Township Textualities

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Abstract
The paper is part literature review and part critique. It begins with an analysis of recent theorizations emerging in local and international urban studies before moving to a consideration of the ways in which the township has been historically engaged across literature and criticism. Noting the absence of substantial work on the township in post-apartheid literary criticism, it seeks to address both the reasons for this aporia and to map the themes and socialities that surface in contemporary township representation.

Keywords: township, cultural production, representation, intimacy, unpredictability

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An online search of the word 'township' yields the following in the *Oxford English Dictionary:*

Noun
1 (in South Africa) a suburb or city of predominantly black occupation, formerly officially designated for black occupation by apartheid legislation:
a Johannesburg township
[as modifier]:
township theatre
2 South African a new area being developed for residential or industrial use by speculators.

I begin with this rather dry definition because it offers layers of utility and meaning I wish to work through in my paper. The dictionary starts where we expect, in the material and racial ecologies of apartheid South Africa.

Although black South Africans had been marginalized throughout the colonial period, under apartheid segregation was systematized and formalized. In accordance with the Group Areas Act of 1950 black, coloured and Indian South Africans were forcibly removed from central metropolitan areas to the outskirts of towns and cities where they were housed in government run locations or 'townships'; satellite settlements providing cheap labour for the cities. Such are the historical conditions to which the first bulletin refers. But this temporal delineation is not uncomplicated. The following point extends the application of 'township' into the on-going construction of residential and industrial sites 'by speculators'. This is private development and suggests the gated complexes that are a feature of the South African cityscape. While I am not arguing for a reading that conflates private property with the specific histories of the township, the referential overlap encourages us to reconsider figurations of township space and how they speak to the present. Do the social and geographical lexicons of the past retain their relevance today? How do contemporary claims to the township intersect with genealogies of displacement and struggle? What arrangements of commonality, difference and mobility are generated once we recognize the confluence of seemingly discrete spaces?

A study written by Ivor Chipkin of the Public Affairs Research Institute (PARi), considers the ways in which the social relations of the township manifest in the experiences of the black middle class (2012). The report deliberates on the clusters of townhouse developments spread across Johannesburg's West Rand. Historically white and Afrikaans, the area is now racially mixed (Chipkin 2012: 31-41). The development, named 'The Milky Way', indexes the complex manner in which the social landscape of South Africa is both altered and unchanged. For many of its black inhabitants, living in the townhouse cluster represents the consolidation of, or entry into modes of middle class accumulation (Chipkin 2012: 46). However, Chipkin argues that class aspirations do not erase race identification (Chipkin 2012: 66). Black residents continue to situate their sense of blackness vis-à-vis the township. For some this means the freedom to fashion oneself by leaving and disavowal, but for the majority it remains a site of deep nostalgia, family and belonging (Chipkin 2012: 66-67).

My concern is to engage these significations of the township and to sift through the meanings allotted to its spaces by tracing textual histories. Accordingly, I will review some of the critical literature and attempt to think

with and beyond it. Grappling with the questions outlined above, I broadly sketch the themes emerging in contemporary cultural production laying claim to township lifeworlds. Before turning to the creative strategies of text, I want to linger on the frictions, possibilities and ideas that have shaped this study.

Architectures of Intimacy

Articulations of reminiscence are reflected in Nsizwa Dlamini and Grace Khunou's conversation with Achille Mbembe (2008: 239-247) in the essay 'Soweto Now'. Here, the women discuss the phenomenon of 'weekending' in the township subsequent to a move to the formerly white suburbs (Mbembe 2008: 246). In suburbia one escapes surveillance by one's neighbours and the financial expectations of extended family. Yet it is the township that provides encounters of companionship and affect so important to everyday life. Hence spending one's weekends with family and friends in Soweto. The interpolation of the material by the personal reveals contours of conflict and commonality in which townships are not and never have been places of homogenous experience. While, as numerous accounts of the apartheid township attest, conditions were overcrowded, impoverished and oppressive (see for example Mphahlele 1959; and Kuzwayo 1985) the 'structure of feeling' that Raymond Williams (1983: 19-21) allies with a communal sense of place was forged against apartheid's impositions. Confines of space meant greater intimacy with neighbours, interdependence, shared playtime in the streets – forms of sociality fondly recalled by Chipkin's (2012) interviewees.

In his quasi-autobiographical *Native Nostalgia* (2009), Jacob Dlamini explores the implications of remembering life in the apartheid township with affection. To do so, he argues, is to contest the reification of the township as a site of suffering and to acknowledge the knotty continuities between the past and the present (Dlamini 2009: 12). It is to recognize that all communities, regardless of location, are composed of lines of alliance and fracture exceeding their particular topographies. The township is wound up in the imaginative and physical terrain of South Africa in ways complicating its designation as a periphery. This is perhaps clearer in the present, as the dismantling of racial segregation has engendered more flexible trajectories between the formerly 'white' city and 'black' location. Yet the boundaries between the two were never entirely stable. In their book on Johannesburg, Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe (2008: 13) argue that the township should

be read as traversing the city across nodes of mobility and hybridity. The bifurcation of urban spaces into 'centre' city and 'marginal' township belies the shifts in the latter's spaces, some of which have come to replicate the kinds of consumption traditionally associated with suburbia (Nuttall & Mbembe 2008:13).

