“Welcome to Our Heaven”: Hospitality and Storytelling in Phaswane Mpe’s *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*

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Abstract

In this article, I offer a reading of Phaswane Mpe’s influential 2001 novel, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, which focuses on the depiction of hospitality in the novel. While I draw on Derrida’s influential theorisation of hospitality, I do so in order to show that Mpe’s focus on the role of storytelling allows him to offer a vision of hospitality that, although it is somewhat reminiscent of Derrida’s ideas, also complicates them in ways that are decidedly informed by an African understanding of the power of stories. For Mpe, stories are neither purely fictional, nor are they uncritical evocations of the real, as the experimental nature of the text makes clear. Stories therefore act as an aporetic site where the impossible can be imagined and enacted. That is to say, storytelling becomes a site of becoming for the impossible task of unlimited hospitality. I end this article by considering how this conceptualisation of story might gesture at an aspect of African literature that might be unique within the global literary imaginary.

Keywords: South African postapartheid fiction; storytelling; hospitality; cosmopolitanism

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Introduction

In the years since its publication in 2001, Phaswane Mpe's *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* has emerged as one of the most influential texts of the postapartheid era.[1] Its technical innovation, unique style, and its evocative exploration of inner-city violence, HIV/AIDS, xenophobia, and the nature of community have all been lauded. And although the novel is now more than two decades old, much of what it describes is prescient—at times alarmingly so. Waves of xenophobic attacks against black Africans from the rest of the continent, as well as continued inner-city decay make Mpe's text feel like it could have been written about South Africa (and Johannesburg specifically) in 2025. Despite being a very short novel, one could even term it a novella, it stands as a fine testament to the talent of a South African writer who died too soon, but who nonetheless has left an indelible mark on South African letters. Yet, as I will show, the radical nature of the ethical vision that informs Mpe's novel has not been adequately addressed by extant scholarship. I argue that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* offers a vision of hospitality that is complex. On the one hand, it seems reasonable to contend that the text invokes dimensions of Jacques Derrida's famous theorisation of the concept. On the other hand, Mpe's novel does not merely depict the heterogeneous yet aporetic relationship between conditional and unconditional hospitality which is central to Derrida's philosophy. Rather, this text suggests a distinctly African reconceptualisation of this formula in which storytelling mediates between the phenomenally real and the imaginary, and therefore between unconditional hospitality and various forms of inherently violent exclusion.

As the title of the novel suggests, hospitality is central to Mpe's articulation of a postapartheid ethics. But is there a welcome that can extend beyond limited, prescriptive forms to include those categorised as outsiders and others? From this query follows other pressing questions: Does Mpe envision forms of community that can overcome the hostilities and prejudices which his novel depicts? Or are these violent forms of othering innate to what he terms "the world of our humanity" (Mpe [2001] 2011, 113)? Is the text about South Africa's doom or its salvation? As Pier Paolo Frassinelli and David Watson note, "the utopian impulse of the novel and its tragic dimension are […] complementary to each other, for the narrative intimates that the radical cosmopolitanism it strives to promote can only be actualized in an imaginary world far removed from reality" (2013, 8). While there is much to admire in Frassinelli and Watson's work on the novel, their reading of the text does take it for granted that the politics of hospitality which Mpe advocates is impossible, "imaginary." As I will show in this article, Mpe envisions story as a site for radical hospitality but not, crucially, as a purely imaginary domain of human activity.

