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Literary Geography and the Informal Sector

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The major focus of works in literary geography has been upon place interpretations in the context of North America or Western Europe. The present paper opens up a new frontier in literary geographical studies by demonstrating the utility of creative writings in studies of the informal sector. An examination is undertaken of South African protest writings on the shebeen and shebeen life, which surrounds the illicit provision of liquor. It is contended that creative literature may serve as a complement to or vital extension of alternative research methods in microlevel studies on the informal sector.

Humanist-inspired literary geography developed as a response to the limitations of positivist research (Tuan, 1976; Relph, 1977; Smith, 1979; Johnston, 1983). In a discipline largely obsessed with theory formulation and elegant mathematical techniques, the domain of human geographers was reduced to an “empty shell where people [were] strangely absent” (Jones, 1962, 9). The subjectivity of novelist, poet, autobiographer, and dramatist offered one avenue of putting “the people back in” (Wreford Watson, 1983, 391).

Although the roots of literary geography extend back to the early decades of this century (Sharp, 1907; Wright, 1924a, 1924b, 1928), the modern phase commenced with Darby's (1948) watershed geography of Hardy's Wessex. The use of creative literature, especially the regional novel, in reconstructing landscapes and evoking “the personality of place” as captured by the literary artist was gain exemplified in studies by Paterson (1965), Jay (1975), Aiken (1977, 1979), and Pocock (1979). A further stream of literary geographical research sought to move beyond the study of merely the personality of place, seeking instead to reveal the underlying experiential “sense of place” (Krone, 1979; Paterson and Paterson, 1981; Prince, 1981). Within this latter body of writings preem-

inence is accorded the themes of attachment to and alienation from place (Middleton, 1981; Radcliff-Umstead, 1981; Seamon, 1981).

As an offspring of developments within the realm of Anglo-American human geography, the major thrust of literary geographical research has been upon place in the context of North America or Western Europe. Other than on these areas, literary geographical research remains largely undeveloped, with notable exceptions in work dealing with India (Dutt and Dhussa, 1976; Dutt, 1981), Russia (Andrews, 1981), Latin America (Crist, 1962), and most recently, South Africa (Hart, 1982; Pirie, 1982; Hart and Pirie, 1984). It is the intention in this paper to address the relative dearth of studies focused on the setting of the Third World. The objective here is to open up a new frontier in literary geographical research, furnishing insight to a theme central to the field of development geography. Specifically, the paper addresses the recent suggestion of McGee (1982) that in microlevel studies on the "informal sector" literature may serve as a complement to or extension of other research methodologies. The validity of this suggestion will be examined in light of a discussion of writings by South African literati on the ubiquitous informal niche of shebeening, which surround the illicit provision of liquor.

The Use of Literature in Geography

One of the prime motivations behind the emergence of literary geography is to tap the literary artist's heightened gift of perception and communication. This vision is unlikely to be hampered by the disciplinary blinkers of scientific method. Moreover, literature is perceived to mirror life (Apte, 1970). It reflects social change and may bring out the salient features of social processes and structures often otherwise concealed in academic analysis and yet potentially of considerable moment to human geographers.

The engagement of geographers with literature occurs at two levels. At the simplest, literary citations are selected on the basis of their ability to describe and inform in a particularly evocative, entertaining, and almost anecdotal fashion. Such literary geography generally colors and revitalizes "the drab and lifeless body of regional geography" (Meinig, 1983, 316), sometimes throwing light on the more mundane, taken-for-granted aspects of life often overlooked in bland description. At a more sophisticated level, creative literature is explored with the intention of unraveling the delicate nuances of place meaning. The latter treatment of literature is most valuable when it, at least, touches upon the social conditions surrounding the creation, publication, and reception of the literary product.

The use of creative literature in human geography is not without its critics. The exercise of literary geography has been likened to window dressing, to uninformed raiding that eschews the complex totality of the work from which the prose is extracted and isolated (Thrift, 1978; Gregory, 1981). In addition, the question has been posed as to whose experience of place is being assessed, that of the author, narrator, the characters in the work, or the persons behind the book (Dijkink, 1983). In cataloguing the abuses of literary geography, Gregory (1981, 2) harshly condemns

the casual ransacking of fictional writing as a ready means of uncovering the most obvious images of intentionality prised from the material structures which help give them their effectivity, and divorced from any serious recognition of . . . the sociology of the text . . . the exasperating interrogation of the mundane and transparently trivial devoid of any attempt to locate the social actions in wider sequences of social reproduction and transformation.

