

# Mines and Mountains: Mine Dump Aesthetics, Marikana, and Contemporary South African Fiction

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## ABSTRACT

The mine dump, long a useful metonym for South African writers, has receded from view in “Johannesburg fiction” of recent years. By contrast, in the visual arts, there has been a burgeoning of renewed engagement with mines and mine dumps. Does this tell us something about representation, and the unrepresentable, in these different creative forms? Mine dumps, urban mountains, are related to histories of oppression, to ongoing economic inequality, and to environmental degradation, but they are still visually impressive. For about a decade, South African novelists have tended to avoid this paradox. One might extrapolate such a trend to suggest that, while in the visual arts there is some level of continuity—the continuation of a tradition—when it comes to fiction there has been a rupture, or at least a disruption. Is it that mine dumps are too familiar, that it has become impossible to avoid cliché in literary evocations of them? Or is the rupture to some degree coterminous with the Marikana massacre of 2012? Marikana has been the subject of essays, poems, long form journalism, and nonfiction books, as well as documentary films, music, and theater. But it has not substantially or explicitly found its way into literary fiction. Like the artificial mine-mountains of the reef, Marikana’s natural “mountain,” Wonderkop, seems to remain out of the immediate purview of contemporary fiction. While Marikana might mark the end of one phase and the beginning of another in South African literary production, it is not (as yet) encompassed by or taken account of in the country’s fiction.

## 1.

Ghosts are living in mine dumps . . .  
 . . . Honeycomb  
 mountains are brittle.—Maneo Mohale, “Letsatsi” (10)

I am sitting in my office on Wits University’s east campus, reading the opening poem in Maneo Mohale’s 2019 collection *Everything Is a Deathly Flower*. The mine dumps referred to by the speaker—enormous flat-topped artificial hills made of tailings, the crushed and compressed sandy refuse of the mining process—are east of the city of Johannesburg, in or near the former mining town of Benoni, thirty kilometers away from my Braamfontein office and out of sight. I search the horizon for equivalent markers. Through the window, seven stories above Jorissen Street, I can see the Nelson Mandela Bridge to the southeast. Due south, across the railway lines, is Newtown, and further away are the high-rise buildings of the city center. Beyond them, I know, are more mine dumps—but they too are hidden from view. If I crane my neck and squint toward the southwest, however, I can see one: not the yellow-sulfur-gold color of Mohale’s honeycomb mountains, but a sort of dull greeny-brown slab. Viewed from this distance, at this awkward angle, it hardly seems worth writing about.

The mine dumps are symbols of Johannesburg. They are also over-determined, over-familiar; often they are overgrown, covered in patchy grass and scrubby trees. For many people across the mining reef of the Highveld, mine dumps remain a daily reality—an eminence in an otherwise flat landscape, a marker on a commute. And yet it is not inaccurate to say that the mine dumps are receding from view.

In one significant sense, they are physically receding too: as sites of both formal and informal mining operations, they are being carved away, their plateaus becoming lower or cut into jagged peaks, their sides gashed with new quarries and craters. This is re-mining, viewed by some within an eco-friendly paradigm of “reduce, re-use, recycle”—for, the argument goes, extracting further mineral resources from what are, essentially, conglomerations of by-products is a reduction of waste. Yet as the mine dumps disappear, or are carved into and hollowed out, they pose renewed health threats to surrounding communities who are now re-exposed to air, soil, and water pollution. Paradoxically, although these artificial impositions on the landscape (now embedded after many decades) might signify environmental degradation, as they recede and are re-mined, the damage is likely to worsen.

A further deleterious effect of disappearing mine dumps, as Daniel Roux and Nicky Falkof have suggested, is psychological. Roux describes how in 2012, flying into Johannesburg (where he grew up), his eyes

were drawn to the mine-dumps that always announce one’s final descent: they surround this city, testimony to its history and its continuing, if diminished, dependence on the mineral wealth that gave birth to it. But where the landscape used to be defined by the dumps, they were now more like intermittent punctuation marks. They have all but disappeared from the city’s skyline.

For Roux, the mine dumps signified (and continue to signify) a “split”:

I was always aware, growing up in Joburg, of the devastating impact of the mining monopolies and their legacies—the compounds, the segregated city, the dissolution of traditional agrarian society under the relentless pressure of the migrant labour system.

On the other hand, growing up white in Johannesburg in the 70s and 80s meant that you were exposed to a different kind of narrative about the mines as well, one that was performed in tourist attractions . . . a sanitised version of the mine that stripped away its history of conflict and dispossession. Middle-class Johannesburg reacted to the ineradicable material evidence of the mining it owes its existence to by commodifying it as a spectacle, attesting to the existence of the mines even as it screened the reality that underpinned it.

Citing examples ranging from Peter Abrahams’s 1946 novel *Mine Boy* (with its treatment of the mine dumps as “disturbance[s] in the visual field”) to William Kentridge’s 1991 animation *The Mine* (in which a coffee plunger morphs into an elevator cage descending into a mine), Roux emphasizes how—precisely because of the prominence of signifiers like the mine dumps—representations of mining in South Africa collapse surface and depth: the underground mine is present in the aboveground “world of commodity objects” and is not a “buried truth, screened from the surface.”