Expanding upon ideas of intersection, Nuttall's book *Entanglement*, deploys a conception of enmeshment to think through the dialogical formation of the South African social:

> Entanglement … is a means by which we draw into our analyses those sites once thought of as separate – identities, spaces, histories – come together or find points of intersection in unexpected ways (Nuttall 2009: 11).

Nuttall admits the troubled and often conflictual conditions of the South African cityscape but her primary focus resides in the poetics of mutuality as they emerge in cultural production (Nuttall 2009:11). Here, her work enters into conversation with Paul Gilroy's notion of conviviality. In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, he describes this as radically open 'processes of cohabitation and interaction' (Gilroy 2005:xv) against rigid declamations of identity politics. Gilroy is writing about the perceived failure of multiculturalism in contemporary Britain, but his theorization has value in the South African context. It reminds us that while the conditions of the township are exceptional, they speak to formations of place and belonging elsewhere in the world. Conviviality enables modes of engagement that start from a position of what is shared rather than what is excluded; it prompts us to think through how the affective shapes space as much as the ideological or economic (see Lefebvre 1992).

Indeed, architectures of intimacy ask us to consider alternate economies of relation. In his work on Sundumbili township in Northern KwaZulu-Natal, Mark Hunter (2010) limns the conjunction of money, sex and love to argue for modes of personal connection permeating the circulation of power and gender in the township. Hunter's study reflects upon the diversification of township space; the inhabitants of expanding informal housing on the township's edges do not experience Sundimbili in the same way as those occupying houses constructed under apartheid. Lindsay Bremner (2010:271), in an essay on 'insurgent urbanisms', writes of

Kliptown, Soweto as a thickly textured 'tapestry' of association and invention that punctures its perception as 'lacking or underdeveloped'. To read the urban thusly is to affirm its constitution through everyday encounters and improvisations that spill over the official organization of space. As Abdoumaliq Simone (2009:3,9) maintains, urban spaces are 'in the making' and as such are inflected by memories, desires and forms of resilience which resist regulation.

Tenses and Tension

Alongside articulations of syncreticism and density, the township remains a space to which particular designations accrue. Let us return to the first definition offered by the *OED* and its confirmation in bureaucratic discourse. As of October 2012, the 2011 South African census has yet to be published. If we peruse the classifications of 2001 census however, we read the following under the *township*:

> Historically, 'township' in South Africa referred to an urban residential area created for black migrant labour, usually beyond the town or city limits. Reference is sometimes made to 'black township', 'coloured township' and 'Indian township', meaning that these settlements were created for these population groups. By contrast, the white population resided in suburbs' (*Census 2001: Concepts and Definitions, Statistics South Africa* 2004:15).

An intriguing friction inheres in uses of tense; the township is defined as a racially specific historical formation, an artefact of the past. But the past is not yet past. Suburbia may no longer be the domain of whiteness but townships remain, as Chipkin's (2012) interviews suggest, the domain of blackness.

What the census points to are structures of spatial racialization imbedded in the history of colonialism and apartheid and persisting under current economic disparity. It is worth bearing in mind that poor white communities have also taken up residence in townships. But such examples are rare and, as disputes over the allocation of Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses in Kagiso, Gauteng illustrate, widely contested (*The Sowetan* 2010). And so while the township is valorised and

mobilised as a place of identity production, it remains deeply marked by race and a lack of resources. Sites of aspirational consumption such as Maponya Mall in Pimville, Soweto, sit uneasily alongside shacks of corrugated iron. The entrenchment of poverty, violence and poor service delivery has been documented in recent studies by historians Philip Bonner and Noor Nieftagodien (2008) and the journalist Anton Harber (2011). The logic of racial capitalism reduced black South Africans to what Achille Mbembe has described as superfluous people. That is, the production of wealth was contingent upon rendering poor black labour disposable (Mbembe 2011:11, 7-8). The production of the poor as waste continues in post-apartheid, as unemployment and struggles for basic survival are masked by spectacular consumption and discourses of neo-liberalism (Mbembe 2011. See also Mbembe 2008: 38-67). Notwithstanding the rise of a substantial black middle-class, the majority of black South Africans remain trapped in ill-equipped rural or urban locales.

The overlap between the rural and the urban has been comprehensively traced by South African scholars. Under apartheid, the migrant labour system compelled black men into urban areas while denying them citizenship (Bonner 1995). Until the influx of women into the cities in the 1940s and 50s they and their children often remained behind, resulting in fractured families. However, as Belinda Bozzoli examined in her study of female migrancy, there were reasons for moving to the city anchored in pursuit of independence and status which pressurized conceptions of the urban as a 'white' (1991). The perception of cities as dreamscapes of possibility is as old as cities themselves. As in the past, the rural exists in the contemporary urban palimpsest as home, obligation and identification. Thus Simone writes of the ways in which urban spaces are crisscrossed by multiple 'elsewheres' of origin and aspiration that may be real or imagined (2001: 25). To speak of Umlazi or Langa or KwaThema is to speak of sites beyond and within the city, local and global, which animate the efforts and hopes of their inhabitants.

