The Changing Dynamics of Social Class, Mobility and Housing in Black Johannesburg[1]

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Abstract

In contemporary public debates regarding the significance of social mobility, new cultures of consumption and the black middle class, the point is often made that Africans living in urban areas before the onset of constitutional democracy were a homogenous group lacking in significant forms of social differentiation. The continued side-lining of long histories of social differentiation among urban Africans today has the effect not only of indirectly overstating the role recent policies such as affirmative action has played in the emergence of the 'new' black middle class, but also in limiting the public understanding of the historically constructed, multiple and complex meanings that practices of consumption has had in urban African municipal locations. In this article, I argue for historically-sensitive and ethnographically-informed analyses of consumption practices that move beyond the stereotyping of the black middle class as 'conspicuous consumers'. Looking at the history of public housing in Soweto helps us understand that 'new' cultures of consumption among citizens is often rooted in everyday experiences as subjects residing in social spaces – former urban African municipal locations – that were defined and designed as spaces of consumption and not of production or income-generation. The arguments contained in this article build on insights derived from my reading of James Ferguson (2002) and Daniel Miller (1988), especially around challenging interpretations of the renovations of municipal-owned housing in Soweto as a form of conspicuous consumption.

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Introduction

The question of mobility and social class has perhaps not received enough attention in social science studies of southern Africa as it should have. The social theories that informed colonial-era sociological and anthropological analyses of society and culture have had the effect of, inter alia, fixing actors within circumscribed social, political and economic structures in which culture was treated as being fixed spatially and ecologically (Gupta & Ferguson 1992). Social scientists who took the categories of 'society', 'social structure', 'culture', 'tribe' and 'ethnic group' as starting point in their analyses tended to emphasise structure over flux, fixity over mobility and movement, patterned relations between kin and non-kin over chance meetings, and static roles and functions in a social and economic structure[2].

In contemporary South Africa the question of social mobility has also been placed on the agenda because of changes taking place in the social and class structure of society. With the onset of constitutional democracy and the greater incorporation of South Africa into global economic and cultural processes, we have witnessed for example the restructuring of classes at the same point at which class analyses have become unfashionable (Terreblanche 2003; Seekings & Nattrass 2000). Commentators now refer to the 'black elite' on the one hand and the 'black middle class' on the other,

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[2] There are important reasons for why the question of mobility has become an important theme in contemporary social science, least of which is the material changes brought about as the result of drastic changes in transportation systems and telecommunications technologies (Urry 2010). Recent work by urban scholars such as Abdou-Malique Simone, writing in the post-colonial era, can also be seen as a reaction against colonial-era analyses that sought to fix Africans (and others) within a series of social and economic structures and identities (Simone 2004). In his work then there is a focus on mobility and movement, on individual actors, and notions of identity that are characterised by negotiation, fluidity and contestation.

while 'white poverty' has again reared its head in public discourse while the 'urban underclass' has received less attention. Undoubtedly remaining relatively small numerically[3], the rise of the black elite and the black middle class has drastically altered the social structure of South African society and economy, and the way in which class is being talked about. In the public discourse more emphasis is placed on the ostentatious displays of wealth or conspicuous consumption by the black middle classes and elites than on growing inequality among Africans [4]. The point is often made that Africans living in urban areas before the onset of constitutional democracy were a static, homogenous group characterised by little internal social differentiation. Subsequent to the introduction of affirmative action and the transformation of the public service, the narrative goes, new avenues for upward social mobility opened up which has lead to growing inequality among the urban African population and the embrace of new cultures of consumption and practices of 'conspicuous consumption'. For strategic reasons, class differences that existed among urban Africans during apartheid were at the time underplayed by Africanist, liberal and Marxist academics alike. But today the fact that histories of social class differentiation among urban Africans is largely 'forgotten' has had the effect not only of indirectly overemphasizing the role of affirmative action and thus the state has played in the emergence of the 'new' black middle class, but also in limiting the public understanding of the historically constructed, multiple and complex meanings that practices of consumption has had in urban African municipal locations. In a global contemporary world in which it is said that identities are made through consumption rather than through production (Comaroff & Comaroff 2000), it has become too easy to 'read off' the meanings attached to practices of consumption and registers of social distinction without exploring these historically and ethnographically.

Soweto: From African Municipal Township to Suburb?

In the middle of December 2004 I attended, together with a few friends from the Sowetan neighbourhood in which I was residing, a ceremony in Thokoza

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[3] Cf http://www.sairr.org.za/sairr-today/news_item.2009-04-03.4114291811.
[4] See Ronge (2007); Bullard (2007); Sparks (2007); Newmarch (2006).