Taking her cue from Roux,<sup>1</sup> Falkof reiterates how white South Africans living on the reef “turned the mines and the dumps into spectacle”:

The theme park-ification of these industrial wastelands was a constant feature of all our childhoods. . . . But the mine dumps, spectacularised though they might have been, were still visible. White people could pretend that they belonged to the landscape. We could reinvent them as indigenous, scatter them with scrub and underdeveloped trees, camouflage them with herbiage, but nonetheless there they were, great hulking metaphors for the city’s unnatural wealth. We could convince ourselves that the dumps meant anything we wanted them to but there was no avoiding the fact that they were there, and all the careful design of the northern suburbs’ famous “man-made forest” could not detract from their secret life as markers of apartheid’s violent avarice.

Falkof then turns to the implications of the mine dumps “slowly vanishing”:

The dumps, for all that their squat, ugly nuisance selves were repeatedly overwritten with apartheid’s narrative of nationalist pride, could never quite shake their association with labour, the back-breaking, often murderous work that was performed by desperate migrants trying to survive in an impossible situation of legislated inequality. But they are vanishing and I cannot see any other coherent signs appearing of the labour that underpins the city. Physical work is invisible to those who do not do it because there are no physical signs of its occurrence. . . . The mine dumps were our visual conscience. What will replace them?

In this article, I want to consider another way in which the mine dumps are disappearing—or rather, another landscape in which they have receded from view: the terrain of South African fiction. It is not insignificant that my epigraph to

this first section is taken from a poem. Poets, like essayists, journalists, and other writers of what we might call creative nonfiction, have continued to respond to mining's external or surface signs (among which mine dumps are the most obvious). In addition to these literary forms, the same may be affirmed of cultural production in various media: the visual arts, film, theater, music. What is it that has caused this curious lacuna when it comes to representations of mining in fiction? I will suggest that the cause lies, at least in part, in a combination of South African fiction's ongoing wrestle with realism and the impact of a central, traumatic rupture in the national imaginary: the Marikana massacre.

## 2.

Writing in early 2013, Roux could not reflect on the (in)visibility of mining without framing his essay in light of the killing of thirty-four miners by police near Lonmin's Marikana mine, on the Rustenburg Platinum belt, on August 16, 2012. Likewise, when preparing a paper for the ninth annual literature and ecology colloquium in October of that year, I found myself unable to respond to the broad theme of the gathering—mountains in South African literature—without acknowledging this brutal and tragic event. My general aim in the paper was to present mine dumps as mountains and to explore how a consideration of this equivalence might challenge the lyricism and mythologizing associated with mountains and their depiction in South African literature. As much as writers of Johannesburg might have an attachment to mine dumps as metonyms of the city and the greater Highveld region, there is no place for sentimentalizing them because—as Roux and Falkof note—they all too obviously represent exploitation, oppression, inequality, and degradation. A sense of “mine dump aesthetics,” I argued, thus collapses the binary opposition of rural and urban, of natural and artificial, of transcendent beauty and mundane ugliness (see Nuttall); this is also to collapse the division between the political (that which has to do with the polis, both the city and the citizens) and the nonpolitical. As such, it indicts our tendency to view mountains—typically associated with wilderness and thus placed in opposition to the polis, arguably even in the case of Cape Town's Table Mountain—as apolitical spaces. The mountain that loomed largest in South Africans' collective consciousness at that historical moment was, however, a different kind of mine-mountain: a natural “mountain” associated with mining.

In the days leading up to and the weeks after Marikana, the stone hill known as Wonderkop<sup>2</sup>—with its gentle gradient and modest height, barely reaching above the highest cables strung through nearby pylons—was transformed, in the words of the striking miners and the journalists who quoted them, into a mountain. (Subsequently, this nomenclature would be cemented in, for example, books such as Peter Alexander et al.'s *Marikana: A View from the Mountain and a Case to Answer* [2012], published within a few months of the massacre.) This was a telling transformation. By describing their gathering place—first a site of refuge and defiance, then a battlefield, before it became a place of mourning and finally a location for acts of potential recuperation—as a “mountain,” the protesters were invoking a range of associations. The decision to occupy Wonderkop was motivated by practical considerations. As Alexander et al. note, “One advantage of staying on the mountain is that it provided a good view. According to

Mineworker 9, 'The mountain is high and we [striking workers affiliated to the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union] chose it deliberately after NUM [the National Union of Mineworkers] killed our members, so that we could easily see people when they come'" (27). Still, the koppie as "mountain" was more significant for its symbolic function—representing manhood, dignity, bravado. Journeying into the mountains is a central feature of initiation and circumcision rites; boys return from the mountains as men, prepared and equipped, symbolically if not actually, for war. Sipho Hlongwane, commenting on the debate around the "clash of arms" at Marikana between the police (with guns) and the miners (with spears, pangas, and knobkieries), refers to his own early exposure to laborers who kept "an arsenal of traditional weapons" under their mattresses:

When these men had gone through a rite of passage, and had received the approval of the other men . . . they were given these weapons, which they would be enjoined to guard with their lives. . . . Even years later, when most of them would prefer a pistol for personal protection, they still carried these weapons around—they were phallic symbols and badges of honour more than anything. The weapons declare: "I am a man. I've earned my place alongside the other men of the tribe. Treat me as such."

Hlongwane thus enjoins his readers to view images of weapon-carrying strikers more sympathetically: "Were they not saying, more than anything, 'We are men, take us seriously?'"

