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Women and Place in Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946)

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Abstract

At the heart of Peter Abrahams's 1946 novel *Mine Boy* is Xuma. He travels from the north (as we are often reminded) to Johannesburg in search of work after his farm has become infertile. It is an anxious transition for Xuma, who is quick to recognise the meaninglessness of his labour, and must adjust to a loud and alienating city. This article concerns the gendering of Xuma's attitudes to both his work and his new surroundings. The women Xuma meets in Johannesburg (Leah, Eliza, Maisy), women he comes to rely on, are in some instances seen as instantiations of their place, where Xuma often reads their femininity into the places they inhabit. Abrahams, through Xuma, offers a portrayal of the city that is limited in its framing, and, as such, limited in how Johannesburg may be narrated.

Keywords: Johannesburg; *Mine Boy*; modernity; Peter Abrahams; women and place

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Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy* (1946) is a novel set firmly in the Jim-comes-to-Joburg narrative tradition, a typical and perhaps predictable response to increased twentieth-century modernity and, especially, the growth of the colonial city. This movement of Black people into Johannesburg was orchestrated by the government: by removing land and an accessible source of livelihood from Black South Africans, the government forced Black men to move into the city where menial work (especially on Johannesburg's goldmines) was available. Stephen Gray details the history or "phases" of this movement in Johannesburg's *fin de siècle*, beginning with the recruitment of Black contract workers onto mines (a system adapted from farm work), with more and more Black labourers, now in the city, finding work in homes and offices in and around their new urban space (Gray 1985, 62). It is within this context that *Mine Boy* finds its narrative.

In film, a typical example of this kind of text may be seen in *African Jim* (Swanson 1949), to which the common tropes of the narrative are faithfully adhered: a young Black man travels to Johannesburg from rural South Africa to find employment; on arriving in the big city, he is disorientated and is taken advantage of by a thief; he finds solace in a kindly group of people who help him make his way; he finds jazz and is mesmerised not only by its sound but also by its heavily suggested sexual appeal; he finds work as a gardener for a white family in the suburbs; there is some tension between him and his white boss; his new sexual relationship takes strain, but in the end he eventually finds success in love; he returns to his rural homestead with his new partner.

In 1948, two years after the publication of *Mine Boy*, there would appear Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country*. Paton's novel, an international success for decades to come, appearing also as a selection for Oprah's Book Club, makes use of the Jim-comes-to-Joburg trope, but to more overtly racist ends. Rev. Stephen Kumalo, the novel's protagonist, journeys to Johannesburg to find his son, who has come into some trouble in the big city. His son is, by the end of the text, convicted of murder and Stephen, disillusioned with the city, returns to his rural homeland. He and the narrator conclude that this is the rightful place of the Black South African; Black people do not belong in the city.

Peter Abrahams's Xuma, the protagonist of *Mine Boy*, proceeds in a similar fashion to these kinds of tropes, ones that mark a return to the mode for the author. In *Song of the City* (1944), Abrahams's first novel where *Mine Boy* is his second, we are introduced to Nduli, who, as the novel begins, journeys from a rural village to Johannesburg, where he has his name changed by a policeman who issues him a pass for the city. Unlike in *Mine Boy*, the "Jim" who finds himself in Johannesburg in *Song of the City* shares roughly equal narrative space with several other characters. Two years later, with the publication of *Mine Boy*, Abrahams would return to the "Jim-comes-to-Joburg" mode, but this time centring his narrative preoccupations on the migrant: it is as though the narrative possibilities of the mode had not yet been fully explored or resolved in the author's previous efforts. (And in 1948's *The Path of Thunder*, Abrahams plays with

the mode's reversal as we follow Lanny Swartz moving out of the city of Cape Town to return to his childhood home in the Karoo as he attempts to reclaim the rural space of his past.)

