Introduction: A Time of Memory[1]

South Africa is clearly going through a ‘time of memory’.

In 1997 the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa's reconstruction and development period was described as an attempt at "healing the wounds of history" (in Nixon 1996:74). As with the TRC there has been much need among many South Africans since the transition to a democratic society to recount the suppressed histories of the past. One of the ways of rewriting history has been through the recalling of personal experiences of the apartheid era in the quest to create an alternative national identity that transcends the separate 'nationalisms' that existed in the past. Rob Nixon has pointed out that "the 1990's have witnessed an upsurge of South African memoirs and autobiographies as writers have begun mining the hitherto under?explored past with increasing vigour" (Nixon 1996:74).
Nixon has argued that "a refusal of amnesia" is as important as some of the more material changes that have taken place in the reconstruction of the new society:

Many writers feel that post-apartheid literature plays an invaluable role by preventing, through restless exploration, the closure of history's channels. If the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has institutionalised the rhetoric of witness as a step towards healing, the new literature of autobiographical witness promises a more lasting refusal of amnesia. To revisit history can be a regenerative endeavour; it need not entail being stuck in the acrimony of the past. The lifting of censorship, the unbanning of outlawed political parties, amnesty for political prisoners, the exiles' return, and Mandela's electoral victory have collectively led to a new liberty in which to engage history in more candid, textured, and impassioned terms. The result has been not just a return to the past but a return in a more personal way. (Nixon 1996:77, my emphases)

J U Jacobs, writing earlier, in the watershed year of 1994, also sees the changes in the literary environment as a reflection of the changing political climate in South Africa:

Since 1991 South Africa has begun to recover from the censorship and banning under the Nationalist Government of the previous forty years; only now can this history freely be written and freely read. The country is at present engaged in a process of self-narration—a national recollection of those blanked-out areas of its identity. The current proliferation of South African life stories may be seen as part of the autobiographical impulse of an entire nation finally bringing its past into proper perspective. (Jacobs 1994:878)

South African Indian writers have been part of this large company of South African writers engaging in a "refusal of amnesia" by dealing with the apartheid past in a "personal way". They have been among those undertaking the process of "self-narration" that foregrounds some of those "blanked-out areas" of South Africa's identity as a nation. Some of the writers have produced direct autobiographical writing while others have used apartheid and even the colonial past as a rich critical context in which to set their writing.
Among the Indian male writers are Imraan Coovadia [The Wedding], Achmat Dangor [Kafka's Curse and Bitter Fruit], Pat Poovalingam [Anand], Ismail Meer [A Fortunate Man], and Aziz Hassim [The Lotus People]. Indian women writers include Farida Karodia, Zuleikha Mayat, Fayiza Khan, Dr Goonam, Phyl­lis Naidoo and Fatima Meer. In previous decades the writings of Ansuyah Singh, Muthal Naidoo, Jayapraga Reddy, and Agnes Sam, constituted significant literary milestones.

I consider here the debut novel of Aziz Hassim, The Lotus People (2002). The novel may be read as an example of writing that exhibits a "refusal of amnesia", a TRC type of memoir, where the past is reconstituted. I read the novel in terms of the cartography of the city, of the many images it projects of Durban. I explore issues of the apartheid city and space, and the present challenges of developing a literary heritage related to the city.

A TYRANNY OF PLACE

In The Lotus People we see how place is an inescapable denominator in South African writing. It was Es'kia Mphahlele who observed that our literature is marked by a tyranny of place. In the South Africa of the past, living in a particular place was the result of who you were in racial terms, and also determined your experience and identity as a person. If 'character is fate’ – how might we think of place as fate and, indeed, of place as character?

I appreciated how place is important in a writer's psyche when I visited St Petersburg recently. My impressions, on visiting the present Dostoevsky Museum, which was one of the homes of the Russian writer, were distinctly of how writers use place in their writings. In this respect, of
the famous Russian writer, Asimbaeva and Biron write:

In his writings set in Petersburg, Dostoevsky presented a social cross-section of the residents … and showed the city's unique physiology. His prose fiction …features[s] Petersburg as an inseparable part of his characters' existence. It was only in this particular mysterious city with a split personality that the events in his novels, fantastic in their very ordinariness, could occur, insane ideas could be born, and crimes could be committed: "All of this is so vulgar and ordinary that it almost borders on the fantastic." In depicting the interaction between the individual and the city, Dostoevsky described everything in the most minute detail, brilliantly intertwining fiction and reality. (Asimbaeva and Biron 2000:12-13)

In The Lotus People we are taken into the labyrinthine world of Durban's Grey Street complex, or Casbah, as important in the literary-political imagination of South Africa as is Soweto, or District Six, or Hillbrow (see Phaswane Mpe's Welcome to Our Hillbrow, 2001). The novel dramatises numerous happenings and events in the various streets and arcades of the vibrant Indian business district and its periphery - Victoria Street, Prince Edward Street, Queen Street, Leopold Street, Kismet and Madressa Arcades, to name but a few. Reading the novel you imagine yourself constantly walking in and out of this intricate grid of streets. And we appreciate Hassim's own peripatetic imagination, both in time and space, throughout the novel. Edward Said drew attention to the "worldliness of the text" where there is a connection between a work of fiction and its historical world. This is true of a text such as The Lotus People.

Place, Space and Writing

There are many different faces of the city of Durban, and the Casbah is but one of them; even with the Casbah, as depicted in The Lotus People, we get an amazing array of impressions and images. We see a lost city, fading and forgotten, excavated from the archives of memory, and reborn. The novel reminds us that the city, any city - be it Moscow or St Petersburg, Berlin or Durban - is a palimpsest: it has layers and layers of history, of memory, each telling of a different city.
Durban's Casbah, where the novel is set, ranged from Pine Street, to Greyville Race Course, and from Soldiers Way to Warwick Avenue. Hassim shows that the place was a vibrant and diverse socio-political, economic and cultural space. Paul Maylam rightly points to the "intersection of urban space in Durban - living space, cultural space, political space and space for pursuing material ends" as well as "residential space" (Maylam 1996:2). And Hassim's book is an important literary example of this kind of writing, or re-writing, of a part of Durban's cityscape. The Casbah was a space of innumerable historical, social, political, economic happenings or encounters and, typical of an apartheid city, segregated on the basis of race and class. Hassim suggests that it was more than a physical space; the Casbah was also a time, a historical era, with its own peculiar characteristics, a time-place that is no more.