Park in Soweto. We had decided to attend this public event because there was to be a free concert during which some of the hottest and new local house acts were billed to perform. Moreover, events organised by the City was not really our cup of tea. But the event was significant because the City had decided, for the first time, to install Christmas lights and decorations in Old Potchefstroom Road (renamed the Chris Hani Road), the main arterial highway running from Main Reef Road through the heart of Soweto towards Potchefstroom. The purpose of the public event in the park, which is located adjacent to Old Potchefstroom Road, was to celebrate the public switching on of the lights at dusk for the first time. On stage a few officials spoke, and then the colourful Christmas lights which had been attached to the lamp poles on Old Potch Road were turned on, to much applause. And then we were swept away by the live music. In the days following that night, I came to appreciate the significance of the event as friends and neighbours who attended the ceremony explained it to me. As thirty year olds, they were acutely aware of how, historically, townships have been marginalised in relation to suburbs. Townships, they knew too well, were stigmatised places, spaces of poverty and crime, dusty streets and dirty children, and tiny, overcrowded 'matchbox' houses. That is why when you have the opportunity, you leave the township, because it is not a place to die in. The Christmas lights were significant, they said, because in some ways it signalled that which they already knew: Soweto has changed. As Hloni told me: 'With this, Soweto is now really becoming like a suburb'.

The turning on of the Christmas lights, a ceremony that in previous years were commonplace in the white suburbs, was then a celebration of the material changes that have led some Sowetan neighbourhoods to look much than suburbs than ever before. Such changes were not limit to infrastructure and material life: paved streets, upgraded public parks, etc. The City of Johannesburg no longer refers to Soweto as a 'township'. In policy documents and press statements, neighbourhoods in Soweto are no called 'suburbs'. This move gives voice to the City's vision of transforming Soweto into a thriving residential and economic hub of Johannesburg, and to overcome the historical opposition between 'township' and 'suburb' (in the process also increasing the market value of houses in Soweto). To some extent the City has been successful in this, but it has come after years of favourable treatment by the City, the political and bureaucratic leadership of

which is dominated by Sowetans. And this has happened to the detriment of other townships and informal settlements in Gauteng. It is evident to everyone that over the last decade, money has flown into Soweto like never before. Soweto is no longer a separate legal entity and now forms part of the larger Johannesburg Metropolitan Region. It is no longer treated by business and public authorities as a temporary labour camp for workers temporarily in the city 'naturally' belonging in some culturally defined 'homeland', even if Sowetans never fully bought into this framing (the dead were buried in the city, after all). But more than any other former African municipal township in Gauteng, Soweto has benefited from substantial household debt write-offs from the Johannesburg City, as was the case in the 1980s. Framed no longer by policy as a temporary African municipal township, but as consisting of a number of neighbourhoods forming part of the City of Johannesburg, Soweto has seen a rise in private and public investment[5].

Private business ventures have focused on the construction of new garages, restaurants and shopping centres in Protea, Baragwanath, Jabulani and recently the much feted Maponya Mall. At some point private consortiums were drawing up plans for a new R60 million upmarket townhouse 'lifestyle' complex to be built in Diepkloof Zone 3, complete with residential units and a shopping centre[6] while others wanted to develop a R500 million waterfront complex at Powerpark, Orlando[7]. Despite the recent increase in public and private investments, and the construction of new shopping malls, Soweto remains a place characterised by processes of extraction in addition to investment. Corporate South Africa regards the residents of urban townships as an important segment of their expanding consumer market, but corporate money that is reinvested in 'communities' rarely leaves the safety of the northern, richer suburbs. An example of the continued processes of extraction is the buying up and removal of mature indigenous trees, especially cycads, from now privately owned township properties by landscaping companies. Very few working class households can turn down cash offers of R5 000 for such trees. Many of the trees that were planted by the apartheid government on municipal residential stands

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[5] Cf. Thale (2002a); Madywabe (2004); Khupiso (2004); Thale (2002b).

[6] Cf. Chikanga (2004).

[7] Thale (2003); Mmope (2006).

now grace the gardens of newly developed townhouses or houses in the suburbs – at times, the gardens of the nouveau riche who grew up in Soweto.

In conjunction with these investments, two sectors of the Sowetan economy has benefitted from these material 'face-lifts' and changes in the perception concerning former African townships: tourism and property[8]. Newspaper reports also suggest that some estate agents believe a property boom is taking place[9]. The increase in house prices aside, commercial banks remain reluctant to finance home buyers in the older townships of Soweto, thus continuing their 'redlining practices' whereby they refuse to give home loans to prospective owners of houses located in so-called 'bad' areas or consumers with little formal credit histories[10]. Redlining practices by commercial banks effectively deny residents a possible source of income and a fixed asset that can be utilised as security against loans. And as former council-owned houses now have become economically valuable, over and above their social and spiritual importance, new struggles over properties have emerged. The transfer of ownership of township properties from the state to residents in the middle of the 1990s has been one of the causes of intra-family conflicts over houses and properties[11]. Many families in the middle class township of Protea Glen for example have defaulted on their bond payments and have met with evictions and the auctioning off of their houses. Some of the residents have mobilised themselves by joining some of the new social movements and numerous instances of members violently resisting eviction have been reported. At the same time, anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more ratepayers associations have been formed in Soweto[12].

Inequality is not new to Soweto, as I discuss in the following sections. In 1999, for example, one economist noted the surprisingly high

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[8] Cf. Van Rooyen (2004); Viljoen (2003).

[9] Cf. Piliso (2005); Robertson (2005); Van Rooyen (2004). See too, 'Three-bedroom Houses in Diepkloof Extension' which were valued at R300 000 in 2001 were reportedly selling for more than R1 million in 2005.