Although the disadvantages of pursuing acontextual literary analyses must be acknowledged, words do have an appeal in their own right, intentionality is not always obvious, the mundane and trivial do often escape notice. Moreover, judicious literary borrowing may have considerable advantages in research situations in which it may be one of the only potential sources of information concerning human experience. This is especially true in the context of research on the nooks and crannies of Third World cities, those places occupied by the casual poor struggling for a day-to-day existence in the informal sector.

As noted earlier, the potential value of literature for development geographical studies pertaining to the informal sector was alluded to by McGee (1982). In what might be styled as the first generation of informal-sector studies by geographers, the prime research method consisted of using the field survey questionnaire to investigate the fundamental characteristics of the individuals or enterprises that were defined as constituting the informal sector (McGee, 1974a, 1974b, 1976; McGee and Yeung, 1977; Bromley, 1978a). More recent works have employed alternative methodologies as the research axis was reoriented from the street *per se* to a cognizance of the structures of the wider economy. The lives of persons in the informal sector have been informed by the increasing use of participant and nonparticipant observation, semistructured interviews with officials, leaders, and informants, newspaper and archival records, and the collection of oral histories (Jellinek, 1976, 1978; Bromley, 1978b; Gerry, 1978; Rusque-Alcaino and Bromley, 1979; Forbes, 1981a, 1981b; Rimmer, 1982; Rogerson and Beavon, 1982, 1985). That literature may

be a vital additional tool in illuminating the world of the casual poor is demonstrated by reference to creative writings on the South African shebeen. Essentially, the shebeen is the South African equivalent of the U.S. speakeasy of Prohibition days; usually its premises are a converted room in a township house (Hart and Rogerson, 1983).

Literature and the Informal Sector

"That noble institution, the shebeen" (Nakasa, 1975, 57), has played an integral role in the lives of South African urban Blacks since the turn of the century. In the bleak ghetto environment of the segregated black townships shebeens are focal points for popular recreation and popular culture (Hart and Rogerson, 1983). Denied more conventional stimuli to writing, a generation of black South African writers has been drawn to the shebeen for artistic inspiration (Laubscher, 1977). The importance of the shebeen has been acknowledged by black writers as having injected something vital into their literary movements (Manganyi, 1983). "The hold which shebeens have on the mind of the Black South African can only be compared to the similar hold the English club has on the mind of the Englishman. This explains why shebeens are so widely celebrated in the fiction and non-fiction of Black South Africans. Shebeens, like the London pub, provided the focal point of city life" (Nkosi, 1965, 14).

A whole subculture grew up in the townships around the shebeen, affording a backcloth to literary creation (Manganyi, 1983). Even in the face of efforts by the state and mining interests to eliminate the shebeen, the subculture survived or, more correctly, thrived. Indeed, the persistence of the shebeen and its celebration in creative writing provides the strongest support to McGee's (1979) assertion that the ability of people themselves to preserve their way of life may favor the conservation rather than the dissolution of informal-sector activities.

The literature on shebeens almost exclusively derives from what is known as "protest writing," a phase in South African writing that brought forth the first works by Blacks about the lifeworld of the townships (Rive, 1983). Within the protest school of writing different literary forms may be delineated. Concerning shebeens and shebeen life, there is a broad distinction between the portrayal on the one hand in a collection of short stories, in essays or in novels and on the other hand in autobiographies penned in exile. In the former the shebeen is treated as a vibrant organization, an important recreational outlet and derivative of traditional black African culture. Set against the miserable drabness of the townships, shebeens are welcomed for their warmth, hospitality, and color. Although scattered references to the appeal of favored shebeens are to be found

in reflective autobiographies written in exile, these works are particularly concerned to illuminate shebeening as a necessary and risky survival strategy amidst abject circumstances of chronic poverty and the absence of alternative income-earning opportunities. In both sets of writings literature serves as a valuable means of penetrating the subjective experiential dimensions of the informal sector in a manner that hitherto has eluded other tools of research.