Mountainous locations are also particularly appropriate for the exercise of traditional medicine; a number of the miners prepared for clashes with police by consuming or applying "muti" (medicinal) concoctions that they believed would make them invincible. If the strikers had started to see themselves as soldiers, their presence on a mountain signaled more than the imagination or recollection of forebears who may in fact have fought in armies with similar weapons and methods centuries before. Photographer and journalist Greg Marinovich, who was a witness to these events, writes in *Murder at Small Koppie: The Real Story of the Marikana Massacre* (2016) that for the striking miners, Wonderkop was "a site of enchanted potency . . . a place where the god-like reach of the mine ran out. It was their redoubt, a place where they felt like *men*" (3). During negotiations with police prior to the massacre, representatives of the striking miners asserted "all they wanted was to talk with their employer. They wanted him to come to the mountain, but, if necessary, they would go to him" (Alexander et al. 31). Wonderkop was thus sacred ground, imbued with power, set in opposition to "the mine," whether that is understood to mean the mining company or the physical space of its underground operations. Yet this mountain became, in the months and years following Marikana, directly associated with—in fact a verbal and visual shorthand for—mining in South Africa. It is my contention that the ground for this association was prepared by those other iconic mining-mountains: the mine dumps of the Highveld reef.

With this association in mind, we may find ourselves reading canonical South African novels somewhat differently. There is Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, of course, with its protagonist Xuma's clunky joke—on first seeing a mine dump after arriving in Johannesburg—about "a mountain of white sand made by black

men" (26). The mine dump, to Xuma's naive eyes, is both impressive and beautiful. Abrahams does not sustain this romanticized depiction, and when Xuma starts to work in the mines they become "ordinary and commonplace" (34). This disillusionment turns into bitterness as Xuma spends the day pushing trucks of excavated sand toward the dumps, a Sisyphean task whose futility almost drives him to despair. Xuma's job is to make the mine dump bigger, but despite his labor it will "not grow" (42), a perception that is especially noteworthy to a twenty-first-century reader who knows that the mine dumps were not, as Xuma perceives them, static; over the course of time, they would "grow" (and many of them have since begun to "shrink"). Even though gold mining production peaked in the 1970s, South Africa's mining-driven GDP grew exponentially in the decade prior to 2012. Yet the Marikana massacre seems to signal little—if any—improvement in the lot of miners like Xuma. The trajectory that runs "from *Mine Boy* to Marikana," as Roux's title puts it, is thus a sobering one.<sup>3</sup>

But what about other famous South African novels that don't treat mining as their explicit subject? Alan Paton's *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1948, more or less contemporaneous with Abrahams's book) gestures toward the "great white dumps of the mines, like hills under the sun" (181) when its rurally oriented characters confront the grim urban prospect of Johannesburg, but the rural/urban binary on which the novel depends is never a persuasive one. The famous opening chapter, which sets in opposition the green hills high above the village of Ixopo and the "red and bare," overgrazed, "desolate" slopes below (7), is undermined by the story that follows—a narrative in which the worlds of faith and fear, of potential and pessimism, of black experience and white experience, of rich and poor, are irrevocably interlinked. The conflation of rural life with innocence and beauty, and of urban life with depravity and taint, is unconvincing. Moreover, for a post-2012 reader, Paton's "red and bare" hills call to mind both the mine dumps of the reef and the russet granite koppies and boulders of Marikana (formerly known as Rooikoppies), especially the "mountain" of Wonderkop. Once the association has been made, the imagined viewer looking up or down the valley can no longer indulge in a lyrical celebration of mountainous terrain. Such a way of looking—seeing mine dumps even as one gazes on mountains, and vice versa—is an essential aspect of any South African "aesthetic."

Another mine dump observer contemporaneous with Abrahams and Paton is Herman Charles Bosman, who was moved to produce a semi-ironic encomium of the mine dumps of the reef comparing them to the pyramids of Egypt (34–35). Aligning skyscrapers and the mine dumps alike with the sands of the Kalahari Desert, Bosman is impatient both with the image of a prelapsarian or "primitive" Africa and with the ambitious, exploitative capitalism of an early Johannesburg denying the means of its wealth—but at least the implacable mine-dumps "do not bother to deny anything" (34) and have merged with the landscape. Sixty years later, another great "Joburg writer," Ivan Vladislavic, hints at something similar in *Portrait with Keys*: "In Johannesburg, the Venice of the South, the backdrop is always a man-made one. We have planted a forest the birds endorse. For hills, we have mine-dumps covered with grass. We do not wait for time and the elements to weather us, we change the scenery ourselves. . . . Nature is for other people, in other places" (94). One might choose any number of examples from the six decades of the apartheid and early post-apartheid eras. Throughout, mine

dumps feature as markers in the broadly realist terrain of South African novels of this period—even when that realism has been inflected, as Paul Rich (120–37) argues has historically tended to be the case in South African fiction, by romance or allegory (see Rich); this even applies to Vladislavic, a writer whose formal experimentation has tended to resist the conventions of realism. Mine dumps are heavily symbolically loaded, but their signification in terms of place, politics, economics, and ecology is consistent.