[10] Cf. Apps (2005).

[11] Rondganger and Aurelia (2005).

[12] Nkwanyane (2004) and Zungu (2004).

inequality within Soweto measured in terms of the Gini coefficient[13]. The roots of this inequality goes far back, but from the 1980s 'Era of Reform' the apartheid government actively sought to create a larger black middle class living in its urban municipal townships and started investing in such townships. This process intensified after the dismantling of apartheid, but has been an uneven process across cities and provinces. In the main it has been the educated and the skilled who has benefitted from the opening up of new employment opportunities in the services sectors of the labour market, boosted by an end to (formal) employment discrimination and the implementation of national labour and procurement policies such as Affirmative Action and Black Economic Empowerment. Moreover, the commodity boom period of the early 2000s has had a proportionally larger impact in urban areas than in rural areas. Many analysts agree that since the dismantling of some of the apartheid state policies and the post apartheid state's embrace of conservative macro-economic and fiscal policies, the economy has continued during the early 2000s on a path of relative 'jobless growth' despite the commodity boom period (Terreblanche 2003). For the growing underclass lacking in the sort of skills required by the growing sectors of the economy (finance, services, tourism), this has meant even greater levels of impoverishment and/or dependence on social security measures. A consequence of this has been a marked increase in income inequality between the new black middle class and the underclass within

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[13] A survey conducted by economist Piazza-Georgi (2002) in Soweto during 1999 – with a final sample of 908 households and 1 186 respondents – reported that the calculated Gini coefficient within Soweto is 51,3. While this measure of inequality suggests that inequality within Soweto is lower than the inequality in the society at large – which stands at 58,4 – it remains very high. Thus, out of 90 countries measured, only 14 countries have a higher Gini coefficient than Soweto. Moreover, Piazza-Georgi (2002:622) notes that 'the percentage share in expenditure of the top 10 per cent of the sample households is 40,3 per cent; this figure is again lower than that for South Africa as a whole (47,3 per cent) and leaves Soweto in exactly the same rank globally as its Gini coefficient, 15th of 90. South Africa as a whole is in fifth place with regard to its Gini coefficient, and in third place with regard to the share of the top 10 per cent of the population'.

former African municipal townships such as Soweto, even as middle class residents are relocating to the formerly white suburbs (Seekings & Nattrass 2000; Krige 2011). Thus we have seen the reported growth in the black middle class and the emergence of a category of rich black elites (the phrase 'Black Diamonds refer to market agencies' attempts to describe the consumer market of the new black middle class)[14]. All over urban South Africa it is reported that middle class residents of former urban African townships have left these townships and settled in formerly ('proclaimed') white suburbs. Such a 'flight' of the township middle class is evident also in Johannesburg, given the growth in townhouse complexes in the south and west of Johannesburg such as in Naturena, Mondeor and Ridgeway. Some newspaper reports and residents I interviewed suggest however that many residents who have left the township over the past decade are returning to buy property and live in Soweto (see Krige 2011; cf Van Rooyen 2005).

That inequality within Soweto is growing is evident to all residents, and it was an important theme in interviews and discussions with residents. When it comes to housing, for example, anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more of the new elites in the townships are buying up former municipal housing stock belonging to residents who can no longer afford municipal rates and services or who were evicted from their homes. This suggests that some council houses that were given to residents are now being concentrated in the hands of members of the new elite. The inequality is also evident in the growing support for local pro-poor social movements such as the Anti Privatisation Forum and the Soweto Electricity Crisis Committee that seeks to fight Johannesburg City's policy decisions to privatise and commodify some of the basic municipal services notably water and electricity provision[15]. These alarming trends notwithstanding, there is much

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[14] See the UCT Unilever Institute of Strategic Marketing's *Black Diamond* reports, University of Cape Town.

[15] While some of these city-level policies have been forced on the city through inadequate funding from national government, the introduction of user fees and 'cost-recovering measures' seem to have impacted negatively on the poor, whom the city views as having a 'culture of non-payment'. These neoliberal policies have exacerbated the already high unemployment rate among poor households (Bond 2004).

in the established neighbourhoods of Soweto to celebrate: many residents exhibit a new-found hope, most are enthralled by their new-found political freedom despite the nostalgic longing for order and safety some older residents express (Dlamini 2009). They revel in their freedom to move around the city and to no longer be restricted to the township. Aspects of 'black culture' which was always treated by suspicion by the state and by the public culture are now celebrated in public, such as the appearance at Mandela's inauguration as President of a praise singer (*imbongi*) and the symbolic burning of incense (*mpepho*) when President Mbeki opened Freedom Park. What was a source of shame has in some instances now become a symbol of black pride (Bogatsu 2002).

In this context, debates about black wealth amidst growing inequality in former townships have become a commonplace if not comfortable fact of daily life. An important argument made by commentators is that black wealth as evidenced in expensive cars driving in and out of Soweto is a form of conspicuous consumption, which in turn is a symbol and interpretation of the underlying values of materialism that animate the new black middle classes, interpreted as the turning away from a mutualist philosophy of ubuntu. A closer look at the longer histories of social mobility, social distinction and consumption provides us with a more complex and nuanced reading of the possible meanings of consumption.

