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Lesedi : Sesotho word meaning “knowledge”

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**Discussing Social Cohesion
in South Africa**

Coordinated by *Léo Fortaillier*

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'Social Cohesion' in South Africa Scientifically Engaging with a Buzzword



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The May 13, 2019, international cover of the American magazine *Time* examines South Africa as 'the world's most unequal country' (*Time*, May 13, 2019)¹. To illustrate this title in bold white letters, the editor chose a drone picture taken from Johnny Miller's *Unequal Scenes* series showing the wealthy suburb of Primrose on the left and the informal settlement of Makaanse on the right only separated by a road². Between the two neighborhoods of Johannesburg the contrast is stark. Even though the country cannot be reduced to such a binary opposition the picture contains a part of truth as South Africa often ranks amongst the last countries in terms of Gini coefficient. If we add to that context that "since the mid-2000s the country has experienced one of the world's highest levels of popular protest and strike action" (Bohler-Muller et al. 2017), speaking of 'social cohesion' could seem arduous.

However, alongside a range of other concepts (such as empowerment, leadership, grassroots, etc.), the social

cohesion rhetoric is prevalent in different social spheres and particularly in the governmental and development sector. The authors who have contributed to the book *Living Together, Living Apart* illustrate the penetration of this concept as they mention a range of different contexts in which it is used, and use it themselves to analyse very diverse types of fieldwork: from the suburbs to the townships to the rural areas, from schools to universities, from the arts to the sport fields, etc (Ballantine 2017). The different chapters of this book show that this 'empty word' (Erwin 2017) can mean very different things in very different mouths, 'social cohesion' being a kind of 'modern shibboleth, an unavoidable password' (Cornwall 2007: 471). According to P. Bernard, it is because of its vagueness and ambiguity that social cohesion can be referred as a 'hybrid "quasi concept" oscillating between the academic and policy worlds'³ (1999:2-3). This comes close to the definition of a 'buzzword' used by A. Cornwall after what the philosopher W.B. Gallie (1956) termed 'essentially

1. <https://time.com/5581483/time-cover-south-africa>

2. <https://unequalscenes.com>

3. "I write 'hybrid' because these constructions have two faces: on the one hand, they are based, in part and selectively, on an analysis of the data of the situation which allows them to be relatively realistic and to benefit from the aura of legitimacy conferred by the scientific method; and they maintain, on the other hand, a vagueness that makes them adaptable to various situations, flexible enough to follow the meanderings and necessities of political action from day to day. This vagueness explains why it is so difficult to determine exactly what is meant by 'social cohesion'". Bernard, P (1999) 'Social cohesion: a dialectical critique of a quasi-concept', *Strategic Research and Analysis Directorate*, Ottawa: Department of Canadian Heritage, p 2.

contested concepts: terms that combine general agreement on the abstract notion that they represent with endless disagreement about what they might mean in practice' (Cornwall 2007: 472). This also asks a key question for the social scientist: how to critically engage with a word that can mean everything and nothing? This issue was at the heart of a symposium entitled 'Social cohesion: scientifically engaging with a buzzword', which took place at the Stellenbosch University on June 4, 2019 with the support of IFAS-Research. The papers published here are largely inspired by the presentations and debates that were held on that day.

Far from providing a definitive and united answer, the different contributions nevertheless have a common point: all the researchers adopted a critical perspective. Instead of doing research *for* social cohesion policies and programs, they opted to do research *on* these policies and programs (Dubois, 2015) taking in account the specificity of the concept of social cohesion in South Africa.

Analysis for policies

A lot of the academic publications around social cohesion are made in an attempt to help policy makers or civil society to frame it and to suggest practical solutions with the ultimate goal of improving cohesion in South African society. In the popularisation process of these two words, the role of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) has been paramount. In the early 2000's, it was the HSRC which imported this very consensual idea, designed in the 1990's to address the 'challenges' of increasingly diverse European and North American societies and promoted by International Organisations such as the OECD or the Council of Europe (Jenson 2010: 3). After the publication of *What Holds Us Together* (Chidester 2003), the HSRC's Social Cohesion and Integration Research Programme was frequently commissioned by the South African Presidency to produce reports on this matter (The Presidency 2004, 2012, 2014). Simultaneously, the Department of Arts and Culture started creating its own social cohesion strategy (DAC 2012). It is also to 'assist local government to develop research and informed policy' that the Gauteng City-Region Observatory



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(GCRO) conducted a research project around social cohesion in the province (Ballard 2019). These research centres played a significant role in the adoption of the concept by national and local governments, materialised by the organisation of a Social Cohesion Summit by the Department of Home Affairs in 2012 or the implementation of the Premier's Social Cohesion Games in the Gauteng Province in 2017.

Similarly, academia and civil society organisations often partnered to produce booklets, reports, guidelines, etc. – often written by people straddling the academia and the non-governmental sector and often acting like 'conscience constituents' (McCarthy 1977) – devised to help other civil society organisations to implement social cohesion programs. Promoted by the government and various international organisations, the concept notably

gained traction in the NGO sphere after the 2008 xenophobic attacks as, unlike the notion of nation building, ‘it does not necessarily exclude cross border migrants’ (Ballard 2019) and sounds more positive than the previous ‘antixenophobic campaigns’ (for example, the Roll Back Xenophobic campaign from 1998 to 2001⁴). Thus, a few months after the 2008 violence, the Nelson Mandela Foundation launched a ‘social cohesion community conversations programme’ and organised different events around the topic, which would also be the theme of Michelle Bachelet’s 2014 Nelson Mandela Annual Lecture. Looking at organisations’ initiatives of that sort and with the aim of ‘promoting social cohesion and countering violence against foreigners and other “outsiders”’, the African Centre for Migration and Society produced a ‘study of social cohesion interventions in fourteen South African Townships’ (Molson 2012), providing local actors with a reflexive toolkit to improve their programs. Last but not least, with continental ambitions, the South African think tank Institute for Justice and Reconciliation, commissioned by the United Nations Development Program, developed a discussion paper proposing a barometer for social cohesion in Africa (Lefko-Everett 2017).

Analysis of policies

Even though they have commendable objectives and often provide useful results, all the research projects quickly presented above have been produced *for* policies (be it national governmental legal productions or local NGO programs), either to inform them, provide them with tools or critically assess them for improvement. This issue will therefore not be yet another endeavour to provide an umpteenth general definition or measurement tools for social cohesion but will rather be an attempt to engage critically on the use of this term and to reflect, more or less directly, on how social scientists in South Africa are and could be approaching the concept (If the question of the relationship between social movements and researchers has been harshly debated in South Africa (Walsh 2015, Steyn 2016, Friedman 2015), the same ‘whose side are we on?’ (Becker 1967) question

has been much more neglected when it comes to relationships with governmental institutions, international organisations or NGOs). However, before introducing how the different contributors of this special issue decided to grasp the social cohesion concept, it is necessary to quickly locate an idiom mostly used in governmental or NGO reports.

To neutralise the vagueness of buzzwords, Cornwall suggests using Laclau’s concept of ‘chain of equivalence’, i.e., the ‘strings of words that work together to evoke a particular set of meanings’ (Laclau 1996), because,

“used in a chain of equivalence with good governance, accountability, results-based management, reform, and security, for example, words like democracy and empowerment come to mean something altogether different from their use in conjunction with citizenship, participation, solidarity, rights, and social justice”. (Cornwall 2007).

A similar approach could be used about ‘social cohesion’ in the South African context. As it has been underlined, this concept ‘borrows some aspects from earlier frameworks for understanding social transformation after apartheid, such as multi-racialism, non-racialism, black consciousness, nation-building, reconciliation and economic transformation’ (Ballard 2019) and it could therefore be interesting to pinpoint more precisely its position in the post-apartheid lexicon while looking at who is using it.

In *Mapping Social Cohesion*, Jane Jenson argues that this notion is primarily used to mask growing social inequalities (1998). Is this the case in South Africa? In two different papers looking at how the South African State states the social cohesion problem, Vanessa Barolsky and Caryn Abrahams demonstrate that the government equates it to nation-building, to a ‘banal form of nationalism that required enactment of certain allegiances – to the symbols and historical narratives of South Africa’s liberation’ (Abrahams 2016) while ‘ignoring the profound institutional weaknesses that have allowed fragmentation to escalate unchecked’ (Barolsky

4. <https://odihpn.org/magazine/we-are-not-treated-like-people-the-roll-back-xenophobia-campaign-in-south-africa/>

2013). Following these authors, the dominant perspective on social cohesion promoted by the state and international organisations is a depoliticised and decontextualized one, and the social cohesion projects are often ‘one size fits all’ programs that do not take into account the local specificities (Monson 2012, Misago 2016). The objective of this issue is to carry on this mapping work of the concept utilisation beyond governmental and international spheres. With the top-down circulation of the concept and its reappropriation by a set of different actors, shifts in meaning happened (Mazeaud 2016), with or without mediation (Piper 2014). Facing the reality and complexity of local situations, and with diverse objective, civil society does not necessarily adopt exactly the same chain of equivalence as the state. Therefore we will see in this volume that social scientists do not speak about social cohesion in the same way in different South African contexts – for example, in reference to refugee rights organisations, to a youth-focused NGO in Cape Town, or in a *City Improvement District* in Hillbrow.

However, the mere discourse analysis is insufficient and has to be completed by empirical, grounded, ethnographic approach, to grasp ‘how policies are concretely made on a daily basis’ (Dubois, 2015), to understand how the different reports, guidelines, booklets, etc. evoked above are concretely used on the ground, but also how people tinker with them and make this distant social cohesion concept their own (Smith 2005). Indeed, if this ‘quasi concept’ oscillates between the academic and policy worlds, it is not purely ‘up in the air’: it has concrete manifestations at the grassroots level. Following Lipsky’s hypothesis that street level bureaucrats have a ‘relative autonomy’ from their managers and can therefore deviate the trajectories of policies (Lipsky 2010), the contributions will look at how a concept imported from international organisations is re-appropriated or mediated (Piper 2014) by local actors able to straddle different ‘talks’ (social cohesion, community, struggle, etc.). Therefore, they are attentive to the agency and subjectivity of street level actors but also to the unintended outcomes that might result from their actions (Robins 2008:23).

In the first contribution, through the study of the recent renaming of Port-Elizabeth to Gqeberha, Caryn

Abrahams studies the way the African National Congress (ANC)-led South African government performs “social cohesion”. According to her, in an electoral context, this toponymic change is an opportunity, for a political party unable to fulfil its promises of structural changes, to keep the ‘authorising authority’ over the meaning of what a cohesive South Africa is. Without taking a normative stance on the name change itself, Caryn Abrahams therefore reasserts her 2016’s argument (Abrahams 2016) that the ANC equates social cohesion to a narrow nation building vision, revolving around liberation heroes and symbols, isolated from the socio-economic reality of the country.

In his paper, Laurence Piper argues that we should not throw out the baby with the bath water and ‘make the case for re-claiming the notion of social cohesion rather than jettisoning it’. Using ethnographic work in two Cape Town refugee rights organisations, he pleads for a ‘place-based conception of social cohesion’. Even though the programs observed in the township of Imizamo Yethu are ‘very modest in impact’, Piper draws from them a desirable horizon where collective action and the ‘right to the city’ would be the cornerstone of a new conception for local and national ‘community’ and ‘social cohesion’.

Similarly, Thembanani Mkhize looks at the complex relationship between the establishment of the Residential City Improvement District (CID) of eKhaya in Hillbrow, a ‘historically troubled neighbourhood in inner-city Johannesburg’, and social cohesion. If the CIDs are usually criticized top-down initiatives, he argues, based on an extensive ethnographic work, that it is not totally the case in eKhaya. Thanks to the engagement of grassroots actors – like property caretakers – that know the neighbourhood dynamics and actors well, the project managed to have a way deeper impact, despite some limitations, notably the issue of vigilantism (law enforcement undertaken without legal authority by a self-appointed group of people).

With a more methodological approach, Chloé Buire builds on her PhD and post-doctoral fieldworks devoted to citizenship, empowerment and self-organisation on the Cape Flats, to present the strength and the weakness of the ethnographic approach – that surfaced more or less explicitly in the other article – when it comes to work on

issue such as social cohesion. She points out the necessity to take into account the impact of the researcher on her/his fieldwork but further than that to rethink the relationship between university and society at large.

To round off this *Lesedi* issue, Leslie Bank provides an analysis of the mall riots and lootings which took place in South Africa in July 2021 (his paper was obviously not presented at the 2019 symposium mentioned above). His contribution is welcomed both as a concluding and opening piece: it is indeed a good reminder of the burning topicality of social cohesion in the times of a global pandemic. Using his expertise of the Cape Town geographical and accommodation inequalities, but also basing his analysis on *kwaito* (a style of popular South African music) lyrics, he argues that the recent events must be analysed through the prism of citizenship, poverty, and suburban desire in a country submitted to restrictive lockdown regulations since March 2020.

In conclusion, even though some divergences appear between the diverse contributions, several common threads are crossing all of them and a few results can thus be put forward to provide food for thought for the social

scientists approaching the concept of social cohesion – or more broadly, conducting research in fieldworks often saturated with buzzwords. By underlining these outcomes, we hope to provide a ‘chain of equivalence’ but further than that, suggest an epistemological consideration that could be used to critically engage with such notions. First, it would seem that speaking about social cohesion in broad general terms is somewhat counterproductive and can even be treacherous: it should not be associated with a concept such as ‘nation-building’ (Friedman) but rather with place-based accounts, attentive to local dynamics, individual subjectivities and agency. Second, far from being limited this micro and meso level observations, if they are set ‘in the broader perspective of power and inequality structures’, can help unveil broader ‘social, economic, symbolic and political domination processes operating in and through policy processes’ (Dubois, 2015). Third, a critical approach needs to reflect on the manner the researchers access and engage on their fieldwork, but also on the prescriptive methodologies and rhythm of their research and, eventually, on the social and political contexts, practices and uses of social science research.

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Social Cohesion as Advocacy

The Case for Place-Based Collective Action for the Right to the City



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Social cohesion is a widely used sociological term with a myriad of meanings associated with concepts like solidarity, identity, networks, trust and mutual aid within and across groups in a society (Burns et al 2018). In the South African context, it is often associated with the notion of ‘ubuntu’ or African humanism, where ‘umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu’ in IsiZulu means something like ‘a person is a person through other people’. In general, social cohesion is conceived as a positive social attribute, an indicator of wellbeing, and is positively associated with a range of other social goods. Indeed, the international literature points to positive correlations between social cohesion and levels of safety and security (Lamb 2019), care for the elderly (Miao *et al.* 2019), better physical and mental health (Echeverría *et al.* 2008; Kim & Kawachi 2017), environmental sustainability (Uzzell *et al.* 2002), political stability (Dhéret 2015) and economic growth (Easterly *et al.* 2006). On the negative side, social cohesion is associated with insular societies, traditional or culturally exclusive social norms, or as concealing class conflict behind cultural commonalities (Burns *et al.* 2018).

In recent times, the concept of social cohesion has become more widely used in South African government and policy circles in relation to challenges of nation-building in a society deeply divided by race, class and nationality. This move has been trenchantly criticised by

Friedman as either a malignant Trojan horse for an anti-immigrant nationalism or a more benign desire for solidarity but without economic justice. There is much to this line of criticism, especially when xenophobic discourse in South Africa connects the identity of who really belongs to particular material interests – as does all nativist nationalism elsewhere in the world. If social cohesion is, in reality, the policy answer to the problem that ‘foreigners are criminals who take our jobs and our women’, then it actually serves as a dog whistle for xenophobes, rather than a rally call for inclusion.

Friedman’s argument is to jettison the notion of social cohesion altogether, everywhere in the world. This argument is fascinating because it identifies and then destroys the grounds of most common conceptions of social cohesion. For example, following a thorough review of recent debate and usages, Burns *et al.* (2018) define social cohesion as ‘the extent to which people are co-operative, within and across group boundaries, without coercion or purely self-interested motivation’. Yet, according to Friedman, it is precisely coercion and self-interest that underwrite the dominant meanings of social cohesion, and that lead us toward domination. His criticism fillets the common-sense conception of social cohesion.

In this article, I will make the case for re-claiming the notion of social cohesion rather than jettisoning it. This is

despite the fact that I agree with much of Friedman's critique in the South African context, especially of the malign meaning of social cohesion in government talk as an exclusive South African racial nationalism. However, precisely because of this reality, I think we need to reclaim the concept. My intention is to demonstrate not just that alternative notions of social cohesion are theoretically possible, but also desirable, and already pre-figured in existing social movement practice in South Africa. In what follows, I make a case for a place-based conception of social cohesion, linked to collective mobilisation that affirms community in a forward-looking way. In so doing, I am making a normative argument for the way that social cohesion *should* be reconstructed to be of use in a particular political context. I will leave it to others to decide whether this 'should' can become a 'will'. This granted, I make this case against the background of an analysis of aspects of exclusion in the South African city and, as noted, many of my proposals are based on the ideas and practices of actually existing refugee rights organisations and social movements.

In this paper, I argue that we need a place-based account of social cohesion that is useful to progressive social movements because it affirms solidarity and attachment based on collective action that (i) resists xenophobia, (ii) demands various rights to the city, but also attempts to (iii) auto-construct local communities. In their excellent review of the concept of social cohesion, Burns *et al.* (2018) usefully contrast social cohesion with physical cohesion. They note that an object can disintegrate in two ways – it can either break into smaller lumps or it can atomise – and that thus we can contrast a deeply divided society with an atomised society. I think this metaphor can be inverted usefully too. It is possible to build social cohesion not only by moving from atoms to the whole of society, but also by combining local residents into local organisations and then these organisations into a larger movement. Indeed, there is a long tradition of this 'bottom-up' organisational approach in the history of popular movements in South Africa. Simply put, building social cohesion in a place-based way might be one way of building it nationally, so long as the political content of cohesion can also reach across local place.