If "[g]eography, maps and cartography...constitute the pillars of Colonialism" {Comellini 1998:346), this is especially so of apartheid. In Hassim's narrative, we are confronted again with the geographical dividedness of apartheid South Africa. The Casbah in which Hassim lived was largely an Indian area, with a sprinkling of Africans and Coloureds. The adjoining white West Street complex or the Berea could have been part of another planet.

We have to appreciate the extent to which segregation laws and apartheid planning divided the different communities in Durban over the long haul of the past century, the time span of The Lotus People. Of the Warwick Avenue Triangle (WAT) Brij Maharaj observes:

WAT had developed as an integrated neighbourhood since the turn of the century. The rise of racial politics since the 1930's curbed the organic development of a thriving, integrated community. Although whites were initially in the majority, by the end of the 1980's the WAT reflected the ethnic vibrancy of the 'rainbow nation'. However, neither the central nor the local state recognised or supported the non-racial character of the area, and attempts were made to use slum clearance laws, the Group Areas Act and urban redevelopment plans to destroy the area. (Maharaj 1999:265)
Hassim's novel shows the extent to which there was integration as well as separation in the socio-cultural economy of the city in the heyday of apartheid.

"Epic Proportions"

Firstly, The Lotus People gives us the image of Durban as the site of the larger history of Indian indentured history. It chronicles the story of a single family, arriving from India around the 1880's, but it is a story set against a larger communal backdrop. The family's history in South Africa spans a hundred years but began centuries before in India. Isabel Hofmeyr rightly draws attention to the novel's "epic proportions":

The novel’s epic reach is announced on the opening page which starts in 325 BCE with the Pathan warrior class in northwest India. And, it is indeed an exhilarating experience to read a South African novel that starts in this way... The dagger is a repository of legend, memory and wealth. It is not static, but is made and remade as it circulates. Like all traditions, it can only gain value and meaning, because it travels and changes. (Hofmeyr 2003)

Beginning with a small-scale hawking business the grandfather, Yahya Ali Suleiman, faces many difficulties in the land of his adoption. Hassim balances generational continuity and difference by telling of the ancestry and life of the grand old patriarch as well as that of his son, Dara and of the grandsons, Sam and Jake, as each responds to the peculiar times and circumstances in which each lived. In spite of many handicaps the family manage to set up large emporiums in the Grey Street complex. While Sam still manages a successful business career, Jake is the brooding, angry young man, choosing a far more defiant and aggressive lifestyle than that of his sombre grandfather and father, and it is not surprising that he is a secret political activist with the African National Congress (ANC) that was forced underground. The young men, Sam and Jake, as they grow up, hover on the edge of the gangster groups in their neighbourhood. The Pathan dagger is indeed passed on from generation to generation in
different forms.

The strong relationship between this Muslim family and a Gujerati Hindu family, the Narans - a unique relationship that spans a century - is evoked:

When they parted, neither was aware that the foundation of two great dynasties had been put in place, over a simple embrace. The Gujerati, whose cardinal rule governing any business transaction was to give nothing for nothing, had made a monumental exception. The Pathan who believed in taking possession of what he considered was his by violence, if necessary, had humbled himself against what was tantamount to a tribal conviction. A bond had been forged between two families, one that would outlast both their families and extend into the next century. (Hassim 2002)

Liberation Lorries

The next layer in The Lotus People is the dominant political narrative for which Durban's Grey Street is well known. It is as if the very pavements speak, telling of tales that they have silently witnessed, resounding with the rousing speeches of some of Durban's greatest freedom fighters, Mahatma Gandhi no less. The streets are witnesses of the familiar historical "threshold moments" in Durban's history, events such as the 1949 Riots (Hassim was 12 years old at the time), the Defiance Campaigns of the 1950's, and the Mass Democratic Movement (MDM) activities of the 1980's. In Footprints in Grey Street, a compilation of vignettes on "comrades" who lived in the Grey Street area, Phyllis Naidoo observes that "Grey Street carried our most visual protests; closed shops during hartal [strikes/protest] spoke volumes for their contribution to the Struggle" (Naidoo 2002:13).
The story of the Casbah as the centre of the collective anti-apartheid struggles of the 50's and 60's, with liberation lorries trundling through its streets carrying aloft heroes and heroines - images we are familiar with through our reading of this history (see Goonam 1990) - is well-known to Hassim, who lived in Cross Street during this period, an area he describes as his "tramping ground" [Interview with Sechurran]. The present Nicol Square Parkade was then "Red Square", the scene of heightened political activity. I C Meer in his autobiography, A Fortunate Man, remembers: "Our flat overlooked Nicol Square, which would become famous as the 'Red Square' of so many historic meetings and events…and which would become the Hyde Park of the city" (Meer, IC 2002:21-22).

In Hassim's book, we see the fictional characters coming into contact with historical figures who were very much part of the political and social scene at the time and presenting their encounters in the form of testimony or memory. The characters listen with rapt attention to the rousing speeches of Dr Yusuf Dadoo, Dr Monty Naicker, and Dr K Goonam (to whom the book is dedicated). Hassim himself listened to these "peoples' heroes" (Leader reporter 2001), and records that he "followed people like Dr Kesavaloo Goonam around" (Interview with Govender 2002). With the interaction of real life characters with fictional ones, and all inhabiting at once a fictionalised framework, Hassim suspends disbelief and provides truth from multiple viewpoints. While recent autobiographies (for example, Coolie Doctor, or A Fortunate Man) recount parts of a similar history, Hassim achieves a tour de force by manipulating different genres with ease.