Histories of Social Mobility and Social Differentiation on the Witwatersrand Reef

The recent history of Johannesburg and the Witwatersrand is indeed the history of a series of movements and processes brought about, in the main, by the discovery of gold in the 1880s. Prior to the discovery of deposits of gold in 1886, Johannesburg was 'no more than an unwanted south-sloping remnant of ground lying between three highveld farms' (Beavon 1997). Only forty years later Johannesburg was heralded as a 'world city'. The discovery of gold not only resulted in the rise of an urban industrial region dotted with towns and mines along the gold reef, the Witwatersrand Reef. The migrant labour system that developed to make this possible has been the topic of many analyses (cf. Bonner 1995; Moodie 1994). In short, African migrant labourers were working on short-term labour contracts for between 6-18

months. Life in the mines was tough and men lived in tightly controlled single-sex barracks. African men had to leave their families behind in rural areas and were forced to carry an identity document which detailed their work contracts and enabled authorities to exert control over their movements.

The creation of the South Western Townships – later to be renamed Soweto – as a public housing estate or African municipal mownship was borne out of these processes. Its existence flowed from the need for unfree, cheap black labour to support the growing mining and industrial economies of the Reef region, owned by white capital. The need for cheap labour was partly fulfilled through the emergence of an exploitative migrant labour system that provided mines with cheap and unfree black labour. This labour system worked on two fronts: pulling poor Africans from rural lands to the City of Gold on temporary contracts with the promises of work while enticing wealthier Africans inspired by missionary education and ideals with promises of greater freedom, work and the opportunity to experiment with urban living (Bonner 1995)[16].

Recent scholarly works on consumption and intercultural flows of ideas and commodities have emphasised the interconnections that existed between Johannesburg and Europe, Harlem and Black America (Hannerz1994; Fenwick 1996; Nixon 1994), and indeed the ways in which the political economy of apartheid never entirely determined social and cultural life. In Sophiatown of the 1950s, however, the borrowing of global cultural products and styles and the movement across state-sanctioned social and economic boundaries amounted to a form of resistance. Those cultural *bricoleurs* and social bandits who thrived in the cosmopolitan space of Sophiatown effectively became local heroes as they defied the cultural Puritanism of apartheid sanctioned categories and discourse. Studies on African elites or the African bourgeoisie (Kuper 1965; Brandel-Syrier 1971; Nyquist 1983) is remarkable for their interpretive emphasis on practices of conspicuous consumption among black elites which in turn is a result of the silent, comparative dimension of their work – in particular, how black elites are always implicitly defined in relation to white elites. Furthermore, what

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[16] While much has been written about migration and the labour migration system, the literature on the immediate Gauteng region is less well-developed (cf. Rogerson 1996).

strikes me reading earlier micro-level studies such as Brandel-Syrier study *Reeftown Elite* (1971) is the extent to which their analyses resemble contemporary arguments about conspicuous consumption among black elite groups.

Revisiting Social Mobility and Conspicuous Consumption in Reeftown

In 1971 a sociologist of Dutch birth, Brandel-Syrier, published a monograph on social mobility among social elites in an African municipal township on the Witwatersrand. While some academics refused to cooperate with representatives of the apartheid state in their research endeavors, she worked closely with the native affairs officials of this township, which she called Reeftown. In *Reeftown Elite* (1971) Brandel-Syrier developed a descriptive analysis of the life histories and careers of 60 African men living in Reeftown. Reeftown is pictured as a community in transition from a small-scale society characterised by face-to-face relations that was the old (urban) Location in Reeftown to the new large-scale type of society which was the new municipal township. As part of this transition the structure of the new community had become more complex and the fields of social activity more articulated and expanded. New occupational groups produced new social groups so that a 'plurality of separate if not always entirely disjunctive elites were arising' (Brandel-Syrier 1971:xxvi). With such increase in social stratification came a greater division among the educated, greater inequality, and clear positions of superiority. The 'social elites' she described occupied a position of social superiority in the social life, social structure and pyramid-like prestige structure of Reeftown, a position attributed to their higher educational, occupational and financial status. They are local and not national elites. Following Nadel, Brandel-Syrier (1971:xxv) treats these elites as 'social' elites given that their status is that of a generalised nature, spanning domains and institutions across social, economic, religious and political fields. The category 'social elites' then is a result of their position in the social structure and not because of any particular behaviour patterns, domestic habits, social styles or moral values. Reeftown's social elites consisted of families constituting the first urban aristocracy as well as newer elite groups formed in the late 1960s with the growth of new occupational

groups. A similar process occurred in Soweto at the time (Bonner & Segal 1998:57-62), in part brought about by a booming post-War economy (Crankshaw 2005; Seekings & Nattrass 2006:106). The older Reeftown elites were typically stand-owners which owned several houses, acted as slum landlords, and were the wealthiest and best-educated in Reeftown (Brandel-Syrier 1971:18).