Given that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* engages so directly with the power of storytelling, it is unsurprising that much of the scholarship on the novel is, as Sheila Giffen points

1 For more on the influence of *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, see Frenkel (2013).

out, "preoccupied with justifying how literature can ameliorate social life" (2024, 3).[2] A nuanced example of this kind of reading of the text is offered by Emily S. Davis. Her article explores "the association between the outsider—as transnational migrant, social outcast, city dweller, and HIV positive person—and disease" (Davis 2013, 99). Broadly, she explores "the possibilities of the concept of contagion as a means for approaching questions of cosmopolitanism, human rights, and shared vulnerability in the era of globalization" (99).[3] Most significantly, given the focus of this study, Davis contends that "the novel presents storytelling as a means to re-humanize the diseased body (but importantly, within its own Afrocentric ethos of the human), a body marginalized by nationalist policies and within popular discourse about immigration and AIDS in post-apartheid South Africa" (102). Davis's otherwise excellent article seems here, and at other points, to conceive of storytelling as an antidote to the malaise of contemporary South African biopolitics. Where Frassinelli and Watson can only conceive of storytelling in Mpe's novel as a mode defined by its impossibility, Davis's work seems too entranced by the potential of storytelling to properly account for the strange, liminal role it occupies in the text.

My sense is that these scholars are not entirely misinterpreting the nature of Mpe's ethical vision. Rather, I would argue they are *partially* interpreting it. For instance, it is reasonable to note that the most ethical space in the novel is Heaven, a realm the protagonist only enters once he has committed suicide. It therefore follows that the cosmopolitan vision of the novel can be categorised as impossible, or fictional at the least. But, when one considers the layered attempts by Mpe to render Heaven and fiction in quite grounded, tangible forms, it is also fair to explore the potential of storytelling to instantiate more ethical forms of engagement. But, if one uncritically maps this possibility onto the social life of South Africa, one ignores the complex, experimental and self-reflexive nature of Mpe's novel. One must, in other words, overlook important aspects of the textuality of the text. On the one hand, the novel strives to link storytelling to the phenomenally real world and, on the other, the experimental dimensions of the novel emphasise the fictional, constructed nature of the narrative. It is precisely this ambiguity that I wish to explore in this article. Neither an overly cynical nor an overly optimistic reading of the text can properly account for its ethical vision. Rather, as I will show, one must acknowledge that it is Mpe's indeterminate, aporetic figuring of storytelling that is his most important contribution to our understanding of what it means, following Kwame Anthony Appiah, to "live in a world of strangers" (2006).

According to Appiah:

> there are two strands that intertwine in the notion of cosmopolitanism. One is the general moral idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those with whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even the more formal ties of a shared

2 For other examples of this type of reading of the novel, see Frenkel (2013) and López (2013).

3 I would like to acknowledge, here, that Davis's reading of Heaven in the novel, along with Clarkson's, has influenced my own ideas in this article.

> citizenship. The other is that we take seriously not just the value of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. Because there are so many human possibilities worth exploring, we neither expect nor desire that every person or every society should converge on a single mode of life. Whatever our obligations are to others (or theirs to us) they often have the right to go their own way. There will be times when these two ideals—universal concern and respect for legitimate difference—clash. There's a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge. (2006, xv)

In Mpe's novel, as we shall see, we find various articulations of precisely this challenge. Certainly the main character, Refentše, espouses a sense of responsibility for others that resonates with the one articulated by Appiah, even as he fails to take responsibility for his own actions, his own partial and limited behaviour, and for the ways in which those around him are limited and have their own differing perspectives. Yet what sets Refentše's, and later Refilwe's, journey apart from other similar explorations of the limitations of cosmopolitanism is that he is granted the gift, perhaps also it is a curse, to see not only what his self-centred behaviour has wrought in the lives of others, but also the aspects of the story that his narrow view did not afford him access. In death, in Heaven, and for us as readers through *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, Refentše comes to know his own story in relation to the stories of others. It is an interconnected narrative, rich, complex, shot through with failures and heartbreak. In a sense, it is a story that cannot be told to or by the living, an impossible story. Yet, it is simultaneously a story that is always being told, retold, revised, and is therefore always in the process of becoming. In a way that is almost Beckettian, Mpe writes a story that must fail, but which is, in effect, the only story worth telling. According to Mike Marais, "Since Beckett's search is for the excess of his search, for what remains after whatever he has said and done, it is never concluded by the completion of the individual text. The story that must be told is always yet to be told, and thus extends beyond the compass of the individual work" (2014, 16). Mpe's novel also seeks what it cannot contain, which, like Beckett, is a radical form of hospitality for the stranger. And like Beckett, Mpe cannot not fail in this endeavour, rendering his narrative a failure. As Marais points out, this renders all of Beckett's texts failures in much the same way and, furthermore, it also explains why he seemed to write what was in effect the same story again and again. By contrast, as we shall see, *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* refuses the closure of its own failure, gesturing beyond itself, and therefore towards the potential of a story that can do what is, ostensibly, impossible.