Re-inscribing exclusion: country, city, and neighbourhood

It is widely observed that the South African city is a hard place for the poor migrant and especially foreign nationals. The most obvious evidence for this claim are high levels of xenophobic resentment and violence against foreign nationals in South Africa since the advent of democracy in 1994 (Crush 2001; Landau 2011). Indeed, recent research suggests that anti-foreigner attitudes are getting worse rather than better in South Africa (Schippers 2015, Pew 2019). Furthermore, while there is no doubt that the ongoing attacks on foreign residents is a form of civic rather than state violence, the state too is complicit in producing this politics. Below, I outline three ways in which the African migrant is excluded from the city in South Africa, somewhat ironically, in ways that largely re-inscribe the exclusions of the apartheid era. In short, the African migrant is perceived as a threat to the country, to the city, and lives in a threatening neighbourhood.

Country

A key source of exclusion for the African migrant is the policy evolution of the post-apartheid state. There exists a profound contradiction between South Africa's refugee policy that, until recently, was comparatively progressive and generous in spirit, and South Africa's post-apartheid immigration policy, that has steadily restricted the access of poor African nationals to South Africa. This disjuncture is partly explained by the fact that, for over ten years, Home Affairs was run by Minister Buthelezi of the Inkatha Freedom Party, while foreign affairs was always headed by a Minister from the African National Congress. Where the ANC felt beholden to the Southern African states that had shielded it in exile, and was more internationalist and liberal in general, the IFP was more conservative and nationalist. However, there are deeper reasons for this tension, and in many ways, this policy can be seen as an extension of apartheid era policy to migration that Kabwe-Segatti describes as the 'two-gate' policy. She explains:

"The front gate welcomed people who corresponded to the criteria of attractiveness defined by the governing minority. The back gate served a double function, preventing

unwanted migrants from entering and allowing cheap and relatively docile labour in for temporary periods". (2008:34)

To a large extent, this policy approach has endured, albeit now more in class than race terms, with immigration policy welcoming wealthy and skilled immigrants while keeping poor migrants out. In a region characterised by high rates of mobility and mixed migration flows, the imbalance between the restrictive immigration framework and the liberal refugee protection framework has resulted in undocumented migrants turning to the country's asylum system in large numbers as a means to regularise their stay. Thus, between 2008 and 2012, the volume of asylum applications was as high as 150 000 per year, while from 2005 to 2011, the country received the highest asylum applications globally, with a peak of over 200 000 in 2009 (UNHCR 2013).

This reality is one that government has responded to with increasing coercion. Notably, in 2015, the Department of Home Affairs stated 'the majority (88%) of asylum applications adjudicated during the 2014 calendar year were rejected either as unfounded (39%) or manifestly unfounded (49%). These findings further confirm that the majority of asylum claims indeed fall outside the definition of a refugee as outlined in Section 3 of the Refugees Act No. 130 of 1998' (DHA 2015). In this regard, the former Minister of Home Affairs, Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, is on record as stating that 'we would like to be firm and very strict with those who are abusing the asylum system, knowing very well they are not refugees' (DHA 2011). During this period, South Africa has adopted 'internal control' measures such as monitoring documentation at state institutions like schools and hospitals, and promoting 'community enforcement' with the aim of detecting and deporting undocumented migrants. In addition, as Hobden (2020) has noted, government has tightened up naturalisation procedures both formally and in informal practice to a significant extent.

The second reason why the state is culpable in the reproduction of the two-gates policy of the apartheid era is the criminalisation of foreign migrants and the securitisation of the approach to immigration in the last

ten years. In this regard, in 2009, President Zuma announced the formation of a Border Management Agency (BMA). In 2010, Home Affairs moved into the Justice and Crime Prevention cluster of government, increasing its focus on security measures such that limiting access to the asylum system became intertwined with national security. In 2012, the ANC made a resolution recommending the establishment of a BMA and in 2015, Cabinet approved the submission of the Border Management Authority Bill to parliament. In 2011, government closed three of the six metropolitan refugee reception centres in South Africa, trying to force foreign migrants to return to the port of entry to renew documents. In 2015, the police launched *Operation Fiela* in response to xenophobia attacks in KwaZulu-Natal that targeted foreigners for weapons, drugs, prostitution, and other illegal activities. All these confirm a strategic move to satisfy security-based and nationalist calls for greater control of foreign migrants, while evading rights and interest-group-based pressures for liberalisation.

City

If the increasing pressure being brought to bear on foreign migrants in South Africa represents an ironic re-inscription of the 'two-gates' policy of apartheid. This re-inscription of the African migrants as a threat is also evident at the level of the city. As Lauren Landau (2011) notes, the South African city has long been defined in relation to the threat of the (poor, black) migrant. Indeed, at the heart of the policy of apartheid, on which the National Party came to power in 1948, was the desire to keep black South Africans out of white South Africa, in particular the city, unless they were there on a temporary basis as cheap labour. Hence, according to the 1921 Transvaal Province Commission,

"[T]he Native should only be allowed to enter urban areas, which are essentially the white man's creation, when he is willing to enter and to minister to the needs of the white man, and should depart therefore when he ceases to minister." (in Landau 2011:5)

In the 1960s, the National Party under Verwoerd doubled down on racializing access to the urban by declaring black South African 'foreign natives' who belonged to the rural 'homelands' rather than the city.

Verwoerd's strategy was to take advantage of the post-colonial nationalist moment in Africa to ostensibly grant independence to ethnically-defined rural 'homelands' within the borders of South Africa but not to confer real powers upon them. The real reason was to try to control migration into the city by poor, black South Africans who were perceived as a threat. In Landau's words, poor African migrants were portrayed as foreign 'demons' that threatened white, urban, Christian South Africa; and there are worrying echoes of this othering in contemporary framings of African migrants in the post-apartheid South African city. For example, according to the City of Cape Town (2014: 12), 'the population grew by 46% in the 15-year period between 1996 and 2011', and by 2016, Cape Town Mayor Patricia de Lille described the city as 'buckling under the pressure of urbanisation'. Similar views were expressed nationally too, for as Landau (2011:6) observes, 'throughout its post-colonial history South Africa has regularly spoken of the nation as a body that could be bolstered or, more regularly, contaminated by outsiders – native or foreign'. The words of former Minister of Home Affairs, Mangosuthu Buthelezi, sum up this attitude:

"South Africa is faced with another threat, and that is the SADC ideology of free movement of people, free trade and freedom to choose where you live or work. Free movement of persons spells disaster for our country." (in Landau 2011:6)

In sum then, to the national re-inscription of a two-gates approach to immigration, overlays the re-inscription of the foreign migrants as a threat to the city.

Neighbourhood

Lastly, the manifestation of the threat of the migrant to the post-apartheid city is, as a general rule, manifest within the city in widening socio-economic inequality between wealthy (and historically white) neighbourhoods and poor (historically black) ones. Where under apartheid residential areas were determined by race, after apartheid they are shaped more by income. The consequence is an asymmetrical form of racial desegregation where, generally speaking, upwardly mobile black South Africans move to historically white areas. The impact is to keep poor, black areas poor, and

sometimes even poorer, and to keep wealthy areas wealthy but more multi-racial. In addition, with high levels of urbanisation but without jobs, most of South Africa's cities witnessed a spike in informal settlement after 1994. While these have stabilised somewhat in recent years, they tend to be adjacent to existing poor, black formal settlements, rendering them hyper-segregated, 'grey spaces' of formality and informality (Geyer & Mohammed 2016; Yiftachel 2009). While there are some significant deviations, such as in the city centres of the major cities, some of which have become poorer, the general pattern holds.

Furthermore, as Anciano and Piper (2019) noted, the re-inscription of spatial segregation in the post-apartheid city has a political dimension too. Simply put, poorer areas where residents are unable to meet key needs of urban life – such as livelihoods, housing, transport, security and environmental health – are subject to both forms of developmental governance by national government / international NGOs and the like, and informal governance where residents meet these needs themselves. Accessing housing in poor areas of the city can thus occur through market mechanisms, access to state or NGO projects, or through informal initiatives. In wealthier areas, it is through market means overwhelmingly. Thus, not only are poorer areas of the city differently governed from wealthy, as white and black areas were under apartheid, but poorer areas have competing authorities, some of which may be overtly oppressive like drug gangs, or security rackets or community patrols that do not respect due process. These 'grey spaces' are the neighbourhoods in which most African migrants settle. Furthermore, the poorer the area the worse not just the quality of life, but generally the degree and character of political order (Ibid). In sum, as well as being portrayed as a threat to the city, poor migrants must live under the worst and most dangerous conditions in urban areas.

Social cohesion as place-based solidarity through collective action

Hopefully, it is now clearer how in post-apartheid urban South Africa, the African migrant endures as a precarious category, constructed as the other to national

belonging, a threat to the well-ordered city, at the same time as being subject to unique and often violent forms of rule in the neighbourhood. This intersection of three kinds of exclusion produces a triple oppression that requires a special kind of politics. While the poor, rural migrant confronts much of the exclusion from the city and neighbourhood too, only the foreign migrant loses the claim to national belonging and full citizenship rights.

In what follows I advocate for a place-based notion of social cohesion for local community formed around collective action that affirms belonging to the community of a place over national exclusion, demands the rights to the public goods necessary for living in the city, and works to build local community through auto-construction of place and social networks. In many ways, this case is informed by the existing innovative practice by refugee rights organisations like PASSOP (People Against Suffering and Oppression and Poverty) and VAC (Voice of African for Change) – organisations I have observed reasonably closely as a participant and research collaborator for a ten year period¹. Both organisations are modest in size, with a history of both successes and failures, and they share not just a network of activists across them, but also an approach to advocacy that sets them apart in the refugee rights sector.

Essentially, in contrast to other organisations that are mostly based in advice offices in the city centre, PASSOP and VAC have/had an approach of setting up offices in the outlying townships, in particular Imizamo Yethu and Masiphumelele in Cape Town. Hence, these organisations work with local community leaders and the community



Figure 1: Imizamo Yethu: the informal section where most foreign migrants live. © Laurence Piper

at large, where migrants actually live. Underwriting this approach was the idea that both South African and foreign migrants to the city share more in common than divides them. This common interest was framed both ideologically and materially. Thus, ideologically, both PASSOP and VAC speak of common human rights and a shared African heritage. Materially, both emphasise that all residents lack jobs, housing, security, environmental health and the like. Thus, according to PASSOP director, Braam Hanekom (2012), ‘one of main goals was to work with everyone in the community to unite all poor people in common struggle on whatever the issue was. Whenever there was a march, we were there. We talked about rights for all’.

Furthermore, both understood that key to the success of this community-based strategy was that members of the organisation not only had offices in the township but lived there too. The idea was not just to be in the same

1. I have served the Board of VAC (Voices of Africans) for change, since its revivification about 8 years ago. Prior to that I collaborated with PASSOP in a participatory research project exploring refugees experiences of insecurity in Hout Bay, Cape Town (see Piper & Wheeler 2016).

streets, churches and shebeens as South Africans, but more to build forms of collective action that affirmed a shared identity. When opportunities arose to participate in community leadership positions, organisation members stood for office. When community meetings were held, PASSOP and VAC members took part. In addition, leadership worked at cultivating good relations with the local ANC and SANCO leadership in the townships and took the initiative to have community-building events like soccer tournaments. Hence, according to Refugee 1 (2012), who lived in Imizamo Yethu and participated in community structures for seven years:

“I was well known in Imizamo Yethu. We spoke with the leaders, we spoke with the youth. We spoke with everyone. We would talk about rights, we would explain why people were refugees. [...] We would help calm issues down when conflict arose [...] They knew us, and mostly there were good people.”



Figure 2: Refugee 1 © Laurence Piper

At the time of writing, both organisations are somewhat on the wane, mostly due to a lack of funding, and their presence in the townships of Imizamo Yethu and Masiphumelele has declined. However, I believe there is much we can learn from this advocacy approach. In what follows, I reflect on how this approach can help resist xenophobia, demand inclusion in the city, and build the local community.

Resisting xenophobia

There are many ways of resisting xenophobic ideas such as affirming universal human rights or a shared African heritage. My claim is that these are likely to be more effective in a local place when combined with a notion of a shared, place-based community. Now, while some criticise the turn to community as romantic, traditionalist or a form of magical thinking that leads to domination, there are two sets of reasons why we should consider affirming rather than denying community. The first are the already existing forms of community as social identity about in the public discourse – in particular the forms of nativist nationalisms identified above. To take these on, it would help to fight fire with fire – that is to counter national discourses of exclusion with local discourses of inclusion. Second, the idea of community is one that most people like, and the idea has a long history in South African and African political thought. Indeed, a defining feature of African political philosophy is the greater weight given to community over the individual (Menkiti 1984, Wiredu 1997). There is thus a tradition of thinking communally that is central to African thought and politics.

In addition, there are three good reasons why a place-based conception of community has the potential to register more deeply with local residents that generalised notions of universal rights or a common African past. First, if exclusion from the city is spatialized, then an effective response is one that speaks to this spatialization. Affirming the common experience of residents who are excluded by virtue of living in the same place is a key way to do this. Indeed, this kind of politics already exists in pockets around the country. As Marks *et al.* (2018) noted in respect of a public housing estate in Durban, the shared experience of precarity in a place as well as the shared identity of living in a poor area, can become the basis of social networks and identities that cross even the racial fissures that separate South Africans. They note (2018:311):

“[...] with scant resources the people of Kenneth Gardens have demonstrated remarkable solidarity and care towards one another regardless of so-called race or class. They have worked with a range of organisations (mostly

non-profit) to put in place tangible structures, such as a feeding scheme and a primary healthcare facility. In an environment generally seen as dangerous and violent, the storytellers talk about their feelings of safety in the estate [...] Instead of conflict and tension emerging as dominant features of everyday life [...] most narrators talk of living in harmony, primarily resulting from an implicit understanding of the shared status of being recipients of social housing.”

Second, a place-based conception of community has a singular advantage over the ‘imagined communities’ of the nation or Africa or humanity, in that residents of a local place are much more likely to know each other. They are certainly more likely to know the local leaders, to know the local issues, to be able to participate in public life and to have an immediate interest in doing so. In contrast to the society of strangers that constitutes the modern nation, at best mediated through mass and social media, a place-based community is one defined by a significant degree of co-presence – and co-presence promises both better conditions for collective action (more on this below) and a greater degree of solidarity.

Third, in addition to solidarity, residents of a local place might well come to share a common, positive feeling of attachment to the place that they live, work, love and struggle. In short, place is often imbued with a common meaning for its residents. This argument draws on Tomas Torbjörnsson (2019), who argues that the concept of ‘place’ has three sets of meanings or constitutive ontologies. These ontologies are physical / material, social / relational and the humanistic / mental. Rooted in what Buttner & Seamon (2015) terms the three root metaphors of geography, the concept of place is thus a composite of a mosaic of forms and patterns (a matter of facts); an arena of social relations, or conflicts of interests (a matter of concern); and a collection of impressions, feelings and emotions (a matter of meaning). It is the last of these, that helps explain the potential resonance of place as the basis of community through shared personal attachments of meaning to the localised material and social world.

In short then, a place-based conception of community offers the rich resources of (i) a spatialized experience of

exclusion, alongside (ii) the potential solidarities of co-presence and (iii) shared personal attachments to the local to compete effectively with the ‘imagined community’ of the nation.

Demanding inclusion

In addition to the promise of solidarity and affective attachment, place-based community also provides access to demands for material inclusion. Part of this argument has already been made above with reference to the spatialization of exclusion – that is, that people living in



Figure 3: Collective action for rights © Laurence Piper

poor neighbourhood will have similar problems of a lack of electricity, roads, sanitation and the like by virtue of where they live. However, the other important part of the argument is that co-presence and shared attachment add further grounds for the political activity required to being meaningful change: collective action.

That collective action, popularly understood as protest, is widely practiced in South Africa is well observed with some commentators going so far as to describe it as a ‘rebellion of the poor’ (Alexander 2010). Also frequently noted is that protest is one of the most effective mechanisms of the poor to get the attention of a state that is often deaf to all pleas other than ‘the smoke that calls’ (Von Holdt *et al.* 2011). In his recent book, Steven Friedman develops this insight further by arguing not only that collective action is the most effective means of bringing policy change, but also that it involves much more than protest. Indeed, he argues that it is routinized collective action where citizens and state engage in various ways, from confrontation to collaboration, that brings pro-poor change most effectively. Thus, protest should be understood as part of a larger suite of tactics of collective action including lobbying, to participating in invited spaces, to contesting elections, to forming alliances and setting media agendas.

Thus social cohesion as place-based collective action offers the mostly likely basis for residents to demand ‘the right to the city’ (Lefebvre 1996), more specifically the public goods required to meet the needs of post-apartheid urban life like livelihoods, housing, transport, security and environmental health (Anciano & Piper 2019). This then forms the content of collective action on behalf of a place in the city. In addition, as many scholars have observed, participation in collective action, broadly framed in the way that Friedman does, offers additional benefits of: (i) drawing on and building local networks; (ii) inspiring and circulating new political ideas; (iii) identifying and developing local leaders, and also holding them accountable; and (iv) building new relations with the state, and other social actors like civil society, unions and business, to strengthen democratic practices (Putnam *et al.* 1994; Diamond 2008; Gaventa & Barrett 2010).

Building community

Lastly, place-based collective action aimed at building the local community is the third component of the model. Extending the argument above, this practice has both material and social dimensions. Materially, poor places of the city are areas of significant need and, residents must often take matters in their own hands, often literally engaging in a process of auto-constructing their housing (Holston 1991). These processes of building informal housing, earning income through informal livelihoods, informal forms of health provision, transport, security provision and so forth are both evidence of exclusion from the systems of the city and the initiative of poor residents to meet their own needs. At the same time however, informal systems seldom achieve the quality of formal systems due to a lack of resources and knowledge, and are vulnerable to being



Figure 4: The church © Laurence Piper

dominated by elites that extract rents through the threat of violence. Drug gangs, protection rackets, and development gatekeepers are all examples of this. These noted, democratic forms of collective action can assist

poor residents in building their shacks, surveying the area for criminals, and looking after children while parents are at work, amongst other activities.