The decline of this older elite group was in part the result of the onset of 'high apartheid' at which point the state no longer differentiated the urban African population according to class, resulting in severe unhappiness among elite section of the African urban population as they lost some of their privileges. The onset of 'high apartheid' had the unintended consequence in Reeftown of assisting with the growth of new groups of social elites, fuelling in the process competition and conflict between these two groups. So whereas the older group consisted mainly of public servants, the new elites included managerial elites as well as entrepreneurial elites (Brandel-Syrier 1971:15-16). The *managerial elite* owed their existence to their competence as Africans, and their services were used entirely for the development and the service of the African market and. Reeftown's *entrepreneurial elite* on the other hand was stronger and much feted by black and white commentators as the only evidence that the so-called African middle class could become a 'true' middle. Both the business elite and the government of the time praised and welcomed this entrepreneurial group of elites, as they saw in this class as an important factor in making the homeland strategy work as such urban entrepreneurs were expected to transfer their capital, experience and skills to the 'newly independent homelands'. Furthermore, Brandel-Syrier shows that the economic lives and careers of these 60 men in Reeftown were characterised by 'extreme occupational mobility' between different employers and kinds of occupation, between employment and self-employment, between private and public employment and between different public employments (Brandel-Syrier 1971:28). Such mobility was furthermore enhanced by changes in state policies which, given low levels of income and the little assets and savings resident had, over and above their reliance on formal employment in order to reside legitimately in urban areas, drastically impacted on their lives.

Brandel-Syrier's work offers us important descriptive material pertaining to the lives of these social elites. However, her approach and

analysis raises several questions relevant to our discussion today. For one she did not problematise the residential area of Reeftown as the outcome of a series of political and economic processes (cf. Frankel 1981). Instead she ignored the politics of relocation, spatial development and segregation as she emphasised the cultural continuities and discontinuities between social life in Reeftown and what she imagined came before. Moreover, by framing her research question in the way she did, she reinforced some of the very notions on which apartheid's cultural politics were constructed. So instead of analysing Reeftown as part of an emerging urban region or South African society, she treats Reeftown as an organic community. In explaining some of the aspect of Reeftown culture, she juxtaposes Reeftown with the Old Location and with a rural, village life she neither observed nor experienced. Brandel-Syrier is likely to have overstated the differences between what she observed and the earlier phases in the life and culture of Reeftown residents. Both the old Location in Reeftown and the imagined rural village are portrayed in terms which are overly idealistic. While referring to changes in the labour market, she paid scant attention in her interpretations of the economic behaviour of her subjects to the influence of the political and power structures that existed in the society at large, which lead *inter alia* to overemphasise competition between social classes and groups within African communities. For example, she noted that 'the only factor' uniting the residents of Reeftown was the overriding desire to prevent at all costs the European 'finding out how bad we are' (Brandel-Syrier 1971:53).

Brandel-Syrier probably overstated her point and idealised the Old Location and rural village life when she wrote that social life in Reeftown was characterised by shame and status concerns and that,

> this township consisted of people who, hardly yet freed from the bondage of a kinship-dominated, custom-bound society, had suddenly been thrown into the unmitigated status struggle and the relentless competitiveness of the modern world in the *milieu* of the ghetto .... The emancipation from tribal restraints had engendered an extreme individualism (1971:62).

It seems that her description of 'extreme individualism' is not measured against the forms of individualism that existed among other urban

environments in Johannesburg at the time but against her idealised notions of 'community' and even collectivism she imagined existed in the homelands. She did not consider the possibility that shame and status, social processes of the first order, may be social styles through which to express social belonging and even collectivity, rather than evidence of isolated, atomized ways of being in the world. Rather than analysing Reeftown in relation to *other* urban residential spaces within the regional industrial complex she invokes an idealised past to explain change and then explains the meaning of upward social mobility only in relation to the immediate social context in Reeftown. Her reluctance to explicitly theorise the actions of social elites of Reeftown in relation to wider South African society stems from the fact that she was not interested in imagining a *national* middle class that could span racial groups as they were defined at the time. Thus, she writes, 'the term 'African middle class' can have no meaning in terms of association and social interaction with the European middle class' (1971:xxviii)[17]. In this singular passage Brandel-Syrier' makes explicit, for a second, the silent comparative dimension of her framing of the black middle class, and how her conception of the middle class is implicitly racialised.

Her reluctance to theorise Reeftown's elites in relation to white elites – the silent, comparative Other – means that every form of visible consumption is taken as evidence of a status war between individuals in a local African community rather than as practices potentially signifying something else. Hence the practices of consumption of Reeftown's social elites are related to an idealized rural culture and inward-looking urban community and thus these practices are taken to be symptomatic of status anxiety and severe competition between elites[18]. For example, Brandel-Syrier analyses Reeftown's social elites investment in their houses as evidence of Reeftown society's obsessions with status anxiety and conspicuous consumption. What if, on the other hand, we read such investments in houses not as an example of local prestige economies, but as directed at the wider

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[17] The fortunes of Africans under apartheid were intimately tied up with the state policies and state practice on both local and national levels.