The continuing delineation of townships as racialised has had other implications for this project. My concern is to think through modes of representation across South Africa's three major conurbations: Johannesburg, Cape Town and Durban. This entails an affirmation of the symbolic energies of urban life and possibilities of mutuality while recognising persisting structures of difference. Mediations of townships are inclined to fix on

Soweto as an archetype. Given its proximity to Johannesburg and central role in the struggle, this is not surprising. With a population of more than a million people, Soweto is South Africa's largest township – so large it straddles the demarcation of township and city (Roberts 2004: 1-21). The trends and socialites surfacing in Soweto filter down to the rest of the country. Yet Soweto's hegemony in national and international imaginaries has a flattening effect. Historically black townships retain far more public purchase than, for example, the Indian locations of Lenasia in Johannesburg or Chatsworth in Durban, an unevenness which my project has been unable to avoid. Partly this is a question of numbers, but one must remain cognizant that 'township' is a variegated and capacious term. Although townships share defining features, they are neither equivalent nor homogenous. The social relations prevalent in the Cape Flats are not identical to those in Soweto (see Jensen 2008).

Media representations seeking to invoke a sentimental South African nationalism tend to appropriate black townships in particular as sites of authenticity. Discussing the commodification of ethnicity, Jean and John Comaroff have demonstrated that it is, 'increasingly claimed as property by its living heirs, who proceed to manage it by palpably corporate means: to brand it and to sell it…in self-consciously consumable forms' (2009: 29). Marketing ethnicity bleeds into the ways in which identity politics are staged and consumed. It is now possible to take tours of Soweto or Gugulethu and thus to purchase an experience of the 'real' and legitimate South Africa. The staging of authenticity renders the communities inhabiting these spaces objects of interest and smothers their particularity. On the other, these communities may well depend on tourism to sustain themselves. This double bind discloses the fraught relationship with the real as it pervades mediations of township forms and selves, a feature I consider in more detail below.

Race definitions permeate the exercise of critique in ways which should be acknowledged here. Andile Mngxitama's review of Harber's book *Diepsloot* for the *Mail and Guardian* is worth introducing as an interrogation of the politics of positionality and voice. Mngxitama eschews analytical subtlety for polemics but he does make a useful challenge: Why does critical scholarship on black experience continue to be dominated by white people? (2011). Certainly his question is resonant for a study on township identities written by a white woman of British ancestry who has never lived in one. My response draws on Ania Loomba's illuminative discussion of histories from

below. In a dissection of Gaytri's Spivak's well-known 1988 essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Loomba warns of the risks of ventriloquising the subjects of representation (2002:243). Concomitantly she suggests that narrative is composed of multiple perspectives; that categories of identification 'are not unitary categories' (2002:239). Following Loomba, this paper makes no claim to totality in its analysis of township forms; its aim is to engender diverse vocabularies about how the township might be theorized and its mapping onto narratives of reciprocity and division in contemporary South Africa.

Histories

The textual forms of the township present are conversant with those of the past and I turn now to a brief genealogy of black urban writing in order to trace its continuities and disjunctures. The growth of black communities in South Africa's cities attended the surge of the industrialization in the first half of the 20th century. In Johannesburg particularly, the discovery of gold in the 1880s witnessed its rapid expansion from small prospect town to frenetic metropolis (Mabin 2007: 33-63). Declared a city in 1928, Johannesburg has dominated the economic and social landscape of Southern Africa ever since and this reflects in depictions of black urbanism. The text widely accredited with first affirming the presence of Africans in the city is Peter Abrahams's *Mine Boy*, published in 1946. The novel tracks the coming into class consciousness of rural migrant Xuma in Johannesburg's mines and the inner city ghetto of Fordsburg.

Abrahams would serialise his subsequent novel *Paths of Thunder* (1948) in *Drum* magazine. Famously and throughout the 1950s, *Drum* captured on page the dynamism of Johannesburg's freehold suburb, Sophiatown. Unlike the government run locations, in freehold areas such Sophiatown or Cape Town's District Six, individual property owners held title deeds to land regardless of their race. Consequently these were creolised spaces which, though marked by poverty and often violence, lent themselves to a vividly articulated modernity which remains iconographic (Nixon 1994). Beginning in the 1950s and continuing into the 70s, sites such as Sophiatown were systematically destroyed, their inhabitants relocated and their land designated 'whites only'. The richly textured worlds of *Drum* collapsed.

In the wake of forced removals a marked juxtaposition emerges –

that of the vibrant, heterogeneous freehold areas against the wasteland of government controlled locations. In their spatiality too, these sites intimated entanglement or atomization. The literatures produced from Sophiatown convey its layered, tightly woven streets and diverse traditions (Chapman 2001). In contradistinction, the rows of match box houses that defined the township were designed to be readily accessible to the panopticon of the white state. Keith Beavon describes Soweto as, '[L]ittle more than a bleak residential outpost on the veld' (2004: 121). Soweto became the focus of opposition to apartheid during the 1970s and 1980s, mirrored by a poetic turn which drew on the ideas espoused by Biko's Black Consciousness movement. The influence of new forms of political expression on black literature was substantial; as blackness became political, so too did black cultural production. Literature was a tool in the processes of conscientisation and an enabling enunciation of black experience (Attwell 2005).

As I have argued above, perceptions of the apartheid township as a site only of immiseration are under pressure. Dlamini's feeling for the possibilities of everyday encounter in *Native Nostalgia*, repeats Njabulo Ndebele's influential call in 1984 for a return to the ordinary in representations of blackness. As a means of interrogating the spectacular oppressions of the state, black writers deployed a documentary style realism, condemning the fiction of *Drum* predecessors as escapist or apolitical (Chapman 2007). Stylistically, their writing was vulnerable to critique. The contemporary review of poet Lionel Abrahams acknowledges the difficult conditions facing black writers but nonetheless describes their work as 'by and large aesthetically underdeveloped' (Chapman 2007:142).

