the first story the news that Diketso's brother is getting married "shoots up and down Nadia Street like an electric current" (1989: 133). The wedding itself is an occasion for communal celebration and participation – presented through impersonal commentary as well as through the observations of onlookers. In one scene Ma-Mafate and Ma-Ntoi discuss the wedding as they bend over their washtubs. Economic necessity (taking in the washing of white families) becomes an occasion for the exchange of views and the invocation of proverbial wisdom. The survival of the African oral tradition is illustrated by the scene where the bridegroom listens to the speeches of various relatives who offer advice on the conduct of married life. He is told by one of his aunts: "Remember, a man is a man because of other men" (p. 134). As we have seen, this encapsulates the traditional wisdom of *ubuntu* and reaffirms the central principle that one does not live for oneself, or in isolation from others. Thus the bridegroom's "first duty" is to provide a grandson for Ma-Lesane to "hold on her lap" (p. 134).

This foregrounding of communal experience is closely related to the fact that the subject matter of these stories is the ordinary events of township life: they deal with ordinary human hopes and fears, with what Njabulo Ndebele has referred to as "the essential drama in the lives of ordinary people" (Ndebele 1986: 154). A recurring theme is the continuity of life in the ghetto:

> Outside in the street the young people were dancing. Dancing as if yesterday they didn't have a riotous beer-spilling raid; as if tomorrow they might not have a pass and tax raid. For them today was just a chunk of sweetened and flavoured Time. And in all this there was a spirit of permanence which they felt, without thinking about it.
>
> (Mphahlele 1989: 134)

The harshness and insecurity of these people's lives are mitigated by the life which they share and celebrate at moments like this. In spite of all the odds stacked against them, they have succeeded in creating a place for themselves

in the white man's city – a place where they were regarded as at best temporary sojourners. Taken together, the stories and the autobiography demonstrate one of Mphahlele's enduring themes – the resilience shown by ordinary people in the most adverse circumstances. In *The African Image* he states that he has witnessed the survival,

> in the most urbanised ghettos of South Africa, of the toughest of traditional traits: the sense of community, the rituals surrounding birth, marriage and death, the theatre that surrounds life in general.
>
> (Mphahlele 1974: 71)

In this Mphahlele is not alone: he can be seen as the founder of a tradition of black writing that runs (with various individual inflections) through writers like Miriam Tlali, Mtutuzeli Matshoba, Njabulo Ndebele and Zakes Mda to Phaswane Mpe.

One should not, however, minimise the harshness, violence and insecurity that are also part of Mphahlele's depiction of township life. As Trump has pointed out, "The central tension in black South African writing is between the violence of the society and the sense of communalism in the black communities" (Trump 1988: 34). Violence is present within the Lesane family itself: the father beats his daughter Diketso, and threatens to chop her (or his son Fanyan) "into pieces" (Mphahlele 1989: 136). Violence is vividly demonstrated in the apparently unprovoked assault on Moosa, an Indian hawker. Violence or the threat of violence is present within the wider community, which is subject to both police raids and the predations of "the Russians":

> In the meantime Diketso continued to meet her lover. They were like refugees, meeting there on Reno Square, at the squatters' camp. The squatters themselves were refugees from Setikitiking, where the Russians had recently run riot. Refugees. Violence. The lovers' lives emerged in the heat and blood of this all. Two lovers seeking refuge amongst other refugees, from the wrath of parents who, like most townsfolk, were also refugees from somewhere outside Johannesburg.
>
> (Mphahlele 1989: 138)[12]

The central focus of the stories is, however, on the efforts of ordinary people – like Ma-Lesane here, or Aunt Dora and the grandmother in *Down Second Avenue* – to hold the family together and affirm the basic human values of caring, compassion and kindness. These texts explore the ability of ordinary people to survive and forge a meaningful community life for themselves – in the face of all the forces that sought to deny this. In Mphahlele's words, life in the ghetto was "a drama of survival", and it is this which he attempts to chronicle (1983: 22).