Perhaps just as important as material forms of community construction are the social. In this respect, collective action around cultural, sporting, education and children's events can go a significant way to building local networks, trust, solidarity and leadership to strengthen the community. In addition, organising events in ways that affirm belonging to local place rather than in terms of national identity or other social divides is critical to shifting discourses and identities in more inclusive directions. Indeed, hosting a regular soccer tournament was a conscious strategy of PASSOP, and VAC hosted a children's play day. In summary then: social cohesion can be re-imagined as local, place-based solidarity and identification to construct a local community through collective action that (i) resists the exclusions of nationalism, but also (ii) demands the inclusion of all residents into the systems of the city, and enables (iii) the auto-construction the local community materially and socially.

Re-placing the nation?

The claim that social cohesion can and should be interpreted in ways that are beneficial to marginalised groups, by conceiving it primarily in terms of the solidarities and attachments to the places people live in the city, is vulnerable to one obvious objection: namely that social cohesion is usually thought of as an attribute of society as a whole, and also that it *should* be thought of this way. To the first point, that this is the usual way of thinking about social cohesion, I respond by saying that this is merely a convention, and more than that, it may be a destructive convention when the meaning of social cohesion is filled out by nativist nationalism. As I have demonstrated in this article, by thinking about social cohesion in terms of building solidarity and attachment to local place we can resist exclusivist conceptions of who belongs linked to nationality and citizenship. To put the point polemically, the neighbourhood belongs to all who live in it.

The second point – that social cohesion should be thought of at the national rather than the local level –

could entail an important objection that building social cohesion at the local level does not necessarily build it nationally. The concern is not just that some areas may never achieve a degree of social cohesion, but the sharper point that various forms of place-based social cohesion could exist in tension with each other. This criticism is analogous to the contrast between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital (Putnam 2000), where the former refers to solidarities amongst homogenous groups and the latter to solidarities that bridge homogenous groups like race and nationality. For instance, well-organised and mobilised poor neighbourhoods might end up competing with each other for state development resources, potentially undermining cohesion across the urban poor as a whole. In short, the tension within local places become transformed to tensions between local places.

To my mind, this is a valid concern, and while there is no failsafe against this eventuality, I think there is much we can learn from the history of social movements in South Africa, in particular the United Democratic Front (UDF) of the 1980s. When formally launched in 1983, the UDF was not an organisation, but an organisation of organisations. Thus, the organisations from various sectors such as youth, civics, health, students and the like came together under a common anti-apartheid message (Seekings 2000). Something similar is required in respect of social cohesion too, in that the substance of what unites the poor of one place is not only common residence but also exclusion from the public goods required to meet the needs of urban life. It is this particular meaning of the 'right to the city' that also brings residents together and in which the basis for solidarities across local places is to be found. This is analogous to the way that, in the case of the UDF, the struggles of students for better education and the struggles of nurses for better healthcare could be united in that both were rooted in apartheid. Similarly, the struggles of poor residents across South Africa are rooted in shared exclusions from the city – many of which are actually re-inscriptions of apartheid and colonial patterns. In this sense, the work of the UDF remains to be completed.

In exploring the concept of social cohesion, Burns *et al.* (2018: 7) usefully compare it to the notion of physical

cohesion. They make the point that the notion of cohesion ‘calls to mind a physical structure whose parts *stick together*’. Conversely, when cohesion fails ‘a structure *falls apart*’. They go on to note that when a structure falls apart it tends to do so either by crumbling ‘into a multitude of individual fragments’ or breaking ‘into a few pieces’. These two ways of breaking apart are then usefully compared to divided and atomised societies respectively. Given that South Africa is widely recognised as a deeply divided society along lines of race and nationality especially, the notion that social cohesion should be built across these divides becomes imperative for social cohesion nationally. However, what I am arguing for here is a slightly different conception of social cohesion that builds blocks by places of the city and then looks to unite them in terms of common experiences of exclusion from the city as a whole. It is a view of social cohesion for the urban poor, not for society as a whole, and the argument is that this needs to be built in each poor neighbourhood of the city as well as across the city to become meaningful and therefore powerful. It is, in sum, a version of social cohesion as advocacy for the African migrant to the city.

Conclusion: The neighbourhood, the city, and the country, belong to all who live in it

Social cohesion is conventionally understood as solidarities among members of society that reflect something like a shared identity, networks, belonging and solidarity. It is also clear that South Africa is a society deeply divided along racial, national, class, ethnic, and other lines with low levels of social cohesion. In recent times, the notion of social cohesion has been mobilised by the South African government to address some of these divides and to try to build a society that is more inclusive. The concern is that it is doing this on the implicit and exclusive assumptions of a racialized liberation nationalism, and that this will fail to include fully people of all races, and overtly exclude foreign nationals – as defined by the South African state. This approach, as Friedman rightly warns, brings with it the threat of domination of the foreign migrant in particular.

As I have demonstrated above, the re-emergence of social cohesion as racial nationalism in the public

discourse reflects and reinforces the re-inscription of three kinds of exclusion from the apartheid era, all aimed at the poor African migrant. The first is the re-inscription of the ‘two-gates’ policy of the apartheid era, where wealthy and white migrants are welcomed, while poor African migrants are excluded altogether, unless migrating as cheap labour on a temporary basis. The second re-inscription is the reproduction of the idea that poor African migrants are a threat to the wellbeing of the city, overwhelming its limited resources, invading its land and threatening the jobs, health and security of its citizens. The third re-inscription is found in the way that the areas of the city where African migrants live are governed both differently and in ways that are worse than the areas in which wealthy citizens abide. In many ways then, the experience of the poor African migrant after apartheid remains just as exclusionary as under apartheid, albeit in somewhat different terms.

In order to contest these enduring forms of exclusion, and the notion of social cohesion as racial nationalism which underwrites it, I advocate for an alternative, place-based conception of social cohesion as solidarity and shared identification based on local place. Importantly, this notion of place-based social cohesion is not a completely new invention, but builds on existing ideas and practices of refugee rights organisations in Cape Town, as well as actual practices elsewhere in the country. While this conception might be a minority one, I argue that it has significant potential to reclaim the notion of social cohesion for a more inclusive and pro-poor agenda when linked to a politics of collective action aimed at (i) resisting xenophobia, (ii) demanding the right to the city, and (iii) building the local community.

On this account, I use collective action in the sense advocated by Friedman (2018) as including both protest, mobilisation and routinized forms of engagement between residents and rulers. This broader conception of collective action implies a broader range of strategies and tactics that includes protest, but is not limited to it, and locates mobilisation in a larger suite of tactics including lobbying, to participating in invited spaces, to contesting elections, to forming alliances and setting media agendas. In addition to being more effective politically, collective action is the most important catalyst in building place-based social cohesion through (i) drawing on and building

local networks, (ii) inspiring and circulating new political ideas, (iii) identifying and developing local leaders, and also holding them accountable, (iv) building new relations with the state, and other social actors like civil society, unions and business, that strengthen democratic practices.

Furthermore, the conjoining of place-based social cohesion with collective action is still able to extend beyond local place through affirming the right of all city residents to the public goods that address the needs of living in the city. In this common condition of marginality in the city, and the conscious demand for the inclusion of all in (for example) decent jobs and housing, effective security and health provision and affordable transport, lies the basis for extending solidarity across places of the city, and behind a shared pro-poor agenda. It is thus not a form of social cohesion for all, but rather to marginalised, to assist in the contestation of power. In many ways this approach echoes the tradition of several important social movements in South Africa's recent history, in particular the United Democratic Front, that was an umbrella organisation of place-based, sectoral

organisations rather than a membership-based organisation.

Finally, this place-based version of social cohesion and its linkages to community-based, pro-poor collective action is a normative vision more than an historical fact. As such, it is just one person's notion of the way that social cohesion can be claimed for more progressive purposes, and there will always be other conceptions of social cohesion that are both possible and desirable. Ultimately, I think whatever version one prefers, and whatever version becomes propagated and institutionalised, my argument is about taking social cohesion – and especially the desire for community – seriously. By demonstrating that one can develop notions of social cohesion that are inclusive and progressive, I hope also to redeem the claim that affirming place and community is not inherently traditionalist, conservative or parochial. Rather, local place can actually be a road to liberation rather than domination, and it is founded on the idea that the neighbourhood, the city and the country belong to all who live in it.

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Social Cohesion as Imposition of National Identity



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South Africa's 20-year review of social cohesion included the below excerpt from the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Development (DPME) as the concept note which guided its commemorative programmes, and its guidance note:

“Because this South African Identity is a political, territorial bound and imagined construct there is a need to continuously persuade people on their South African-ness’. Steps towards that include the creation of a founding myth e.g. South Africa a special ‘nation’ that could pull themselves from the brink of a civil war, a founding legend ‘Nelson Mandela’ and the establishment of a founding document: the constitution, which outlines certain ‘non-negotiable, universal values’ e.g. democracy, the acceptance of multiple identities South Africa’s path [...] allows individual cultures, languages and identities to become building blocks of a greater whole, which gives rise to certain challenges. Minority groups may hesitate to identify with the symbols of the state; groups in the periphery of power often feel marginalised [...].”

(DPME, 2014, *Terms of reference for 20-year Review of Social Cohesion*).

The wording of the concept, and as I argue elsewhere (Abrahams 2016), belies the deeply politicised framing in which it is used in a South African congress movement liberation context¹. What this means is that performance of social cohesion in places are tied into to narrative of history, memory and the veneration of so-called struggle stalwarts from the South African congress tradition.

The performance of social cohesion is the concept that I want to undergird the discussion in this paper, which then allows us to understand its conceptualisation within the South African state (as led by the current ruling party, the African National Congress). While aiming to cast social cohesion as a concept that all South Africans can ascribe to and *demonstrate*, institutional structures like the national Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (DPME) often measures these in narrow and prescriptive ways. The DPME is housed in the Office of the President as is dedicated to measure the effectiveness of the state's intervention

1. Congress movements post colonialism generally brought together collectives of political formations across the world and cohered under liberation alliances. Liberation or struggle organisations are an identifiable part of anti-colonial movements. In South Africa these organization cohered with the United Democratic Front for political mobilization, and then under the African National Congress when it was unbanned.

toward the National Development Plan. While the drive to ‘measurement of social cohesion’ is an effect of the move toward measurable impact of state practices, these indicators often are narrow or geared toward compliance. Compliance in the case of social cohesion is linked to performance – where there are demonstrable actions that would directly link to the idea that people need to be continuously persuaded on ‘their South African-ness’ (DPME, *Terms of Reference for 20-year Review of Social Cohesion*, 2014), and would demonstrate a sense of nationhood and cohesion. Crucially, the measure is not meant to be an indication of the state’s performance of so-called social cohesion exercises, yet this is what characterises its social cohesion initiatives in society. This is despite arguments for building and support civic engagement initiatives, or community solidarity initiatives.

This performance of nationalising (party) politics would account for, as I illustrate in this paper, the ongoing prioritisation of name changes in municipalities across the country. These examples, if seen within the framework already developed in Abrahams (2016), casts social cohesion as a foundation value, while simultaneously investing the phrase with unapologetically politicised notions of national belonging, history, and symbol veneration. In effect, this allows the state to capture the concept with potentially very specific and narrow meanings. In the politicised version expressed in Abrahams (2016), we might think of this formulation as the framing of an historical ideal, or a claim on history; in making those ideals fixed to particular symbols; and as an act or enactment of the ideal. The pertinent point for this paper is that state functions as the ‘authorising authority’ (term used by Mbembe 2001), meaning that it not only outlines the conceptual parameters of social cohesion, articulates the definitions of it, and suggests how cohesion ought to be demonstrated or performed, but it *itself* performs social cohesion in this way.

Scholars argue that there are a number of ways social cohesion has been defined – as a set of claims preceding redistribution; as forms of social solidarity; inclusion; overcoming and mitigating social fracture; or a set of civic values (Beauvais and Jenson 2002; Jenson and Saint-Martin 2003; Stanley 2003; Barolsky 2013). And as such, it is framed by a number of social institutions in a number

of different ways to achieve particular ends (a comprehensive review of these is highlighted in Mkhize 2019). While as scholars argue, there is not one definition of the phrase (see Mkhize, 2019; Lefko-Everet *et al.*, 2018), the broad pattern here is that social cohesion can be and is envisaged in particular ways, its ideal ends are articulated in particular ways, and the quest for indicating cohesion is cast in particular ways – all of course relating to who is doing the defining and who is measuring the outcomes. So, demonstrations of social cohesion so envisaged in the changing of street names, or removal of statues, relate to who the ‘authorising authority’ is. In the case of South Africa, where the ruling party not only defines social cohesion in particular ways, but also frames the measurement of social cohesion as the demonstration or enactment of a unitary South African identity, the persistent move to instantiate the centrality of liberation heroes and the liberation movement through place renaming, for example, appears rational and even necessary.

The case

The practice of name changes is very much a part of transitional justice, where the names of oppressive leaders of an old regime are replaced with names that symbolise the values of the new dispensation. Thus, this erasure is deemed part of a reparative form of justice as Swart argues (Swart, 2008) where it is as much about correcting the ills of the past, as well as prioritising memory and honour for those who served to dismantle oppressive and racist, genocidal regimes. Name changes as enacting social cohesion has been met with differing arguments in the literature in South Africa, as well as society. In the literature scholars argue that these represent the changing nature of government, both in national terms, as well as in normative terms. In society, claims on history – even history that is deemed anathema to the collective national democratic ideal – find space along the spectrum of South Africa’s diverse population. There is often huge backlash from communities who either do not see a problem with the older names, and those who want to deliberately keep those names for posterity or other forms of national adherence.

The race to the 2021 national government elections has been one that seeks to transcend the deep loss of trust

in the state, due to massive corruption scandals and evidence of these presented at prominent extra-judicial hearings such as the Zondo Commission of Inquiry. It also comes at a time where two-thirds of municipalities in the country are found to have been performing poorly, embroiled in large scale mismanagement of funds, and crippling incapacities. A few months before the local elections, a prominent port city, Port Elizabeth (named after a Cape colonial governor's wife Elizabeth), was renamed to Gqeberha, and within 2021 a number of other place and street names across the country were changed. Within a month of the local government elections, the metropolitan municipality Ekurhuleni had 44 street name changes. The metropolitan municipality is hotly contested and represents the second largest metropolitan municipality in the most populous and politically important province of Gauteng.

More recently, the strong societal opposition to name changes relates to the costs of name changes, which, compared with how much corruption cost the economy, seems unnecessary and frivolous.

Resident responses from the City of Ekurhuleni² in the province of Gauteng for example argue thus:

"Just more wasted money. If only we could boycott taxes because we get hammered on taxes while the government waists it [sic]. Who cares what the names are [sic]."

Another resident adds:

"Then on Nov 1 [Local Government elections] the DA or another political party wins and hates the names, then we as rate payers pay again for wasted resources and inefficiencies."

Although the budget for name changes do not actually come from local government, but national or provincial, the perception of residents about name changes being linked to electioneering is on point.

The disgruntlement about name changes relate strongly to disgruntlement about service delivery. Interestingly, in the next response this is also (rightly) linked to the fracture of the ruling party's confidence:

"Can't even fix potholes but we want to rename a street. How crap can someone's self-image be when something like this takes precedence over priorities?"

Finally, two responses indicate a sobering commentary on the state's prioritisation of name changes for the purpose of fostering cohesion: the first criticises the exercise of name changes while exploiting the linkages to heritage and memory for narrow political ends:

"Why spend money on non-essentials like street names? [sic] Fix the country first. [...] How about helping the living, and leaving the dead to RIP?"

The second, however, is squarely a defence of the old apartheid regime's way of linking place to heritage, while decrying the changing of place names for redress (and political) reasons – highlighting the various layers of complexity demonstrated through these issues:

"No matter how many names are changed we old timers will still call a spade a spade[.] Surprising what length they will go at voting time I AM PROUD OF MY HERITAGE ONS VIR JOU SUID AFRIKA [sic] (Translation from Afrikaans: 'we are for you South Africa')"

These responses do not reflect the myriad of responses to these and other name changes, which are a complex mix of national identities, class and racial politics. However, they do indicate the multi-layered nature of the issue of name changing. Indeed, the area where these responses come from is a majority white, privileged area in the wealthier south east of the province.

Some of the complex narrative highlighted here are as follows: the ruling party's politics have been condemned for monopolising on the loyalties of the black urban majority of the poor while continuing to use liberation narratives to garner support. Yet, this actually shows that even in an attempt to recapture popular support and grassroots credibility, the ruling party leans toward the political identity politics of its liberation past. This is less about social cohesion, as it is about social compact, again

2. Participant observation research in residential committee groups, and public conversations over social media.

relied on the tropes of nationalism to demonstrate that the party is worthy of trust. This demonstration of national identity or cohesion serves a narrow political interest, but indeed to this part of the broader public who are not political loyalists (or even opposition necessarily), it serves to demonstrate the ineptitude of the way the state spends its money.

Ndletanya (2012: 89) considers the study of name places within its political and historical contexts. Toponymy (which is the study of place names) he argues, shows that naming ‘is not a neutral exercise. It is mediate by power relations depending on the political order’. Indeed, it is related to colonial memory, history, slavery and subjugation ‘reflecting the self-imagery of the settler, in communities of the conquered’ (ibid.). Similarly, Guyot and Seethal (2007) have noted that name changes in South Africa are at the intersection of redress, identities, and spatial representativity.