For many engaged in black cultural production at the time, this application of Eurocentric literary aesthetics was simply irrelevant when compared to the exigencies of community politics and 'going to the people'. Hence Mothobi Mutlaotse was able to write the now infamous, '[W]e will have to 'donder' conventional literature: old-fashioned critic and reader alike. We are going to pee, spit and shit on literary criticism before we are through: we are going to kick and pull and drag literature into the form we prefer' (Mutlaotse 1980:5). However, criticisms of protest literature's instrumentalism were not confined to white scholars. Contending that the 'history of black South African literature has largely been the history of the representation of spectacle', Ndebele (1991: 31) called for a move away from the genre's reliance on exteriority towards the interiorities of the everyday,

'Rediscovering the ordinary … remind(s) us necessarily that the problems of the South African social formation are complex and all-embracing; that they cannot be reduced to a simple, single formulation' (Ndebele 1991:51). Dlamini's recent appeal to the ordinary suggests that the parameters of the township remain conceptually suspended in the weave of the everyday and the excessive.

The end of racial apartheid –economic apartheid endures – and the election to power of the African National Congress in 1994 engendered something of a crisis in the modalities and agendas of South African cultural production on the left. No longer was culture a weapon in the struggle, but writers and artists were exhorted to explore those themes they had ostensibly abandoned as politically irrelevant (Sachs 1989). What have the consequences of this move been for literature and literary criticism? In the literature, a complication of the categories of the past, a more oblique take on the processes of self-construction, wariness about summoning truths and a focus on transnational exchange. Simultaneously, vectors of class, race and gender and negotiations of space and belonging continue to have valency (Frenkel & MacKenzie 2010). The tension between deconstructive practice and identity politics mirrors in the scholarship. If, under apartheid, this was dominated by a commitment to materialism and suspicion of post-structuralism, then there has been a turn towards textual hermeneutics expressed through histories of convergence rather than segregation. Witness for example, Nuttall's theory of entanglement or Leon de Kock's evocation of 'the seam'. Yet other scholars insist upon historicity against the perceived vagaries of discursivity (see Parry 2004; Lazarus 2011). Congruent with the position outlined in the preceding pages, my research locates itself in the join between reading for textual elasticity and a mindfulness of evermore pronounced inequity.

Naturally, the robustness of criticism is enabled and sustained by an expanding market – more books by South African writers are published locally than ever before. Drawing on Isabel Hofmeyr's study of the transnational circulation of the book (2003), Andrew van der Vlies has written about how textual production and reception constructed the field of 'South African literature' (2008). Van der Vlies's timely intervention reminds us texts themselves have material histories in ways consonant for this paper. My contention is that while post-apartheid literatures may generate new vocabularies of the self, race continues to inflect decisions of publication and

circulation. Books by young black writers especially are marketed in quite knowing ways that fetishise their capacity to stand in for 'the real'. And yet the upsurge of recent narratives on township life is not matched in the critical literature. Against the substantial body of work produced on township forms the 1970s and 1980s, there has been what might be described as a withering away of interest. While the township remains the subject of sociological work, investigations in the humanities are relatively scarce (Mbembe 2008). Included in the scope of my project is an interrogation of this aporia. Why does the township register dimly on the radar of South African literary studies?

Michael Titlestad (2012: 676-694) illustrates that part of the answer resides in the deregulation of cities and emergence of more fluid habitations and imaginaries of urban space. It may also be that, as Sam Raditlhlalo objects in a review of Kgebetli Moele's 2006 novel *Room 207*, 'critics still discount black writers at the level of 'technique', and thus continually read new writing with a deeply ingrained pre-judgmental attitude' (Moele 2006: 93). Black writers are under-theorised when compared to their white colleagues, although David Attwell's reading of South African postcoloniality through black modernities (*Re-writing modernity* 2005) and Duncan Brown's often poetic navigation of identity *To Speak of this Land* (2006) are sustained and significant examples of complex theoretical work. My sense is the confines of the literary insufficiently engage broad practices of representation proliferating from and about the township. As Nuttall has shown, these often dwell outside conventional textual analyses (2009). Township residents deploy multiple registers of expression, some of which are more suited to capturing immediacies of experience than others.

Lastly, an intriguing and provocative supposition for the dearth of recent literary criticism on the township can be extrapolated from the intersection of the academy with other publics. In his book *Complicities*, Mark Sanders maintains that attempts to write against apartheid had the unforeseen effect of ensnaring the intellectual in a constellation of complicities with the system. Thus, he describes the intellectual 'as a figure of responsibility-in-complicity, a figure between complicity and complicities' (2002:19). Sanders's (2002:1) subtle critique suggests intellectuals may inadvertently reproduce the paradigms they seek to eradicate. Moreover, it provokes thoughtfulness *vis-a-vis* knowledge production and its subject(s). Why does intellectual capital accrue to some areas of study over others?

What is at stake, and is the absence of the township tied to its availability for the kinds of readings academics want to undertake?