[18] In similar vein, Nyquist (1983:224) argued that the upper stratum of the African communities in Grahamstown in the 1980s was characterised by similar status competitiveness.

society: as statements about people demanding or even proclaiming their right to belong to the city and to belong to the wider society[19]. Following an argument made by James Ferguson (2002) elsewhere, I read these not as imitations of a white ruling culture, and evidence of an inward-looking local culture, but as claims to membership of wider society and the city. In my analysis I also build on Daniel Miller's work on how residents of council estates in northern London appropriate the kitchens of such estate homes, effectively re-socialising the artefactual environment (Miller 1988) into their social lives. Despite such houses not being the product of their own labour, and thus potential a source of alienation and estrangement, Miller shows how some residents develop a sense of self and household through the active, creative consumption of these houses (treating kitchens as canvasses). The arguments contained in this article build on insights derived from my reading of Ferguson and Miller, especially around challenging interpretations of the renovations of municipal-owned housing in Soweto as a form of conspicuous consumption.

Houses and Social Class: Social Mobility and the Politics of Consumption

The history of Soweto, and many such former African Municipal Townships, cannot be told without writing about houses. Such urban townships were, in essence, public housing estates constructed for Africans but run by local white authorities. These local authorities were not interested in using the money of white taxpayers to build and develop such housing estates into permanent and decent residential areas. As a result, there has always been an incredible housing shortage in Johannesburg (cf. Car 1990; Kane-Berman 1978; Bonner & Segal 1998). This shortage not only inflated rents, but resulted in legislation such as the Native (Urban Areas) Act which gave local authorities a monopoly on the brewing and selling of African beer, all of which had to be placed (together with all fines and rents raised in the

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[19] Similarly, in 1965 Leo Kuper (1965:90) wrote that among the then emerging African bourgeoisie in Durban the 'style of houses in urban areas provides some opportunity for conspicuous consumption, as a display of wealth and a claim to prestige'.

townships) in a 'Native Revenue Account' which was used to finance housing schemes (Carr 1990). The City's reluctance and failure to provide housing for urban Africans and the resulting high demand for housing has also lead to the issue of housing becoming a site for political mobilisation, as was the case with James Mpanza and the independent black city of 'Masakeng' he had tried to create in the 1940s (Stadler 1979; Bonner & Segal 1998:22). In the freehold areas in Johannesburg where Africans could own land, such as Sophiatown, the relationship between landowners and tenants were structured by the high demand for housing. It was home ownership which Lodge saw as the primary marker of an emerging class conflict in Sophiatown which local authorities cleverly exploited in the context of the destruction of Sophiatown (Lodge 1981, 1983) and which Coplan (1985) saw as influencing the social and cultural life of Black Johannesburg. In Soweto, the construction of back rooms and shacks on council properties has always been an important source of income for many township dwellers (Crankshaw *et al.* 2000), in addition to providing accommodation for sons who could not establish independent households or who were not in line for inheriting a house, given the expectations that daughters would marry out of their parental home into another (Crankshaw *et al.* 2000:850). What this means is that the structural shortages of housing in Black Johannesburg had led to cultural, social and economic valuing of houses. Moreover, houses, whether owned or rented, became material and symbolic sites for the expression of social class *and* membership to the city. And, as I have argued, expressions of social class were not only directed at fellow township residents but were also expressions of belonging and an expression to the state about Africans' right to the city and to the wider society. How did I arrive at this interpretive position?

It was the many discussions I had with Sowetans about houses and the value and practices of 'renovating' houses that generated this insight and which led me to read the literature in a different light. In these discussions I had with residents, arising from the opportunity of residing in a backroom on a former municipally-owned yard in a Sowetan neighbourhood for two years, it became evident to me that houses are carriers of social class and play an important part in local configurations and practices of social distinction. While residents were reluctant to label or 'class' people in discussions they found ways of talking about status. The reluctance of some to explicitly label

others according to social class is most likely a leftover of the political ethos that were dominant in the townships during the 1980s and which stressed workers' unity and racial solidarity over and above ethnic and class differentiation. This reluctance notwithstanding, residents articulated an acute awareness of local registers of social status hierarchies and distinctions in wealth[20]. As elsewhere, such hierarchies were never only about income but were often peppered with perceptions around residential locale (even within Soweto), and type of residence, 'upbringing', schooling, type of marriage and forms of association marking off different status groups. Certain types of employment, such as teaching, nursing and civil service positions, were traditionally regarded as typical of 'the middle class'. Talk about the kind of 'upbringing' an individual had, and whether this took place in a 'broken' family or not, were often remarked upon as markers of social status. Such talk was not completely irrelevant or limited to gossip or without consequence – it could influence, for example, calculations of value during bridewealth negotiations.

When residents spoke to me about social class, they often started off by talking about houses. Residents of municipal-built houses spoke to me of the importance of replacing the government issued wire fences that surrounded their yards, and replacing it with prefabricated waist-height fences, aptly called 'stop-nonsense' fences. These walls were intended to keep playing children, their makeshift soccer balls and stray dogs out of the yards. Such solid fences also prevented neighbours from jumping over them or it from being pulled down by the prolonged leaning of bodies. Importantly, it promised to keep at bay the 'nonsense' of township life – thugs and *tsotsis*. The construction of such fences was a first step leading to the higher and more private walls evident in Soweto today, typical of course of most suburban residential areas[21].