What Stories Can and Cannot Say

It is not hard to see why certain critics read *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* as a sombre representation of postapartheid South Africa. In the space of a mere 124 pages, the

reader encounters descriptions of murder, necklacing,[4] suicide, xenophobia, threats of rape, and more. One is struck by Mpe's refusal to sugarcoat his evocation of certain aspects of contemporary South African life. Indeed, in the novel, Mpe equates euphemism with the language biases and moral dogma of the apartheid state ([2001] 2011, 56–57). A coded, guarded language not only inaccurately reflects South African society, but does so in terms that reinforce the logic and language policing of the apartheid state. For this reason, Mpe's text overtly denounces euphemistic, impressionistic language. To call a thing, even a painful and/or violent thing, by its name is not only an aesthetic but an ethical choice on Mpe's part. Yet, as with many aspects of this novel, this declaration of the need to be forthright is undermined by other stylistic choices in the text. In her persuasive article on Mpe's creative *oeuvre*, Sheila Giffen shows that this writer often employs what she terms "silent speech," a strategy that she contends is "a conscious negotiation of the political and social contexts that condition speech, and the cultural protocols determining what can or should be said" (2024, 2). In the context of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, Giffen explores how,

> Rather than render a lived experience of illness as ethnographic evidence, Mpe explores how the social and political life of disease necessarily frustrates regimes of intelligibility in speech and writing. Mpe confronts and disrupts the discursive construction of the individual medicalized subject who is tasked with speaking the truth of self and experience in the very language that seals her institutional enclosure. (2024, 2)

The self-reflexive, experimental form of Mpe's novel deliberately disrupts the desire for an expression of truth that can be separated from the discursive formations that render truth subjective and political. Some stories, it seems, cannot or should not be told. Yet, Mpe's novel clearly renounces euphemism. In effect, Mpe constructs a narrative in which the ethical demand to be explicit is in tension with an equally valid need for some things to remain secret/veiled/unsaid. The question, then, becomes how stories can accommodate such opposing edicts. How can one speak and not speak, render in discourse while protecting oneself from the dangers of generalisation inherent in discursive formations? How is it possible to represent without rendering one's subject representative?

In Giffen's work, she focuses on "the experimental narrative strategies [in Mpe's writing] that resist transparent speech" (2024, 3). In particular, she focuses on Refentše's short story, which is never published, and that centres on a protagonist, also a writer struggling to find a publisher for her work, who contracts HIV/AIDS. The story has a powerful impact on Refilwe, who overcomes her own xenophobia partly due to it. Ironically, like the character from Refentše's story, Refilwe contracts HIV, later AIDS,

4 This is an act in which a person is murdered by placing a tyre around a person's neck, doused in petrol, and then set alight. Necklacing gained notoriety for its use by anti-apartheid activists during the armed struggle. The protagonist's mother suffers this fate after she is accused by her community of Tiragalong of witchcraft. The inclusion of this act points to the continued influence of apartheid in the postapartheid era. For more on the history of necklacing and its continued presence in contemporary South Africa, see Moosage (2010).

and is ostracised by her community as a result. The reader is enveloped in these layers of story, where a character in a story written by Refentše begins to resemble a character written by Mpe. As a result, the reader is left with a troubling, vertigo-like sense that the bottom, by which I mean the real, is both imminent and yet too far away. One is made to feel one is always approaching a ground that nonetheless never arrives. Consequently, such experimental strategies stage, in an overt and self-reflexive way, an irreconcilable tension between what is "real" and what is not. In the logic of the novel, stories both contain and veer from the "real." Reality cannot be disentangled from stories, yet stories are not real.