In his opening address to the AUETSA Conference in July 1983 (reprinted in the *English Academy Review* of that year) Mphahlele expressed the hope that "some part of our South African humanity" would survive (1983: 15). To what extent, one wonders, has this traditional humanism survived the ravages of apartheid and the dislocation and disruption brought about by industrialisation and urbanisation – to say nothing of the political violence of the 1980s and the transition (1990-1994)? Bishop Tutu is quoted as saying (in 1991): "It seems to me that we in the black community have lost our sense of *ubuntu* – our humanness, caring, hospitality, our sense of connectedness, our sense that my humanity is bound up in your humanity" (*Sunday Times* 26 May 1991, quoted in *A Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* 1996: 749a). It could, however, be argued that one factor that has made a relatively peaceful transition to democracy possible is the survival of some vestiges of this traditional humanism. (Its centrality to the work of the TRC – presided over by Bishop Tutu – has been noted earlier.) This in part may help to explain the unprecedented appropriation and invocation of the concept of *ubuntu*, particularly in the period after 1990. Noyes acknowledges the extent to which a discourse of humanism has asserted itself in South Africa in the last two decades:

> When we listen to debates of reconciliation, of common identity, of nation building in South Africa today, they return us time and time again to concepts of our shared humanity. And how could it be otherwise? What else is there to speak about when our goal is a future without violence? In much South African intellectual discourse of the 1980s and 1990s, the problem of language and violence is expressed as a struggle for an adequate conception of the human.
>
> (Noyes 2002: 273)

Phaswane Mpe's recent novel, *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* (from which the title of this article is taken), challenges any easy invocation of the ideas of *ubuntu* or humanism in the South African context.[13] The title – which is repeated with variations throughout the novel – operates like a refrain and provokes a number of related questions. Who is being addressed? (The immediate addressee may be Refentsê or Refilwe, but it also functions as a direct address to the reader, implicating her or him in the world of the novel.) What kind of place is Hillbrow (or Johannesburg, or London, or Lagos, or any modern metropolis) – and how can one feel welcome (or "at home") in such a place? The irony of the "welcome" is underlined with every repetition of the title phrase, as in "Welcome To Our Hillbrow of milk and honey and bile" (Mpe 2001: 41). "Hillbrow" comes to stand as a metonym for the modern city or metropolis, and, as the novel demonstrates, this is a place characterised more by the absence of human community than by its presence. The novel reveals

the extent to which prejudice, intolerance and xenophobia are rife in both the rural community of Tiragalong and the inner-city community of Hillbrow in post-1990 South Africa – and in this way it deconstructs the familiar urban/rural opposition that characterises the "Jim Comes To Joburg" trope of South African writing: "Welcome to our Tiragalong in Johannesburg" (p. 79). It lays bare the myth of rural innocence: the traditional rural village of Tiragalong is as riven by suspicion, fear, prejudice and intolerance as is its urban counterpart (Hillbrow) – an intolerance which manifests itself in its most extreme form in witchcraft accusation and killing. Furthermore, the novel demonstrates that it is in fact the Tiragalongians' mistaken construction of themselves as "innocent" that explains their intolerance and suspicion of others (whether these "others" are defined as "Hillbrowans" or "Makwerekwere" or those who carry the AIDS virus).[14] The immediate catalyst for the deaths by suicide of first Refentsê and then his lover Lerato is Refentsê's mother's "relentless hatred for this Hillbrowan she had not even met yet" (p. 39) – a hatred which results from her uncritical consumption of the stories about "Hillbrow women" which proliferate on the "informal migrant grapevine" (p. 4).

These (necessarily) very brief comments cannot do justice to what is a rich and multifaceted novel, but are intended to direct attention to its exploration (in the context of present-day South Africa) of man's capacity for inhumanity to his fellow man.[15] The novel suggests that at the root of this recurring problem is our incorrigible tendency to construct an opposition between self (or those whom we identify with) and others (however these "others" are defined). As such, it questions the claims that are frequently made for *ubuntu* or the survival of traditional communitarian values, and subverts familiar views of the rural/urban dichotomy.

Mphahlele's early writing derived its impetus from his response to life in the segregated townships of the 1940s and 1950s (Marabastad, Sophiatown, Newclare, Orlando) and explored the ability of ordinary people to survive and establish some kind of community in the inhospitable and unwelcoming urban environment of apartheid South Africa. His writings helped to inaugurate the tradition of black South African writing in English. At the other end of this tradition, *Welcome To Our Hillbrow* can be seen as a post-apartheid dystopian novel which explores the random, contingent, dangerous and unpredictable world of the modern inner-city, and foregrounds "the ambiguities, ironies, paradoxes [that are] the stuff of our South African and Makwerekwere lives" (Mpe 2001: 23). It can also be read as a (somewhat despairing) plea for the acknowledgement of a shared humanity: without this, it is difficult to see how we (as South Africans or Africans or global citizens) can work together to construct a common society and a common future. However discredited humanism may be, however many crimes may have been committed in its

name, "the human" remains a concept or a category which we have to work with. What we seem to need is a version of humanism that allows for heterogeneity and difference, and does not mistake a culturally specific version of what it means to be human for a universally applicable norm.