Xuma's introduction to Johannesburg is our introduction to his character. He meets various people in Malay Camp (now Pageview) who adopt him as a new member of the family, with a few of the family members positioned as stand-ins or inspirations from Abrahams's own life, and where Xuma is likely modelled after the author's father, also a miner (Frydman 2020, 10). Almost none of the relatives are bound by blood though they refer to each other as family—instead, they are bound by the need for mutual support in a space hostile to their race and class. They, especially Johannes, who has worked extensively on the mines before Xuma's arrival, assist Xuma with finding work on Johannesburg's goldmines. There, Xuma becomes a leader among the other Black miners, but also suffers a crisis of his place as a worker. It is in this that Abrahams's novel becomes its most didactic, as Xuma's crisis is marked by an existential remove from his labour. He questions his placement in the industry as a miner, in which his work is reduced to repetitive and unfulfilling tasks. In this, he befriends a white mine manager, Paddy O'Shea, who goes by "Red." Paddy's nickname and Irish nationality suggest he is sympathetic to Xuma's Marxist politics. Xuma's remove from his work is echoed in his remove from the city. By the end of the novel, however, instigated by a catastrophe in the mine in which Xuma works, Xuma comes to find his political identity.

Writing broadly on Abrahams's politics, and how they define his writing, Kolawole Ogunghesan (perhaps the most prolific critic of Abrahams's work) shows that the political impetus that informs Abrahams's novels is "the attempt of black men to regain their manhood and self-respect, which alone can help them to achieve true freedom in a world dominated by white men" (Ogunghesan 1973, 419). This reading of Abrahams's oeuvre is shared by Mawuena Logan, who describes this feature of Abrahams's work as the irreducible and singular premise from which all the author's writing is derived (Logan 2011, 525).

Up to the point at which he was writing in the 1980s, Ogunghesan reminds us of the author's mixed reception regarding race and political freedom, at some points in his career derided by South African writers and scholars as the "champion of western liberalism," but then again not imbuing his writing with enough "cultural exotica" that Western readers would come to expect of African authors (Ogunghesan 1980, 188). Jean-Philippe Wade echoes this point (1990, 98), and Michael Wade, while appreciating that Abrahams is at heart a Marxist writer, further explains Abrahams's novel's awkward political solution to the points at which class and race meet: he argues that the novel is one that assumes that the class struggles of both Black and white are "fundamentally similar. The two groups share a common interest: when they recognise this and act together they will overcome their problems" (Wade 1978, 96). For Andrea Thorpe, Abrahams's sometimes-misplaced political impetus defined many of his political successes later in both his activism and his writing: we are not to hold the

author's political roots against him in all instances, Thorpe argues (2018, 74). But this is also what Megan Jones would later refer to as Abrahams's "somewhat tangled politics" (2012, 203). For Ogunghesan, this tension is resolved in Abrahams's later works, as he develops into a writer who began to see the necessity of writing as a Black subject first, after which all else followed (Ogunghesan 1980, 203).

The certainty with which Xuma expresses his political identity is reflected in the certainty with which he expresses his placement within Johannesburg. This is different to the kind of attitude Paton expresses about the rightful place of Black South Africans. For their own good, Paton seems to suggest, Black South Africans ought to confine themselves to the familiarity of rurality. Paton shows the city as corrupting of Black folk, so passively moves them out to rural spaces. Xuma, though he struggles finding his place in the city from the country, eventually discovers a way of making sense of his new space, and asserts his presence there, where he finally believes he belongs. This transition from the rural to the city is mapped onto Xuma's discovery of himself; Xuma's character development is reflected in the change of attitude he expresses in the various spaces with which he tries to contend in these few months we spend with him in the big city. Xuma's placement within Johannesburg, and especially the political identity he forges because of this, serves as a major source of interest for most scholarship on the novel, and marks the beginning of this article's interests; it is the gendered lens through which Xuma comes to appreciate the city that is central here.

Once in Johannesburg, Xuma must acquire and develop a new urban identity. Megan Jones briefly touches on the points at which gender and urban space meet in the novel and focuses specifically on the street as a contested site of power, where Black folk both exercise and lose it. The citizens of Malay Camp use various "modalities of movement—walking, running, dancing"—to challenge and transcend the imposed restrictions of movement in a segregated space, and, as such, become active participants in a political context intent on confining its Black citizens (Jones 2012, 205). Such modalities of movement are inevitably gendered, as men brawl and women parade in the streets, both groups asserting themselves through material consumption, through clothing specific to their gender (208). Regular police interference, though, means that these performances of power are limited (208). Looking at and beyond Jones's streets, there are various other urban spaces that this essay explores.