An interesting shift in the representation and “use” of Johannesburg’s association with mining is instantiated in Lauren Beukes’s *Zoo City* (2010), the opening line of which employs a shorthand scene-setter: “Morning light the sulphur colour of the mine dumps seeps across Johannesburg’s skyline and sears through my window” (1). From this point, however, the novel introduces a defamiliarized, magical realist version of the city, one in which the underworld and the underground (along with the menacing Undertow) are thematically and physically prominent. The emphasis is thus not on aboveground markers of mining activity but on the mine as subterranean dystopia, a “vast, abyssal receptacle for the detritus of the city,” as Rebecca Duncan describes it (“Johannesburg’s Literary”). Duncan links this aspect of Beukes’s novel—which unfolds in a “gothically hollowed out” Johannesburg—to S. L. Grey’s *Downside* trilogy, published over the three years following *Zoo City*: *The Mall* (2011), *The Ward* (2012), and *The New Girl* (2013). Grey “sets up a dualism between the recognisable world of contemporary Johannesburg, and another society which exists ‘Downside’, below its surface”:

This universe acts as a grim distortion mirror for what is above, reflecting the unequal demographics, eroded state institutions and privatising impulses of post-apartheid South Africa in the language of exaggerated violence, nodding frequently, as it does so, to material continuities between past and present. Indeed, in the context of Johannesburg, the subterranean locus itself signals a particular relationship to the past: the city of Johannesburg is subtended by the craterous colonial and apartheid legacy of the goldmine. . . . The mine—its coercions, exploitations and frequently fatal working conditions—is invoked in the Downside narratives as the heritage of contemporary economic protocols, participating in the constitution of a post-transitional gothic vocabulary that is local to Johannesburg. (Duncan, “Johannesburg’s Literary”)

With Beukes and Grey we see a move away from a social realism that employs mine dumps as surface signs of the violence, exploitation, and consumption ingrained in colonial/apartheid/post-apartheid Johannesburg (and the wider reef) into a more speculative fictional mode exploring the imaginative possibilities of that which is underground: hidden, marginalized, forgotten.<sup>4</sup> Mining’s subterranean metaphorical power is retained, but is no longer constrained by the physical terrain of underground tunnel complexes. There is something in this of Martin Arboleda’s concept of the *Planetary Mine* (2020), which requires us to “rethink extraction beyond the mere spatiality of the mine” (244)—its quarries and tailings dumps, its shafts and pits—and instead to take a broader view of the global “webs” (110, 138) of labor and commerce, as well as political oppression and resistance, that are interconnected in the processes of extraction and distribution.



In the final section of this article, I will turn my attention to a selection of texts that were published subsequent to *Zoo City* and the *Downside* trilogy (2013 and later). In these novels and short stories, when mining is linked to characters or plot points—or, more often, employed as a trope—it is almost always a spectral presence: mines and miners are haunted or haunting, recursive, recalling pasts that have been repressed or people who have been ignored. Their spectrality requires, or results from, a focus on the underground rather than the surface: mine-mountains recede from view and, indeed, almost disappear. This phenomenon, I will suggest, is indicative of how Marikana is largely absent from “post-Marikana” fiction.

### 3.

... the gravity of the Marikana massacre is something utterly unsayable.—  
Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese (in Mogami)

Before offering some reflections on the ways in which mining is a partial, obscured, or sublimated presence in what I am calling “post-Marikana” fiction—disappearing mine-mountains above the surface, offset by an emphasis on the subterranean—I want to consider the representation of mining, mine dumps, and Marikana in a variety of other modes, media, and genres.

In books like Greg Marinovich’s *Murder at Small Koppie* and Thanduxolo Jika et al.’s *We Are Going to Kill Each Other Today* (2013), which draw on Marinovich’s and Felix Dlangamandla’s roles as journalist-witnesses to Marikana and the now-iconic images that they and other photographers produced recording the events of August 2012, the complementary function of image and text recalls earlier instances of this pairing in depictions of mines and mining life. David Goldblatt and Nadine Gordimer’s *On the Mines* (first published in 1973 and revised for a new edition in, coincidentally, 2012) is the foremost example. That book also offers a tangential connection to Gordimer’s novels, in which the regular appearance of the mine dumps both as landscape features on the reef and as markers of racial capitalism may be seen as an inevitable consequence of the author’s anti-apartheid social realism. A more direct connection between the visual arts and fiction when it comes to mining is Gerard Sekoto’s *Mine Boy* (1947), which inserts a copy of Abrahams’s novel into the Van Gogh-inspired iconography (chair and candle) of poverty and exploited labor.

Sekoto did not paint the mine dumps, but a number of artists who were more or less his contemporaries did, ranging in style and technique from J. H. Pierneef in the 1930s to Moses Tladi in the 1940s. This tradition was sustained over the second half of the century but was disrupted in the 1990s, both within the medium of paint (a good example is Alan Crump’s “dense and claustrophobic watercolours” [Corrigall] from this period) and in other visual arts media. Here one thinks immediately of Kentridge, who would revisit the mine as a subject again and again over the next thirty years, or Sam Nhlengethwa, whose mining-oriented oeuvre (primarily portraits of miners at work) also spans three decades. A particularly intriguing engagement with mining in the early post-apartheid period was Clive van den Berg’s *Mine Dump Project* (1995), which was not simply art of but art *on* the mine dumps, drawing attention to the tailings that can be seen from the Soweto highway southwest of Johannesburg: “Blazing shapes illuminated the



previously forgotten dumps . . . reminding people that the man-made mountains are monuments to the corporate powers that once owned them" (Kritzinger 29). By this stage, artists like van den Berg were already treating the mine dumps as "post-industrial" sites that were disappearing from view.