"The Casbah is Another World - Another Country"

Hassim also presents the Grey Street complex as a bustling centre of commerce and trade, of leisure and sport, among other activities. Maharaj points out that the term “Casbah” normally refers to the "exotic market places of North Africa and the Middle East" and has been used here to refer to the Warwick Avenue Triangle [Maharaj 1999:250]. Hassim shows how ‘India’ was translated, with Grey Street becoming ‘A Little India’.
In the late forties Grey Street, and the roads bisecting it, were a miniature replica of a major city in India. Rows of neat double-storied buildings, consisting of stores on the ground floor and residential flats above, stretched from one end of the road to the other. Occasionally, in between the colonial styled structures, was the odd cottage with mock Grecian columns and sash windows. The Casbah, as it was often referred to, was inhabited almost exclusively by Indians, with a fair sprinkling of Coloureds. It was owned and developed in its entirety, and from its inception almost a hundred years before, by Indians who had automatically settled within its confines before spreading out into the suburbs. It was a vibrant and energetic community that was representative of the second and third generations of the early settlers. (Hassim 2002:165-166)

The Casbah was the hub to which people converged, offering a range of activities and experiences, very much like the present-day shopping malls. Ansuyah Singh, in her novel, Behold the Earth Mourns, depicts a city of an earlier period. She describes how Durban had expanded from its small beginnings: “From this sleepy colonial town Durban had grown like an enormous lazy octopus washed out of the sea bed of the temperamental green valleys and hills northwards, westwards and southwards” (Singh 1960:2).

Hassim paints lively word-murals of the Casbah:

The Casbah on a Saturday morning was like no city anywhere on earth. The streets and pavements were clean, the shop windows freshly washed and glittering, the shoppers dressed in festive gear and wearing anything from the sari to the Hawaiian sarong. Old men in turbans and long shirts shuffled alongside the younger generation in jeans and colourful T-shirts.

It was a day reserved exclusively for pleasure. It seemed to provide a catharsis for body and
soul and primed the spirit for the week ahead.

They came from everywhere, from the suburbs and the country towns, from distant villages and tiny hamlets; White, black, brown and all shades in between smiled at perfect strangers and strolled on the pavements with gay abandon, some looking for bargains, a large number simply out to enjoy the day and meet friends and relatives before moving on to restaurants and bioscopes.

Each street served a specific function. The eastern end of Victoria Street was Theatre-Land, the western half reserved mainly for the markets and grocery stores. Grey Street, from the racecourse to the West End Hotel in Pine Street was the clothes-horse paradise, offering an array of the most recent fashion trends from virtually every major centre in the world, the garments carefully copied and faultlessly reproduced in local sweat shops and factories. Queen Street was a street of barbers on the one side and hardware and timber merchants on the other. Pine Street housed the best family owned tailor shop in the world; Prince Edwards Street the neatest sari houses and craftsmen jewellers. In between and at every corner was the inevitable tea-room, serving the best in chilli-bites and confectionery.

The numbers rackets, or Fah Fee as it was called, was played by nearly everyone who could spare a tickey or more and provided a lucrative source of income for the street-wise operators, which was supplemented by the sale of black-market cinema tickets, always in short supply and available for sharp-eyed operators who had cornered the market. They were bought and sold with a cheerful smile and a gambler's abandon. It was simply a part of life in the Casbah. (Hassim 2002:102-103)
Hassim is all too aware of the Casbah as an amazing site of transculturality, of cultures clashing and coalescing in a pluri-ethnic or multicultural social space. We see differences between cultures and differences within culture, as periphery and centre confront each other and mingle, defying the dualistic and oppositional thinking of then dominant apartheid society. "Unsurprisingly," as Hofmeyr points out, "the Casbah is a site of a distinctive cosmopolitanism that includes Rabindranath Tagore, Charlie Parker, and Beethoven" (Hofmeyr 2003).

Hassim points to some of the inescapable and now well-known landmarks of the area:

At the corner of Grey and Queen Streets, occupying almost half a block, was the magnificent and architecturally famous Jumma Mosque, with its minarets and many domes. The largest of its kind in the Southern Hemisphere, it was a natural landmark for both the local residents and the out of town visitors. Adjoining the mosque, fronting onto the Cathedral Road and directly opposite the historic Emmanuel Cathedral, were a row of cottages that had been consolidated into a large unit that served as a madness for Muslim children. (Hassim 2002:166)

He also insists that the Casbah was a politically-conscious zone. He writes of a politics that was understandably ubiquitous, dominating discussion at every gathering, including sporting and social events:

And life in the Casbah was about politics too. Children were weaned on it, as children elsewhere were weaned on mother’s milk. It was the logical outcome of the policies of repression, the common denominator around which their lives revolved. Spectators watched sport and simultaneously talked politics, diners enjoyed their meals and discussed the latest developments, young couples impressed each other with their awareness and the depth of their knowledge, and street sweepers picked up pamphlets and debated the merits of protest as a force for peaceful change. There was no other area of under one square mile that could equal it for the intensity of its emotions and its pursuit of justice. (103)
As suggested earlier, it is not surprising that place and struggle have become synonymous in South African history. We see this in the arch example of Soweto, and all that the name and place conjures up and personifies in our collective consciousness in South Africa. This is also true of Chatsworth. As Ashwin Desai asserts in The Poors of Chatsworth (2001), Chatsworth is both a "place" and a "struggle". The agency that the oppressed from particular places display shows that “localities are not submissive recipients of the products of external social forces. Rather as contested arenas of everyday life in class societies, localities possess an 'endogenous' or a 'proactive' capacity for social change" (Chouinard and Fincher 1987:350 in Maharaj 1996:63).