The gendered space of Malay Camp and Johannesburg generally is internalised by Xuma throughout the text. While Red and Johannes, both men, assist Xuma in finding his political identity and in coming to know what is expected of him by working on a Johannesburg goldmine, the knowledge Xuma acquires of Johannesburg as a lived-in place, its moods and daily rhythms, is acquired most notably through his interactions with women. Through these means he comes to define his relationship with Johannesburg, and comes to define his sexuality, where these two significant aspects of his new being inform each other throughout. There are three women that come to define Xuma's introduction to the city: Leah, Eliza, and Maisy.

It is 03:00 a.m. as the novel begins, and Xuma is alone walking the streets of Malay Camp, on the outskirts of Johannesburg. We see him unaccustomed to the ways of the city, unsure of himself and inexperienced. Leah, the first person in Johannesburg, as far as the reader witnesses, to whom Xuma speaks, is the light that guides Xuma into the city. Xuma meets Leah outside her residence and asks her to provide light by which they may see. Leah goes inside her house and comes out with a lamp, switches it on, and, little by little, moves the light up Xuma's body so that we may become acquainted with his physicality. "'Come,'" Leah says as she invites Xuma inside; Xuma abides, and "[follows] the beam of light" (3).

When introducing each other, Xuma discloses that he is "'Xuma. I come from the north'" (1). From then, Leah jokingly refers to him as "'Xuma from the north'" (1). The man and the place become synonymous. The name also marks Xuma as an outsider, a new face in Johannesburg who has not yet integrated into his new context.

Leah, unwavering in her strength, both mentally and physically, and unashamed of her sexuality, is "A tall strong woman with firm heavy hips" (10). She is a shebeen queen, a business owner, and her establishment is famous in Malay Camp. Ogungbesan (in a book that spells his name thus and not "Ogunghesan" as is the case in his other publications) determines that such a characterisation suggests that she is "not a complicated character," that she is "a Dickensian figure, one-dimensional to the point of grotesqueness" (Ogungbesan 1979, 41). Indeed, there is little deviation or contradiction in her character throughout the novel, even under the most compromising circumstances—police intimidation and her eventual imprisonment.

Xuma's movement from the rural north to industrialised and urbanised Johannesburg is instigated by the loss of his mother. He explains his move to Eliza, part of Leah's surrogate family, and Xuma's first love interest before Maisy. Xuma tells Eliza that "'At one time we had many cattle but now there are only a few, and the land is poor. My father is there, and my brother and sister. They are younger than me'" (24). When Eliza asks about his mother, Xuma says that "'She died'" (24). With the infertility of the land coupled with his mother's death, the implication is that the death of the land is tantamount to the death of his mother. It is left to Xuma to trek to Johannesburg to support his struggling family, a familiar narrative reflected in the time's familiar reality, though the impetus behind his migration is historically atypical. In *Stories of Women* (2005), Elleke Boehmer reminds us that "in societies where rates of urban and transnational migration for men are high, as they were in apartheid South Africa, … women may practically speaking become the guardians of the land: they hold the earth in safekeeping" (Boehmer 2005, 38). In *Mine Boy*, there is no earth for Xuma's mother to tend while he is away, and there is no mother who may tend the earth.

With the loss of his biological mother, his mother from the farm, Leah takes him in and becomes his surrogate mother, his city mother, a role Leah plays to so many of the lost and unattached in Malay Camp. Speaking to Xuma of his socialisation and integration

into the city, Leah says the following: "'But listen to me Xuma from the north, you are a baby with people. I can be your mother with people'" (10). The rest of the novel details Xuma's attempts to lament and mourn the loss of the farm from which he came and accept his new space, though this comes with a struggle.

Xuma internalises this alienation from his new place. The word "strange" and its interpolations ("strangeness," "stranger" and so forth) are mentioned 64 times in the roughly-200-page novel—most of these uses are attributed to Xuma, in his speech and in his thoughts—through the omniscient narrator. (Apparently a word with which Abrahams identifies strongly, it also appears several times in his 1954 autobiography, *Tell Freedom*.) Most these uses appear specifically in his early encounters with the mines or new aspects of the city. This extract, from the first chapter of the novel in which he encounters Leah for the first time, is exemplary of Xuma's urban alienation:

> Xuma laughed. "You [Leah] are a strange woman. I don't understand you. The only thing I can understand is your kindness."
> "You're all right," she said softly. "But the city is a strange place. Good night."
> She went out and shut the door.
> Slowly Xuma undressed. He felt better now that he had eaten, but he was very tired. Yet he found it hard to sleep when he got into bed.
> A strange group of people, these, he thought. Nothing tied them down. They seem to believe in nothing. But well, they had given him a bed. She had given it to him. She who was the strangest of them all. And in the other room the old one they call Daddy was sleeping against a wall with an open mouth and with nothing to cover him. But life is strange. Yes, and these people are life. … Of course. … (6)

There is a sense of projection in Xuma's description of the people that he comes to identify as his family: his indiscriminate claims that they are all strange, not yet able to identify the differences between them, serves to mark his own strangeness among them.