Text

Earlier iterations of township identities and their narrative strategies have left a lasting imprint on textual production about townships. Questions of authenticity and belonging, of realism versus more opaque expressivities, and of the ordinary and the spectacular have retained their cogency. Simultaneously, shifts in social and political formations mean that one has to ask new questions about township spaces. In an attempt to enter into a conversation with the concerns mapped above, I suggest domains of representation speaking to the experiences of township constituents. For the sake of coherence, I have theorized these under overlying sub-headings which are by no means exhaustive: Emergent languages of blackness; patterns of consumption and destruction; threatening and threatened youth; dystopias; the predominance of 'the real'; and modes of satire as thriving sites of contestation.

The Terms of Blackness

The problematics of how and why to constitute blackness in post-apartheid are articulated in contemporary black self-writing. During apartheid, autobiography countered the erasure of black voices from the public sphere, relying on the invocation of truth and the unified self as prerequisites for social action (Nuttall 1998). The self was in turn tied to ideas about collective resistance and suffering which tended to erode variances played out across class, gender or age. The erasure of difference registered in critique too; as Lewis Nkosi discussed, the need for iconic struggle figures tended to obstruct critical analyses of black writing (1981). As Nuttall observes, representations of the black self after 1994 remained informed by discourses of shared suffering and resistance. Recent autobiographical engagements with the township have sought to complicate the kinds of identity production evident in previous works. Dlamini's *Native Nostalgia* blurs delineations of genre by positioning itself as a hybrid of memoir and ethnography, examining the intricate effects of wistfulness for the past. Where Dlamini disturbs commu-

nal narratives in order to propose different kinds of publics, Fred Khumalo's more conventionally told *Touch My Blood* (2006), struggles to instantiate meaningful communities in the present (Daymond & Visagie 2012: 730). In the tradition of Bloke Modisane's *Blame Me on History* (1963), Khumalo deploys humour to resist one-dimensional readings of the township. Dlamini and Khumalo's tactics imply that the township cannot be reduced to monolithic narratives of suffering, or solidarity or straightforward resistance. How then might constructions of blackness be similarly complicated?

Autobiographical historicity intersects with novelistic form and intention. For example, scepticism about the promises of the past and successes of the democratic present emerge in Zakes Mda's *Black Diamond* (2009) and Niq Mhlongo's *After Tears* (2006). Mda's earlier *Ways of Dying* (1995) captures the hopeful potentiality of the mid-nineties in a playful and luminous depiction of urbanization in which the ghetto is imagined as fluid and polyphonic (Barnard 2006). Contrastingly *Black Diamond*, written originally as a film script and retaining a spare filmic quality, evacuates the heroics of the struggle by presenting the disillusionment of struggle veterans and the affective fetishisation of township space by a black middle class which has moved elsewhere. Mda's somewhat bleak depiction is matched by Mhlongo's novel, where terse realism conveys deep cynicism about the rhetoric of change. Mhlongo's Soweto is marked by inequality, disenchant-ment and jaded criminality. If the realist aesthetics of Mda and Mhlongo tend to abridge the complexities of township experience, K. Sello Duiker's children's book *The Hidden Star* (2006), deploys fantastical imagery to deepen the intimacies of everyday relationships in Phola Park, and which are anchored in past acts of resistance. Duiker's enmeshment of the historical and the magical parallels the mosaic of style and remembering in Dlamini's text, pointing to configurations of black selves which are various and subtle.

Conspicuous Destruction

The capacity to craft the self against the echoes of history and confines of the present manifests in bodily practice. In her work on consumption by black youth in Johannesburg, Nuttall theorizes the ways in which the body is remade across a series of surfaces – architectures, music, clothes and magazines – to forge identities that simultaneously reference and escape the past (2009:108-132). Paralleling these acts of 'self-styling' (2009:109)

through conspicuous consumption are modalities which might be described as conspicuous destruction. *I'khothane*, or *izikhothane*, is mode of self-enunciation depending upon the disposability of expensive possessions. Young people gather in large numbers to watch competitors perform dance moves that mirror the stylised commodity of 'swanking' in the 1930s and 40s and mapantsula in the 1950s (Ballantine 1993). Designer labels and wads of money are flaunted before being burnt in a gesture of indifference. Cars too, are aspirational commodities that seem to provide traction in the neo-liberal landscape of contemporary South Africa. As much the legal or illegal ownership of cars operates as self-affirmation, so does the destruction or spoiling of high-end vehicles. The spinning and burning of cars began as a ritual at the funerals of Soweto gangsters in the 1980s, and the former is now a mode of performance across South Africa's townships. Spinning remains widely associated with criminality and youthful deviance, although attempts have been made to assimilate it into the mainstream.

Destruction as play on physical and social mobility emerges in two recent novels about the township; Sifiso Mzobe's *Young Blood* (2010) and David Dinwoodie-Irving's *African Cookboy* (2010). In these fictions, criminality organizes the lives of their protagonists and points to the imbrication of official and illegal discourse. Both novels stress the mobility of their male characters across local and international landscapes via the vehicular, and both contain scenes of vehicular destruction. Iterations of spectacular consumption and the disposability of the commodity enable socially excised voices to penetrate the public sphere at large. However, the increasingly acquisitive trajectories of Mzobe and Dinwoodie-Irving's characters are halted through death and filial compliance. Thus, though the performance of wastefulness ruptures the elision of the poor, it simultaneously demonstrates its inability to effect deep structures of inequality.