Hassim shows Durban's Casbah then as a multi-dimensional site, reflecting not only the macro-history of Indian indenture, the mainly passenger Indian privilege and entrepreneurship, the Indian market and proletariat activity, political resistance and struggle with marches and liberation activity the order of the day, but also as a site that is home to a range of colourful people such as socialites, activists, sportsmen, actors and gangsters.

The Crimson League

Indeed, the Casbah, with its plethora of streets, has a dark, liminal side. Hassim takes us to the subterranean jungle of gangsters and tsotsis, drawing attention to a local topography that has been hitherto occluded and repressed in our writing, our consciousness, and in our imaging of the city of Durban. This is one of those “blanked?out areas" of our identity, to use Jacob's phrase cited earlier. In The Lotus People the Casbah is a theatre of wheeling and dealing, gambling, Fah Fee, drug dealers, pawnbrokers, loan sharks, ‘uplung’ (hot money), shebeens, blackmail and extortion. Hassim describes the colourful goings-on in the personal fiefdoms demarcated by the different gangs, among them the notorious Crimson League, the crime kings
of the Casbah, the Victorians and the Dutchenes. These gangs, beginning as vigilante groups, comprising Indian and Coloured and a few African youth, were determined to deal with extortionists and unscrupulous businessmen that plagued the area.

Enduring racial slurs such as ‘coolie’ or ‘curry guts’, seeing their families traumatised by the iniquitous Groups Areas Act, and other unjust laws, the young gangsters are forced to develop tough mindedness. They remind us that their heroes and heroines were not Al Capone and Dilinger, as we might have assumed, but icons of the political landscape such as Dr Goonam, Dr Dadoo, Dr Monty Naicker, Zainab Asvat, M D Naidoo and Fatima Meer. Drawing inspiration from a range of diverse sources, including scraps of poetry recalled from their school days, they march forward recklessly, “one equal temper of heroic hearts”, engaged in some noble work “not unbecoming men that strove with gods” (Hassim 2002: 500). Politics plays a major role in the lives of the gangsters, as they intermingle with other strata of society. This aspect of their lives is not often known or recorded, and Hassim brings this strand of our socio-cultural history to the fore and emphasises that their socially transgressive behaviour must be condoned in the context of ‘struggle politics’. Phyllis Naidoo corroborates the view that the gangs, such as the Crimson League, were politically conscious. She tells of the story of Daddy Naidoo, a member of the League, who donated generously to political prisoners, and she concludes her vignette on him with the words: "Thank you Daddy and the Crimson League who made their contribution to the struggle" (Naidoo 2002: 233).

Hassim’s book thus resonates well with other writings in the ‘gang’ genre. Prabashini Moodley, in her book, The Heart Knows no Colour (2003), also alludes to the criminal underworld of Durban, depicting an earlier time, at the turn of the past century. Other books which try to understand gangsters from the inside are Peter Carey's The True History of the Kelly Gang (2000), the documentary/novel by Paulo Lins, The City of God, now made into a successful film directed by Fernando Meirelles, Herbert Ashbury's The Gangs of New York (2000), Ashbury’s more recent The Gangs of Chicago - An Informal History of the Chicago Underworld (2003), and Ashwin Desai’s The Poors of Chatsworth (2001), where he writes of the thriving gangs in Chatsworth from the mid-1970's. Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel Prize winner for Literature from Egypt, drawing on his intimate knowledge of the back streets of Cairo, in his novel, Children of the Alley (2001), captures the inner city life of a Cairo neighbourhood, its crime kings and avengers.
It is not surprising that in a society that denies one’s humanity a streetwise macho culture becomes an important way of surviving and asserting one’s identity. Hassim’s novel paints a vivid picture of a “brotherbond” in these back streets, where friends and comrades would lay down their lives for one another. The diverse alliances are epitomised by the friendships of young men (such as Jake, Sam, Nithin, Karan and Vusi) who sidestep the bigotry of race, class, caste, and religious differences. Away from the hostile white West Street and its environs, these are kings of their underworld where they sashay as they please, a natural "symphony in motion" (Hassim 2002: 300, 536). For the gangsters, harried by the police, it is a matter of sheer survival that they should be familiar with their separate maze of streets: “When you know your way around the cops would not find you”. It provides a haven from the surveillance of the apartheid police, offering innumerable safe micro-spaces for those in the know:

The Casbah is another world... Another country. When you know your way around an army of cops wouldn't find you. You could disappear for weeks, move around freely. And don't ever think this is the only such place. You could lose yourself just as easily in the Dutchene or May Street or in any dozen other mini Casbahs. (Hassim 2002:191-192)

It is clear that the Casbah provides sanctuary, as apartness, ironically, undercuts apartheid. The Casbah, by its very nature is, at once, an alternative centre and a borderland. This is similar to the sanctuary that District Six provided for all its inhabitants, as Rive reminds us:

You know, it's a funny thing, but it's only in the District that I feel safe. District Six is like an island, if you follow me, an island in a sea of apartheid. The whole of District Six is one big apartheid, so we can't see it. We only see it when...we leave the District, when we leave our island and go to Cape Town or to Sea Point or come here to Kalk Bay. Then we see apartheid... When the white man comes into the District with his notices he is a stranger, and when we come out of the District he makes us realise that we are strangers. (Rive 1986: 95-96)
The gangsters and their comrades in Durban’s Casbah, as depicted in The Lotus People, come to the realisation, learnt in the “University of the Street” (Hassim 2002: 376), that the thuggery of apartheid can only be met with the thuggery of the street. “The only okes that don’t freeze when you talk about the Special Branch are the thugs and the hustlers” (428). It is the “gangster state” of apartheid that prompts and creates the violence of opposition.