The attitudes Xuma comes to demonstrate about the city cohere with (and are perhaps even the result of) his attitudes towards the women who inform his sexuality. Where Leah is the first woman Xuma encounters, the surrogate mother who nurtures Xuma's introduction to the wider world, Eliza is the first woman with whom Xuma begins to explore his sexuality. Eliza, beautiful and volatile, is a woman described by Xuma as "'the devil in my blood'" (59). Indeed, Michael Wade believes that Abrahams's women characters often "[fall] victim to a version of feminine mystique" (Wade 1978, 107); they are often "capricious, indecisive, moody, dangling their men on a string," all qualities identified by Michael Wade as representative of Eliza in *Mine Boy* (Wade 1978, 108).

Xuma first encounters Eliza at Leah's house. Eliza, who works as a schoolteacher, has come under the care of her aunt Leah. Leah is Eliza's mother's sister, and Eliza's mother, we learn, has died (25). In this way, Eliza and Xuma are alike: both have come to enjoy Leah's maternal protection after the deaths of their mothers. Unlike Xuma,

Eliza was born in Johannesburg (149), and so possesses intimate and broad knowledge of the city and how it functions, knowledge she willingly passes on to Xuma. It is suggested that part of Xuma's attraction to Eliza is predicated on her extensive knowledge of the city.

Eliza's city lore is imparted to Xuma in two significant scenes in the novel. Noticing his distress at his new louder surroundings on first meeting Xuma, Eliza suggests that they take a walk to a grassy patch some distance from Malay Camp (25). It is here that Eliza introduces Xuma to Johannesburg's iconic mine dumps, here where he begins to feel his first sense of capitalist alienation from the work he will eventually do as he wonders why it is important that all he will contribute to the process is "'Just sand'" (26), where the mine dumps are composed entirely of the dirt from the innards of the earth—the discarded stuff in the pursuit of gold.

Further into their relationship, at a point when Xuma begins to immerse himself more and more into the city, Eliza offers Xuma her last lesson of the city, a cartographic overview of Johannesburg and its surrounds: Xuma asks Eliza where Malay Camp and Vrededorp are; she points them out wistfully (148). It is here that Xuma completes his education regarding Johannesburg and its geography. This is implied by the analogous language Xuma uses to describe how he sees the city from afar: "'When I first came to the city I got lost in Malay Camp. I walked there from the afternoon till it was very late in the night. … And now it is so small. Just like a big farm'" (148). That Xuma likens the city to a farm, that he can read it as such, suggests that the city has become familiar to him. While they meet here, it is clear that Eliza is distressed as she cries and shies away from Xuma. This is the last time they see each other, and the loss of his partner distresses Xuma in the days that immediately follow.

In the wake of his devastation, the narrator tells us that "the streets [Xuma] did not want tonight. They reminded him of Eliza" (158). Xuma's emotions are in flux, and his feelings towards Eliza become entangled with his feelings of his placement. He thinks of the possibility of going back home, but dismisses it: "And [at the farm] there would be the quiet without the deep undertone of buzzing that one heard in the city. But home was finished. The going of Eliza had ended it. He had dreamt of going home with her" (163). The distress Eliza demonstrates on their last meeting together comes as no surprise to the reader, who is familiar with Eliza's various insecurities: insecurities about her race, her desire to live a white life, and whose attempts at upward social mobility can only lead to disappointment: "She leaves in search of a utopia that the political conditions in South Africa at the time *Mine Boy* was written would categorically deny" (Jackson 2007, 167). Some, like Maisy (Xuma's other partner, whose name rhymes with Daisy, the protagonist's love interest in Abrahams's earlier novel, *Song of the City*), explain that this distress is "like a devil" inside her (113), using language echoed by Xuma. Eliza's language is different in explaining the anguish she feels: "'It is the madness of the city that is in me'" (126). Eliza, though having been

born in Johannesburg, cannot find coherence between her interiority and the exteriority of the city.