Seen in light of this scholarship, the toponymy demonstrates the power relation deriving from a political order, or as we have intimated earlier an ‘authorising authority’s framing’ (political in this case) of social cohesion as an ideal articulated in particular ways, here as a set of practices that plays out in place through street name changes. This may be seen by the political regimes as an exercise in social cohesion that invites people to transcend their own identities, but rather it is the demonstration of an imposition of a set of identifiers that relate to party political loyalties, particularly when this comes during the electioneering campaign. Similar to the point Abrahams (2016) made about the espoused national myth becoming a symbol of political statements about what constitutes a transcendent identity, and therefore social cohesion, here we see how these espoused name changes stand for a set of political statements that seem to say ‘we are still the liberation party you know, vote for us’, as well as to reassert its power on space, through the erasure of innocuous names.

Yet this exercise is apparently highly prioritised by the political regime: in a 12 October statement from the (ANC) Mayor of the city, Mzwandile Masina, reiterates

the well-rehearsed tropes of social cohesion according to the state (echoing the DPME’s early stance) relating to name changes:

“The overarching objective of the ANC is to build a national democratic society that recognises and celebrates the heroes and heroines of South Africa who embody the ideals of social justice and equality. Street names and the names of landmarks symbolise the identity and character of our city. Critics may accuse the city of wasting public funds with the name changes. However, we believe, with great conviction, that future generations of South Africans must grow up in an inclusive environment that celebrates the best of humanity and recognises personal sacrifice in the name of justice as an epithet for remembrance.” BusinessTech, 13 October 2021³.

Here we see the complex but obvious interplay of party politics (just before elections) and national narratives of history, cohesion and identity. This is further evidence of what Abrahams (2016) notes as the mobilisation of political identities and memory politics as a nationalising narrative – which as Anderson (1983) in his book *Imagined Communities* notes is typical of nationalising enterprises.

Social cohesion: from concept to landmarks

The framing in this paper has extended from arguments of social cohesion as a state-led project, but departed strictly from it, insofar as the state’s own demonstration of social cohesion is imprinted with the idea of extending the histories and myths associated with a party-political identity – in this case the ANC’s liberation movement, which is shared with or imposed on places and people through street name changes.

We see an almost mirrored framing of social cohesion as imposed and enacted by the state. Mkhize (2019) argues that social cohesion is conceptualised in different ways as a response either to systemic socio-economic fractures in society that played out in social interactions, or to social fissures caused by less systemic issues, or even

3. <https://businesstech.co.za/news/government/528874/these-44-roads-in-ekurhuleni-are-getting-a-name-change-what-you-need-to-know/>

as a response to periodic points of social tension in particular areas. Seen in this light, this paper illustrates how the name changes seek to respond to growing mistrust of the ruling party, as well as upcoming local government elections as the systemic fractures in society, but not through meaningful change to infrastructure and services, but rather through reiterating symbolic identities of ‘inclusion’ and other transcendental values linked to history, remembrance and redress. All of the latter redress or transitional justice ideals are necessary, but increasingly less of in a context of heightened social fracture, failing municipalities, and defunct service provision from local government.

This, then, is a demonstration of nationalism, and political power rather than cohesion. As provocatively stated by Mbembe (2006, cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2009: 63)), this way of continuing to monopolise national identity politics in service of narrow political ends is merely repeating ‘the sorry history it pretends to redress’.

Conclusion

As many of the articles in this special issue would have covered, the recent literature particularly in South Africa has taken on a decidedly normative meaning, which is championed by the state, with a view to foster social cohesion as a value in society. As scholars argue the phrase has come to be a catch all for related normative values such as civil inclusion, social inclusion, diversity, cultural recognition, and to some extent antiracism (Barolsky 2013; Kearns and Forrest 2000; Mkhize 2019; Ballard 2019; Erwin 2017).

In these different ways, social cohesion acts as a social project or programme of intervention to tackle the social fracture either as a bonding exercise (within segments of society in cases of strife between sectors of society) or a bridging exercise (between segments of society). Various authors who talk about identity and nationhood as it pertains to social cohesion make use of (or critique) Putnam’s (2000) distinction between bonding and bridging cohesion (see Kearns and Forrest 2000; Norton and De Haan 2012; Struwig *et al* 2013; Barolsky 2013). Bonding cohesion includes cohesion *within* particular groups, causing individuals to cohere to specific identities. Bridging cohesion, on the other hand, relates

to social cohesion beyond ethnicities, class or other divides. Bridging cohesion takes places across these divides, where differences of specific identities / ethnicities are transcended toward a broader identity – for instance of city regions or nation. The accepted logic in social cohesion of the nation building or national identification type is *bridging cohesion*, where residents should be persuaded to transcend individualised or community identities to claim an identity with a national bent.

Bridging cohesion with a side order of nationalism may be demonstrated in a number of ways, insistence on pledges of allegiance, singing of national anthems at public events or school assemblies, flying the flag or venerating struggle heroes. In the case presented here the bridging form of cohesion is designed to redress the spatial elements of place names, which is very much part of democratising space, but when it is served up with the nationalising politics in a context of attempting to fix political fractures, it may delegitimise the exercise. I raised the concept of performance or performativity as undergirding the thinking in this paper. What we see exercised here, by the state, is a demonstration of political power over space, naming narratives and community cohesion. While the sum of these parts may indeed be laudable and necessary, when these performances are the opening act of a hotly contested local election campaign, then what is performed or demonstrated is a nationalising politics.

What we have, in essence, is articulation and enactment of ‘social cohesion’ in its rather more insidious form of nationalism, enacted in urban space. This form of social cohesion is not new, even (bonding) national projects of building a cohesive society has been employed to exclusionary ends. Hague and Jenkins (2005) use Hilter’s *Volksreich* and his city planning of Berlin to argue, for instance, that a vision for a ‘cohesive’ society was built on a particularly ethnicist type of cohesion that represented a constructed form of nation, while providing the infrastructure for exclusion and architecture for control (Hague and Jenkins, 2005). Younge (2010: 184) argues that this polarising form of community coherence may often become a seedbed for fundamentalist, reactionary, and un-solidaristic trends, which the case presented here has the potential for, in this political environment.

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Social Cohesion in an Improvement District?

The Exceptional Case of Ekhaya Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (Hillbrow, Johannesburg)



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Introduction

This paper is based on an understanding of the manner in which social cohesion takes shape at the neighbourhood scale as well as how it is being operationalised in development-related programmes such as urban regeneration tools. The paper uses the case of *Ekhaya Neighbourhood Improvement Programme* – a residential city improvement district (RCID) in inner-city Johannesburg's Hillbrow – which is hailed as the first participatory, bottom-up and socially driven RCID in Johannesburg (Johannesburg Housing Company 2010). With its emphasis on social cohesion and social capital as main ingredients of urban regeneration, Ekhaya is the first urban regeneration tool of its kind in Hillbrow – a predominantly high-rise, high-density part of inner-city Johannesburg that is notoriously ridden with crime and prone to crime. Ekhaya is said to have “reclaim[ed] the streets and buildings of Hillbrow, one step at a time” (City of Johannesburg 2012) with the broad objective of “making Hillbrow a [liveable] neighbourhood” (City of Johannesburg 2012). As a community-led response to urban disorder, Ekhaya is still an unusual case. Using this exceptional case, this paper attempts to understand how social cohesion, particularly social capital, is (re-)appropriated by people on the ground. I attempt to show what various stakeholders in Ekhaya are doing to the concept of social cohesion, how they understand it,

how they are ‘tinkering’ with it as well as what it means to them.

In doing this, I draw from qualitative fieldwork conducted in Hillbrow between 2013 and 2017, first as part of my postgraduate dissertation research, and subsequently under the auspices of the Department of Planning Monitoring and Evaluation as well as the Gauteng City-Region Observatory research projects (see Mkhize 2014; Mkhize 2018; Mkhize & Mosselson 2019). The qualitative fieldwork entailed a series of transcribed formal interviews with various stakeholders engaged in managing urban renewal and effecting neighbourhood change in Hillbrow – four property caretakers in Ekhaya member buildings and three Ekhaya coordinators. The interviews were augmented by ethnographic observation which included shadowing one Ekhaya coordinator and three property caretakers as they went about their daily routines, sitting in on two monthly property caretaker meetings, accompanying the local policing forum on neighbourhood patrols, and spending time on the streets of Ekhaya observing daily interactions. I also had informal, unrecorded interviews with Ekhaya street patrollers as well as with tenants, some of whom were acquaintances.

The rest of this paper is structured as follows. The next section presents the morphology and characteristics of Hillbrow, the neighbourhood which has played host to

Ekhaya, paying attention to the area's form before the advent of the programme. This sets the scene for a main section which draws heavily from ethnographic research to present the story of how social capital/cohesion has featured in Ekhaya, from the initiative's conception to its production and everyday management. The section is divided into three sub-sections which detail Ekhaya's conception, production and management respectively. The last section concludes the paper by way of outlining main remarks.

Introducing Hillbrow

"Ishmael said, 'Josie, take a break from the squatter camps and come to Hillbrow'. After six months of working in Hillbrow I said to him, 'Ish, you've put me in the biggest squatter camp I've been in and it goes up ten floors! I would rather be in one where when something happens I can grab my kids and run away; not on the tenth floor of a bloody building where I've got to pay boys on every floor to get my daughters down safely' [...] And the place stank! I used to put gloves on and lavender in my nose to go into Hillbrow. It was foul! The tar of the street was eaten by this acid foulness. [...] The relationship between the City and the landlords was gone, the relationship between the landlords and the tenants was gone, the tenants were victims, they were not tenants. The governance in the buildings was bad news." (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013).

The excerpt above gives a brief glimpse into the flawed governance characteristic of Hillbrow, the inner-city neighbourhood that has played host to Ekhaya. Hillbrow is a predominantly high-rise residential inner-city area whose favourable location has made it, most notably since the 1990s, one of the preferred port-of-entry neighbourhoods for many newcomers to Johannesburg from other parts of South Africa and increasingly from other parts of the continent (Winkler 2013). Although this proliferation of people from different walks of life has made Hillbrow a culturally vibrant and densely populated area, it has also culminated in the area becoming characterised by xenophobic tensions (Simone 2004). Discrimination against foreigners not only manifests physically with xenophobic violence episodes, it also contributes in various ways to urban configurations. For instance, some buildings of

inner-city neighbourhoods such as Hillbrow are characterised by 'invisible populations' keeping to themselves and evading victimisation as well as state capture, especially given the state's stance on (undocumented) foreign nationals (Simone 2004). Simone also shows that xenophobia and small-scale segregation manifest spatially since "some blocks and many buildings clearly 'belong' to particular national groups, in part due to the disparate practices employed by building owners and their managing agents" (2004:415). As "cross-border migrants have been widely blamed for the deterioration of the physical environment" (Bremner 2000:186), even documented and income-earning migrants sometimes find it difficult to rent property (Kihato 2011).

Indeed, there is sizeable academic literature depicting Hillbrow as an embodiment of inner-city Johannesburg's physical, socio-economic and spatial degeneration, bedlam as well as failed management (Morris 1999; Winkler 2013; Lipietz 2004; Gossman & Premo 2012). Scholars reference Hillbrow as an area that has significantly metamorphosed for the worst over the last four decades, arguing that it has transitioned from a prosperous whites-only area in the 1970s to a 'grey' area from the 1980s onwards (Gossman & Premo 2012:5). It is noted that the area's changing conditions in the 1980s, coupled with the pull of development in emerging nodes north of Johannesburg, prompted white flight to northern suburbs and led to Hillbrow's redlining by banks as the then-Johannesburg City Council abrogated its responsibilities (Morris 1999). Desperate to fill their housing units and thus maximise their economic capital, most white landlords cut back on building repair costs, ignored tenants' maintenance complaints and charged them higher rentals. In order to meet the unaffordable rentals, tenants resorted to subletting, a practice that contributed significantly to massive overcrowding and inner-city apartment buildings' decay (Morris 1999). The City Council's ineffective urban management and indifference to these housing politics worsened the strained landlord-tenant relations and gave way to illicit practices such as slumlording, landlord-tenant tensions, violent tenant intimidation, unlawful evictions, building hijackings, illegal landlordism, invasions and illegal tenancy in abandoned buildings as well as a culture of non-payment (Bethlehem 2013; Mkhize 2018).

A staggering number of atrocities is reported weekly in Hillbrow. These include murders of police officers as well as homicides of tenants, property caretakers and property owners within buildings, and most of the murders are related to property hijackings (Mkhize 2014). Some of the deaths have resulted from Hillbrow's "trashing culture (throwing rubbish onto the streets). This culture [was] extremely widespread in Hillbrow and perceived to contribute to crime and violence by degrading the neighbourhood" (Gossman & Premo 2012:20). For many years, Hillbrow has been notorious for becoming a 'danger zone' during festive seasons, largely due to "its dangerous New Year's Eve bashes, where fridges, televisions and couches would be thrown out of flatland windows, endangering lives [of pedestrians] and causing chaos" (City of Johannesburg 2012). All this bedlam and violence have been happening notwithstanding the very close proximity to the Hillbrow Police Station and the City offices (Mkhize, 2018). Gossman and Premo assert that Hillbrow's "qualitative, intangible distance from the state ... [lack of] constant communication with the government [...] [and] an ephemeral police presence" (2012:6) are significant contributors to crime, grime, disinvestment and the redlining of the area.

Whilst there have been numerous attempts at rejuvenating as well as restoring social order in the area whilst also tackling its housing management crisis, most have arguably been unsuccessful. For instance, social housing initiatives in the 1990s collapsed (Lipietz 2004). The failure of such initiatives is attributed to inner-city Johannesburg residents' failure to work together in Hillbrow, and Lipietz writes that, "attempts to engage with 'civil society' in order to devise more inclusive neighbourhood-based approaches to dealing with the urban environment, have shown to be highly frustrating more often than not, leading to numerous dead-ends" (2004:11). This may be true in light of the possibility that "the inner city is a domain that few want to belong to or establish roots in" (Simone 2004:425). The failure of several initiatives in the area has also been attributed to the City's insensitivity to Hillbrow's and inner-city Johannesburg's socio-economic and political context. Winkler (2013) asserts that inner-city Johannesburg will never regenerate through top-down initiatives that do

little-to-nothing for Hillbrow residents. According to Winkler, this area's challenges will only be addressed when different stakeholders are closely incorporated in context-sensitive initiatives because "neighbourhood change in Hillbrow [...] is shaped by situated histories, politics and economics, in addition to the activities of diverse local actors" (2013:309).

Social capital in Ekhaya: Conception, production and everyday management

Ekhaya, a neighbourhood association that credits itself for having "destroyed the perception of Hillbrow as a no-go violent zone" (Adler 2009), was initiated as an



Figure 1: Physical regeneration ushered by Ekhaya in Hillbrow.
© Mkhize 2018

informal/voluntary RCID in 2004. Spearheaded by a rigorous Johannesburg Housing Company (hereafter JHC) consultant and community organiser in collaboration with property owners, their property caretakers, tenants and the City’s institutions, Ekhaya has effected change in Hillbrow in more ways than one. Its transformation of the area into a liveable neighbourhood has taken multiple forms, among them urban revitalisation. These include the upgrading of sidewalks with paving and lighting, installation of surveillance cameras on public space, and the cleaning up of several alleyways (see Figure 1 and Figure 2).

However, Ekhaya asserts that it involves more than just physical urban regeneration. In Ekhaya, there is a very strong emphasis on social cohesion and community building, and this is said to be achieved through social capital, building networks and relationships among the programme’s stakeholders and the residents themselves, and the actors on the ground (Mkhize 2018). Of Ekhaya, the Housing Development Agency (HDA) reports that

“Compared to existing CIDs, eKhaya [sic] uses a more bottom-up approach. Initially this has involved organising local stakeholders on a voluntary basis and then involving them in defining priorities and making and implementing the plans to deal with these.” (2012:13)

Against the backdrop of CIDs and Residential CIDs co-opting private sector actors and shutting out the urban poor (Ah Goo 2018; Miraftab 2007; Mkhize 2014), Ekhaya is argued to be “a collaborative project” (Savage and Dodd Architects, 2012:1) working from the ground up with the aim of building relationships among different stakeholders. Indeed, Ekhaya sees social capital as “the *sine qua non* for a healthy city” (Adler 2009). As the overarching principle of progress, social capital is said to be engrained in each and every Ekhaya project and activity. According to the current Ekhaya coordinator, social cohesion and the spirit of *ubuntu* (humanity) inform the three other brand values encapsulated in the area’s operational endeavours – safety, cleanliness and friendliness. In a narrative about Ekhaya and the change it has ushered in Hillbrow, the founder of the programme constantly contrasted it with its Berea counterpart,

Legae la Rona (meaning ‘our home’ in Setswana). According to her, Legae la Rona has not had the same success in counteracting crime and grime in Berea, as it has not fully incorporated the social cohesion component into its operationalisation. By so doing, the coordinator gave the impression that social regeneration is as critical a factor to Ekhaya’s success as physical regeneration.