The Shebeen as Vibrant Cultural Institution

In the creative writing of both white and black South Africans shebeens are shown as the “social hub” of every black township (Sampson, 1957). Shebeen culture comprised “that twilight underground world of urban African life where all classes met, united only by the need for European alcohol, the consumption of which was prohibited” (Nkosi, 1965, 14). “Tucked away out of sight down dark passages or in muddy backyards” (Sampson, 1957, 703), the shebeen is often likened to the U.S. speakeasy and the British public house (Lötter and Schmidt, 1975; Lötter, 1981). Such comparisons notwithstanding, the shebeen emerges in literature as a distinctively African cultural form in terms of its genesis, organization, and mode of operation.

The origins of shebeening may be traced to the effects of proletarianization and of the growth of urban black settlement in South Africa. Beer brewing was a traditional skill of rural women; in the urban milieu the craft was transformed into the institution of the shebeen. The cultural significance of beer is detailed by Mokgatle (1971, 22–23):

My ancestors, like people of all nations, have always brewed their own beer. They drank it and enjoyed its flavour. Beer brewing from the days of my ancestors until today has been the occupation of women. Every woman in my tribe is expected to know how to brew good and nourishing beer, and before the arrival of Europeans, when all young women of marriageable age spent more time in the tribe with their mothers, they were taught the art of brewing . . . a woman must be in a position to entertain her husband and his guests . . . with beer.

Every African man is expected to be a beer drinker. It sounds odd when a man declines beer that is offered to him. . . . Close friends always invite each other to their homes for beer drinking. . . . No function can be praised and regarded as a dignified one if there is no beer for men to drink.

Under urban conditions the whole context and meaning of beer brewing began to shift. With relatively few formal-sector employment opportunities open to the flood of newly proletarianized women entering the urban areas, the economic function of beer brewing began in the 1930s to

outstrip its social and recreational roles (Hellmann, 1948). The importance of the beer trade for such women is a recurrent theme in literature. The leading characters in three novels by major writers—Abraham's (1946) Leah, Paton's (1948) Gertrude, and Dikobe's (1973) Ma-Dhlovu—were all drawn to beer brewing as a source of income. Equally, in the writings of Dhlomo (1975, 16–17):

As soon as the mother of Momiti had lost her husband she made up her mind to go to Johannesburg and work for money herself. . . . They left their home in Maritzburg and came to Prospect Township, so as to be near the mines, because the work done by women prospers near the mines. In the compounds old men and young men live alone; they have nothing to make their blood warm. . . . 'My Child', she said, 'I think that it would be good if we also brewed isikokeyana so that we may make money quickly. That is our only hope.' . . . Her mother began now to brew beer, which is the only work that brings in money quickly to the native people. She brewed and brewed and sold it to all tribes. . . . The business thrived.

Although the economic significance of the shebeen was increasing, its recreational role remained vital. In the absence of any other sources of popular recreation, shebeens relieved something of the gloom of everyday life in the regimented location. The converted township premises that functioned as shebeens were celebrated by such exotic names as Cabin in the Sky, House on Telegraph Hill, Thirty-Nine Steps, House Back of the Moon, and House of Truth (Sampson, 1956). Recognized and appreciated as "hospitable homes . . . not like the municipal bar lounges with their business atmosphere and inevitable high fences which gives them the look of cages" (Nakasa, 1975, 57), the atmosphere and attractions of preferred shebeens are frequently revealed in literature. A favorite shebeen of writers for *Drum*,¹ Nkosi (1965, 15) recollects, "was within a stone's throw of Marshall Square, Johannesburg's biggest police station." But it was the popular shebeens of Sophiatown, the last freehold area for black settlement in Johannesburg (Hart and Pirie, 1984), that in particular galvanized the imagination of writers of the 1950s. Themba (1982, 80) vividly recalls "Little Heaven, Sophiatown's poshest shebeen" as patronized by professional people and run by a huge "queen." Another Sophiatown shebeen, Thirty-Nine Steps is described thusly:

Now, that was a great shebeen! It was in Good Street. You walked up a flight of steps, the structure looked dingy as if it would crash down with you any moment. You opened a door and walked into a dazzle of bright electric light, contemporary furniture, and massive Fatty. She was a legend. Gay, friendly, coquettish, always ready to serve you a drink. And that

mama had everything: whisky, brandy, gin, beer, wine—the lot [Themba, 1982, 104].