Xuma finds the same kind of alienation in the mines of Johannesburg as he finds in Johannesburg itself. One of the ways we know this is by the familiar word "strange" on first encountering the mines: "For Xuma the day was strange. Stranger than any day he had ever known. There was the rumbling noise and the shouting and the explosions and the tremblings of the earth" (41). He becomes particularly unnerved when observing the mineworkers:

> It was the strangeness of it all that terrified him. And the look in the eyes of the other men who worked with him. He had seen that look before when he was at home on the farms. He had seen it when he herded his cattle and when a dog came among the sheep and barked. The eyes of these men were like the eyes of the sheep that did not know where to run when the dog barked. It was this that frightened him. (41)

The mine stands as a symbol of that which is opposite to Xuma's farm. The implication is that the farm is not only familiar to Xuma, but also a site in which Xuma and his community were in full possession of the means of production and their produce. To make sense of the mine and the mineworkers, Xuma, by means of the narrator, must frame this description with customary language and images, recognising the fear in the men's eyes as the fear in the eyes of the sheep he knows. He continues by referring to the indunas (the mine leaders) as shepherds chasing the other miners. Still unfamiliar and frightening to him, to gain some semblance of control over his new surroundings, Xuma's language speaks to his attempt to overcome the displacement he feels at his place of work.

Achille Mbembe, in his essay "Aesthetics of Superfluity" (2008), details the history of Johannesburg since its establishment as what it would eventually be: one of the world's largest mining towns. Mbembe's particular interest is in how Black people occupied, and in many cases were not allowed to occupy, the various spaces of this new city. Adapting the term "superfluity" from Hannah Arendt's use of the term, Mbembe's usage

> does not refer only to the aesthetics of surfaces and quantities [but] also to the dialectics of indispensability and expendability of both labor and life, people and things. It refers to the obfuscation of any exchange or use value that labor might have, and to the emptying of any meaning that might be attached to the act of measurement or quantification itself, insofar as numerical representation is as much a fact as it is a form of fantasy. (Mbembe 2008, 38)

Johannesburg, as Mbembe recounts, is a city that was adapted from European aesthetics, thus bearing no real relation to its architectural inspiration being located on the African continent. Mbembe uses this moment to suggest that much of what has been forged around the Johannesburg goldmines as racialised and racist spaces (its labour, its

accommodation, its products and so forth) have been assigned a value and meaning that has been divorced from the object to which that meaning has been ascribed. This is true, also, of race, which, as Mbembe explains, became a construct to which, for Black people, two meanings of Blackness were assigned to their racialised identity: "Through the commodification of labor, the superfluity of black life could be manifested. But the same process also transformed the native into something more than the object he or she was, a thing that always seemed slightly human and a human being that always seemed slightly thinglike" (Mbembe 2008, 44). In this process, Black people were both vital to the functioning of the South African economy, but also expendable given that the market created a system in which the only labour available to Black people was menial jobs such as those on goldmines in Johannesburg. Xuma is exemplary of this, and this contradiction of his Blackness is expressed in the alienation he feels not only in the city but also in the mine.

In an oft-quoted passage of the novel, we witness Abrahams's political disposition most fervently expressed in his description of the Sisyphean and meaningless labour in which Xuma is forced to engage:

> And men gasped for breath and their eyes turned red and beads of sweat stood on their foreheads and the muscles in their arms hardened with pain as they fought the pile of fine wet sand.
> But the sand remained the same. A truck would come from the heart of the earth. A truck would go up to build the mine-dump. Another would come. Another would go. … All day long. …
> And for all their sweating and hard breathing and for the redness of their eyes and the emptiness of their stare there would be nothing to show. In the morning the pile had been so big. Now it was the same. And the mine-dump did not seem to grow either.
> It was this that frightened Xuma. This seeing of nothing for a man's work. This mocking of a man by the sand that was always wet and warm; by the mine-dump that would not grow; by the hard eyes of the white man who told them to hurry up.
> It made him feel desperate and anxious. (42)

In the penultimate paragraph, "man" is not necessarily used as a universal signifier, "man" as an instantiation of "humanity." We know this because, in his first conversation with Leah, Xuma expresses his eagerness to work on the mines because "'It is a man's work'" (5). The mines become a space that is not only gendered, not only masculine, but a space of Black masculine humiliation and meaninglessness. We are never privy to Xuma's work inside the earth though we are made aware of the useless results of that work: the mine dumps, which become metonyms of the alienation of the mines. We are, for the most part, removed from the cause of the mine dump, much in the same way as Xuma is removed from any meaning he may attach to the work he performs, removed also from the gold he extracts from the earth. Unlike gold, which, as we have learnt from Mbembe, at least has some value, fabricated though that value is, the mine dumps are the uninteresting and valueless byproducts of Black labour under white command, reflected in their meaninglessness, meaningless because their form remains unchanged.