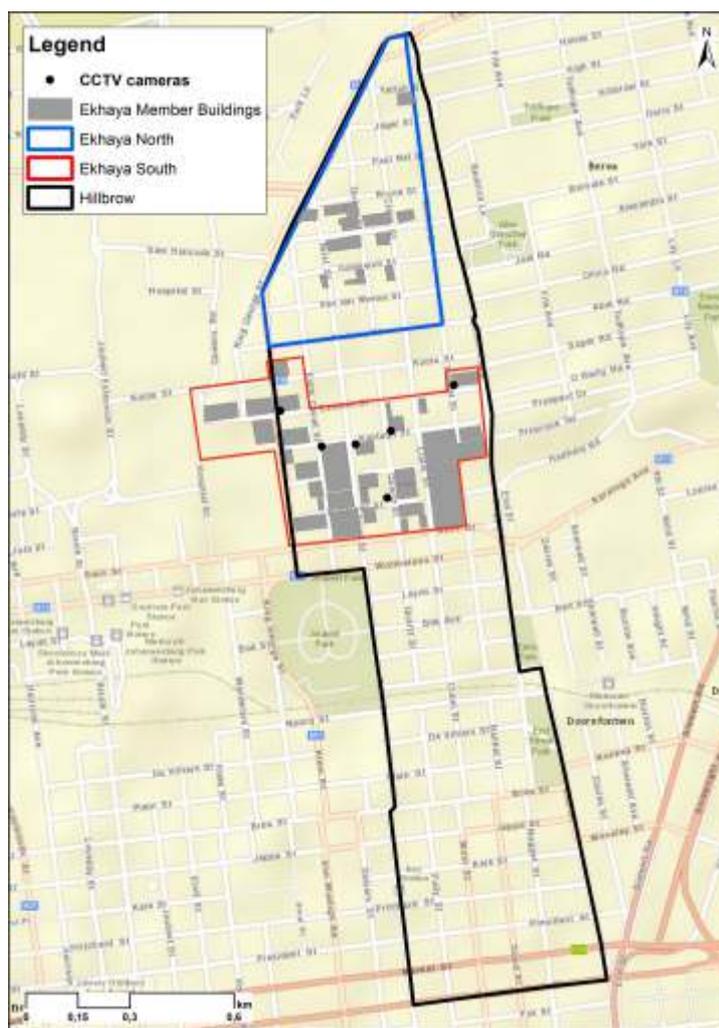


Figure 2: Ekhaya clusters relative to Hillbrow.
© Samy Katumba; appears in Mkhize & Mosselson 2019.

In this section, I unpack how neighbourhood change was brought about by different stakeholders. I pay attention to the changes that they think have occurred over time, how they are presented as virtuous, and, since Ekhaya advocates for social capital and social cohesion as essential ingredients for the regeneration of Hillbrow, in the next sub-sections I explore how these have featured and been operationalised in effecting change.

Conceiving Ekhaya: ‘Breaking the Anonymity’ through invited spaces and safety campaigns

One observation I made whilst doing field research in Hillbrow was how suspicious and distrustful most stakeholders/respondents were of me. Most suspected that I was either a journalist, a political party representative or undercover agent collecting information that would incriminate them. I found out that it was the same reception that Ekhaya organisers encountered when they started working in the area. The suspicion and distrust became apparent when, after the purchase of properties on Pietersen Street by the JHC and Trafalgar Properties, a community organiser/mobiliser was hired and the ‘Know Your Neighbour’ campaign was initiated. This campaign was a neighbourhood scanning and walkabout project that entailed going into 33 buildings getting acquainted with neighbouring buildings, their property owners, property caretakers, tenants, as well as common issues around all Hillbrow buildings (Mkhize 2018). Nevertheless, this was no easy feat to accomplish because Hillbrow residents were very distrustful of each other. The essence of this notion is captured in the quote below:

“People from the buildings thought, ‘She’s coming from the City Council, is she going to give us summonses?’ Or they thought I wanted to buy their buildings? Well, they were very suspicious, you can imagine! And all I said was, ‘JHC owns a building here and here, and they want to know their neighbours. Trafalgar’s also doing it with them, and they want to know their neighbours’. The particular way you do it as an organiser, you don’t come in selling in a project; you don’t come in saying, ‘Come and join me to regenerate the city’. You just do it in a way that really unnerves people because they can’t believe you just want to know them.” (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013)

As part of countering issues of trust and ensuring that Hillbrow residents “talk to each other and not about each other” (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013), there was active mobilisation of all concerned stakeholders around building issues – CBOs, FBOs, property owners, caretakers. One of the problems around building management pertained to alleyways (lanes) that most

buildings shared. They were perpetually putrid filthy garbage dumping grounds that became dangerous at night. Moreover, property caretakers blamed each other’s tenants for the continuous dumping of rubbish in the alleyways (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm 2015). The ‘Know Your Neighbour’ campaign also revealed that although some property owners within Hillbrow had been lobbying the City for years to intervene in managing their buildings’ environs, they had done thus in silos and the City had been unresponsive. Part of getting the property owners to work together and identifying their issues as a collective thus took the form of ‘invited spaces’ (meetings) where there could be discussions of common challenges as well as forging of a way forward. In the first meeting, attended by 26 people, a steering committee was elected and property owners were mobilised to pay monthly levies (Mkhize 2018).

It was also at these initial meetings that a housing manager forum was established. This was after the organiser had talked to property owners and asked to work closely with their property caretakers in their capacity as residents and governors of their respective buildings. Yet, given Hillbrow’s flawed housing politics and history of management committees within buildings, the property owners were (understandably) worried that this would lead to a mobilisation of tenants. The original Ekhaya coordinator recounted an instance that involved a property owner adamantly refusing to be part of Ekhaya and his property caretaker becoming closely involved in the initiative, by so doing going against the property owner’s will:

“One of the buildings [within Ekhaya] is owned by a pensioner in Pretoria, and he’s an old man now. When Ekhaya was forming its association, during one of the meetings he stands up and says, ‘I’m not joining anything in the new South Africa!’ But he didn’t know that his property caretaker, who has been living in Johannesburg for 30 years [...] is in Ekhaya. He’s been in Ekhaya all the time, he’s one of the leaders, he’s getting round, he’s helping make the list of the manholes, but his owner in Pretoria is not in. So, OK, I enjoy that. And then after about 3 years, he notices the meeting go out and he goes to Pretoria as well, Mr Odendaal. And then we get a call from Mr Odendaal and he says, ‘Please tell the chairman that I see what Ekhaya’s doing; I’m joining’. You can never define people. Now I could say,

'Aargh, that's an Afrikaner old nationalist, whatever!' Hey? Don't do that to people; people are too full of surprises. People will choose, and they'll choose in their self-interest. (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013)

By narrating this story, the coordinator hinted at the centrality of property caretakers – their lived experiences and their agency – in effecting change in Hillbrow. Anyhow, although a few property owners refused to let their property caretakers partake in Ekhaya, most tentatively agreed, and this ensued in monthly housing manager meetings which revolved around building issues. Following extensive engagement with property caretakers, grime and chaotic New Year's Eve celebrations were identified as immediate challenges. To counter this, the 'Safe New Year' and 'Our Healthy Ekhaya' campaigns were born. The 'Safe New Year' campaign in particular culminated in a simple A3-sized poster encouraging residents within Ekhaya member buildings to celebrate their festive season "with respect for each other, the neighbourhood and the environment" (Figure 3). In ensuring peaceful New Year's Eves, property caretakers worked hand-in-hand with officials from the local police station in controlling access and movement into and within Ekhaya member buildings (Mkhize 2018). Doing this effectively ensured that building residents could not get into any of the 33 buildings carrying harmful items. Initiated in 2004, this campaign has been actively conducted by property caretakers on an annual basis, with the result being relatively safer New Year's Eve celebrations since its initiation.

The Ekhaya coordinators credited the 'Know Your Neighbour' and 'Safe New Year' campaigns as social cohesion projects that have helped lessen anonymity and fear in Hillbrow. The 'Know Your Neighbour' campaign in particular was referred to as "one of the greatest social cohesion projects we have ever done" (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm 2015) on the basis that it got various people talking about collective issues, and understanding one another in the process, in this culturally diverse neighbourhood. The establishment of connections among residents and with other 'external stakeholders' is said to have created spaces for socialisation and developed feelings of trust and attachment to the area. It also created a platform for various stakeholders to come



Figure 3: 'Safe New Year' campaign poster on one of Ekhaya member buildings. © Mkhize 2018

together and work collectively on management issues pertaining to Hillbrow. For instance, attending some of the property caretaker meetings revealed that they were comfortable enough to discuss issues such as problems within the buildings, including difficult tenants, and offer each other advice on how to deal with such common issues. It became apparent that "face-to-face contact with other stakeholders helps to form social capital because it increases trust in each other" (Putnam as cited in Jin *et al.* 2018:3).

Producing Ekhaya: Materiality, refurbishment and community-building through children's 'cohesion projects'

The *Ekhaya Neighbourhood Improvement Programme* physically came into being through the purchase and

upgrading of derelict properties in the south of Hillbrow around 2004. Improvements to the buildings' facades as well as interiors, which included the hiring of security guards, installation of surveillance cameras, upgrading of laundry drying areas, not only made them better places to live in, it also improved the quality of life of the area's built environment (Mkhize & Mosselson 2019). In response to the crime and grime for which Hillbrow is known, the Ekhaya precinct is now characterised by viable street infrastructure – upgraded and paved sidewalks comprised of functional conducive lighting; cleaned-up alleyways; state-of-the-art Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) in targeted areas. In 2005, the City's institutions – Johannesburg Development Agency and Johannesburg Roads Agency – upgraded lanes between buildings, street lights and pavements within the precinct (Mkhize 2018). The provision of private security and cleaning services, including foot patrols in the streets and CCTV surveillance monitoring, complements the physical improvements effected by public institutions (Mkhize & Mosselson 2019).

It is however noteworthy that not all stakeholders initially saw eye-to-eye on the notion of Ekhaya as a neighbourhood association and a residential CID, chief among them the City. Perhaps because Ekhaya's materialisation occurred four years before the City approved of CIDs in residential areas, and given that Hillbrow had for a long time been associated with bedlam and failed civil society mobilisation efforts, the City was cynical of the notion of Ekhaya. The HDA reports that

“Initial response from the City was sceptical; one senior official declared the whole idea ‘fluffy’ and thought that rather than organising the stakeholders, the focus should be directed on measuring the levels of waste coming from flats.” (2012:18)

It took endless lobbying by the Ekhaya Neighbourhood Association for the City to get on board. It also took years of lobbying, community mobilising, negotiating and forceful policing by the Ekhaya organiser for the City to reclaim an unsightly brownfield site in Hillbrow into Ekhaya Park (Mkhize 2014). Built on a derelict lot that had previously been occupied by minibus taxi operators and drug dealers, this park has become a green recreational space in which children, mostly boys, from



Figure 4: One of seven CCTV cameras installed in Ekhaya, on areas identified as crime hotspots. © Mkhize 2014

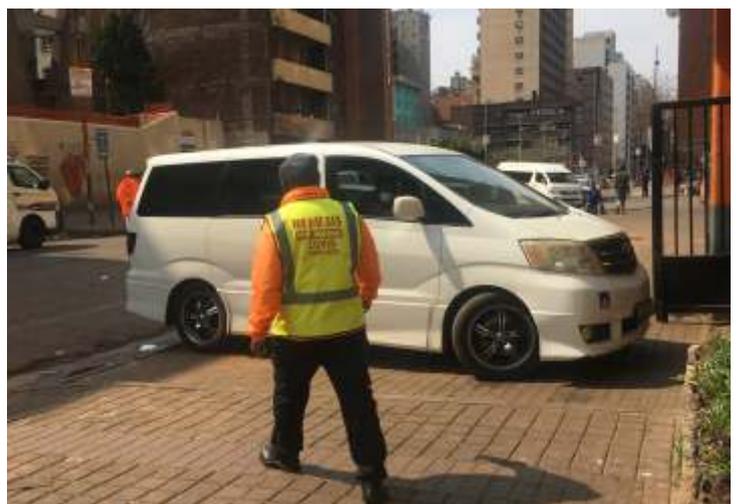


Figure 4A: Natural surveillance in the form of an Ekhaya street patroller. © Them bani Mkhize

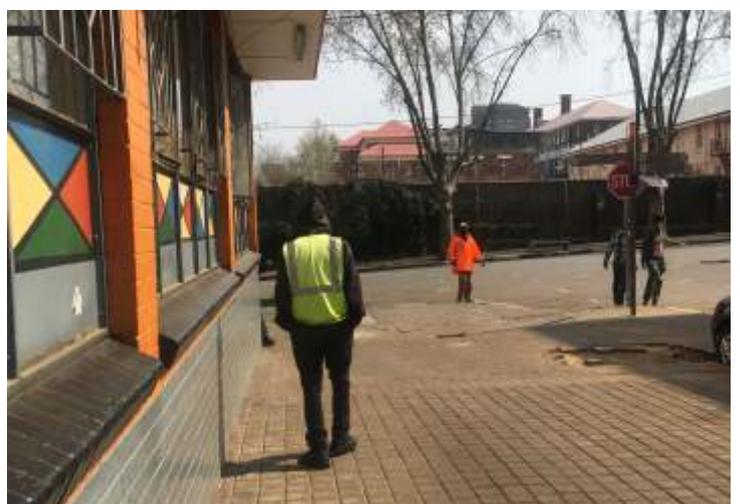


Figure 4B: Ekhaya street patroller. © Them bani Mkhize

Ekhaya member buildings play soccer and have informal soccer tournaments (Figure 5 and Figure 6). Until recently, Ekhaya Park was the only green space in Hillbrow.



Figure 5: Ekhaya Park is a reclaimed brownfield site that has been turned into a children's recreational space. © Mkhize 2018

As part of lobbying the City and convincing it to refurbish the derelict lot into Ekhaya Park, bargaining as a tactic was used by the programme. Ekhaya had to negotiate “to undertake the joint management of Ekhaya Park with the City doing physical maintenance and gardening while Ekhaya secures and manages the use of these areas” (HDA 2012:8). Yet, the materialisation of the park was not without conflict. As it displaced and threatened the livelihoods of minibus taxi operators and drug dealers, it was unsurprisingly fiercely opposed. The opposition was particularly from drug dealers who defended ‘their’ territory, with one apparently ramming his car into a crowd that had gathered there for one of the informal soccer tournaments (Mkhize & Mosselson 2019).

One of the social benefits that Ekhaya claims to have achieved is giving voice and power as well as instilling leadership qualities to property caretakers, some of the actors that literature on improvement districts would consider as disenfranchised stakeholders. The HDA informs that

“The eKhaya approach [...] has concentrated on building a key leadership structure among the building managers that evokes real ownership of the activities and supports them in spreading this engagement with the tenants of their buildings with whom they have strong day-to-day

contact. At the same time, they are participating and feeding into the decision-making forums that have a strong locus with the direct interests of the owners of the buildings.” (2012:19)

Indeed, interviews with the two coordinators revealed that at the core of the relationships forged by Ekhaya are the property caretakers. As managers of the buildings that they inhabit, property caretakers have been the glue keeping the landlord-tenant relations together in a neighbourhood characterised by absentee landlords. One of the coordinators echoed these sentiments in the excerpt below:

“The asset for the Residential Improvement District is in the housing supervisors. They have become a proud asset; they know each other strong; they are good for their management and internal governance in the buildings because they’ve been given the confidence. They’re a part of a group; they know each other. I can’t tell you the excitement for me to see human life behaving the way it can. It really thrills me!” (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013)

One of the ways in which property caretakers have been given the confidence to lead in Ekhaya has been through the planning and preparation of various children’s activities which one coordinator referred to as ‘social cohesion projects’ (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm. 2015). Although the events are organised by the Ekhaya coordinator(s), the fact that the property caretakers live in the buildings they govern, and are familiar with their respective tenants, means that they organise participants from each of the buildings and are entrusted with the children’s safety. The first of these activities was Ekhaya Street Soccer, an idea that was conceptualised and organised by a now-deceased caretaker and then carried forth by other property caretakers following his demise (Mkhize 2014). It involved organising thirty-two soccer teams out of children who had been playing soccer on the streets of Hillbrow as well as initiating informal soccer tournaments out of these teams.

The idea hatched other annual informal boys’ soccer tournaments, and it culminated in other social events specially organised for all local children (Mkhize 2018). Chief among them is Ekhaya Kidz’ Day, an annual end-of-



Figure 6: Children from Ekhaya member buildings play soccer on a soccer field in Ekhaya Park. © Mkhize 2018

year event funded by Ekhaya property owners and organised by their property caretakers. I attended the Ekhaya Kidz' Day in 2013 as well as one of the soccer tournaments in 2015, and I personally experienced the spirit of camaraderie not just among children but among their parents. Not only was it apparent that the parents in attendance in the two events personally knew each other, it also became evident that some were friends. According to one of the Ekhaya coordinators, the importance of friendship is actively being instilled in the Ekhaya residents' children for a reason:

“By having these kids’ sporting activities, we are teaching the kids how to play with each other because people who grow up together ... people who grow up playing together know each other and become brothers and sisters at the end of the day, and they won’t rob each other when they grow up. So we are trying to build social cohesion by teaching them to play together.” (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm. 2015)

In support of this, the City writes that residents' participation in Ekhaya social activities has broken the characteristic façade of anonymity that was prevalent among Hillbrow residents because Ekhaya residents have been “brought out from behind their closed doors, [are] socialising with one another, and [are] developing an interest in their surroundings” (City of Johannesburg 2009). In agreement, Gossman & Premo argue that

Ekhaya, through its emphasis on social activities and social regeneration, may have “fostered a sense of community that is lacking in many other [inner-city] areas, and may have established a common vision for Hillbrow that has been essential in its hoped for reestablishment as a vibrant destination within Johannesburg” (2012:12).

Yet, one observation I made about the children's initiatives was that insofar as they are inclusive of all children within Ekhaya – most notably the Ekhaya Kidz' Day end-of-year event – most of them are gendered. As most of them revolve around soccer, which is widely considered a male sport, they tend to leave girls aside. This got me wondering whether these efforts were a deliberate attempt to keep boys on the sporting grounds and off the streets on the condition that boys were considered to be potential troublemakers. I reasoned that should this be the case, it makes for a pragmatic approach on the one hand, but it also contributes to the reinforcement of public space as male-dominated. If this consideration is anything to go by, it is a good example of ‘gendered social cohesion’ which, in essence, excludes half of the community.