Mine-dumps-as-mountains have remained prominent subjects among South African visual artists since then—or, rather, objects of enquiry whose aesthetic qualities can be captured even as the artist critiques the economic, social, political, and environmental consequences of the mining processes that formed them. A startling instance is Natasha Christopher's "Harmony Gold" and other photographs from her *Mine* (2010) that trouble the "beautiful/ugly" binary; this ambiguity is likewise central to Jeanette Unite's work, from *Earthscars* (2004) to *Headgear* (2009) and *TERRA* (2010) (see Thurman, *At Large* 281–82, *Still at Large* 214–15). Santu Mofokeng's *Poisoned Landscapes* (2011) shows the impact of mining's subterranean activity on the surface by documenting the aboveground effects of acid mine drainage. There has been a proliferation of mining-oriented visual art exhibitions, catalogs, and art books since Marikana. In 2013, there were Jerry Gaegane's *Marang a Letsatsi*, Ilan Godfrey's *Legacy of the Mine*, and Jason Larkin's *Tales from the City of Gold / After the Mines*, although all of these were culminations of projects begun before Marikana was seared into the national consciousness. Other work published and exhibited in the same year more directly in response to the massacre includes Mary Wafer's *Mine* and Chepape Makgatho's *Marikana: Truth, Probability and Paradox* (Makgatho would continue in this vein in 2014's *Voices from the Koppie* and 2015's *Marikana: The Rituals*). In his *For What It's Worth* series, which offsets mining landscapes with a metallic orb as a visual approximation of the amount of refined metal eventually produced from the activity that occurred there, Dillon Marsh shifted his attention from copper and diamond quarries to gold tailings and, in 2016, the platinum of Marikana. Significantly, however, in the latter images the platinum orb is imposed not on the mining site but atop Wonderkop and among the red granite boulders where some of the miners were killed. Here, again, the effect of the full series is to blur the artificial and natural mine-mountains into a composite image/concept representing the historical inequity of mining and the recent iniquity of the Marikana massacre.<sup>5</sup>

If photojournalistic coverage of Marikana—as well as its reception by news media consumers—was first informed by and subsequently became part of the body of visual artworks of which I have listed some examples above, then something comparable occurred with video footage of the massacre and the spate of documentary films that followed it. The two films that have generated the most critical and scholarly attention appeared in 2014: Rehad Desai's more conventional documentary *Miners Shot Down* and Aryan Kaganof's experimental *Threnody for the Victims of Marikana* (see Strauss; Frassinelli; Scott; Graham). The latter is especially noteworthy for its explicit treatment of the relationship between visual and aural/oral modes of representation. Kaganof's recursive use of the same news agency footage makes the differentiation in its soundscape, from music to the spoken word, more significant. In the same year, on the second anniversary of the massacre, Greg Nicolson would note the dearth of engagement by artists in popular genres like hip-hop, kwaito, house, and electronic dance music but could affirm that poets like Thabiso Mohare (Afurakan) had taken the microphone to protest, mourn, and console in the wake of Marikana.

Here we may turn to Sindiswa Busuku-Mathese's observation, quoted as the epigraph to this section, that the gravity of the massacre is "utterly unsayable." She made this comment in an interview about her poem "Midnight in Lusikisiki" (see Msimang), which succeeds nonetheless in saying something about Marikana. Busuku-Mathese's explanation that, notwithstanding the inadequacy of language to respond to tragedy, the body "has its own language . . . a language that I often find more revealing than speech . . . [an] interior language" (in Mogami), gestures toward poetry in South Africa as a primarily oral—embodied, performative—mode of expression and only in a secondary, almost derivative, sense as a textual form. The poems collected in *Marikana: A Moment in Time* (2013), compiled by Raphael d'Abdon, capture this vividly. Artists working in another embodied verbal/visual form, theater, have also found themselves able to engage in the difficult act of "saying" Marikana, or at least representing it on stage. Eliot Moleba's *The Man in the Green Jacket* (2013) is one example, Audrey Sekhabi's *Marikana: The Musical* another.<sup>6</sup> Nduka Mntambo queries the latter's depiction of the miners and policemen, describing the show as complicit in the "cultural amnesia" around Marikana—a forgetting of the circumstances that led to the massacre and of the asymmetrical clash between miners and police.

*Marikana: The Musical* takes its inspiration from Jika et al.'s *We Are Going to Kill Each Other Today* (2013), which, as Mntambo asserts, offers more nuanced portraits of the strikers and their leaders through photographs and text—including the words of the miners (whose songs thus find their way indirectly into Sekhabi's musical). Other nonfiction books like those by Marinovich and Alexander et al., or interview-based studies (see, for instance, Moleba) that quote many of the striking miners and tell the story of the massacre and its aftermath from their perspectives, or from those of family and community members, are arguably similar to filmic storytelling in the documentary mode of Desai. The combination of journalistic, essayistic, and academic discourses in these publications—as with the essays and articles in a collection like *Marikana: A Moment in Time*—provide a format and a register that make it possible to overcome the "unsayability" identified by Busuku-Mathese. Writers of fiction, lacking such generic or stylistic frameworks, have had to find other ways to grapple with the difficulty of representing the Marikana massacre and with mining-after-Marikana more generally. In the final section of this article, I will address this by returning to questions of surface visibility (mine dumps and mountains), subterranean invisibility (or sublimation), and social realism (and its discontents).