The mine dumps do, of course, change in size (they must necessarily grow), so their perceived stasis becomes a reflection of Xuma's disillusionment with the greater meaning of his work (Thurman 2022, 32). The implication is that Xuma cannot develop, neither as a worker nor, given the gendered nature of the mine, as a man. If Xuma has designated the farm as feminine, then the hardness of the city and the mine that sustains its economic growth is masculine. The mine is a space of Black masculine labour without creation.

While the mine dumps, particularly in this scene, mark Xuma's remove from his labour, we notice the change in his attitude to the mine dumps in the preceding chapter. When walking to work with Johannes, his colleague, Xuma sees the mine dumps in the distance:

> Xuma looked at them. They looked ordinary and commonplace now, not as they had looked on Saturday night when he had watched them with Eliza. Then there had been something beautiful and faraway and grand about them. Now they were just ordinary mountains of sand and he did not like them. (34)

The beauty the mine dumps once possessed seems a reflection of Eliza's beauty. In her absence, in the absence of any femininity as Xuma joins Johannes and eventually the other men who make their way to the mines in the morning, the mine dumps lose any sense of appeal. Xuma looks on them with dislike. The lack of love Xuma now feels for the mine dumps, representations of Xuma's work and the colonial city, suggests the city's inhospitability. With Eliza gone, Xuma lacks a welcoming home. Yet it is also suggested that Eliza, having run away from Xuma, from the city, comes to understand Johannesburg in the same way, that it cannot accommodate her. Both experience the city as alienating.

In *The Postcolonial City and its Subjects* (2012), Rashmi Varma reads women in urban contexts. Varma describes the postcolonial city, real and fictional, as inhospitable to women, whose presence in the city are signs of crisis, where the presence of "women, poor, foreigners and other figures" in the modern city was "experienced as an irruption of uncontainable difference" (Varma 2012, 26). Indeed, throughout the twentieth century, Elleke Boehmer shows that the movements of Black women from rural to urban spaces have been restricted at worst, or, at best, severely policed and monitored (Boehmer 2005, 34–35). As such, women in modern postcolonial cities are what Varma calls unhomely:

> Philosophically, the notion of the "unhomely" suggests existential issues of estrangement, alienation, exile and a metaphorical homelessness. Departing from this dominant usage, "unhomely", this book suggests, destabilizes the inscribed meanings of home and homeliness and represents the state of lacking home in both a material and a representational sense. Through a simultaneous assertion of the political and the literary, the figure of "unhomely women" helps unravel the construction of the home as a refuge from the city, or as the site of an unproblematized and a priori community …. On the

> contrary, the figure of unhomely women brings to light the often hidden sources of modern terror, as the figure embodies domesticity's discontents, its perplexing and undomesticated Other that threatens to bring to a crisis the dominant regimes of urbanism and can be only represented as crisis. (Varma 2012, 27)

Unhomeliness assumes multiple meanings: it describes women in the city who occupy urban spaces beyond the private and domestic (Varma's most positive usage); yet it also describes women who are made to feel that they cannot claim the city as their home; last, it defines instances in which women are not made to feel safe in their own homes, especially in city contexts in which the communities offer little by way of support for women in compromised domestic spaces.

To be sure, all subalterns that inhabit the city are unhomely in Varma's sense. Xuma, then, is one such character who finds himself in unhomely circumstances and spaces. Yet Varma reminds us that Black women in the modern city are unhomely more so since they are "twice removed from subjectivity, situated as she is within the overlapping structures of patriarchal native and colonial societies" (Varma 2012, 13). Indeed, the city is set up such that Leah is made to defend what is perceived to be her sexual promiscuity (3), and Eliza is made insecure about her Blackness throughout the novel, where her aspirations of whiteness cannot be fulfilled. Leah defends her business and surrogate family, and remains in the city despite the city's clear hostility to her. Eliza eventually runs from the city, a space that cannot accommodate her being. With Eliza gone, Xuma is afforded more time to nurture his love for Maisy, and, in the process, discover different avenues of belonging in the city.