Where others might pursue a sober trail, looking for stories of identities or of resistance in well-worn places, Hassim breaks new ground, taking us to a surprising and unexpected place, where different varieties of subversive behaviour against institutional power are spawned and nurtured. He writes of people who dared to take on the burden of history in their own way, on their own terms. The gangsters are not shadowy, ethereal beings; they speak with authority, asserting their individuality and identity in a society that otherwise tries to occlude and deny them.

Interestingly, the history of the gangs is presented as part of the history of indenture and colonialism, of apartheid and resistance to apartheid. Hassim gives voice to a suppressed, well-known part of the history of the Casbah. The mainstream narrative of history is interspersed with the grassroots and marginal, as varieties of subversive and alternative imaginations exist at different levels and spaces. The power and hegemony of the macro liberation narrative is juxtaposed and tempered by the diffused, low level struggle.

Hassim’s mission, it would seem, is about perspective – what we see is related to where we are looking from. With a bourgeois sensibility and decorum one is inclined to view the gangsters as the flotsam and jetsam of society. But Hassim provides an interesting angle to the gangster groups by highlighting their political activities, a dimension that is not often known or understood. In presenting a narrative from within rather than from a detached perspective,
Hassim questions the definition of ‘gangster’, suggesting that the real ‘thugs’ are in the government: "What these thugs in government are doing is beyond belief, they’re tearing decent people to ribbons with those killer dogs of theirs, they're using their sjamboks to scar children for life and their elaborate laboratories are workshops of the devil!" (539). Similarly, in her biography of Andrew Zondo, Fatima Meer (1998) argues eloquently against any reductiveness about the understandings of ‘terrorist’, given that our usual definitions come from dominant moral and normative positionings. In both works the authors write against the grain of accepted and usual representations, where both ‘gangster’ and ‘terrorist’ are seen as irredeemable categories.

The novel provides an interesting study in the formation of masculinities in a racially divided society. We appreciate how oppressed black men create ‘psychic shelter’ in a hostile and alienating dominant culture, and how ‘home’ becomes that domain where the bruised self is restored, where the wounds inflicted by a menacing society are bandaged and tended. When one belongs to a gang the street becomes “a cocoon that’s safer than a mother’s womb” (Hassim 2002:224).

Hassim paints a complex picture of virile, street-savvy men, who still show a deference to the cultural practices of arranged marriages, negotiating their way through this; a sensitivity to the role of women, the extended family or ancestral history. It is understandable that the men are torn between the options of violence and of non-violence as responses to their oppressive condition. The noble principle of Gandhi’s ahimsa is ever before them, but the reality of their existence forces them into another direction. There is protracted ambivalence and continual wrangling over the adoption of Passive Resistance or the use of violence, given the intractable nature of the apartheid regime. It is not for nothing that the two kingpins from the Suleiman family, Jake and Sam, constantly hark back to their luminous ancestry, of their being of the lineage of the mighty Pathans, the legendary warriors who dared challenge even the mighty Moghul overlords on the Indian sub-continent.
Women and the Casbah

Agency, in The Lotus People, is not confined to men, and we are provided with animated portrayals of women. We have those who refused to capitulate to the imposed victimhood of apartheid at a formal, public level - women such as Dr Goonam, Fatima Meer, Fatima Asvat, Fatima Seedat, Amina Cachalia, among others. Hassim shows them making speeches to groups of women and men either on the streets and public spaces, or in homes, and galvanising widespread participation in the Passive Resistance movement. We also have those who ruled largely in the inner domestic space. Many of these women are also strong and resilient, supporting their men in their refusal to cower to the indignities of apartheid society and in their resolve to fight oppression. As the men are quick to point out, the women are "the real fighters, they do not pussyfoot around" (454).

The Lotus People - A Hybrid Text

It is clear from the foregoing that The Lotus People is a multi-voiced, hybrid text, both in content and form. By moving away from foregrounding any one narrative, by intertwining the macro-historical narrative with other narratives, The Lotus People Paul Sharrad has observed that "one key marker of post-colonial literature is that it offers a more cogent description of Empire by de-scribing it – by allowing the unspeakable a space in which to speak, uncovering gaps in discourse and revealing hidden dialogue and intercourse" (Sharrad 1994: 216). re-defines what a ‘historical’ text is.

In Hassim's novel we see a merging of history not just from the inside but from the underside. There is a deft interweaving of past and present, fiction and history, testimony and memory. Hassim presents eyewitness accounts of historical happenings, drawing from his own personal experiences, but transposing them into the lives of his fictional characters. There is surprise and suspense woven into predictable occurrences under apartheid.
There are interwoven narratives, and this makes the relationship between truth and art in the novel a fascinating one. Hassim achieves a singular sleight of hand by his juxtaposition - indeed interplay and convergence - of high and low culture, Red Square mass political rallies and cloistered backyard gatherings or barbershop meetings, formal speech-making and street slang and ghetto patois. Through Hassim's ingenious and delicate balancing act, we are reminded that there are multiple models of resistance, overlapping and permeable genres of struggle. Although earlier I used the metaphor of the palimpsest, I would like to suggest that Hassim shows how the different layers were actually in interaction with each other. Hassim is clearly a post-colonial writer, questioning, and intuitively challenging the hegemonic forces that shape his own life, language and literary production, and might be compared with writers, such as Caryl Philips, who also push the boundaries of writing (see Sharrad 1994:215).

By deploying a loose literary form (rather than the documentary mode of the TRC), Hassim is able to achieve multiple effects through his writing, juxtaposing different ways of narrating the past. Ronit Fainman-Frenkel argues, in reference to writings such as Achmat Dangor's Bitter Fruit, Farida Karodia's Other Secrets and Beverley Naidoo's Out of Bounds, that the emergence of other post-apartheid narratives has complemented the ‘findings’ of the TRC. Using the literary mode, a writer, she points out, is able to explore both the silences of apartheid and that of the TRC. "In examining literature as a form of cultural history", she investigates how selected "literary texts undermine culturally constructed oppositions that establish difference and sameness" (Fainman-Frenkel 2003: 2). This is true of Hassim's writing that noted, incidentally, that writing the book was his "personal TRC".