#### 4.

In a seminal scholarly assessment of the literature of mining in South Africa, Isabel Hofmeyr discusses the divergence between early mining novels (1870–1920), which were "very much the prerogative of the ruling class, blessed as it was with leisure time and literacy" (1), and other forms of literary and cultural production that emerged from mining communities—whether these were oral narratives and songs shared by miners or satirical verse dramas, sketches, poetry, memoirs, and plays. She also notes that a distinction must be drawn between the early diggers' own literary culture on the one hand and, on the other, novelists' responses to mining, which were both belated and harked back to a bygone set of

mining practices that had been short-lived in Kimberley and “virtually out of the question right from the beginning” in Johannesburg (Hofmeyr 3). The novelistic misrepresentation of the digger figure as “gentleman” and “pioneer” was not innocuous sentimentalizing; it colluded in the “whitewashed history of the mining industry” (5), a description that calls to mind the later methods of sanitizing mining history described by Roux and Falkof. Although Douglas Blackburn and a handful of other writers challenged this process in the first two decades of the twentieth century, it remained the case that mining novels were part of “the literary production of the bourgeoisie” (Hofmeyr 3). It is worth asking if class is still a useful or necessary consideration in an assessment of South African fiction today, particularly as it pertains to differences in representation between novels or short stories and the other media, modes, or genres discussed in the previous section. Reluctantly, readers and writers of contemporary South African fiction would have to admit that, to some degree at least, the division described by Hofmeyr still applies: other artistic and literary forms are more likely to emerge from, or cut across, different social “strata.”

Arthur Rose, glossing Hofmeyr’s analysis, adds an insightful observation of his own: the mining novels discussed by Hofmeyr

[tend] to be nostalgic for earlier phases of mining (written during industrialized mining but about small claims/digger culture), whereas poetry and plays tend to be closer to the culture in its moment. As mining becomes more machine-driven, Zola-style naturalism becomes less and less possible, because there’s less chance of sustaining a reader’s interest in mining itself, across an extended prose narrative. That much is clear when one compares the more expanded mine scenes in [Zola’s] *Germinal* with the relatively contained scenes in *Mine Boy*. More and more, it becomes about the surrounding story, with the mining itself a forgotten or disavowed condition of possibility.

This partly explains why South African novels have predominantly used mining not as material context but as metaphor or motif. Two intriguing post-apartheid exceptions are Jane Bauling’s *Dreaming of Light* and Pixie Emslie’s *Cry of the Rocks*, both coincidentally prepared for publication immediately prior to the Marikana massacre (2012). These novels are rare examples of books that employ mining simultaneously as sustained setting and as metonym for wider socioeconomic ills. In light of Rose’s comment above, it seems worth pointing out that *Dreaming of Light* is a young adult novel (so it is shorter) and focuses on informal/illegal “zama-zama” miners (so it is less industrial or “machine-driven”).<sup>7</sup> *Cry of the Rocks* may not, in fact, sustain the reader’s attention—but it is noteworthy that its setting is a deep rock platinum mine just like Marikana. Bauling and Emslie’s novels are thus also interesting for being, like those of Beukes and Grey discussed above, on the cusp of what I am calling “post-Marikana” fiction. Annel Pieterse uses the term “‘post-Marikana’ narratives” to frame her discussion of Niq Mhlongo’s *Way Back Home* (2013) and Jacob Dlamini’s *Askari* (2014); her essay treats Marikana as “a persistent symptom of an ongoing and unresolved conflict” (72), a long trajectory of betrayal by and within the liberation struggle, and the two texts she chooses to demonstrate this are centrally concerned with betrayal. In what follows I will consider a different selection of post-Marikana narratives: novels and short fiction featuring mining and miners.

A rare example of Marikana being mentioned specifically in fiction—and with characters tied directly to the event—is Thabo Jijana's short story "Native Mayonnaise" (2015, in Szczurek and Mulgrew). Here, the protagonist, Josiah, is a former Marikana rock driller. In an imagined tragicomic account to a policewoman (foretold by his friend Jela, who advises him on how to make a convincing admission of guilt for a drunken indiscretion), he mentions the reason for Marikana's former name, Rookoppies, in passing: "It means 'red hills,' my sister. Not because of the miners' blood, no, no—it's the minerals in the soil, is why" (1420). He glosses over "the strike, the killings and all that" (1431), instead emphasizing "the illness of the lungs" (1443) he acquired over many years working on the mines. Through Josiah, Jijana implies that focusing on the Marikana massacre is a "short answer"—the "long story" that needs to be told is a much more complicated social, political, and economic history. Marikana, Jijana seems to acknowledge, can be alluded to but cannot be adequately represented.