A love triangle is at the emotional centre of the novel, one in which Xuma, Maisy, and Eliza are implicated. The novel's contrivance necessitates that Xuma must choose between the two lovers. Maisy, who also frequents Leah's establishment, competes with Eliza for Xuma's attention. Maisy, unlike Eliza, is plain, uneducated, and unwavering in her dedication to Xuma's happiness and well-being; she has "laughter in her eyes" (81). By the end of the text, Eliza has run away, which means that the novelist comes to choose Maisy for Xuma. The sexual relationships that Xuma forges with each woman is not one that is defined solely by their character. Xuma's attraction to each woman is based in part by their objectification, particularly in relation to place. Xuma's attractions to the women, and the decisions he makes based on his willingness to be with them, is one that depends on his reading them as instantiations of place. Both Eliza and Maisy demonstrate certainty about the moods and movements of the city; both women assist Xuma in finding his place within Johannesburg through similar means, mainly by acting as links between where he comes from and where he finds himself at present, easing his transition from one to the other.

Towards the middle of the narrative, Maisy plans a trip with Xuma and a group of friends to the rural outskirts of Johannesburg. The structure of the excursion is an interesting choice on Abrahams's part. It is told nonlinearly. We begin the narrative of the trip being told that "The day had gone so quickly that before they knew it, it was

time for the last bus" (96). What follows immediately after this is a description of the trip as told in recollection. The narrator recounts several moments of the trip to the river by which Xuma drinks and socialises with Maisy and her friends. We spend about three pages with this kind of description, and, by the end of it, we are back to where we began: "They had found the last taxi" and that "Xuma was sorry it was over" (98).

We are told of the trip in retrospect; we are told of it as a series of reflections Xuma recounts to the reader through the narrator. Framed differently, we are told of the excursion through Xuma's nostalgic recollections of the event. The instances that stand out to Xuma are significant—the nostalgia with which he recounts the trip is nostalgia transferred about his life back on the farm: "And there had been laughter, free and happy as in the old days on the farms" (96); "And life was good for the beer was the beer of the farms and not the poison of the city that was only to make you drunk and not to make you happy" (97); "And under the warmth of their friendliness and the freedom to talk that the beer had given him, and with his hand on Maisy's shoulder he talked about his home and his people" (96). This excursion becomes gendered: we know already that, for Xuma, the farm on which he spent his youth is feminised (perhaps even maternised). So, since he thinks of Johannesburg's rural outskirts as his family farm, the suggestion is that places beyond the city, outside of the city, assume a feminine shape in his mind. It is within rurality that he finds comfort.

Still finding the city alienating at this point, Xuma's recollections of his family farm function as a defence against the harshness of living and working in Johannesburg. In the same way that Xuma, on first meeting him at the beginning of the text, projects his anxiety onto the other "strange" inhabitants of Malay Camp and Johannesburg more broadly, so too does he guard himself through different psychological means against this strange place—he does so by immersing himself in the narrative of the familiar. This marks one of the few joyous moments Xuma experiences before he feels most broken down by Johannesburg.

Toward the end of the novel, Xuma's family begins to fall apart. Leah is taken to jail for running her illegal liquor-trading business; Daddy, an incontinent alcoholic who frequents Leah's establishment, has died; and Eliza has run away. Xuma feels despondent: "Time had lost its meaning. All things were unreal" (168). He goes through his days as if by rote (168) and once again begins to feel like a "stranger" in Malay Camp and Johannesburg (169). As is typical of his character, he begins to reminisce about the more pleasant experiences he had in Malay Camp and Johannesburg over the last few months, which differ from the kinds of experiences he has now toward the end of the novel: "He thought of the night he had gone to the house that had been Leah's. He had left his room and walked slowly. And people had greeted him for he had become a citizen of Malay Camp and people showed it in their eyes" (169). By thinking nostalgically of the city he first thought of as alienating suggests that Xuma's transition into the city is complete—he now believes and certainly feels connected to the city in the same way that he felt connected to the farm from which he came. Nostalgia, once

felt in relation to his farm, now expressed in relation to the city, becomes the temporal marker of his belonging. Both Eliza and Maisy assist in this change of attitude to place, yet in some cases, Xuma, particularly in relation to Maisy, confuses his feelings for women with his feelings of the places he comes to know.