One of the things that the programme prides itself on is its ‘fluid boundaries’ and indistinct geographical delimitation. CIDs in Johannesburg and other South African cities, like improvement districts in American cities, are typically characterised by clearly defined

boundaries and these are proclaimed in terms of the Gauteng City Improvement Districts Act. This characteristic is typical of the City of Johannesburg's high-profile inner-city upgrading processes since the 2000s. For instance, Figure 2 indicates the city blocks occupied by Ekhaya South RCID in 2017 and shows how buildings belonging to participating housing companies are located in close proximity to each other. Although there appears to be specific demarcation between the Ekhaya clusters and the whole of Hillbrow, the neighbourhood does not have formal boundaries since Ekhaya 'member buildings' forming part of the initiative exist alongside 'non-member' buildings within the demarcated residential CID area. Figure 7 indicates how the boundaries of Ekhaya South are fixed and can grow over time, and also shows the buildings that have been earmarked as potential new additions. According to the Ekhaya coordinators, the fluidity of the boundaries was done deliberately and strategically to avoid a sense of 'outsiders' and 'insiders', and thus forestall external resistance:

"The most important thing about the CID is not to define it because the minute you make a wall, you're building reaction against the wall. Nobody knows where Ekhaya begins and ends, and that's useful. You get jabbed with a knife, not knowing from which building you've been hit; whereas here it's absolutely rigid, you can see that [...] You can see Ekhaya has a funny shape, and that's where the [CID] legislation is not useful." (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013)¹

Unlike other improvement districts, Ekhaya has difficulty eliminating freeloaders because its control over the territory it occupies is not total (Figure 7). Not all buildings in the demarcated area participate/pay in the improvement district, but have benefitted from a clean and safer area (HDA 2012). While this may make effective organisation and management, particularly over public spaces, more difficult, the Ekhaya organisers posited that they had found a way of working with actors

from non-member buildings. One of these has been the co-optation of property caretakers within non-member buildings in both precincts to join Ekhaya. Part of the coordinators' duties is persuading owners of neighbouring non-member buildings to join Ekhaya (Mkhize & Mosselson 2019). I learned that property caretakers are usually the coordinators' entry points because they provide critical knowledge on where and how to find property owners, especially in sectional title buildings. In some cases, Ekhaya property caretakers are the ones who persuade property caretakers from non-member buildings to convince their property owners to join the movement. Coordinators thus draw on property caretakers in Ekhaya and Hillbrow who, in turn, are involved in various types of decision-making and space management.

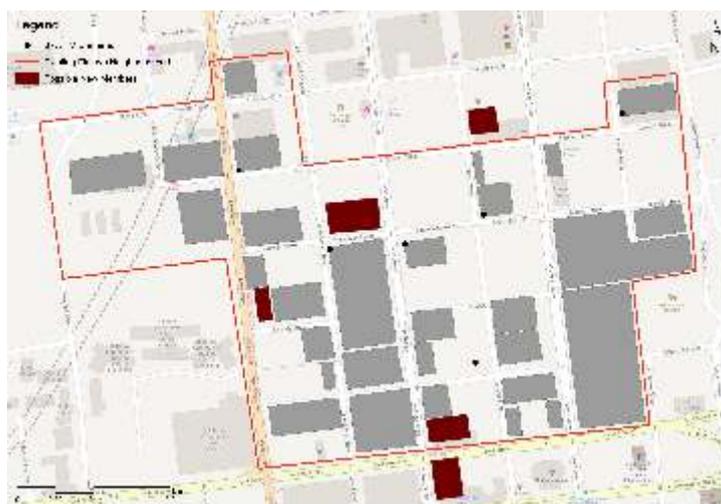


Figure 7: Clusters of buildings forming Ekhaya South cluster.
© Samy Katumba; extracted from Mkhize & Mosselson 2019

Ekhaya coordinators have also worked with non-member buildings through actively encouraging property caretakers of such buildings to clean their buildings' surroundings and fostering a sense of personalisation in their tenants. One of the coordinators shared how the programme has worked with some hijacked, non-member buildings in the excerpt below:

1. Yet, informal conversations with tenants within Ekhaya revealed that the distinction between Ekhaya and the rest of Hillbrow was not lost on them. Most tenants argued that they had made a conscious decision to stay within Ekhaya member buildings as they felt safer in them than in non-member buildings and/or anywhere else in Hillbrow. Ekhaya property caretaker respondents solidified this by positing that since Ekhaya materialised, most of their units have been occupied by tenants who stay longer.

“We have managed to work the outside of [hijacked buildings] and keep them with their internal problems. We had one [hijacked building whose residents] used to throw things over the balconies; but through talking to the caretaker, we have now managed to control them; they’re no longer doing it. [...] We’ve got quite a number of hijacked buildings in Ekhaya; but you cannot realise now because of the outside environment. Before, you could see the hijacked buildings by the area, the dirtiness outside; but those within our area now, the outside is clean, it’s only when you get inside the buildings that you can see that this is a hijacked building.”(Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm. 2013)

A sense of ownership was also fostered through the annual ‘Our Healthy Ekhaya’ campaign, a massive clean-up initiative in close association with a City refuse removal institution. This entailed the mobilisation of cleaning volunteers from among the residents of member and non-member buildings within Ekhaya. Initiated in 2007, this project has taken place on Nelson Mandela Day² since then. The instilling of a sense of ownership and community appears to have trickled down to residents of hijacked buildings that do not have Ekhaya membership. The founder of Ekhaya recounted a story pertaining to how certain residents within such buildings, inspired by the cleanliness and good management characterising Ekhaya member buildings, have taken the same kind of initiatives within their own buildings, in spite of the absence of management and security companies (Mkhize, 2018). They have worked collectively to renovate their buildings, fixing their broken windows and the security gates. This suggests that although there are problems that Ekhaya is incapacitated to address, the internalisation of the institutional rules governing the initiative’s member buildings and spaces within the precinct has occurred.

Managing Ekhaya: ‘Networked policing’ and trickle-down social capital

The notion of social capital in Ekhaya is also evident in the everyday management of spaces. This becomes most

evident in the manner that human surveillance and policing take shape within the precinct. Not only are these multifaceted – policing comprises Ekhaya street patrollers (Bad Boyz Security; see Figure 8), property caretakers, building security guards and, to a lesser extent, tenants and the Hillbrow sector manager from the local police station – but they are also networked (Mkhize 2018). For instance, accompanying the current Ekhaya coordinator (during a routine visit) as well as interviewing the Hillbrow sector manager revealed that the private security providers (street patrollers and control room operators) facilitate the sector manager’s job in the neighbourhood, particularly in Ekhaya. The private security identifies offenders via CCTV, after which they are caught by street patrollers and apprehended by the South African Police Service in Hillbrow. The internal building guards also have CCTV cameras and they alert Ekhaya street patrollers of any illicit behaviour taking place in the immediate environs of their respective buildings. Whilst drawing comparisons between Hillbrow before and after Ekhaya, one Ekhaya coordinator indirectly articulated this principle of ‘networked policing’ in the excerpt below:

“Law doesn’t make change happen, people make change happen! And policemen don’t stop crime, people stop crime! [...] When an opportunist snatches a bag, in the past, security guards inside the buildings would see something happening in the street and just watch. But now you’ve got relational engagement, so the guys in the buildings and the cleaners and the supervisors and there’s few Ekhaya security guards ... there’s immediate engagement and response! And the security guards go to the buildings hourly and clock in; they know each other. The security guards will cross the streets with the young kids. This must have an impact on crime prevention; and that’s why I say people stop crime, not police.” (Coordinator 1, Pers. Comm. 2013)

Indeed, Ekhaya’s networked surveillance system is clearly practically effective. This became apparent to me whilst I was engaging in ride-alongs with the Hillbrow sector manager in Ekhaya. I noticed how familiar he was with the street patrollers and how closely he worked

2. The 18th of July.



Figure 8: Bad Boyz Security van patrolling Ekhaya streets.
©Thembani Mkhize

with them. I also noted how familiar the Ekhaya street patrollers were with the building guards, property caretakers, tenants and the buildings themselves. They, like the property caretaker respondents, appeared to have a mental map of all problematic buildings and crime hotspots within Ekhaya and Hillbrow.

Nevertheless, I also noted that there was a ‘darker side’ to this networked policing and surveillance. On various occasions, street patrollers, internal building guards and property caretaker respondents constantly

hinted at punitive approaches to dealing with problematic tenants within Ekhaya member buildings, as well as offenders caught misbehaving on public space. For instance, one Ekhaya street patroller constantly referred to how “they [offenders] have to be given a bitter taste of their own medicine” before being handed over to the police (see Mkhize 2018). I personally noted some of this heavy-handed treatment of offenders on public space (see Figures 9A and 9B).

Some Ekhaya property caretaker respondents also shared the notion of heavy-handed security when asked about how they dealt with troublesome tenants in their respective buildings. They disclosed that although it was against their company rules to engage in physical fights with tenants – doing thus would mean immediate dismissal – they more-often-than-not drew on their social capital (building guards and Ekhaya street patrollers) to solve such problems. One of the property caretakers expressed this clearly when asked about how she dealt with altercations in the buildings she governed:

“Sometimes they [tenants] get out of line, and if you decide to take me to that limit, then I will just start and they’ll say, ‘OK, OK’ because they know that I don’t get angry, I don’t fight. If you start to be a problem, I’ll just look at you like that; you’ll get discipline there by the



Figure 9A & 9B. Ekhaya street patrollers collectively reprimand an offender on public space. ©Thembani Mkhize

Ekhaya guards. They will discipline you, not me! They will really discipline you!" (Caretaker 2, Pers. Comm 2013).

Some building entrances comprise large posters alerting visitors and residents of 'house rules' – visiting curfews, what not to bring in, rules pertaining to hosting social events (parties), what not to do within the buildings, and what happens to offenders – and property caretakers manage social relations within their buildings. In some of them, it is explicitly stated on posters that offenders are dealt with punitively before being handed over to police officials (Mkhize 2018). Turnstiles block entrance and ensure that only building tenants/residents gain access; and visitors enter by signing in and surrendering their identification at the entrance gates (Mkhize 2018). It became apparent that Ekhaya does not address deeper philosophical questions around surveillance, safety and security. Whilst it may be true that many tenants were willing to forgo a level of privacy for safety – as brought about by informal interviews with tenants – it is also highly possible that a trade-off has been made and not all residents want to exchange their privacy for safety.

Ekhaya has also established relatively strong networks and management relations through monthly ground surveys (neighbourhood walkabouts) with property caretakers and City stakeholders (including City officials and the ward councillor). Aimed at ensuring neighbourhood cleanliness and continuity of management, the monthly walkabouts seek to identify and compile a list of service delivery issues such as potholes, burst pipes, dysfunctional lighting and other problems associated with each Ekhaya member building. The coordinators consult all property caretakers and compile reports for submission to appropriate City entities, who are then expected to respond. According to both Ekhaya coordinators, acting in a neutral manner at meetings is the key to getting all stakeholders to get along. The stance to adopt is to "never take sides [...] never make other people feel like their opinions are more important than opinions of others" (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm. 2015). Yet, participant observation in several of the walkabouts showed that City agencies do not always deliver on time and Ekhaya has constantly had to put pressure on the City to respond to management concerns

within the precinct. For instance, not many City agencies' representatives participated, and there were many apologies from City officials who could not attend. Ekhaya coordinators thus use such meetings to air their grievances, hold the City accountable as well as tell officials to behave.

Nevertheless, it was interesting to note that such meetings have, at least over the years, resulted in personalised social networks and interdependencies on the ground. For instance, according to several property caretaker respondents, the Ekhaya monthly walkabouts and meetings have provided a platform for encountering the local state – meeting, mingling and making connections with the City's service delivery agencies (Mkhize & Mosselson 2019). One property caretaker stated that through the said meetings, he has become acquainted with the City official who does the monthly or fortnightly electricity readings for his building (Property Caretaker 3, Pers. Comm. 2013). These personalised relationships and networks are important for the everyday governance of the neighbourhood, especially when there are pressing management challenges on the ground.

The notion of social capital and personalised social networks also becomes evident in even the most micro- and localised settings within Ekhaya, especially in the everyday governance of issues such as informality within the precinct. One thing that sets Ekhaya apart from other city improvement districts or urban regeneration tools is the large number of 'informal actors' (street traders, hawkers, car mechanics, homeless persons, beggars, minibus taxi operators) operating on Ekhaya's turf and co-existing with rental residential properties and businesses (see Figure 10 for instance). Given that City institutions are usually hostile towards informal traders and (unlicensed) street traders are in principle not tolerated as this contravenes City by-laws, it was refreshing to note the presence of such actors on Ekhaya turf. I later found out that in Ekhaya, street traders are tolerated, if not actively encouraged. Ekhaya's leniency towards survivalist livelihood activities (with provisos) was expressly articulated in an interview with one coordinator below:

"We are not like other CIDs. Other CIDs see street traders and chase them away but we allow them to operate, as

long as they clean their trading areas. The Johannesburg Metropolitan Police Department does not want them to be there because it's against the City by-laws, but we have no problem with street traders; it's up to them how they deal with the JMPD." (Coordinator 2, Pers. Comm. 2013).

Indeed, a 'cat and mouse game' is constantly being played by street traders and the police, and "there are often bribes to policemen and [all traders] run the risk of goods being lost, seized or stolen" (Simone 2004:423). Participant observation in the Ekhaya precincts showed that street traders are constantly harassed by the JMPD, having to evade police patrols, and they sometimes seek refuge in Ekhaya member buildings. In one such incident, an informal trader ran into one of these buildings to evade an approaching JMPD truck. I overheard her asking the building guard on duty to tell her when the truck had gone, remarking that she was not about to give the JMPD "an early Christmas present" (a bribe) (Mkhize 2014). An interview with the caretaker of the building in question, whose building environs are utilised by many street traders, revealed that he has a mutually beneficial relationship with them:

"I have nothing against street traders. Yes, they know that they are violating bylaws and they know that they will be

harassed by the police people and their things will be taken from them if the police catch them. But one thing you must understand is that these people help me in my job sometimes. They bring us clients who then become tenants in this building and in my other building. They recommend people looking for flats to us, and then the people will call me and say, 'Oh I heard from one of your street traders outside your building that there is a flat to let in your building', and then we give that person a flat, you see?" (Caretaker 1, Pers. Comm. 2013).

Although some respondents were not actively supportive of informal trading and homelessness around their buildings, others expressed empathy and acknowledged that property caretakers and traders can help each other sometimes:

"Sometimes when you look at a homeless person, you need to meet that person halfway. You have to become half like him and he have to become half like you. So then you will have an understanding, you know? Sometimes you find that those people are the ones that can protect you and your building from outside, while they sleeping there, eating there. But it's just they like to mess! But if you have an understanding with them to say, 'You can eat here, you can sleep here, but you must clean up', I don't think you will have a problem." (Caretaker 2, Pers. Comm. 2013).



Figure 10: Informal trading outside an Ekhaya member building. ©Thembani Mkhize

It becomes clear that although the City as a stakeholder disapproves of unlicensed street traders, various Ekhaya staff members are able to exercise their agency as well as use their discretion to adopt nuanced positions towards informal trading. As actors with a degree of influence, Ekhaya property caretakers interact with informal actors on a daily basis and have found beneficial ways of accommodating and co-existing with street traders and the homeless. Here, informal actors may be said to be the social capital and social networks of Ekhaya building managers – they help make the work of caretakers easier and

in exchange get space to occupy. This, in essence, speaks not only to mutual recognition and the expression of empathy, but also to practical ways of making space manageable by drawing on resources already at one's disposal within a particular setting.

Whereas gentrification has been experienced in other RCIDs within Johannesburg and has led to displacement of the poor (Ah Goo 2018), there is no obvious sign of gentrification within Ekhaya. Although environmental conditions have clearly improved through the programme, Hillbrow still does not attract middle-class residents. This may be due to the fact that Ekhaya has shown flexibility in relation to subletting, a practice which is often seen by City officials as irregular and contributing to urban disorder but which is hugely important in opening access to the city for the poor. All property caretaker respondents argued that they tolerated subletting within their building units as a means to an end (as the only way rents can be collected in full in a context of mass poverty and urbanisation). Subletting may be more of a pragmatic choice to continue business than it is a humanistic, redistributive and socially aware effort, but it encourages poor tenants to draw on their social capital in a manner that makes it possible for them to afford living in Ekhaya, thus making Ekhaya more liveable (Mkhize 2014).

Concluding remarks

This paper is about a specific form of improvement district that effects urban neighbourhood change – combats crime, grime and physical decay – whilst building sustainable relationships and a sense of community in a historically transient, redlined neighbourhood. Although most improvement districts and urban regeneration tools in South African cities have been critiqued for being exclusionary, undemocratic and revanchist, the case of Ekhaya, for the most part, suggests that this needs not always be so. Ekhaya emphasises social capital and social networks as prerequisites of urban change/regeneration. Although largely driven by profit and capital accumulation – it is a rental property

business – Ekhaya still signifies an innovative, humanistic, back-to-basics management of grime, opportunistic crime and 'anomie' in a populous urban neighbourhood. By stressing the importance of bringing and keeping various Hillbrow residents on board in a neighbourhood characterised by transience and absentee landlordism, ethnographic evidence shows the possibility of facilitating social cohesion as well as respecting human dignity in a very unequal society. By giving a voice to groups who are often overlooked in urban regeneration initiatives (those who do not own property and those without financial influence), Ekhaya may have re-written the 'rules' pertaining to who can(not) form part of improvement districts. This example shows that the establishment and maintenance of human relationships in regeneration efforts does indeed lead to the accomplishment of shared urban goals as well as neighbourhood transformation.