The remainder of the texts that I will discuss, published between 2018 and 2020, leave Marikana "unsaid" in their invocations of mining. In Mohale Mashigo's collection of interconnected short stories, *Intruders* (2018)—experimenting with something like Afrofuturism, although Mashigo eloquently problematizes this label in an introductory essay—and in Masande Ntshanga's speculative novel *Triangulum* (2019), mining entails going back into a more distant past. In Mashigo's story "The Palermo," the Johannesburg CBD carries historical oppression in its architecture and the ghosts of exploited miners in and under its foundations: "Beneath the buildings, stuck in the concrete, was the blood and sweat of those who had built the city. Beneath their sweat lay the limbs and dreams of those who were digging the core of the earth on the promise of a better life (it never materialised)" (49). In *Triangulum*, we learn that the narrator-protagonist's father, Lumkile, went and, he affirms, "climbed back up with pocket change and poison in [my] lungs" (364). But it is contemporary or near-future data-mining that is the stronger association—recalling the figure of George Harrison (the prospector who allegedly discovered gold on the Witwatersrand) and his heroic statue in the southeast of Johannesburg, the unnamed narrator imagines herself and her surveillance colleagues as "prospectors too, seated in front of quieter machines, burrowing into what he'd left behind" (273).

Sue Nyathi's novel *The Gold Diggers* (2018) has as its basic conceit an updating of the Jim-comes-to-Joburg narrative, emphasizing migrant experiences marked by xenophobic (and misogynistic) violence. Nyathi's characters see Johannesburg as Egoli, the place of gold, but historical miners are recalled only once in the text—in a reference to a grandfather who "had been an *umaWasha* . . . washing laundry for European miners" and a father who was "a miner himself" (236). Again, despite the novel's title, the act of mining as extraction of underground mineral wealth does not appear until the very last page, in the mention of "gold bullion . . . formed in the belly of Johannesburg" (279). Surprisingly, given the realist conventions employed by Nyathi, there are no mine dumps, even though the geography of the novel ranges across the greater Johannesburg area.

The city's venerable trifecta of gold, migrancy, and xenophobia is also the framework for Niq Mhlongo's introduction to the collection of short fiction he edited, *Joburg Noir* (2020). In Nedine Moonsamy's *Joburg Noir* story "The Waste Picker," homeless recycler Amu has "inherited a level of invisibility . . . from

his father—a miner—who came to this city and disappeared” (148–49). Again, the figure of the miner, like the activity of mining itself, recedes from view; the miner has always been anonymous, unseen, but has now become part of history. Moonsamy observes that mining is “in the background of so many of the stories” in this collection—a “trope” that all the contributors “somehow ‘tapped into.’” In these manifestations of noir, as with Duncan’s analysis of the gothic in recent South African literature, mining is characterized by spectrality: miners are dead, missing or lost fathers to a post-apartheid generation constantly haunted by apartheid.

But what about present-day miners—the miners of Marikana, both those who were killed and those who survived, as well as their contemporaries across the country? In another story in *Joburg Noir*, Sibongile Fisher’s “Feasting,” we learn about the “mountain men,” a cannibalistic gang that was formed “when the mines were closed, and the workers were left to rot in the violence of their impoverished demise” (Mhlongo 9). These miners become something like the living dead—flesh-eating zombies—and their numbers grow into a death-cult that spreads from an unnamed small mining town to Johannesburg. There is an intriguing ambiguity in Fisher’s depiction of the terrain first occupied by the “mountain men”: they “sift the sands in the eastern parts [of the town] for diamonds and dig in the large old mining hills for any gold or gold remains” (9). Are these “hills” mine dumps? Or “natural” mountains that contain gold? The mine dump and the mountain are fused. Once more, there is the recurring figure of the ghostly miner-father, merging with the miner as lost child, haunted and haunting: moving from the mining town to the city, the mountain men “dig deep beneath the City of Gold for their lost fathers, uncles and brothers who never made it back home. In the hole they are most alive, bending their backs to marry their childhoods with the dusty rocks of what haunts them. The alchemy of their pride. . . . They slither in and out of the old mines belted around the city” (9).

In “Feasting,” we again encounter a version of the zama-zama miner—simultaneously the cause of pity, fear, and revulsion. The figure of the zama-zama is partially redeemed in Imraan Coovadia’s *A Spy in Time* (2018); in this time-travelling tale, the only humans to survive a supernova are/were those who could take refuge beneath the “catacomb city” of Johannesburg, its reef “honeycombed with a hundred thousand miles of mining tunnels” (Coovadia 20). The Johannesburg that was subsequently rebuilt “tick[s] with radiation” and becomes an even more artificial environment. Instead of the mountains of white sand encountered by Xuma in *Mine Boy*, there are “thousands of yards of perfect white sand” (129) on an indoor beach at a funfair (perhaps an updating of Gold Reef City) and instead of Mohale’s “honeycomb mountains” across the Witwatersrand, Coovadia’s protagonist, Agent Enver Eleven, must make his way underground through a ridge “honeycombed by endless hot tunnels and shafts” (207). Once more, the *unheimlich* subterranean world is suited to the speculative mode, which in turn is linked to the motif of mining as a means of connecting past, present, and future. Eleven feels that he is “living in a story where I am doomed to be buried, only to be dug up and reburied” (129).

Post-Marikana fiction has not entirely abandoned the invocation of mine-dumps as a convention of “Joburg realism.” In Fred Khumalo’s “Weep for Me, Willow” (in *Joburg Noir*), they reappear as shorthand scene-setters. Echoing

Beukes's opening device in *Zoo City*, Khumalo starts his short story: "The sun hesitates behind the yellow mine dumps. It has a hangover, the sun. Just like me" (Mhlongo 41). The mine-mountains are, however, absent from Khumalo's novel *The Longest March* (2019), a fictionalized account of the five-hundred-kilometer walk undertaken by approximately seven thousand Zulu mineworkers who found themselves stranded on the reef at the outbreak of the South African War in 1899. If we are to believe Henry Morton Stanley's description in *Through South Africa* (1898), by this time there were already "hills of white tailings" dominating the landscape in and around the city (Ricci 51–52). Yet these are not mentioned in the parts of Khumalo's novel set in Johannesburg as the miners begin their march southeast from the Witwatersrand showgrounds—more or less where my office is located today—toward Heidelberg. No mine-mountains of the city here: in fact, *The Longest March* tends instead to reinscribe an urban/rural binary, as the mineworkers seek to escape Johannesburg and retreat to the mountains of KwaZulu-Natal.