In most literature shebeen life is associated with noise, color, and vibrancy, factors that are vital to the survival of this informal sector niche over nearly a century. Central to the conviviality of the shebeen was the personality and character of the shebeen “queen.” The good-hearted liquor queen plays a primary role in several South African novels. In *The Marabi Dance* the appeal and success of the “queen” is captured by Dikobe (1973, 7): “Ma-Ndlovu served the brandy drinkers, . . . as she moved, she danced with her dress spread out and showed her pretty petticoat. The brandy drinkers ordered half-jack quantities, paid a pound and refused the change.”

Nakasa’s writings in exile reveal one further element in the appeal of shebeens, namely, the danger and risk of illegal drinking: “Life abroad lacks the challenge that faces us in South Africa. After a lifetime of illegal living in the Republic’s shebeens, the exiles are suddenly called upon to become respectable, law-abiding citizens. Not a law to break in sight” (Nakasa, 1975, 110). Even in the ghetto environs of New York’s Harlem, which Nakasa (1975, 116) finds in some respects parallel to the black South African townships, “I missed the sense of danger which characterised our drinking sessions, many of which were so rudely interrupted by the Johannesburg police.” Contained in such writings are rich insights into personal dimensions of shebeen culture that facilitate an appreciation of the persistence of this informal-sector activity.

In addition to documenting the appearance and lifeworld of the shebeen, literature offers an often unique understanding of the organization of this illegal income niche. Several aspects of the complex and ingenious procedures affecting the operation of shebeens are revealed only or most clearly through the lens of creative writing. As has been shown elsewhere (Hart and Rogerson, 1983), despite being illegal, shebeens are linked in an ambiguous dependent relationship with the large capitalist liquor concerns. Some of the many ingenious ways in which liquor supplies were obtained by shebeens unfold through literature. Themba (1982, 83) notes, for example, that much of the liquor flowing into the illicit trade in Johannesburg was not purchased in the city; rather, “it comes from suburban bottle-stores. One shebeen queen travels as far as Kimberley . . . to get it.” To maintain a continuous supply of liquor to the shebeens, white bottle-store owners would take note of vacant lots in white suburbs, and collect addresses of deceased or jailed persons so as to conceal illegal supplies to shebeens. Most bottle-stores, Themba writes, supply independent dealers known as liquor runners, who in turn supply particular

shebeens. Other dimensions of the covert liquor-supply network include the "big-time operators" who break into bottle-stores, wholesale merchants disposing of liquor via runners or their own shebeens, and white tramps or hobos. The last are described in this way: "These democratic characters visit various bottle-stores and make small purchases at each and at the end of the day they are able to supply a runner with about six bottles of brandy" (Themba, 1982, 83). During the years of prohibition in Johannesburg "most township shebeens in the Big City were stocked through the efforts of these handy white gwevas . . . these gwevas were white men who were always hanging around the city bottle stores in Johannesburg waiting for Africans to come along and give them orders for liquor" (Joel, 1981, 20). The services of the hobos and liquor runners were dispensed with in the lower class of shebeens, which provided home-brewed beer and catered particularly to the elderly and laborers (Lötter and Schmidt, 1975; Hart and Rogerson, 1983). Others combined both home brewing and dependence upon the liquor runner. Typical was Ma-Ndlovu who "ordered a great many bottles of liquor from a white liquor runner to whom she paid an extra ten shillings for each bottle that was bought. She prepared ten gallons of beer and brewed several concoctions" (Dikobe, 1973, 6).

With prohibition lifted on black liquor purchases in 1962, state officials believed that shebeens would be forced out of existence (Hart and Rogerson, 1983). Yet in creative writing the reasons for the continuity and vitality of shebeening are sharply exposed.