Old Youth

In an essay on the music of kwaito, Bheki Petersen notes that alignment of genre with criminality omits the social vulnerabilities out which its performers emerged. The kwaito star, writes Petersen, 'seems more endangered than dangerous' (2003: 207). The spectre of threatening yet threatened youth points to historical formations that reverberate in the present. In the South African context, the word youth has a particular

genealogy and political resonance. During the 1940s and 1950s the ANC Youth League gained influence both within party circles and among its supporters. Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and Oliver Thambo are all political icons who came to prominence through the Youth League and who sought to differentiate themselves from the older, more conservative leadership. In the 1970s and 80s young people played a pivotal role in the struggle and were willing to take significant risks against the policy of Bantu Education. The Soweto Uprising of 1976 was initiated by school children, who also bore the brunt of violent police response (Lodge 1992).

The term youth has a fairly wide application, designating anyone between eighteen and thirty five. The majority of South Africa's unemployed are drawn from this group (National Youth Development Agency 2011:6). The fact is that young people in South Africa often die young, are made old by scarcity, crime and illness. The fraught correlation of black youth who do not live to be old; of poverty, polemic and desire is forcefully embodied in Julius Malema, president of the Youth League from 2008 until his expulsion in 2012. Malema is a highly provocative figure, reviled and admired for his canny populism, regarded as dangerous by most white South Africans. Fiona Forde's excellent biography *An Inconvenient Youth*, tracks his birth in the township of Seshego, Limpopo, through his early involvement in the ANC, to his trial for hate speech in 2010 (2011). Malema's self-perception registers as a kind of epic, an account of heroic overcoming which is a signifier for the struggles of ordinary black South Africans. In this regard, it is not unlike the origins narrative of the ANC. Contrastingly, Forde's investigation suggests that epic is not an adequate narrative mode with which to capture the contradictory and even opaque manouevres of identity construction. The 'threat' of Malema reveals itself as a slippery assemblage of influences and agendas which escapes both his own narrative intent and that of others.

The dialogism of identity production is explored by Muff Andersson (2010) in her work on the hugely popular television series *Yizo Yizo*. Running between 1990 and 2004, *Yizo Yizo* staged a re-articulation of youthful selves through the students of Supatsela High, a fictional high school set in Daveyton township near Johannesburg (Andersson 2010). The plot lines of *Yizo Yizo* acknowledge the Fanonian implications of apartheid while excavating the lived experiences of post-apartheid township youth through scenes of despair, love, aspiration and violence. In Andersson's view, the portrayal of violence specifically is interwoven with textual references and

histories that complicate its reception as merely offensive or gratuitous (2010:60). Scenes of violence reflect its everyday occurrence in the township but are also nodes through which the interiorities of *Yizo Yizo's* characters are laid bare. Thus are discourses of dangerous youth unravelled into multihued threads of potentiality and vulnerability.

Ruins and Rituals

If *Yizo Yizo* and Forde unpack the leimotiv of threatening youth, it is also the case that violence stalks townships in real and imagined ways. The dystopian landscape of Mhlongo's *After Tears* is darkly rendered elsewhere in literature and popular culture. Deathliness is mediated through symbols working at the level of foreclosure – graves, coffins, mourning attire – conjuring forms of social hauntedness theorised by Derrida (*Spectres of Marx* 1993). More than this though, they offer up radical avenues for remembrance and critique. Following the disclosures of the country's Truth and Reconciliation Commission between 1995 and 2000, the margins of memory in the private and public sphere have been shown to be entangled (Sanders 2002; and Nuttall & Bystrom forthcoming 2012). The politically motivated but profoundly intimate consequences of murder and assassination under apartheid ruptured the surface of public life with personal loss that made us all culpable.

In the contemporary moment, death and grieving are strewn across the public imaginary. Sindiwe Magona's novel *Beauty's Gift* (2008) reads sexism and the HIV/AIDS crisis through female friendship. The death of Beauty, who has been infected by an unfaithful husband, and her burial in Gugulethu cemetery outside Cape Town, prompts her friends to instantiate change in their own lives. Echoing Magona's analysis of gender relationships in the township, the video for Kanyi Mavi's 2012 hip-hop single *Ingoma* (song) evokes death to explore abuse and affirm female power. The song's densely metaphorical lyrics draw on isiXhosa *iimbongi,* a form of highly stylised praise poetry. Ritualistic scenes of dancing reveal Kanyi in the white clothing of *iqgirha*, a traditional healer. Juxtaposed against these colourful and hectic scenes are black and white shots of graves being dug, of ruined buildings and wasteland in the Cape Flats. Kanyi's aggressive rapping style and ferocious gaze unsettle the silencing of women and mobilises conventions of ritual to forge counter-voices.

Spoek Mathambo's dark house cover of the Joy Division single,

She's Lost Control is filmed in an almost identical landscape, that of Langa township, slightly closer to Cape Town. The video, shot entirely in black and white, lingers on a cemetery and a series of abandoned buildings in order to reference Zionism, gangsterism and witchcraft. Ritual is made uncanny, and the zombie-esque movements of the children pursuing Spoek defamiliarize textures of body and skin. Modes of the ritual and the gothic point to the imbrications of private and public spheres and the defamiliarization of space though uncanny bodies. Ritual is a site for the intersection of diverse traditions, offering possibilities for forging alternative modernities. By making the social landscape strange, ritual resists typification while mapping the uneven experience of death and wellbeing in contemporary South Africa. It is worth noting, unfortunately only briefly here, that the latest project of the video's director, South African photographer Pieter Hugo, entitled *The Bereaved*, engages 'spaces of mourning' through images of AIDS victims taken at Khayelitsha morgue. The men are shown in their coffins, carefully prepared for transport for burial in the Eastern Cape (http://www. pieterhugo.com). This weaving together of death, memory and space makes private grief viscerally public.