*The Longest March* is set in a similar period to a number of the early mining novels to which Isabel Hofmeyr refers in her survey, including W. C. Scully's *Daniel Vananda* (1923). This text, Hofmeyr points out, is exemplary of white liberal critiques of the exploitation, racism, and injustice entrenched in the mining industry even before the end of the nineteenth century. Scully's novel "stands squarely in the 'Jim goes to Joburg' genre" and employs "techniques of social realism" in "documenting, often in moralistic terms, the subordination of Africans"—without properly "analysing the conditions that create such suppression": "this type of writing focuses exclusively on the African as victim, without ever turning to the positive contributions that the working class made in adapting to changing social conditions, and the extent to which their responses have shaped the course of history" (Hofmeyr 14). Here *The Longest March* stands in direct contrast. Although Khumalo's homeward-bound Zulu miners follow a similar trajectory to Scully's eponymous hero—a "Jim leaves Joburg to go home" twist—they are not objects of pity. Vananda's odyssey, in the white liberal narrative,

can only develop into the cyclical routes of migrancy—from the crumbling and overpopulated reserve economy to the sprawling slums, ghettos and segregated "townships" of the urban centres and back again to the impoverished "homeland." And predictably enough, the novel ends with Vananda returning to his Eastern Cape home, where all that remains is to face up to the ineluctability of migrant labour. (14)

To counter this sympathetic but also ultimately condescending and paternalistic portrait, Hofmeyr ends her article by quoting an example from "the oral literature and songs of mining migrant workers" (14)—a song still being sung by miners at the time of her writing. She insists, in doing so, on allowing the black miners to speak for themselves, in their own voices. Similarly, in much post-Marikana nonfiction, miners' voices are recorded and published. This is not the case with post-Marikana fiction. Jijana's "Native Mayonnaise" is one exception (although Josiah's voice is very much imagined rather than quoted), and *The Longest March* is another. Khumalo undertakes the ventriloquism of historical fiction: miners' voices are likewise imagined or conjured, but at least they are redeemed from the neglected margins of South African history.

Khumalo's setting 120 years ago is an extreme example, but it shares with most of the post-Marikana fiction I have discussed an orientation, as far as their engagement with mining is concerned, toward a Johannesburg or Highveld reef of the past. This evocation of the past tends to be interested in the uncanny underground (unsettling, mysterious, but also eerily familiar in ways that are implicit rather than explicit); it is much less interested in the more readily recognizable (and perhaps over-familiar) features on the surface. What, then, is to become of the mine-mountain, the image that is redolent both of "receding" mine dump landscapes and of Marikana's Wonderkop? If the pattern observed by Hofmeyr—a certain belatedness in South African fictioneers' depictions of mining—still holds, is it simply a matter of time passing? Can we expect writers of fiction in ten or twenty years to respond to Marikana in a more direct, social realist mode? Or is this unlikely, because the notion of sociopolitical commentary through documentary realism has itself been superseded, as symbolized by the general fading of the mine dumps from view? If so, then mining (and its mine dumps and mountains, its Marikanas) may remain for the most part an allusive, elusive presence in South African fiction. Marikana is, as the theme of this special issue suggests, an inflection point that signals both continuity with and difference from the past, marking the end of one phase and the beginning of another in South African literary production. Over the course of a decade since the massacre, however, it has not been explicitly reckoned with in the country's fiction.

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## NOTES

1. Some of the observations that Roux makes in his essay, published on *SlipNet* in March 2013, were first presented to the Johannesburg Workshop in Theory and Criticism panel "Things of Nature, the Nature of Things" in July 2012.

2. A nearby settlement—where many of the miners and their families lived—shares this name.

3. For a selection of other novelistic, short fiction, poetic, and prose nonfiction representations of the mine-dumps over the course of the twentieth century—ranging from R. R. R. Dhlomo to Sarah Gertrude Millin, from Benedict Vilakazi to Siphos Sepamla and Lionel Abrahams—see Angelucci.

4. It could be argued that this shift from the surface to the subterranean as marked by a move away from conventional realism is anticipated by Michael Green's verse novella *Sinking* (1997), which is on one level an account of actual events in the mining town of Blyvooruitzicht (where, in 1964, a family home was swallowed by a sinkhole, killing the occupants) but is also an experiment with form—described in its subtitle as "a History, Romance, Allegory, Prophecy, Survey, Domestic Drama, and None of the Above."

5. For further examples and discussion of the relevant artworks, see Angelucci; MacKenney; Hess; Kirkwood; and Kritzinger.



6. See also Smith on mining as a prominent theme in theater productions at the 2014 National Arts Festival.

7. Griffin Shea's *The Golden Rhino* (2020) is another example of youth fiction featuring mining—in this case, at the contested historical site of Mapungubwe.

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