Bottle stores or no bottle stores, the shebeens will be with us for a long time to come. These institutions have been here for generations; they are as old as Johannesburg. . . . As outsiders, excluded from the hotel lounges by law and convention, we drank our drink the shebeen way—a way outside the normal human experience of drinking in bars, hotel lounges and clubs.

It is a mistake to think all these years non-whites have been dreaming about the day they would be allowed to graduate to the status of the white drinker and be welcomed into the lounge. Instead, a different way of drinking has evolved and it cannot suddenly disappear from the face of the Earth [Nakasa, 1975, 57–58].

The Shebeen as Survival Strategy

New reflections on the experience of shebeen life were prompted by the exile, forced and voluntary, of many of South Africa's leading black writers during the 1960s. From a vantage point outside South Africa the warmth, glamor, and vitality of shebeen culture were dwarfed by the overarching harshness of township conditions and of the shebeen's place in the daily struggle for survival. Growing up in a shebeen household

or the direct experience of having close relatives as participants in the trade place the works of Modisane, Mphahlele, and Jabavu in a separate category. Through an examination of this second strand of protest writing, one obtains a richer understanding of an aspect of the informal sector as survival strategy and of the associated dangers of securing a livelihood from a precarious illegal trade.

The increasing primacy of the economic rather than the social function of the shebeen in township life is confirmed in Themba's writings (1982). The dedication of the shebeen queens to their work was simply a response to grinding conditions of household poverty and a determination in particular to educate children. The mother of Modisane, a now-banned writer, was such a parent: "'You will be a doctor', she said, determined. She turned our home into a shebeen, worked fourteen hours a day brewing and pressing home brews . . . and from the proceeds she educated me to high school level and the two girls to primary school level" (Modisane, 1963, 35). Likewise the imperatives for shebeening were made clear to Mphahlele by his aunt: "'That is how a woman does it; look at us, we do not sit and look up to our husbands or fathers to work alone; we have to send our children to school with money from beer selling'" (Mphahlele, 1959, 41).

The continuing importance to the present day of the shebeen as vital income-earning opportunity is starkly posed in Sepamla's poem "Queens/Kings," which tells of a meeting called by Soweto students to request that shebeens be closed in observance of mourning for the dead of the 1976 riots. Although the majority of queens and kings swear to agree to this request, one shebeen queen demurs:

i'm not mad
i must live
i must pay rent
i must pay school fees
i have no husband

(Sepamla, 1977, 20-21)

That shebeening was always an illegal occupation exposed both shebeen operator and patron to the predations of police harassment. The experience of growing up in a shebeen is recalled in Modisane's autobiography (1963, 35): "Life in a shebeen exposed me to a rude introduction to the South African Police, they made me realise the brutal, dominant presence of the white man in South Africa." Equally vivid is Mphahlele's (1959, 41) childhood remembrance of beer raids in Pretoria's Marabastad location: "It was always like this: Saturday night and torchlights; Saturday night

and police whistles; Saturday night and screams; Saturday night and cursing and swearing from the white man's lips." The often cruel way in which police raids were mounted is sharply etched in creative writings. One shebeen queen describes to Jabavu (1982, 203) the atmosphere of police raids on houses:

'You suddenly hear whistles. . . . Rattles, screams. Northern pagan women ululate the alarm, startled dogs bark, all kinds of ear-crashing sounds rise up like a whirlwind; men and boys shout to warn nearby households. The police try to take a house by surprise, but it's difficult because the moment anything happens in the location everybody sees. . . . You hope [the police van] will pass your house . . . but the brakes grind and you see police pour out and leap over your fence . . . [on one occasion] they rushed in. Pushed the door, *broke* it with axes because it was closed, and ripped up the floor boards to find the still, the brewing well. Then started digging up the yard.'

Fear of the police raid was accompanied by the ever-present fear of imprisonment. Modisane (1963, 35–36) writes of the impact of frequent confinement upon family and shebeen life:

I saw my mother insulted . . . and bundled into the kwela-kwela, the police wagon, so often it began to seem—and I perhaps accepted it—as a way of life, the life of being black. . . . [At Newlands Police station there was] a continual buzz flowing from the shebeen queens . . . making arrangements, sending out messages, to relations, to friends, about funds, fines. . . . It was always the same, the same voices, the same desperation, the same pleas, and throughout all this I waited outside the police station, waiting for my mother to be charged, fined and released, waiting to escort her home.