Notes

1.   Obierika remarks, prophetically, "What you have done will not please the Earth. It is the kind of action which wipes out whole families" (Achebe 1958: 61). Okonkwo's subsequent expulsion from the clan (for an apparently unrelated offence) seems like a fulfilment of Obierika's prophecy.

2.   Kamwangamalu cites *umundu* (Kikuyu), *umuntu* (Kimeru), *bumuntu* (kiSukuma and Kihayi), *vumuntu* (shiTsonga and shiTswa), *bomoto* (Bobangi), and *gimuntu* (kiKongo and giKwese). These languages are spoken in Kenya, Tanzania, Mozambique, the Congo and Angola (Kamwangamalu 1999: 25). Mphahlele cites the equivalent terms *vumunhu* and *vuthu* (2002b: 126).

3.   Bell warns against the easy adoption of clichés like "Western values are driven by individualism" and "African values are driven by communalism": "The range on a spectrum from the one to the other is both multivaried and complex" (Bell 2002: 64).

4.   He does wonder how, if respect for human dignity features strongly in Western humanism, the Holocaust, Nazism, slavery and colonialism were possible (Kamwangamalu 1999: 37). This is, of course, the problem enunciated so clearly by Fanon, and referred to at the beginning of this paper. He also notes that similar questions can be asked about certain traditional practices in African societies, such as "*muti* and *witchcraft*-related killings. Are these practices *ubuntuistically* acceptable?" (p. 37).

5.   By killing his King, Macbeth of course severs himself from this human community, pours "the sweet milk of concord into Hell" (*Macbeth* IV.3.98) and violates what is best in his own nature.

6.   Gyekye argues that such rights are grounded in "the human capacity for moral autonomy" (Gyekye 1997: 63). He goes on to quote Kant's famous "imperative": "Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, in your own person or in the person of any another, never simply as a means but at the same time also as an end" (Kant quoted by Gyekye 1997: 64).

7.   This point is made by R. English, who quotes the concluding provision of the Constitution:
     The adoption of the Constitution lays the secure foundation for the people of

> South Africa to transcend the divisions and strife of the past ..... These can now be addressed on the basis that there is a need for understanding but not for vengeance, a need for reparation but not for retaliation, a need for *ubuntu* but not victimisation.
>
> (English 1996: 642)

8. This is the subject of a book by Michael Battle, entitled *Reconciliation: The Ubuntu Theology of Desmond Tutu* (1997).

9. One can see how this ethic informed the approach and practice of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which brought perpetrator and victim together, and made amnesty dependent on "full disclosure".

10. In this article Mphahlele also uses the African language terms *ubuntu, botho, vumunhu* and *vhuthu* as synonyms for "African humanism" – thereby stressing its roots in indigenous culture.

11. These stories were not republished until Chapman's anthology of *Drum* writing, *The Drum Decade* (1989), made them more readily available. Perhaps for this reason, they have received little critical attention. An exception is Bruno van Dyk, who, in his MA thesis entitled "Short Story Writing in Drum Magazine" (1988), recognises the importance of these stories for Mphahlele's development as a writer.

12. Newclare was notorious during the 1950s as being the base of the most notorious and feared of the "Russian" gangs. They were recruited from among the Basotho mineworkers who came to the Reef to work on the gold mines.

13. The following quotation from an article in *The Star* (31 December 2002) suggests the part that "Hillbrow" plays in the South African imaginary: "The suburb of Hillbrow, Johannesburg's high-crime hotspot and a haven for druglords, prostitutes and gangsters, has become well-known for turning into a war zone at the [end] of the year."

14. Through the character of Refilwe, the novel makes a powerful plea for us to avoid stigmatising those who carry the AIDS virus. The novel explores her predicament with great compassion as she herself "reaps the bitter fruits of the xenophobic prejudice she had helped to sow" (Mpe 1991: 113).

15. I give more detailed and in-depth examination of the novel in a paper delivered at the AUETSA-SAVAL-SAACLALS Conference (5-7 July 2004). The paper, entitled "Stories and Storytelling in Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome To Our Hillbrow*" can be accessed via the English Academy website.

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