Renovating the house, as opposed to the fence, presented other challenges and required much more of an investment even if the house did not belong to you. But for a few houses built in Dube in the 1930s, most

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[20] 'Classing people' is an actual phrase used to denote the labelling of people as belonging to specific status groups. In fact, when Sowetans use the term 'class' they are referring to the Weberian notion of status group.

[21] Cf. Makatile (2005) and Power (2004:5).

houses built in Soweto between the 1940s and the 1980s were municipal-owned. Renovating, or appropriating (cf. Miller 1988) a house you did not own, was risky, given the way in which the township was defined by the political economy of the time as a temporary space. In the late 1970s, as part of a broader 'Era of Reform' that included granting rights to black trade unions and introducing some privileges to urban black workers, the government of John Vorster (after lobbying by the Urban Foundation) reintroduced 99-year leaseholds that allowed Sowetans to buy rather than rent municipal township houses. Residents were allowed to renovate their houses and, as Bonner & Segal (1998:104) points out, 'a new class of residents, concerned with the safety and value of their property, began to emerge'. But some residents had started renovating their homes long before this regulation was introduced. Apart from improving fences, better-off residents started extending their houses by building extra rooms, replacing government-issued steel doors, plastering the original face brick walls and painting them, and eventually constructing back rooms and garages with tiled or paved runways. Some residents imported water features and glass ornaments into their walls and gardens, leaving enough space for flower gardens and paved walkways, and thus ensuring coverage in the *Sowetan* and the local gossiping circles. Very important too was the construction of an 'inside toilet' if your stand only had an 'outside toilet'.

It is important to note that the construction of extra rooms, for example, was obviously not merely about showing off. Monies secured from the renting out of brick or zinc backyard structures to young, unmarried men or recently married couples or migrant workers from outside of South Africa has been an important source of income for landlords (Morris *et al.* 1990), even though middle class households were often reluctant to populate their yards with poorer tenants. The numbers also do not suggest that small-scale landlords could get rich from it (Crankshaw *et al.* 2000). And, as mentioned, sons could establish semi-independent households in the backward of their parents' municipal homes. The possible income households could generate from the construction of backyard structures aside, much of the effort that went into the renovation of houses were either an investment gamble, with households hoping to secure rights to these houses in the nearby future. Brandel-Syrier (1971:56-57) argued that these were investments into the 'prestige economies' that flourished in Soweto and Reef townships since the

1960s. She thus writes how 'improvements' and 'renovations' to houses were often unproductive and inspired by considerations of status and 'when finances threatened to run out, the interior had to remain unfinished and the last available money was spent on external features and embellishments' (1971:57). But are these really examples of a 'prestige economy'?

The first point to make is that historically the South Western Townships have in the first instance always been public residential estates, with nearly no industrial zones. In the industrial areas of the cities and on the mines and in the hostels, residents of the South Western Townships emphasised their identities as workers and organised themselves accordingly, sometimes along ethnic and linguistic lines (cf. Moodie 1994). In the interactional and social context of the South Western Townships, however, urban Africans consider themselves and their neighbours firstly as residents of specific townships before they regarded each other as workers or as belonging to a specific ethnic group. Up until today when you meet someone you are likely to enquire about which township (or *kasi*) they are from, but not how they earn a living. Residents of the South Western Townships did – and continue to do so today – underplay questions of work and income in the interactional and social context of their everyday lives. This is in part the result of a generation that had to earn income in illicit ways because of growing joblessness amidst more and more jobseekers (Glaser 2000) and in part the stigma attached to certain types of employment. Thus, all forms of income-generation (whether legal or illegal) are typically lumped into broad categories of 'business' or 'hustling' (*ukupanda*) while potential embarrass-ing questions about income are avoided (cf. Peterson 2003). Unless you worked for the state as a teacher, policeman, clerk or nurse, or work in some other professional public capacity, you typically did not broadcast the way you earned your money. In fact, middle class-ness was to some extent defined by the fact that everybody knew where those who form part of the middle class worked and how they were earning their monies. When talk about the generation and sourcing of money is avoided, talk of how it is spent takes on a great social significance. As a result, residents did not stress their identities as money generators and producers in the context of their everyday life in the townships: rather, they stressed practices of spending and consumption. Long before theorists proclaimed the importance of consumption as a means of creating and expressing identity, Sowetans

experimented with spending and consumption as a form of social distinction and a statement about their place in the city and society.

What possibly were asserted by Sowetans when they purchased and displayed consumer items or renovated their houses? More historical research has to be conducted to answer such questions properly. My own ethnographic research suggests that practices of consumption – and appropriation as consumption (Miller 1988) – have much to do about them as being markers of modernity (cf. Leclerc-Madlala 2003). Given the ways in which urban municipal townships have been framed as spaces of consumption rather than production, it is unlikely that consumption as appropriation and as statements about belonging to wider society is a new phenomenon. Sowetans were explicit in how the appropriation of consumer items as symbols of modernity was one tactic through which one could subvert and struggle against the homogenising and negative representations of black people by a dominant white political system and media industry. In this context houses also symbolized households' relationship to the city. Under apartheid there existed little political space for black Africans to assert their claims to their right to the city, and their place in it. The mainstream representations of the public housing complex of Soweto under apartheid stressed the undifferentiated nature of the houses and its people and the displaced nature of its residents who do not belong to the city. Residents were reduced, discursively, to faceless and nameless black bodies who were similar and equal in their poverty and subordination, waiting for their time in the city to come to an end. In this context, practices of differentiation articulated through the appropriation of consumer items taken from the dominant culture or elsewhere had potent symbolic and political meanings. The adoption of consumer items and styles from the dominant system served as a vehicle for the expression of social claims in the township neighbourhood *and* political claims in relation to the city and the wider society. In other words, consumption has always had a political dimension in Black Johannesburg in that it expressed a claim of belonging to wider society. And the desire to communicate something about power and agency, even under today's conditions, remains to be expressed, *inter alia*, through buying, owning and displaying consumer items. Put differently, we should analyse it not only in terms of its horizontal meaning, but also vertically.

