

ABSTRACT

This research report comprises two parts: a theoretical introduction and a long-form narrative. The overall piece focusses on Welkom, a town in the Free State which was established in the 1940s as the centre of one of the largest gold finds in history. Welkom was soon the richest, fastest growing town in the country and attracted fortune seekers from around the world; simultaneously the mines recruited thousands of black labourers to work for minimum wage in dangerous conditions underground. After its peak in the 1980s the town went into rapid decline as the gold industry contracted. The political and economic disparities created by the mining industry and apartheid haunt the town today as it struggles with its own existential crisis. The theoretical section considers how the discovery of gold impacted South African society and how its decline is affecting mining communities like Welkom today. It examines various non-fiction texts on gold-mining in South Africa, noting how the majority of these texts focus on broad historical references or portray mining communities in a one-sided way without nuance or first-hand experience. The narrative addresses these limitations by focusing on the daily lives of ordinary people, based on observations and conversations during time spent immersed in the Welkom community. It incorporates personal memories of growing up in Welkom and recounts a day spent underground in a gold mine. The narrative sketches the memories and current lived experience of a mining community in decline and connects the challenges they face to the broader implications of the collapse of the gold mining industry.