Social cohesion in Ekhaya is broadly understood to mean co-opting and mobilising various actors, aligning their divergent interests and forging long-lasting networks and relationships essential to drive and sustain change in Hillbrow. Social cohesion is thus understood to mean social capital and social networks. Social capital and networks have been supported through various platforms and infrastructures – consistent community meetings, annual social events, annual safety and cleanliness campaigns, and ongoing lobbying of the City – which enable mutual exchanges. Clearly, forging social capital and networks would have been incomplete without the placement of Hillbrow residents, most notably property caretakers, at the centre of the initiative. In a context of tenancy and absentee landlordism, giving property caretakers a voice was/is clearly a shrewd strategy to draw significantly from their lived experiences and knowledge of Hillbrow's dynamics as a means to regenerating the neighbourhood. As knowledge brokers with some form of discretion, such actors have managed to incorporate other marginalised actors (traders and the homeless) via forging symbiotic relationships based on patronage. The relationships/networks are critical for change, continuity and even growth in Ekhaya.

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Engaging with Social Cohesion as an Ethnographer Opportunities and Pitfalls of a Participatory Audio-Visual Method



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This paper is a first-person reflection on social cohesion as a question mark that lingers in the mind of anyone living in, working and engaging with South African society nowadays: how can such a highly fragmented society start suturing its multifaceted divides? My point is not to offer a well-rounded definition of social cohesion, nor to debate its political uses. I mobilise the idea of social cohesion as an open-ended question that brings more discomfort than certainty. To me, social cohesion is both unreachable and unescapable. It is unreachable because social divisions are intergenerational and intersectional, they are too deep to be easily resolved in a trendy keyword. But social cohesion is also unescapable because it remains a necessary horizon that somehow guides my research. What sense would it have to document social divisions, collective doubts or individual angers if it was not with the hope of contributing to minimize them?

Since 2007, I have been conducting various ethnographic projects in Cape Town. In this paper, I question how some of the tools I have used might help to disrupt tremendous inequalities and structural divides. I will start with two vignettes that exemplify why I believe commitment to long-term ethnographic observation offers a precious vantage point that allows us to embrace the ambivalence of togetherness in South Africa, without limiting ourselves to the idea of social cohesion. I will then present in more details my experience of Digital

Story Telling workshops led on the Cape Flats in Cape Town. Originally designed as a means to understand how young South Africans build their sense of self through autobiographic stories, these workshops proved to be meaningful not only to me, as an academic researcher interested in youth citizenship, but also to the participants who were able to strengthen their voices and enact – even if temporarily – new relationships with their peers and their social environment. Through this article, I also wish to encourage other researchers to experiment with photography, sound-recording and film-editing as I believe that these tools help us to ask difficult – and nevertheless necessary – questions about the legitimacy of academic work in general and about the ethics of ethnographic work in particular.

Vignette 1: January 2007, I land at Cape Town International Airport, my heart bumping with doubt and eagerness. I am about to carry an immersive fieldwork for my MAs in geography about the perception of urban space amongst the formerly outcast communities on the Cape Flats. I have never been to South Africa before, hardly speak English, cannot drive a car and have never even met the friend of a friend who is picking me up at the airport. In my A5 notebook, I have the emails of a couple of academics based at UCT who might be able to help me around the city.

A few weeks later, I am spending my days between

UCT African Studies Library and the windy streets of a small community of newly built houses on the western margins of Gugulethu, a former ‘Black African’ township located about 15 km from the city centre and built as the paramount of apartheid urbanism for ‘Africans’ in the early 1960s¹. As the room I stay in is located in the distant suburb of Fish Hoek, commuting on trains, buses and taxis can take hours every day, but it gives me a great opportunity to witness the silent choreography of a highly racialised society.

If someone had asked me what ‘social cohesion’ meant at that time, I don’t think I would have talked about a general idea of togetherness and inclusion. These terms were probably already in fashion then but they did not have much meaning on the ground. ‘Social cohesion’ was more something that was lacking than an apt descriptor of what I experienced every day. However, I have always been a disciplined student so I would have made an effort and probably said that if there was anything that would come near ‘social cohesion’, it was encapsulated in the bizarre mixture of pride and shame expressed by those I met, who described themselves as “born and bred in Gugulethu”, but who spoke of “Cape Town” as this distant white city at the end of the trainline. In our conversations, it was clear that being from Gugulethu was an affirmation of belonging to a place, to a community and even to a proud political heritage – thus drafting a sense of ‘social cohesion’ – but belonging to “Gugs” unavoidably also meant that one did not belong “the city”.

This first experience raises two of the stickiest questions that linger when we interrogate social cohesion in South Africa. Firstly, the question of scale: if social cohesion only ever makes sense at the micro level, can we imagine social cohesion as a matter of *multiple* belongings

playing differently at different scales rather than as a one-size-fits-all kind of ideal? Secondly, the question of space: can there ever be *social* cohesion without *spatial* cohesion, i.e., without rewiring the lived space of the everyday? *Where*, concretely, can people be comfortable to be both “from Gugs” and “from the city”?

Vignette 2: February 2015. It has been eight months since I arrived in Cape Town for my latest postdoctoral project. I am now employed as a research associate on a big research contract (bye-bye, doctoral freedom!). My role is to develop a series of case-studies in partnership with local youth organisations around Cape Town. I coordinate my work with two other researchers doing similar work in Beirut (Lebanon) and Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Our objective is to understand how the codes of what we call the “citizenship industry” promoting “civil society” and “active citizenship” all around the world are interpreted, put into practice and possibly challenged by the young men and women who work on a daily basis to build a society where they can nurture their dreams (Nagel and Staeheli 2015, Jeffrey and Staeheli 2015, Buire and Staeheli 2017).²

One of my field sites is a community-based organisation working in formerly ‘coloured’ townships just a few kilometres west from Gugulethu. These places are known for their high-level of poverty, unemployment, drug use and gang-related violence. Statistically, young ‘coloured’ men are twice more likely to spend time in jail than ‘Black Africans’, and more than ten times than ‘white’ men.³ The primary objective of the NGO is to challenge this seemingly prewritten fate by exposing the youth to alternative role models. It has opened two cafés where, beyond surfing the internet and drinking coffee, young people are invited to participate in motivational talks and workshops that encourage them

1. I use single quote marks to emphasise that the racial categories mentioned in this text are borrowed to the official census terminology currently in use in South Africa, but do not refer to the way individuals may define themselves.
2. This research project was called *YouCitizen*. Funded by a European research, *YouCitizen* explored the meaning and experience of citizenship for young people in societies with histories of conflict and division (ERC Advanced Grant #295392). As a postdoctoral researcher, my role included conducting fieldwork in Cape Town for an uninterrupted period of 18 months. Various aspects of this research are developed in the rest of the text. Details can be found on the website: www.youcitizen.org.
3. These figures come from various reports by The Department of Correctional Services and the South African Police Services, although Leggett (2004:25) notes that “in order to evaluate whether coloured people contribute disproportionately to the crime problem in the Cape, the crime rates in coloured and non-coloured areas would have to be compared. Unfortunately, this is impossible without station-level crime statistics – figures that the government no longer releases to the public.”

to enhance their self-confidence, embrace the digital turn and ultimately cultivate their entrepreneurial dreams.

I must confess that at first, I am not very comfortable with the uncritical promotion of the model of social enterprise that the NGO insistently presents as *the* key alternative to unemployment. But I am far too busy in my role of workshop facilitator to track the NGO's managerial ethos or liberal ideology. I am working with five young volunteers, showing them how to create their own "digital story" about who they are and where they aspire to be. These digital stories are a combination of still pictures, short videos and audio recordings, edited together in the form of 5-minute movies, easily sharable online and via WhatsApp. They can be viewed here: <http://www.youcitizen.org/videos/vimeo-south-africa>

This time, if someone had asked me what I thought of 'social cohesion' in South Africa, I would have probably emphasised the conundrum experienced by young people on a daily basis. Although the common saying goes that they are "the future of the Nation" and that their main objective in life should be to "be the change they want to see in the world", their daily reality is made of school drop-out, street crime, and often hunger. The young men and women I work with are not desperate however. Their stories are filled with optimism and pride in the path they have negotiated for themselves so far. But all of them also describe the general sense of abandonment they feel in relation to their neighbourhoods. They have accepted the fact that their best professional perspective relies on their capacity to create their own job rather than on furthering higher education and earning a decent salary. They have many stories to share about street life and the ordinary violence they witness, suffer from or partake in. What strikes me the most with these five young people is that they are both optimistic and hopeless. That would probably be my definition of social cohesion in South Africa at the time: what might bring all South Africans together is the certainty that there is no certainty about the future. In other words, to think about social cohesion, we need to

acknowledge the ambivalent affective landscape in which the youth is growing up. They are neither naively optimistic nor irremediably desperate. Instead, they are actively seeking ways to navigate the contradictory injunctions ('be the change' / 'don't expect anything from society' / 'be optimistic').

These two vignettes do not define social cohesion. They are here to introduce how I relate to such a vague term as a French researcher committed to understanding socio-political dynamics on the Cape Flats "from within" (yes, the contradiction is intentional here, I shall always be an outsider and the whole challenge is to make this otherness productive). The vignettes help understand why, in my opinion, 'social cohesion' just does not work as a key word. It is not an apt descriptor of social dynamics but I cannot just say 'social cohesion is lacking'. Thinking about it actually triggers interesting questions about the tacit rules that we all play along in South Africa. Why does Cape Town still remain unreachable for those who are born and bred in Gugulethu (symbolically, physically, politically...)? On what terms is a young person who grows surrounded by gang violence supposed to enter adulthood? These questions also apply to my own research practice and ethics. How do I understand my political positioning in the field? What research methods can I develop in order to challenge the intersectional power games I am unavoidably part of?

My first proposal, if we are to engage with the question of social cohesion as ethnographers and not just as pundits, is to commit to patient engagement with small groups in society. In 2015, student protests were spreading across the country, prefiguring what would later be known as the '*Fees Must Fall*' movement. I was then working on the research project mentioned above and one of my case-studies was about an after-school programme based on the outskirts of Khayelitsha, about 35 km east from the city centre. Twice a week, I volunteered with a dozen of young women and men who recently matriculated⁴ and now dedicated their free time to coach high-school students. They offered academic support in Maths, English, Physics, or History. The NGO

4. In South Africa, secondary education ends with a national exam called "matric", that learners prepare during the dreaded 'Grade Twelve' final year of high school.

also helped Twelve Graders to prepare their application for university. It provided administrative support, life orientation, sometimes even counselling. What I noticed there, is that the tutors firmly emphasised their sense of self-worth and empowerment. Displaying force and conviction was essential. The learners, on the other end, often described themselves as hostages of a failing system that they had to escape at any cost. The tacit agreement between both groups was that dropping out of school was the worst escape possible and that another life was possible if you could jump over the structural gap that, as a young 'black' South African living in Khayelitsha, kept higher-education out of your reach.

INTERVIEW 1 (two male tutors, 23/10/2015):

"[...] grade twelve, to me, it was the stage when I said, 'Life begins after grade twelve, life begins after matric.' Because if ever I failed matric, I don't know where I will be now. Because in failing matric, your dreams, your hope, your values, start to flush- start to decrease [...] Your goals didn't go the way you have planned, so you feel you become someone who has no idea or has no goals. You are hopeless, idealess, because you don't see a future behind what you are doing."

INTERVIEW 2 (one female tutor, 11/06/2015):

"Interviewer: So did you go straight from matric to university?"

N.: Yes, no gap year. I made sure that I go further, because in my family, I'm the first one to actually go to university, and I'm the last born. The other girls are older than me, and I'm the first one, so I'm just setting the example for the other- for my cousins who are younger than me also to get that 'Okay, let's work hard so we can go to university'."

The testimonies of these young university students are important to me because, at the time of these interviews, 'black' students were mostly portrayed as either revolutionaries eager to burn campuses down or apathetic opportunists seeking to maneuver the loopholes of BBBEE.⁵ Listening to them reveals the social weight of entering post-matric education and the

affective labour involved to respond to the expectations of their peers and of the adults around them. When *Fees Must Fall* became the mediagenic cry of "the youth", it is this contrasted picture of what being young implied in and across Cape Town that I had in mind. I believe this kind of slow ethnographic engagement is to be nurtured, especially in times of confusion or even conflict. It forces us to move away from the debate about what 'social cohesion' is (or what it fails to be) and focus instead on what is actually going on. The tutors from this NGO taught me that as first-year university students, they were well aware of the centrifugal forces that prevent them to 'belong' but nevertheless actively worked to impose themselves even where they were not expected. It would take me beyond the scope of this paper but they indeed developed very distinct tactics to disobey some of the rules imposed by the NGO, while being the guardians of the discipline during the tutoring sessions. I would not have perceived this if I had not been myself involved in the tutoring.

Moreover, and that will be my second point, the very act of taking part in a social situation as a participant observer can, in certain circumstances, create a very peculiar space where the persons who are involved can reflect on their own doings and possibly shift some of their prejudices, researchers and participants alike. The unpredictable friendship that grew between Tyrone and Ashwin during our *Digital Story workshop* mentioned in the second vignette illustrates this point. In their respective stories, Tyrone presents himself as a grieving survivor of gang violence, while Ashwin reveals his homosexuality as a joyful alternative to dominant models of violent masculinity. During our final sessions together, they both admitted that if it had not been for the workshop, they would have never spoken to each other. But listening to each other's life stories and witnessing the hard work they both put in the workshop made them realise they had a lot in common after all (Buire, Garçon, Torkaman Rad, 2019).

That leads me to my main point: how audio-visual participatory methods help me reconcile the two

5. BBBEE stands for *Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment*. It is a national programme aiming at bringing the black majority into the economic mainstream through preferential procurement processes, Corporate Social Investment guidelines, mentorship programmes, etc.

objectives of my work, i.e., produce original knowledge about emerging political subjectivities and contribute to disrupt some of the identity assignments that are so entrenched in South Africa. I do not pretend to write a set of guidelines or “best practices” that should be reproduced by others. More humbly, I hope to give some ideas about how to mobilise the audio-visual technologies of our time not only as tools to mediate ethnographic encounters or as writing devices that help disseminate our research but also as practical ways to interrogate social cohesion in real life.

In our “*Digital Story Telling*” project, the goal was to produce self-portraits where the authors reflected on the people, events or places that influenced their personality. An important part of the workshop was thus dedicated to “finding the story”. Five members of the NGO participated. The three men spontaneously identified what they wanted to speak about (respectively being homosexual, quitting a gang, being a role-model). For the women, it was harder to decide what aspect of their lives to focus on (“there is nothing special about me” said one of them). This first obstacle is an important reminder of the difficulty of an autobiographical exercise.⁶ It is also where my own interest as a researcher rested since I could follow how the process of self-narration unfolded for each participant. For example, it is striking to note that the young men initially seemed more confident than the women to state who they were. Abstract figures of masculinity were readily available to them, while the women were struggling to find ideotypes that fitted their representations of self.

However, this initial confidence soon faded away when we moved from “what do you want to speak about” to “how do you want to tell the story”. This is where the use of audio-visual tools takes all its importance. The authors needed not only to order their narrative in a way intelligible to others, they also had to decide what

pictures would carry their message best, what sounds would translate their state of mind. As a facilitator, I shared some theoretical knowledge about photographic language (playing with frame and composition, scales and perspective, patterns and colours, etc.). I lent them cameras so that they could take their own pictures and encouraged them to collect images from their own personal or family archives. I introduced the notion of soundscape and showed how to use a semi-professional sound recorder. This training programme was mainly meant to equip them with theoretical and technical skills



Figure 1: Tutoring in Khayelitsha (June 2015). © Chloé Buire, 2015

that they would be able to pass on to their peers for future projects in the NGO.

Then came a phase of one-to-one tutoring. A key step was to go out and take pictures. Even the most confident participant found it impossible to take the camera home and take pictures by himself. With him as with others, we took my car to drive through the places he mentioned in his story, photograph the landscapes and find metaphorical representations of his feelings, both past and present.

6. Jean-Baptiste Lanne (2018) wrote an excellent chapter on the impossibility of self-narration in his PhD dissertation about the employees of private security companies in Nairobi.

Tyrone for example felt quite confident at first with his narrative. As a teenager, he got involved in a street gang. A few years later, his best friend and his girlfriend were shot dead in front of him in a terrible – but common – settling of scores. Tyrone wanted to end his story on a positive note and emphasise his commitment to the entrepreneurship spirit promoted within the NGO. It was easy to take pictures in the NGO space but how to illustrate his past life as a gangster? Tyrone initially collected generic images of guns and gangsters extracted from Google visual database. Most of the pictures were of low quality and probably protected by copyright, but the main problem to me was that they were not *his* (I shall come back later on this spontaneous censorship of mine). I wanted Tyrone to get beyond the literal association “My friends were shot” = picture of a gun, or “I was a gangster” = picture of a group of threatening-looking young men. It took us a whole day to discuss and look for alternative images. We drove past his neighbourhood twice before he asked me to take pictures of the flats for him as he did not feel comfortable doing it. Tyrone was keener to walk through places from his childhood. We spent half an hour in a sad-looking park where he took more pictures and slowly opened up to the possibility to use images not for what they showed, but rather for the feelings they might carry. There, we decided to use two distinct ambient sounds to structure his story. In the park, I recorded birds chirping, swings squeaking and cars racing in the background. That would be used as a marker of his life “before”. Later on, Tyrone recorded the audioscape of the NGO training space, to accompany the “after the killing” part of his story. We also used a sepia filter that we applied to the picture of the flats to evoke the past. When the filter fades out, the picture recovers its colours and that transition represents the grieving process of Tyrone. I call these choices “metaphorical materials”, by opposition to the literal pictures that Tyrone had spontaneously identified at first. The movement from literal to metaphorical is a key principle of the *Digital Story Telling* method in general but I argue that it is particularly relevant if we are to explore what ‘social cohesion’ means for young adults on the Cape Flats beyond ready-made narratives of the successful Rainbow Nation.