There is no domineering authorial voice - the narrative seems to narrate itself, with the novel characterised by an ubiquity of narratives, each piled on the other. There is a preponderance of dialogue – which gives voice to the marginalised, with much of the dialogue between the gangsters and other marginalised characters. The street language that they inevitably use, the textual freedom rather than restraint that Hassim deploys, the use of intertextuality, with different genres juxtaposed shows an interesting pastiche of literary-historical reconstruction. His approach is similar to Gayathri Spivak's where she states that she struggles to find a position within history from which to speak critically about it, as she "circles her own subjectivity and positionality" (see Sharrad 1994: 215). Hassim gives us a new understanding of 'history',
where textuality is neither an objectified historical phenomenon ‘back there’ nor a “univocal, uninterrupted monologic drone”, to use critical reflections from another postcolonial context (see McNaughton 1994:218).

There is also hybridity, indeed plurality, in the way identity and difference is presented. At a time when questions of Indian identity are bandied about, with some rather essentialist discourses of “Indianness” (see Mesthrie-Dhupelia 2000), Hassim’s work is a sobering reminder of the varieties of self-fashioning that might occur. Gillian Whitlock writes that we are at a new autobiographical moment, “at a conjuncture where there is intense self-consciousness, collectively and individually, about subjectivity and identity in the wake of colonialism” (2000: 173). However, Hassim shows that Indian identity is layered, differentiated and complex. There are varieties of “Indianness” in “The Imperial Ghetto”, a phrase used by Omar Badsha to describe the Casbah. He cuts through all the rhetoric of ethnocentric identity and shows how identities are formed in a welter of diverse experiences, and that “community” is not to be understood in narrow one-dimensional terms. Indeed, in The Lotus People, we see the "cosmopolitanisms that can be created at the cross-roads of contemporary South Africa" (Hofmeyr 2003).

This complexity is to be embraced and celebrated, and attempts to essentialise ‘Indian’ identity, to assert an ‘authentic’ identity in the present time should be seen more circumspectly. Reflecting on this in relation to Coloured identity, Zoe Wicomb observes: “The contradiction of forging an ‘authentic’ culture …through North American cultural conventions and musical forms seemed to escape the mainly Coloured audiences enraptured by the process of being constructed in the “tepid amniotic fluid of pastiche” (Wicomb 1998: 95).

In Hassim’s novel, we do not get an exoticised reading of the past nor is there an attempt to exoticise cultural difference. Written in its own distinctive voice, The Lotus People is a nuanced and intricately textured South African story, beyond the narrow narratives of racialisation that
one might expect. In this respect Bill Freund makes a general point: “There is frequently a sentimental association of the idea of community with homogeneity and total, organic harmony…Community relations invariably embrace (but perhaps to the outsider, mask) conflict and inequality” (Freund 1995: 75). Hassim, in eschewing homogeneity at every turn, implicitly understands this.

Hassim's portrayal of the Casbah is in stark contrast to the one rendered in Barbara Trapido’s Frankie and Stankie, where Grey Street is described from a distance and fleetingly, a place one passes through:

The flash off-duty clothes that blacks wear can be bought on tick in the Indian-owned emporiums like Moosa's at the upper end of downtown Durban where the legless beggars hang out. That's the end furthest from the beachfront, so to get to the white department stores, or to the beach, you have to pass through this commercial area, where Indians ply their trade from pretty, rickety old buildings with New Orleans-style balconies and shady covered walks. The walkways have baskets full of brass bangles and cheap sandals and bales of sari cloth that spill out on to the pavements. (Trapido 2003:82)

Trapido is aware that Indians are seen as the ‘Other’:

...white Durbanites call all male Indians Sammy and all female Indians Mary - or sometimes, to be pejorative, it'll be koelie-Mary. So they'll say to the Indian fruit vendor, 'Have you got a nice watermelon for me today, Sammy?' - just as if Sammy was his name. Or they'll say, 'Who does that koelie-Mary think she is - sitting on the bench there like Lady Muck on Toast?' That's if they see an Indian woman sitting on a park bench, just like a white person, instead of squatting on her haunches as Indians usually do. (73-74)
Trapido's characters circulate in a different (English) Durban, a world that includes beach parties, trips to the "classy shops in West Street" (Trapido 2003:84) such as Payne Brothers, Greenacre's, John Orr's and Stuttafords or the "penny-bazaars" (84) such as the Hub and the Bon Marché, with only the occasional visit to the Durban Indian Market. A fuller comparative study of these two novels would show the contrasting images of Durban that they project, the silences of the one reversed in the other.

With its continuities and discontinuities in the context of the larger city, the Casbah in The Lotus People is home, an inner sanctum, a self-contained enclosure. Hassim's portrayal evokes the loss that was endured as the idyllic (and at times harrowing) Casbah of Hassim's former years could not be sustained. It resonates with Rive's description of District Six when it was demolished and recreated on the Cape Flats (interestingly, District Six was also referred to as The Casbah):

District Six has a soul. Its centre held together till it was torn apart. Stained and tarnished as it was, it had a soul that held together. The new matchbox conglomerates on the desolate Cape Flats have no soul. The houses were soulless units piled together to form a disparate community that lacked cohesion. (Rive 1986: 127)

"A Refusal of Amnesia"

Remembering, and re-membering (to use Toni Morrison's formulation), is important in the present context in South Africa. The present climate in South Africa has been described as a cusp time, in which narratives of apartheid history are increasingly being produced, and memory itself is a site of struggle. Are these elegies of the past merely a valiant attempt to counter historical amnesia?
Hassim points out in an interview: "I wanted to record a past I was convinced had disappeared forever". Writing The Lotus People was regarded by him as "part of his cleansing process, his 'personal TRC' ". He does write from a sense of loss, and observes: "Durban and the Casbah area had a kind of romance and bittersweet lifestyle during the 1950's and 60's, which, despite the apartheid laws - or perhaps because of them - lives on only in the minds of those who inhabited it at the time" (Interview with Govender, 2002).