In terms of the ethical dimension of the novel which concerns me in this article, this aporetic characterisation of stories is significant. Even as the novel seems to map the possibility of an African cosmopolitanism rooted in Johannesburg, the reader is alerted to the constructed nature of the text. For this reason, Mpe's cosmopolitan vision is "merely" a story being told, and an incomplete one at that. Yet it would be wrong, therefore, to assume that the cosmopolitanism which Mpe gestures at is only imaginary. For, as Mpe reminds us, "the worlds of fiction are never quite what we label them" ([2001] 2011, 59).

The Impossible Demands of Mpe's Welcome

In order to accurately account for what Mpe imagines fiction to be, it is necessary to first outline how the novel depicts the complexities of hospitality. It seems sensible to start by unpacking Mpe's titular phrase. Near the beginning of the narrative, the second-person narrator reminds Refentše of his early days in Hillbrow. In particular, Refentše is instructed to recall what happened when the South African national football team, locally known as Bafana Bafana, beat the Ivory Coast in 1995. The people of Hillbrow celebrated by "hurl[ing] bottles of all sorts from their flat balconies. A few bold souls, boasting a range of driving skills, swung and spun their cars in the streets, making U-turns and circles all over the road." The protagonist also "recall[s] the child, possibly seven years old or so, who got hit by a car. Her mid-air screams still ring in [his] memory. When she hit the concrete pavements of Hillbrow, her screams died with her" (Mpe [2001] 2011, 1–2). The child dies, the car and driver disappear, presumably never to answer for this crime, and someone in the crowd says, "Welcome to our Hillbrow!" to his companion who is new to the area (2). There is clearly something cynical, sardonic, even hopeless about this eponymous phrase when used in these circumstances. The speaker seems to be implying that this kind of thing happens in Hillbrow all the time. He wants his companion to understand that the death of a child and the lack of accountability for this tragedy are dimensions of what Hillbrow is—perhaps even all it is. In this context, the welcome registers ironically, as if the speaker were saying, "this is not a place one can find welcoming, this is a place of death, of suffering." According to this logic, Hillbrow offers no safe haven for the many migrants who occupy it. Instead, it is the last resort when all other options vanish. One does not come to Hillbrow because of choice but out of desperation. And if there is no choice, there is no

hospitality. There is no welcome worthy of the name that denies the guest the right to decline the offer to enter. Such a welcome is not just inhospitable; they are the words of the warden as he locks the cell.

Yet, as Carrol Clarkson notes:

> The "Welcome" is irrepressibly zeugmatic: we are welcomed to our Hillbrow, our Tiragolong, our Heathrow, but also to our Heaven, our Humanity, our All. The welcome thus extends from, and to, places not reducible to geographic coordinates. The further import of the zeugma is this: a refusal to be welcomed to our Hillbrow becomes difficult to extricate from a refusal to be welcomed to the "World of our Humanity", to our All. (2005, 457)

In other words, Mpe contends that every attempt to refuse a limited form of affiliation inevitably leads to a more significant exclusion from humanity, from humanness (see also Davis 2013, 106).[5] One can only be fully human if one accepts that one is implicated in all that constitutes human sociality. And to the extent that one rejects a certain limited part of the human world, one rejects one's own humanity in the process. Mpe constructs a moral vision in which one's humanity is defined by one's ability to be implicated in and responsible for what one considers other to oneself.[6] Hillbrow's disputed boundaries come to stand for the porousness of all boundaries, which is to say, the implicatedness of all people. The title of the novel may as well be "Welcome to Our Humanity" since Hillbrow and our humanity are, in Mpe's vision, one and the same. To be precise, Hillbrow is a part of our humanity, but also, and at the same time, Hillbrow *is* our Humanity. That is, it is only by embracing Hillbrow that we can access our humanity. So yes, the phrase "Welcome to Our Hillbrow" is voiced amidst violence and loss, and it is said by a person who means it to indicate the loss of decency and humane morality in Hillbrow. But, ironically, it is this dark and melancholy form of welcome, the one that seems a bitter joke, that most demands to be accepted. One dare not turn away from this welcome, although such a refusal seems obvious and sensible. If there is any kind of hospitality at all, if such a thing is even possible, it is there, where it seems least likely, if not utterly impossible.