The Changing Dynamics of Social Class, Mobility and Housing

It is important to recognise that the state was not a bystander in the process of social differentiation among urban Africans. It was not the case that 'the market' naturally produced these class differences based on the innate qualities of individuals who made use of opportunities to improve their own lives. The colonial and apartheid state was active in the construction and management of social class differentiation among urban African populations[22]. During the pre-apartheid and early apartheid period, occupational class differences among the African population were reinforced by state policies that recognised these class differences. However, during the 1960s and the 1970s, the time of high apartheid, the state increasingly ignored class and occupational differences among Africans and instead sought to differentiate Africans in terms of whether or not they were born in Johannesburg (Crankshaw 2005). Under high apartheid the African middle class had no legal rights that distinguished them from the working class, with whom they lived side-by-side in the municipal township areas. By then end of the 1970s, the apartheid state under siege, it began to offer piecemeal reforms that did away with many of the laws restricting urbanisation, employment, education, home-ownership among Africans. By the middle of the 1980s the apartheid state was actively promoting the development of an urban black middle class in order to keep black elites from becoming radicalised. This is not to say that the state was completely successful in its efforts to engineer class difference, but to acknowledge the role it played in shaping the conditions under which social mobility became a reality for some residents[23].

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[22] With the enactment of the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act, government explicitly recognised social class differences among Africans. Prior to the Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 the government did not distinguish between urbanized African families and rural migrants – the pass laws made no reference to place of birth or urban status (Bonner & Segal 1998; Crankshaw 2005).

[23] The encouragement of the growth of a black urban middle class did not take place without any contestation and conflict, and had interesting consequences.

Concluding Remarks

Consumption has become an important theme in social science studies over the past years (Leclerc-Madlala 2003; Comaroff & Comaroff 2000). In much of the literature the renewed interest in consumption is explained with reference to changes in the constitution of global capitalism and the 'condition of postmodernity' and how processes of consumption rather than production lie at the heart of *contemporary* expressions of selfhood and identity. The earlier literature on Black Johannesburg and Soweto – and urban Africans in South Africa more generally – did not consider the ways in which the urban African township was discursively and politically framed as a space of consumption and how consumption allowed Africans to participate in city life to which they had no political right.

I have argued that a consideration of the history of Soweto and Black Johannesburg tells us that Africans living in former African municipal townships have for long been practicing with different styles and registers of social distinction. It tells us that the state has played an active role at various points in discouraging and encouraging the emergence of an African middle class. The shortage of housing, for example, has meant that houses have become valued, socially and economically. Improvements made on municipal-owned houses could be interpreted not merely as a form of conspicuous consumption, but as an expression of residents' 'right to the city'. Thus, while signifying practices of consumption were important in local registers of social distinction within urban townships, they were also expressions of the desire to belong to wider society. Practices of consumption today are too easily read as evidence of 'conspicuous consumption' and the local variant of 'people making themselves with things'. This is not to deny the role that consumer items play in shaping identities. Rather, we should be cognizant of the fact that the urban spaces in which Africans were forced to live under apartheid were discursively and legally framed as spaces of consumption and not of production. And that a consideration of both vertical and horizontal lines of symbolic expression through consumption shows that consumption is both social and political processes. This should inform hasty interpretations that explain the display of consumer items as a form of conspicuous consumption voicing underlying dominant values of materialism, and evidence of a turn away from the principles of solidarity and mutuality expressed by ubuntu.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the same interpretation may be made with regards to motor vehicles. For a younger generation of Sowetans, investing in a motor vehicle has become the equivalent of their parents' investment into their municipal home. As with housing, transport has been one of the most regulated aspects of the lives of urban Africans. Furthermore, in the context of the incredible costs that Sowetans historically had to carry in terms of transport to their places of work, and dependency on unsafe public forms of transport, it is perhaps not surprising that ownership of a motor vehicle and physical and spatial mobility have been and remains a potent symbol of individual success. And given the history of state monopoly on the brewing of beer it is perhaps not surprising that the consumption of beer has been so closely tied up with definitions of African masculinity (Krige 2011). In other words, three important material objects that have been and are still today deployed in the popular economies of Soweto as symbols of agency, mobility and identity come from sectors that have a long history of state involvement and control if not monopoly: housing, transport and alcohol. More research is needed that will address the historical relationship and contemporary meaning of between specific commodities in relation to local practices of social differentiation and social class and political claims to participation in the wider economy and society.

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