This sentiment and intention is similar to Ronnie Govender's purpose in his collection of short stories, At The Edge - Stories Cato Manor, and the depiction of Magazine Barracks by Pushpam Murugan in her book, The Lotus Blooms on the Eastern Vlei (1997), where in Durban of another time is being recalled, thereby making these books important socio-cultural documents of the city. All these writers are writing from alienation of some sort, from a "kind of void" (Papastergiadis 1994: 87, in Jacobs 1998), and are resisting erasure, even of memory; they are located now in a different part of the city, in a landscape that does not yield the same memories as their previous locations. They are writing a world, mapping a territory that no longer exists as they knew it. In an interview with Niren Tolsi, Hassim states that the Casbah is "still vibrant, but the romance has gone" (Daily News October 2002:4). Where writers might ruminate on home and homeland in the global context of leaving one continent to another, writers such as Hassim and Govender show the impact of the smaller diaspora in the space of a local apartheid city as, with increasing desegregation, new homes are set up in different parts of the city and the urban landscape is dramatically changing (for general discussion see Brah 1996). from

Has Hassim mythologised the Casbah of 50’s and 60’s? Is identity being constructed within a "politics of nostalgia" that sentimentalises the loss (as Wicomb asks of current descriptions of District Six, obviously referring to Rive's portrayals, it would seem to me). Inevitably, there is nostalgia. There is wistfulness when one of the characters in The Lotus People muses:

The street's changing...Look around you. There was a time you could spot half a dozen scotens with one sweep of your eyes. Not anymore. And the cinemas - the Vic, the Royal, the Avalon -
all no more than a memory. What happened to Dhanjees Fruiterers, Victoria Furniture Mart, Kapitans, that noisy Royal Tinsmith Company… hell buddy, I could go on forever. (Hassim 2001:525)

And as Rive writes: "I remember those who used to live in District Six, those who lived in Caledon Street and Clifton Hill and busy Hanover Street. There are those of us who still remember the ripe, warm days. Some of us still romanticise and regret when our eyes travel beyond the dead bricks and split treetrunks and wind-tossed sand" (Rive 1986:1).

But Breyten Breytenbach's observation in Dog Heart is worth noting here: “Just as you cannot survive without dreams, you cannot move on without memory of where you come from, even if that journey is fictitious" (1998:17). And Katherine C Hill-Miller, in writing about Virginia Woolf's literary landscapes, shows how the "connection to a place is an inescapable fact of the human condition, and places are therefore an element or theme in the work of every novelist who ever picked up a pen…the idea of place acts as a fulcrum for the creative imagination. A place is the element that anchors memory" (Hill-Miller 2001:3). The material [place] is important for itself and for the way it prompts a writer towards the transcendent.

Rive recalls and reconstructs the past for the purpose of trenchant critique of the dominant historical narrative, pointing to the morally indefensible demolition of District Six: "Everyone in the District died a little when it was pulled down. Many died spiritually and emotionally. …to part is to die a little. We all died a little when we parted from the District…they have taken your past away…and the ghosts of the past swirled around me in the growing dust" (Rive 1986:126,127). Accordingly, Rive's conjuring up an imagined life lived in the past is perfectly understandable, given such wanton and grievous destruction by the apartheid state.
Whether we are speaking of Durban's or District Six's Casbah, or Soweto, or Sophiatown, we are aware of the "loaded signifiers" (the term is Wicomb's, 1998: 95) that these places all are in our history, of their importance in our collective psyche, and the way literature in South Africa has both shaped and reflected this. They become "landscapes of memory" or "landscapes of the mind", as "the symbolic representation of landscapes in literature is primarily directed by the way the land is perceived, within the frame of the social imaginary of that specific place" (Linguanti 1998:771).

Developing a Literary Heritage

It is a truism to assert that such activity of reconstruction is far from innocent. We have archives that are attempting to reconstruct the past in different ways, with competing discourses and approaches as to how our cultural heritage should now be marketed, and this is linked to the many different genres of tourism evident at the moment in South Africa.

There is, for example, mainstream tourism, marked by a multicultural planning discourse, where there is an attempt to celebrate expressions of urban cultural diversity. Robins points out that here the entrenched racialised inequality of the past is reclothed: "In the post-apartheid era it would appear that our multiculturalism and the celebration of the cultural diversity of the 'rainbow nation' have replaced, and at the same time reproduced...tribal discourses" (Robins 2000:416). We see a depoliticised multiculturalism at work, similar to the ethnological thinking of apartheid ideologues. The example cited in this regard is of the Cape Malay Quarter, packaged as a place of exotic spice (see Robins 2002).

The other genre is ‘alternative tourism’ where, for example, tours to townships are arranged. It is sometimes criticised for presenting township life as detached exotica, and even when
"progressive", of glossing over the inequalities of township life.[3] More radical political tourism includes visits to sites of resistance, and as Robins points out, "[i]nstead of participating in the field of national[ist] production, the tour operators appeared to suggest that the very idea of the 'new nation' was problematic given the ongoing problems of poverty and social transformation" (Robins 2000: 420). Referring to the District Six Museum, Robins argues that it is a "politically significant site of remembrance on the tourist's itinerary" as it draws attention to "the mundane banality of apartheid's devastating Groups Areas removals" (Robins 2002: 409). -This is an important attempt to represent and render the past in new and innovative ways.