Finally, the intersection of sex and death as a form of ritual encounter is performed in Mpumelelo Paul Grootboom's 2009 production *Foreplay*. *Foreplay*'s intertextual plotting, Grootboom adapts Arthur Schnitzler's sexual morality tale *La Ronde*, universalizes and localizes the exploitation of desire and power. Set between the township and the city, the play stages sex as commodity exchange across class lines. The transferral of HIV/AIDS between the characters, all of whom practice unsafe sex, is ceremonialized through red bubblegum passed from actor to actor. If Grootboom's techniques understate the complex economy of sex and affect explored in Hunter's study, his sharp and often humorous writing mocks sanctimonious moralising too frequently coded with race and class. Everyone, says the play's archetypal prostitute, 'is a fucking whore' (2009:78).

Satirising the Self

Grootboom's tart critique of societal corruption is extended into full-blown satire in other forms of media, most evidently stand-up comedy. Dustin Griffin, in a broad ranging study of satire, observes its resistance to containment within any single theory or form (1994:3). Its slipperiness means

satire is an ideal site from which to disarticulate farcical but persistent prejudices around race and place. During his stand-up shows, Cape Town comedian Marc Lottering performs an array of characters normatively associated with the city's Cape Flats. The Flats has a history of segregation distinct from townships in South Africa's other provinces and bears the residue of apartheid paternalism that saw coloured South Africans elevated relative to their African contemporaries (Salo 2003). Himself coloured, Lottering's parody of 'Aunty Merle' the housewife and 'Smiley' the taxi gaartjie inject irreverence into habitual racial stereotyping. On the one hand, Lottering's enmeshment of English with *Kaaps*, an Afrikaans dialect originating with Malay slaves imported to the Cape in the 17th and 18th centuries, reframes Afrikaans as polyglot, shaped by voices residing outside its conventionally white, Protestant register. The recasting of language undermines social scripts in which the Flats figure as marginal. However, Lottering's reliance on the alignment of *Kaaps,* and indeed colouredness, with the comical may tonally flatten coloured identity and its edgy relationship with place (see Oppelt 2012).

Stand-up Trevor Noah exploits (mis)readings of skin typography to produce race as a gaffe. Simply by virtue of his skin, Noah is widely assumed to be Cape Coloured and Afrikaans speaking. In fact he was raised in Soweto, the child of a Xhosa mother and Swiss father. Noah has achieved widespread popularity in South Africa, suggesting that his comedic take on the slippages of identity politics resonates across local audiences. Concomitantly, he draws on painful experiences of poverty marking his childhood in Soweto. In a recent documentary on Noah's life he addresses the camera: 'I'm no stranger to poverty … I know how to be poor … so … if ever this comedy thing doesn't work out I've got poverty to fall back on' (Meyer 2012). This witty puncturing of rhetoric about the bleak emotional lives of 'the poor' is reinforced by the fusion of pathos and humour in film's title; township life is as affectively dense and capable of comedy as anywhere and everywhere else.

Being the Real

Representations of township life as *funny* are outweighed by its couching in social realism. Here, the highly successful and volubly discussed film *District 9* suggests itself. Although the film is punctuated with comedic moments,

most significantly in its hapless protagonist Wikus Van der Merwe, John Marx observes a dedication to experiential legitimacy hinging upon the township as squalor (2010: 164-167). Many of the scenes were shot in the informal settlement of Chiawelo, Soweto, described by director Neill Blomkamp as 'unbelievably disgusting' in an interview with British newspaper *The Guardian* (Marx 2010: 164). Accordingly, the crew's grim encounters in Chiawelo concretised the value and weight of the filmic process. The piles of waste scavenged upon by the ostracised prawns are recognisable metaphors for social exclusion. The film's visual coda is a clever composite of science-fiction, tragedy and journalistic documentary, but its approach to the township is less subtle, as this is compressed into a desolate slice of realism, made all the more authentic by its misery.

In counterpoint to the unforgiving gaze of his novels and *District 9*, Niq Mhlongo writes of everyday affective interaction in his introduction to Jodi Bieber's (2010:13) photographic collection *Soweto,*

> Our house in Chiawelo hosted those interesting *stokvel* gigs on a monthly basis, and my brother's friends would come and drink beer and listen to the jazz music of Miles Davis or John Coltrane, or The Soul Brothers on his Tempest Hi-Fi.

Mhlongo's insistence that Soweto, alternatively and affectionately known as *Msawawa*, is both variable and byzantine is reinforced by Bieber's beautiful and often unexpected pictures. Bieber's training is in photojournalism – she has covered local and international conflict zones and in 2011 was awarded the World Press Photo of the Year Award for her image of Afghani refugee Bibi Aisha (http://www.jodibieber.com). Her images are marked by social realism in echoes of David Goldblatt, their subjects face the lens eye to eye. Where her photographs differ is their luminous colour and the intense, almost hyper-reality this confers upon ordinary life. The friction between the real and technicolour does much to dislocate the township as locat(e)ion and free it from narratives of violence and paucity. Bieber and Blomkamp's very different visions of the township throw up challenging questions about *why* it continues to be demarcated as 'real', even when this is playful or fantastical.