In the face of the imperatives for household survival and of the absence of alternative formal-income pursuits, most women brushed aside the dangers with the attitude "You have to live. You can't be ever worrying about the risks. . . . You carry on in spite of them" (Jabavu, 1982, 204). The underlying rationale behind the maintenance of shebeening in the face of the constant dangers is admirably captured by Modisane (1963, 38): "My mother accepted her life, and, I suppose, so did the other shebeen queens; they chose this life and accommodated the hazards, a kind of insurance against poverty by trying to give me a prestige profession, and if necessary would go to jail whilst doing it."

The "accommodations," or, more correctly, the patterns of informal resistance, fashioned in shebeen culture form the final theme in literature. It might be anticipated that with a tradition of police harassment, shebeens would be forced out of business. From the literature, however,

it is apparent that raids were often carefully planned so as not to upset a delicate symbiosis between shebeen queen and police authority. One writer draws analogies of the police raid to a local form of taxation: "To the police departments shebeens were a source of unlimited funds, the tariffs for liquor offences were worked out with careful attention, reasonably steep but not calculated to discourage or inconvenience the budget of shebeen queens" (Modisane, 1963, 35). In similar vein Nkosi (1965, 15) describes the aftermath of a raid on his favorite shebeen close to Johannesburg police headquarters: "The police would then take Aunt Suzie, the 'shebeen queen', into the kitchen for a brief business chat after which they soon emerged, surreptitiously stuffing their pockets with something—perhaps with money."

Literature exposes that the police bribe was an integral part in the organization of shebeen life. Police would "arrange" to raid and arrest particular shebeeners on alternative occasions. Jabavu (1982, 202) writes that bribes most commonly took the form of free shares of liquor "and of course, *they* get the whisky, gin, brandy that is reserved for special customers, not *skokiaan* from methylated spirits, potatoes, whatnot." In addition to the bribe other shebeen defense mechanisms were evolved. The activities of the "crier" shouting advance warning of the impending stampede of "fierce Boer policemen" are graphically depicted by Nkosi (1965, 15). It was common practice to deploy relatives, especially children, as guards on shebeens. The harrowing experience as a child guard is given literary expression by both Mphahlele and Modisane. The latter remembers:

I was trained to be the watchdog capable of spotting a policeman fifty yards away; but the element of risk was a strong potential, the liquor squad was changed much too frequently, and the blank periods before I could recognise the new squad were dangerous to my mother.

By seven o'clock every night I would go on duty and over the weekends remained on my post until after midnight. . . . I would go to bed for three hours and be on the post again at three whilst Ma . . . pressed the brew [Modisane, 1963, 39–40].

Conclusion

Hitherto the use of creative literature has rarely been included among the kitbag of research tools in development geography. To a large extent blame for this situation of neglect rests with the particular First World bias of that tradition of studies pursued under the banner of literary geography. The major objective of the present investigation was to

demonstrate that literature is a potentially rich vein for development studies in Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

In moving beyond the traditional preoccupation of literary geography with place interpretations, creative writings may serve not only as an extension of other research methods but, in some instances, as fundamental sources of primary information. In microlevel studies on the informal sector, literature offers an avenue into the previously "hidden" subjective experiential world of the casual poor. Studying the shebeen in South Africa through the lens of literature extends understanding of the origins and persistence of this informal-sector niche, emphasizing its significance both as cultural institution and survival strategy under circumstances of chronic poverty. Moreover, aspects of the organization, mode of operation, and mechanisms of resistance in shebeen life are further crystallized through the use of creative writings, supporting and deepening insights derived from alternative research techniques (cf. Hart and Rogerson, 1983). These observations suggest that an exploration of Third World literature may provide a rich harvest for students of the struggles of peasants, proletarians, and the casual poor in the fields, factories, streets, and shantytowns of peripheral capitalist societies.

Note

1. *Drum* was the first South African magazine of wide circulation that invited contributions from black writers in English. In launching careers of several of South Africa's most talented writers (such as Themba, Mphahlele, Modisane, Nakasa), it was perhaps the most important landmark in black South African literature.

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