These projects are especially important given the dominant images of our present-day cities. Looking at today's great world cities one urban commentator, Mike Davies, has written:

"Today's upscale, pseudo-public spaces - sumptuary malls, office centres, culture acropolises, and so on - are full of invisible signs warning off the underclass 'Other'. Although architectural cities are usually oblivious to how the built environment contributes to segregation, pariah groups …read the meaning immediately. (In Cupers and Miessen 2002:2)"

Indeed, the shopping malls have become the new temples of the modern age; they may be described also as the epitaphs of a past and forgotten era, buried, decaying and hidden from view. And as two urban architects [from Berlin] recently have written: "The mall makes the real city simply redundant: reality has never appeared to be more boring and dirty. Reality has simply been abandoned by reality, the real world is over" (Cupers and Miessen 2002: 14). This is indeed true, as the hyperreal becomes the norm in the modern city.

The modern city seems to distinguish between what and who is in and acceptable and what or who is out and unacceptable. If the signs all over is that the 'underclass Other' of the present is
to be kept at bay from the city, this is true of the life of the "underclass Other" of the past even more so, as a particular tourist city is being invented. We need to see the present-day modern city as sometimes opposed to the "...traditional sense of place, as defined by the identity, relations and history of its inhabitants" (Cupers and Miessen 2002: 15). The messages we seem to get from the modern city is that some aspects of the past are long dead, and we have selective aspects of the past remembered.

A book such as The Lotus People forces us to read the city (and its history) in the context of the imagined nation in alternative ways, forces us to go to those places that have been occluded from the dominant imaginary, or the "symbolic economy" of the city (see Zukin 1995 for general discussion). It implicitly challenges narrow and exclusionary conceptions of nation. Developing literary heritage projects contributes to a critical understanding of our past and present as we find the intersections between literary writings related to place and space.

The Lotus People gives the story mainly of Indians in Durban. This division is an inevitable feature of South African literary writings in general given the apartheid-city experience that characterises South Africa. The various literary writings related to the city of Durban depict space and place from different vantage points. The corpus of writings shows the multi-faceted character of the city, both of the present as well as the past, the different, diverse and even separate histories that it embodies as well as the historical moments (and places) of overlap, the changing character of the city through the past century, and the way its past is reflected in its present dynamics.

Working in an inter-disciplinary and comparative way in our study of the literary heritage of the city we would promote a fuller and more critical understanding of how the city is experienced, imaged and marketed now. For example, the aims of the new historical geography has been "to examine the connection between the spatial, social and racial divisions within South African society" (Maharaj 1994:1; Maharaj 1999:249), and engagement with this inter-disciplinary area
of study would enhance our engagement with the literary heritage of the city. Much of our literary writings depict and reflect social relations, and we are reminded by urban geographers, such as Maharaj, that “social relations exist in space; even as society shapes space, space shapes society” (in Maharaj 1994:1).

There are interesting possibilities for internal comparative study revolving around literature and literary heritage, place and historical moment. How do we read Coloured, African, White and Indian writings on the city - written from living in different circuits of experience - intertextually, for silences and separateness? How do we read them for points of intersection and interaction? When I read Barbara Trapido’s Frankie and Stankie, for example, I find I am reading it against The Lotus People Poors of Chatsworth, against Mafika Pascal Gwala’s poetry on Grey Street, and so on. against The

In her interesting novel, Kartography, set in Karachi of the 1980’s and 1990’s (but still showing the effects of Partition, and the creation of Bangladesh in 1971), Kamila Shamsie, suggests that maps of cities tend to order, they do not reflect the reality of the city. Maps "could only exist through their disdain for the reality of the city: the jumble, the illogic, the self-definition, the quicksilver of the place. As usual, the maps did nothing but irritate me" (2002:1310. Literary writings do capture something of the "quicksilver of the place", more than maps they reflect “the heartbeat of the place” (2002:180).

Conclusion: Borderline Writing - Back To The Future

Reading The Lotus People, I am haunted by the present – the changing character of the CBD [Central Business District], the many decaying and rusting remnants of a former history – and the need to tell of the present stories of innumerable feet etching out new footprints, new stories
of struggle and survival, intrigue and disenchantment, neglect and restoration, apathy and energy. How do we read the present city as a text, mindful of the layers it seems to conceal? How do we read the flight from the inner city to the suburbs, the neglect, the inner city slums, the remnant of some retail businesses, the mushrooming of new enterprises, new ventures? How do we read the past as depicted in The Lotus People with its images of racism against the present tendency towards xenophobia (see Sewchurran 2003; Machen 2001)?

Of Johannesburg, Tomlinson and others write:

The city is imagined almost like a declining industrial city in the United States: as obsolete, so deteriorated as to be beyond redemption, or as taken over by [or left behind for] Africans. It has become the "other" to the affluent northern suburbs and white, working class communities alike. From a white suburban perspective, Johannesburg, the symbol, has become the city left behind; Sandton is the new centre. The old Johannesburg exists in nostalgia; the new Johannesburg exists in absentia. (Tomlinson et al 2003: xiii)

The parallels with Durban are obvious. We realise that apartheid has not ended. We take a more sober view of the present city as we concede the persistence of the apartheid city. Officially we have urban desegregation but we see in a new guise the "socio-spatial continuities of the apartheid city" (Robins 2000:422).

Hassim’s rendering of Durban in The Lotus People is against the "mainstream media and tourist representations" of Durban that obscure "the legacy of racialised inequality" in order to promote "an imagined rainbow city and exotic African tourist destination" (Robins 2000: 423, writing of Cape Town). Durban is also a "space of social polarisation, ghettoization, and fortified shopping malls…” (422). We appreciate these contemporary images of the city more critically
when we read them against the city’s past histories. The Lotus People, as a bold new book dealing with a hidden past, makes me ask more questions about the present and the future. As Hassim writes: “If you don’t know where you come from how can you know where you are going!” (Hassim 2001:482).

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[2] I have interrogated the use of the term "Indian" in my larger work.

[3] Robins points out that we do see, however, the occasional unconventional township tour, such as that of Western Cape Action Tours, where former members of the uMkhonto we Sizwe, take tourists "across the historical divides" [in Robins 2000:420].