Although I will argue that Mpe's vision diverges from Derridean theorisations of hospitality in important ways, it is nonetheless worth first considering the similarities between the two formulations. In the latter part of his career, Algerian/French philosopher Jacques Derrida turned his attention to studies of ethics, drawing heavily on the work of Immanuel Levinas. In particular, he became concerned with the ethical demands of hospitality. Derrida theorises two forms of hospitality in his work: the conditional, limited form and the unconditional. The latter invokes a form of welcome

5 Carrol Clarkson's article draws attention to the African roots of this ethic. See Clarkson (2005, 453).

6 The use of second-person narration seems to hail or invoke the reader at the same time as it hails Refentše. In this way, the narrative gestures at the reader's inclusion in the cosmopolitan community which it imagines. Although this idea is broadly related to the focus of this study, it is not central to my concerns here. For more on this aspect of the novel see Dass (2004) and Davis (2013, 102).

that places no limitations on who may arrive, who may enter. It therefore renders the host hostage to the guest, infinitely responsible for this guest who can neither be anticipated nor denied. By contrast, limited hospitality refers to forms of welcome that attempt to limit which guest may enter, for various reasons, including safety and protection of privacy. In Derrida's view,

> It is between these two figures of hospitality that responsibilities and decisions must in effect be taken. This is a formidable challenge because if these two hospitalities do not contradict each other, they remain heterogeneous at the very moment that they appeal to each other, in a disconcerting way. Doubtless, all ethics of hospitality are not the same, but there is no culture or social bond without a principle of hospitality. This principle demands, it even creates the desire for, a welcome without reserve and without calculation, an exposure without limit to whoever arrives [l'arrivant]. Yet a cultural or linguistic community, a family, a nation, can not not suspend, at the least, even betray this principle of absolute hospitality: to protect a "home", without doubt, by guaranteeing property and what is "proper" to itself against the unlimited arrival of the other; but also to attempt to render the welcome effective, determined, concrete, to put it into practice [le mettre en oeuvre]. Whence the "conditions" which transform the gift into a contract, the opening into a policed pact; whence the rights and the duties, the borders, passports and doors, whence the immigration laws, since immigration must, it is said, be "controlled." (2005, 6)

So one must place limitations on the form of hospitality one extends in order for it to be "effective, determined, concrete." But, in doing so, the hospitality one proposes in this concrete way is no longer hospitable. This is to say, it no longer aligns with the "principle of hospitality," which is the desire for "a welcome without reserve and without calculation." Accordingly, every limited form of hospitality that is offered invokes the unlimited form that it nonetheless cannot be and which renders the absolute form impossible.

In a different but related vein, Mark Sanders, in his book *Complicities: The Intellectual and Apartheid*, argues that the intellectual is always faced with a choice between complicities in the narrow sense and complicity in the broader form (2002, 10). Limited complicities amount to choices of affiliation which run the risk of denying the enfolded-ness of self and other precisely because they are "one-sided" and "accept responsibility only in front of their own" (8). In the process, one is able to deny responsibility for and complicity with all those rendered outsiders. According to Sanders, the broader, more infinite form of complicity is a "basic folded-together-ness of being, of self and other" (11). What Sanders proposes, in other words, is that a limited responsibility for one's own camp, party, or affiliation is irreconcilable with a more general "responsibility-in-complicity" (11). Such responsibility is theoretically infinite, at least in the sense that it is taken in the name of a human folded-ness that can never be quantified or determined in advance.