The difficulty of imaging the township through the real is thoughtfully worked through by Louise Green in a paper on South African advertising (2010). Green discusses an advert flighted in 2003 on SABC 1,

that presented itself as an attempt to disarticulate race. The focaliser is a young white man who wakes in Soweto and whose day leads us through a landscape in which white South Africans are township residents, catch mini-bus taxis, are stereotyped as criminal, and black South Africans take township tours, hire (white) domestic workers and own expensive private property in suburbia. The advert's symbolic register and tagline *Ya Mampela* (the real thing) project the city through modalities which, she argues, are in conflict (Green 2010: 3). On the one hand, the advert's resonance draws on its stated authenticity (Green 2010:4). On the other, this claim to 'the real' has been forged through meticulous artifice (Green 2010: 4). The advert's representational weakness resides, says Green, in a disconnect between its invocation of 'the real' and unequal circulations of value shaping space and sociality in contemporary South Africa (Green 2010:8).

As a way of engaging Green's critique, I want to travel full circle to the work of Njabulo Ndebele. Writing on the pop star Brenda Fassie, also known as 'The Queen of the Townships', Ndebele describes powerful tropes of unruliness and ungovernability. 'Thinking of Brenda: the desire to be' was first presented in Grahamstown 1996, and reworked and published in different arenas three times since: *Chimurenga* in 2002, after her death in *This Day* in 2004 and finally in an anthology of his essays titled *Fine Lines from the Box* in 2007. The several permutations of the essay speak, I think, to the elusive, transmutable traits of the singer herself. Brenda, writes Ndebele, had a 'talent for the art of reversal' (2007:209), overturning statements about her into oppositional truths, 'some people say that I am ugly … I don't want to be beautiful. My ugliness has taken me to the top' (Ndebele 2007: 209).

Brenda's lifestyle choices unsettled the social norms of her fanbase; her hedonism, bisexuality and outspokenness positioning her well outside convention. Simultaneously, she resisted delineation as 'other', adopting a strategy of narrative distance from declamations about her lesbianism (Ndebele 2009:209). Such strategies were a form of evasive enunciation that capture her many contradictory qualities. Like her music, Brenda was an amalgam of styles, of hardship and glamour (Ndebele 2009:213). Her songs signal everyday sadness and exuberance alongside trenchant socio-political critique. Brenda's refusal of fixity and her desire to inhabit the moment of being, meant that her voice, 'enter(s) the public arena as ungovernable, the ultimate expression of personal freedom' (Ndebele 2009:213). Ndebele maps

Brenda's boisterousness onto anti-apartheid, but we can use it to read for resilience in the face of disparity *and* the startling possibilities of aesthetic spontaneity.

Brenda makes us read the township creatively.

Conclusion

This paper has tracked texts and genealogies of township lifeworlds and embraced the richness of their forms. It has tried to cover extensive terrain across modes of cultural representation and any gaps in its analysis are my own, not that of the work. In conclusion, I want to draw out three sites of intersection that pervade the essay; unpredictability, affect and race. Let's begin with the last. Living in South Africa, reading South Africa, writing South Africa: all of these force encounter with the profound racialization of our society and its persistent structuring of our material and social lives. Public discourse is saturated with race talk and, frankly, racism. This study recognises the continuing effects of race. Indeed, its very premise is rooted in articulations of being black and their ties to geographies subject to recent neglect in the humanities.

Concomitantly, though I hope not contrarily, it wants to push against essentialism via imaginaries that complicate the township and conceptions of what it means to black, and by extension coloured or Indian or white. Following Lauren Berlant's theorization of the 'intimate public sphere' (1997), I argue that aesthetic circulations of affect intersect with and inform public life in South Africa. Such reading has critical precedent in the work of Nuttall (2009) and Neville Hoad, whose book *African Intimacies* interrogates formations of race and sexuality through the prism of the personal (2007). Approaching texts through the rubric of intimacy as well as difference allows for the latter's perforation by unpredictability and invention.

These articulations have significance outside the South African context. As Christopher Warnes shows in an essay on Mhlongo, township space is interpolated by and in conversation with international cultures not only of the South (2011). Sites in Khayelitsha, Langa and Gugulethu for example, bear the imprint of residents' engagements with global spaces and events – Kuwait is a taxi rank known for violence during the taxi wars in the 1990s and 2000s; Kosovo was named after the peace agreement signed there in 1999 and Europe references the establishment of the European Union in

1993*. Rob Nixon's recent work on the convergence of postcolonialism and ecocriticism serves as an inspirational template for transnational critique. Tracking incremental environmental violence perpetrated against poor communities across the globe, Nixon mines opposition in literatures from Africa, Asia, North America, Europe and the Caribbean (2011). In so doing, he enacts a reading strategy that rethinks the parameters of discursive intervention and activism. The environment is only one point through which to read across and between geographies and temporalities. How do urban communities at 'the margin' – and I use the term with an awareness of its limitations – challenge discourses of privilege through affective and material strategies? If we agree with Mike Davis (2007) that the global future is slums, then to critique them as symptomatic of widening inequality is only half the work. Returning, finally, to the dictionary definition offered at the beginning of this paper, I argue that we are compelled to look beyond the surface structures of etymology to deep connective strata of creativity and resilience.

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