Xuma first meets Maisy after his first day working on the mines. At this encounter, Maisy declares to Xuma that,

> "I was born here."
> "In the city?" He looked curiously at her. …
> "Yes. In the city."
> "You've never been on the farms?"
> "No."
> "Don't you long for the farms sometimes?"
> "No. I have never been on a farm so I cannot long for it." (53)

Though Maisy is through and through of the city, Xuma begins to associate her with the farm from which he came. When travelling with Maisy and her friends to the rural outskirts of Johannesburg, Xuma uses this trip as a temporary respite from the harshness of the city, and thinks to himself, "He had forgotten Eliza and Leah and Daddy and Ma Plank and the mines and everything connected with the city. And it seemed that Maisy was not connected with the city" (96). This denies Maisy the place with which she identifies and also shows that Xuma's appreciation of Maisy in this instance is not in and of herself, but as a symbol of that which is not the city, a symbol of that on which he may rely to remind him of the fondness he feels for the farm from which he came. As a Black woman of the modern city, Maisy is already one of Varma's unhomely women, yet Xuma amplifies this unhomeliness by creating a fiction of her belonging that does not cohere with her reality. Maisy, through Xuma's love for her, through his need to feel more at home in a city that unhomes him, is in turn made more unhomely than she already is. So, it is not Maisy that Xuma loves, but an imposed inscription of an idea of Maisy instead, and one that reads her as synonymous with a place to which she does not belong. That Abrahams describes their union at the end of the novel as both a triumph for Xuma, and as an instance of grace in the turbulence of his protest at the mines, serves only to undercut Maisy's character further. She is, by the end, also a sign of Xuma's maturity since he does not select the more beautiful and volatile Eliza. Maisy, as with the other prominent women in the novel, is an object onto which Xuma's preoccupations are written and mapped. Initiated by Xuma's tendency to read women as instantiations of their place, the women also become convenient plot placements for whatever we need to know about Xuma, for however he needs to develop, and for whichever difficulty he must overcome on entering the city.

It comes as no surprise that Xuma would read the city as gendered—indeed, this kind of reading is implicitly prescribed to him early in the text. As soon as he is introduced to the various regulars who inhabit Leah's house, Xuma learns a lesson from one of the more imposing figures of the house about the differences between the country and the

city—Daddy. Daddy, often drunk, and a regular at Leah's establishment, informs Xuma about the differences between the ways of the country (or, as he terms it, the "custom") and the ways of the city (11). He explains the differences by way of allegory: "'One day the city came to visit the custom, Xuma. And the custom was kind. It gave the city food and it gave the city beer and it gave the city beautiful young women'" (11). To instil in Xuma a sense of paternal wisdom, Daddy, authoritatively nicknamed, genders and sexualises the spaces to which he refers. He roots his story in familiar though binaristic, and therefore simplistic and potentially harmful, metaphors. Spaces become gendered, and this imposes limitations on how they may be inhabited and appreciated.

The novel's sometimes confused politics seem also reflected in its portrayal of women. The novel is in some instances politically progressive and in some instances not. Similarly, women are in some instances subjects whose power is comparable with that of men, and in other instances it is evident that their characters are subsumed by their male counterparts. The women in *Mine Boy* are sometimes neglected by Abrahams, especially through Xuma's characterisation, and this is shown in the way they are used as representatives of their surroundings.

By the end of the novel, as Xuma confidently champions for the rights of his colleagues, as he begins to feel a sense of belonging to his new urban context, it is suggested that Xuma has fully immersed himself in the city, that he begins to find a way to designate a place for himself (at least as far as a racist city will allow). But this growth is undercut by his reading of the relationship between women and place. Having Xuma read place as feminine, and to read the feminine as place, demonstrates the limitations of his successes at immersing himself into the city.

As women are placed in the novel ultimately in the service of Xuma's character, Abrahams's hand is made visible as plot contrivances deviate from narrative likelihoods. As such, *Mine Boy*'s Black women are made unhomely not only by the (pre)apartheid and colonial city in which they find themselves, not only by Xuma who displaces them, but they are also made unhomely by the author's intervention, by the author having forged a male protagonist whose growth is foregrounded to the detriment of the women who surround him.

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