The Humanness of Our Shared Bodies and Passions

It is precisely this "human folded-ness" that *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* depicts so well. Although the text is replete with examples, I will focus here on one instance in which this interconnectedness of people is illustrated. Refentše discovers Lerato, the "bone of his heart," having sexual intercourse with his close friend, Sammy, and this betrayal leads Refentše's mind to view "*suicide* and *relief* [as] synonymous attractions" (Mpe [2001] 2011, 41). Notably, a short time before beginning his relationship with Lerato, Refentše has a sexual encounter with Sammy's partner, Bohlale. He goes to visit her because she is distressed that Sammy, probably drugged at the time, brought home another woman and demanded she sleep on the floor while he and this woman have sex. Refentše's attempts to offer comfort become physical and the two engage in an act which they both later regret. And, although Refentše does not know this, very similar conditions lead Sammy and Lerato into bed with one another. Sammy too visits Lerato to comfort her, as a friend, and the encounter develops from there. These similarities in motivation and action lead Davis to conclude that, in Mpe's fiction, "we are all guilty (or potentially guilty) of the same crimes and linked by our shared bodily passions and our shared vulnerability to suffering" (2013, 107).

It is worth elucidating why Lerato is distraught and requires Sammy's counsel in the first place. After a visit to the village of his birth, Tiragalong, and for reasons that he refuses to explain, Refentše is distant with Lerato. Consequently, she comes to fear that her relationship is "crumbling before her eyes" and so she turns to her lover's best friend in order to understand why this may be happening (Mpe [2001] 2011, 49). What is hidden from Lerato and Sammy is that when Refentše went to his village, his mother demanded that he stop seeing Lerato or she would no longer acknowledge him as her son (48). His mother's rejection of Lerato is informed by stories circulated in the village that construct Johannesburg women as immoral and sexually lascivious. Of course, when Refentše does eventually commit suicide, Lerato's infidelity is used by people in the village as evidence of the correctness of this point of view.

What I think is most important about this series of interrelated events, some of which mirror one another, is how storytelling informs it. If Refentše were only able to share the pain of his mother's rejection of his choice of partner with Lerato, the narrative intimates that she would never have needed Sammy's consolation. Or, if Refentše had been able to share with Lerato his own indiscretion with Bohlale and the circumstances that led to it, they may have been able to understand one another rather than accord blame and become distant with one another. Furthermore, if Refentše's mother were not convinced by the prejudiced stories about Johannesburg women that disseminated in her village, she would not have threatened to disown her son, which in turn would also have prevented tragedy. Storytelling therefore has the potential to cause harm or to prevent it. The story one tells can present an event in all of its complexity or render it simplistic and devoid of context. It can reveal the connectedness of people and things or do the exact opposite. Mpe constructs a narrative in which stories play a crucial role not just in how community is constructed but also in how it may be destroyed. It follows

that stories can allow for the limited forms of complicity and hospitality which Sanders and Derrida critique, or they can instantiate the conditions for the more unlimited forms which they (separately) theorise.

Mpe's Heaven: The Story Has No End

In order to fully grasp the importance of storytelling for Mpe, consider the role played by the courtyard of Heaven in this novel. First, as already mentioned, the entire narrative hails Refentše once he is already dead and in the afterlife. The effect of this positioning is contradictory: It renders Refentše powerless to affect the lives of those who remain in the world of the living (such as Lerato and his previous girlfriend, Refilwe). When Lerato chooses to kill herself, in no small part because of the vicious rumours that circulate about her after Refentše's death, her great love can do no more than watch. And the regret he feels for his role in her demise turns heaven into his own personal hell (Mpe [2001] 2011, 47). Similarly, he must look on as Refilwe, filled with grief at the loss of Refentše, spreads those rumours about Lerato that drive her to suicide. He must also look on as she revises her ideas on black foreigners from other parts of Africa, falls in love with one such man, and then succumbs to the ravages of AIDS. The Heaven which Mpe imagines is neither utopian nor a realm imbued with interventionist power. Yet, if Heaven does not grant Refentše the authority to intervene in the lives of those on earth, it also cannot be characterised as a dimension devoid of purpose. That is to say, Mpe's Heaven plays a very particular role in the narrative. On the last page of the book, we find the following description:

> Heaven is the world of our continuing existence, located in the memory and consciousness of those who live with us and after us. It is the archive that those we left behind keep visiting and revisiting; digging this out, suppressing or burying that. Continually reconfiguring the stories of our lives, as if they alone hold the real and true version. Just as you, Refilwe, tried to reconfigure the story of Refentše; just as Tiragalong now is going to do the same with you. Heaven can also be Hell, depending on the nature of our continuing existence in the memories and consciousness of the living. (Mpe [2001] 2011, 124)

Clarkson notes that this evocation of Heaven is rendered even more intricate when we consider that the word "courtyard" "has special significance in that it resonates with three culturally loaded Sepedi words." She elaborates:

> Primarily, "courtyard" could be a translation of "*lekgotleng*"—the court of law at the kraal of the chief or the village induna. "Courtyard" also summons up the words "*kgorong*" and "*mafuri*." "*Kgorong*" can be synonymous with "*lekgotleng*" but it also refers to the place in the homestead where the men spend their evenings. "It is a place of storytelling", Mpe said to me, especially "men's stories"—of war, bravery and manly instruction. "*Mafuri*", the third word to resonate through "courtyard", extends the meaning to include the women of the homestead. (Clarkson 2005, 456)

What I argue we find in *Welcome to Our Hillbrow*, then, is a distinctly African understanding of storytelling that allows us to (at the very least) reconfigure the aporia of hospitality and community laid out by scholars such as Derrida and Sanders. For Mpe, like Derrida, we must place conditions on the forms of welcome which we extend. Consequently, gestures of hospitality are incomplete, that is, they limit who will come rather than being open to the unknown and unknowable stranger. But, unlike Derrida, Mpe places storytelling in between these two forms of hospitality. In the worldview that his novel espouses, storytelling can shut the guest out or enfold them within. It can instantiate the hostility of prejudice and xenophobia, or the miracle of forgiveness and understanding. Consequently, stories do not belong to the world of the living, nor do they belong to a purely metaphysical realm. For, the metaphysical realm of Heaven is not, in Mpe's novel, entirely separate from the phenomenally real world. As Davis rightly asserts, "Mpe's Heaven is not a place you get to after death but a place with which you are already engaged while living. And as the representation of Heaven's inhabitants in the novel makes clear, they exert their own demands on the living" (2013, 109).

Moreover, since Heaven is just another place where stories get told and retold, constituted and then interrogated, the novel *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* can be articulated as a "heavenly" site: It is a place where we learn about a story and then, as the narrative progresses, we learn that the story we thought we knew is limited and needs to be told anew. And, the story does not, in a sense, cease when the narrative ends. There is yet the possibility that the story can be retold, made more complex, given more context, allow for more that has not yet been added. In this sense, Mpe's novel ends on a generous, unconditional note. It ends with the possibility of a version of itself that it has not even told. It ends, in other words, in Heaven, and with the potential for the unconditional, the unlimited, the community without borders, the story without end.

Conclusion

I began this article by noting the influence and importance of Mpe's novel within the postapartheid literary sphere. I would like to end this piece by once again making the case for Mpe's continued literary worth. *Welcome to Our Hillbrow* offers its readers a vision of story that moves beyond the limitations of a Western metaphysics. That is to say, African metaphysics and ethics, such as depicted and enacted in Mpe's novel, are not reducible to an either/or logic that distinguishes what "is" from what "is not." Rather than a simple binary that conceives of stories as not "real," this text enfolds reality and its supposed opposite within story. If African literature offers something distinct within the global circulation of literary output, perhaps it does so not only because of its locatedness in Africa. Perhaps, as Mpe's novel shows, what African literature might offer is a unique conceptualisation of story itself. This is to say, Mpe's novel provides a way of interrogating what is deemed impossible, precisely because his work implies that the impossible is always being constructed, in story, where it is anything but fiction.

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