For Tyrone and his colleagues, ‘social cohesion’ basically looks like a “Proudly South African” campaign

picturing smiling people of different race groups working together on an equal foot. It is a stereotypical image that has no resemblance with what they see every day. When I pushed them to reflect on how they felt about growing up on the Cape Flats, what came up first were challenges and obstacles rather than celebration. The five participants all spoke of violence both as a real-life experience (the death of Tyrone’s friends, the mugging experienced by Amiena) and as a threat (symbolised by the *graffiti* in Ashwin’s story or by the walls in Taryn’s story). They also all built their story within the contained geography of the segregated city. Amiena’s story is very powerful in this sense. She shows the physical borders of her neighbourhood in her photos and explains in her voiceover the fear that comes from seeing ‘outsiders’ intruding that safety zone.

All in all, what the stories tell us is that these five young people live in a society that is violent and divided. The opposite of social cohesion. But what *making* the stories taught us is that it is possible to create temporary places where violence can be kept at bay and where relationships can flourish beyond the usual divides. I explained earlier how Tyrone and Ashwin became friends. Empathy between these two men would have been impossible a few weeks earlier and they both knew it as Ashwin jokingly pointed out when Tyrone reacted to his story during the debrief:

FOCUS GROUP (Debrief session, 08/09/2015)

“Tyrone: So, along the way, [Ashwin] didn’t actually forced it into. He put it in a soft gentle way to say that he is... gay.

Everybody laughs at Tyrone’s visible hesitation in pronouncing the word ‘gay’ but Ashwin finishes the sentence with him.

Ashwin: You can say it!”

This temporary disruption of the dominant script also appeared in the relationship between the researcher and those participating in the research. When Tyrone and I were working on his film, we both had to accommodate the other’s views and feelings in a way that I had never experienced before. Usually, my ethnographic observation relies on participating in situations in which I try not to express my own views. But when we edited Tyrone’s story, I was so worried that it would end up being a flat account of redemption that I kept pushing



Figure 2: Public screening of the stories at the Youth Café (September 2015).
© Chloé Buire, 2015

him to look for original sounds and pictures. I initially thought we would never use any of the images he had downloaded from the internet, but the intensity of his grief made me realise that we had to acknowledge the figure of his grand-father through the motivational image he chose for the end of his story. The same thing happened with Ashwin who brought over thirty ‘selfies’ taken in various festive events (nightclubs, NGO events, outings with friends). I convinced him to include pictures of his street as I thought it was important to show where he came from but, at the end, we agreed that one thing did not make any sense without the other. The strength of his story precisely relies on the fact that he brings together images of the Cape Flats and images of trendy nightclubs. That allows him to show people from Manenberg that other models of masculinity exist, but also to call the attention of the gay community on the reality of queer life on the Cape Flats.

After the first public screening of the stories in the training space, a young man reacted powerfully to that particular story. Without saying a word, he stood up and hugged Ashwin. All the people present in the room felt their mutual emotion and that is only then that I realised the strength of the story. At first, I thought that it was oversimplifying to make growing up as a boy in Manenberg a matter of a dual choice of either joining a

gang or being marginalised. To those more familiar with this environment, however, the dichotomy is not a cliché. It does encapsulate the conundrum of queer life and directly touches those who do not belong.

To sum up, coproducing visual outputs is not just a question of sharing the research tools. The very process of film-making (from pitching a story to actually creating aural and visual materials and eventually showing it to others) triggers a series of discussions that would be difficult to have otherwise. As we ponder the technical options (how to frame a picture, how to edit a transition between two pictures, how to illustrate an abstract feeling, etc.), different and sometimes diverging narrative tactics become explicit. As a researcher, I had never been so directly confronted to my own biases and to the blind spots of my analyses. I argue that this kind of participatory audio-visual method eventually creates opportunities to unravel, and possibly challenge, the power game inherent to any research project. The stories we created reveal the fragility of the construction of self for all the participants.

As a way of conclusion: Confront ethical pitfalls, accept defeat, keep pushing

As announced from the start, the objective of this paper was not to offer a new definition of social cohesion or a recipe to fight against social divisions. I take social cohesion, or the lack thereof, as the unescapable epistemological landscape we all have to acknowledge when working in and on South Africa. This allows me to reflect on my own research practices. Committing to long-term ethnographic observation and experimenting audio-visual co-creation represent potential tools that we can use to disrupt the multi-layered divisions that characterise South Africa.

I am fully aware that these qualitative approaches rely heavily on individual personalities and on my specific position on the intersectional chessboard. However,

slow-research helps move beyond one's own personal reaction, especially when caught in a moment of social trouble. It possibly mitigates the legit fascination for the spectacular and allows a more patient acknowledgement of the plurality of affects involved – mine and that of others. None of this comes easily and that is what I want to emphasise as a way of conclusion.

How do we navigate the intricate politics of the community we embarked to partner with in a community-oriented research project? How can I be certain that the “metaphorical” pictures we choose in a digital story reflects the feelings of the author? Whose reaction to a story matters the most? These questions are difficult. At times, my inability to answer them makes me feel overwhelmed and out-of-place. My whole work seems, at best useless, at worst inappropriate or even harmful. To make things even more complicated, “my” work is actually shaped by external academic duties such as those imposed by funding agencies, institutional

ethical committees or ordinary teaching and administrative tasks.

If, as social scientists, we are to engage seriously with the profound divisions that structure the real world “out there”, we certainly have a duty in making the tensions that shape our work “in there” more explicit. Audio-visual approaches make it more difficult to hide the breaches that so often derail the utopian principles of “participatory research” as defined in textbooks. We have to decide what pictures and what sounds we will use to convey specific ideas and feelings. The book co-edited by Claire Bénit-Gbaffou and her colleagues about the politics of community-based research in Johannesburg is courageously doing a similar effort at de-romanticising partnerships beyond the university (Bénit-Gbaffou *et al.* 2019). Deconstructing the legitimacy of our symbolical authority as academics is probably one of the most honest contributions we can make towards imagining a new epistemological landscape for South Africa.

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Liberation and Looted Malls

Fractured Urbanism and Suburban Nationalism in South Africa in the Time of Covid



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In 2003, Ivor Chipkin (2003) published a study which found that the provision of improved physical infrastructure (taps, housing, new schools, etc.) did not necessarily improve social cohesion in communities with broken homes and gangsters. Physical infrastructure provision, he argued, was not the same as development. It did not on its own make communities more cohesive, democratic and tolerant. The South African concept of *ubuntu*, or human togetherness, he argued, did not come naturally; it had to be cultivated as part of a programme of social upliftment and empowerment. He used fieldwork from the Cape Flats in Cape Town to show that accommodating street gangsters and their families in better housing units had not stopped them from being gangsters. In fact, on the contrary, the housing programme seemed to be rewarding them for being gangsters. Chipkin contended that the belief that state housing and service delivery would create social cohesion based on “decent and virtuous citizenship”, as the policy documents seemed to suggest, was a mistaken assumption. He criticised the state-run housing programme for not attempting to address “how these products [housing units] might assist residents become ethical citizens in a position to sustain themselves virtuously” (Chipkin 2003: 74). He defined ethical and virtuous citizenship as tolerating social and cultural difference, acknowledging the rights and dignity of others, and encouraging social cohesion at family, street

and neighbourhood levels. In this regard, he was critical of the state’s decision to step away from the challenges of promoting social cohesion and a participatory democracy in favour of the delivery of physical assets, such as taps, houses and toilets, to the poor. He felt that the work of building a new society required much more (*Ibid*).

Several years later in 2011, Fiona Ross at the University of Cape Town published a book called *Raw Life, New Hope: Decency, Housing and Everyday Life in a Post-Apartheid Community*. In this volume, she explored the changes in the lives of members of a poor black community in Cape Town over a ten-year period. During this time, the neighbourhood, which had been a rough and ready shack settlement, was transformed by the arrival of free state housing under the government’s *Reconstruction and Development Plan* (RDP). Ross (2011) described the provision of the suburban-style RDP units as a potential game changer in the lives of the local residents and how they had believed that the houses they were to receive would wash away the pain and indignity of poverty and bring social advancement and decency (*ordentlikheid*). However, the book shows that while the houses provided by the state initially offered hope to the residents, the community continued to experience considerable difficulties and violence even after the houses had been delivered. In fact, the book concluded, the RDP housing programme had helped to create more

tensions, including xenophobic violence, than it had resolved. Families were no less dysfunctional by virtue of having a better standard of housing, nor was the community less divided by virtue of the gifts provided by the state. Ross's lament, like that of Ivor Chipkin, is that state-driven development should do more. It should result in less marginalisation and greater employment and should provide more opportunities for social inclusion and coherent family life.

In other work on the issue, Barolsky (2013; 2019) and her colleagues at the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) provided a different perspective on cohesion and suburban desire in their exploration of the development model promoted by a European-funded non-governmental organisation (NGO), Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU), in the Khayelitsha township of Cape Town. Barolsky (2019) argued that the NGO failed to win sustained local support because it was perceived as too Euro-centric and neo-liberal in its approach, which was to offer access to modern bungalow housing as a solution to inter-personal and public violence. The NGO believed that new built forms would produce more modernist forms of family, identity and behaviour. In other words, it was another project based on the belief that the right kind of infrastructure can produce the right types of social relations, behaviour and citizenship and help create peaceful and cohesive communities. In the end, Barolsky argued, VPUU lost momentum because its models for development collided with local people's ideas of kinship and their fear of new forms of social control and community. The imaginary of an "ordered city" (reproduced by VPUU and the state) came into conflict with local forms of mutuality, social cohesion, and informality. This view is supported by the work of De Sagté and Watson (2018) on the history of modernist town planning regimes in the Langa township in Cape Town and why these planning models failed over a long period. Both these studies highlight the complex cultural contexts surrounding public housing delivery in Cape Town; but they also over-estimate African resistance to suburban-style homes and consumer lifestyles. In this regard, most studies of Cape Town pay too little attention to the fact that, although the long-term refusal of particular forms of urbanisation with services and land aimed at poor and marginalised African residents has

blocked suburban development, this has not suppressed suburban desire among this population.

The argument of this paper is that it would be difficult to understand the recent nationwide mall riots and looting which took place in South Africa in July 2021 outside the deepening economic crisis of employment in the country and an appreciation of how embedded consumer culture and suburban aspirations has become in South Africa since apartheid. Since the 1990s, popular notions of citizenship have come to pivot on the possibility of a suburban transition, even in peripheral location. Therefore, those who are unable to build suburban homes in the city due to limited access to land or the costs of building and services, often build such homes in the rural areas, where there is more space – and they can show their communities how they have progressed as a family (Bank 2015). Our inability to be able to see the urban and the rural in the same frame blinds us to the extent to which citizenship is today connected to the expression of suburbanised living in South Africa. To be sure, ethnic building styles and homegrown cultural styles have not been abandoned but have been combined with globalised sub-urban forms. In fact, globally, there is a large body of literature to suggest that the desire for suburbanisation continues to grow across the world as cities sprawl and consumer culture deepens in diverse, complex ways (Berger & Kotkin 2017; Calderia 2017; Keil 2018). There is also an assertion of a close connection between imaginations of urban citizenship and the promise of infrastructure, including housing and suburban style services (Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018). Lemanski (2019) uses the term "infrastructural citizenship" to explore how poor people in cities interact with the state and with one another around infrastructure provision.

In this paper, I argue that it is difficult to dismiss the deficits of state service delivery failures and the unfulfilled promise of suburban desire as fundamental causes of the looting of malls and supermarkets across the country in July 2021. The creation of over 17 million square metres of retail, supermarket and mall space in South African since democracy bears testament to the materiality and physical presence of the machinery of suburban desire as fundamental infrastructures of post-apartheid South Africa. They are examples of the "the

gross material of materiality”, as Amin and Thrift (2018) would say. In their book *Seeing like a City*, they view infrastructures as “moments of standardisation, technical compatibility, professional rivalry, bureaucratic imperatives, regulatory competences and general disposition” that literally hold the city together (2018: 34). The argument of this paper is that access to suburban infrastructure is considered an essential component of urban citizenship and post-apartheid African nationalism in a society, where so many still look in on this dream from the outside with envy. It was Franz Fanon (1961) who warned that, it was not only the filthy and overcrowded “native towns” of colonialism that needed to change after liberation, but settler town and its culture too (Fanon 1961). In the many interviews aired on television of those involved in the violence mall looting, there appeared to be an air of entitlement in the

justification of the action take, almost as if the citizens of the townships were taking for themselves what the state had promised with liberation and failed to deliver.

Service-delivery protests and cultivated suburban desire

Lizette Lancaster (2018) produced a statistical account of popular protests over five years from 2013 to 2017 in South Africa, using multiple sources of information. Her findings provide an important context for the discussion below. Lancaster (2018) found evidence of almost 5,000 protests over this period, with the highest numbers recorded in 2013 and 2014. There was a slump in protest activity in 2015 and 2016, but a rise again in 2017, which seems to have continued

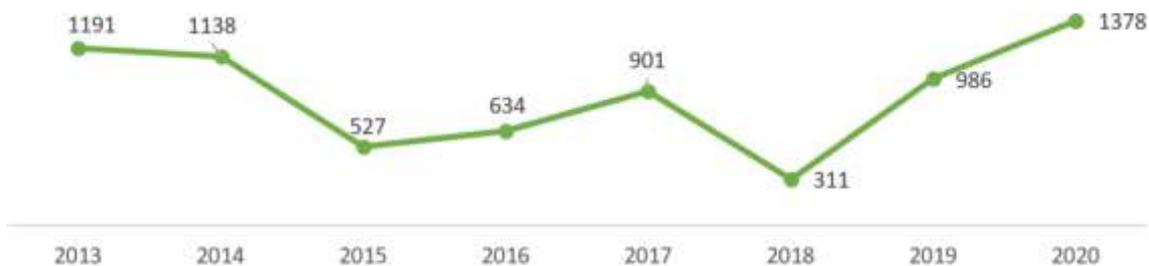


Figure 1: Number of protests in South Africa, 2013-2020
 Source: ISS Protest and Public Violence Monitor (2020) <https://issafrica.org/crimehub/maps/public-protest-and-violence-stats>

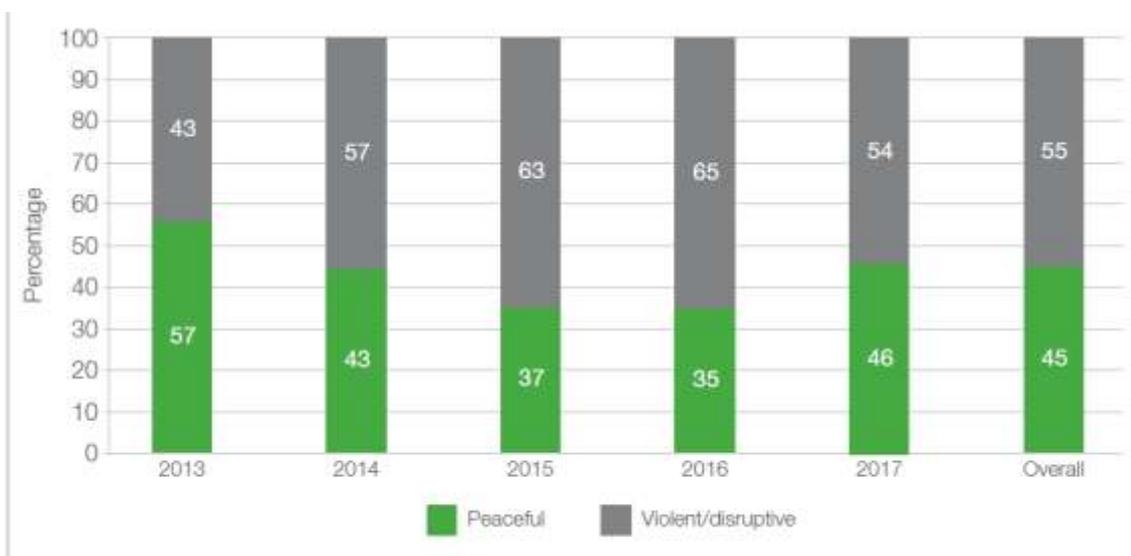


Figure 2: Peaceful or violent nature of the protests, 2013-2017
 Source: Lancaster (2018: 40)

through to the mall riots of 2021. The protests occurred mainly in large urban areas, with 31% recorded in Gauteng and 20% in the Western Cape. Another 30% occurred in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.

In her analysis, Lancaster noted that the spatial distribution of the violent protests suggested that they tended to occur around large informal settlements in major metropolitan areas. The research suggested that labour disputes were the most common reason for protest action, followed by issues of crime and safety (often related to the inadequate performance of the South African Police Service [SAPS]). The next most common source of unrest was the government's failure to deliver basic municipal services, such as sanitation, water provision and electricity, which accounted for almost 700 protests between 2013 and 2017.¹ Lack of access to education or conflicts at schools accounted for 520 protests, while disputes among political parties accounted for 466 protests over this period. The next most frequent basis for protest action was housing, which could include the non-delivery of houses that the municipalities had promised, as well as the inadequacy of the houses delivered by the state. The anger around service delivery and housing is indicative of how poor urban populations have internalised expectations about the provision of these services, such that they are considered to constitute basic urban rights. In rural areas, for example, there were hardly any service-delivery protests and communities seemed to regard many of the services that urban residents took for granted as privileges or luxuries. In parts of the rural Eastern Cape, for example, the ruling African National Congress (ANC) is lauded for providing communal taps and running water, or free water storage tanks, when in the cities the provision of such amenities would be regarded as a basic right. The meaning and the nature of the demand for infrastructure thus varies according to context. However, the data clearly shows the level of anger and impatience among urban residents, whose disappointment over the broken post-liberation promise of a better life appears to be the greatest.

In Johannesburg, Diepsloot is a dense, complex and diverse post-apartheid settlement with multiple, small housing and service-delivery ecologies. Parts are evolving into new forms of suburbia, while others comprise highly compressed shack settlements. Diepsloot has also been the site of many service-delivery protests and a number of outbreaks of criminal and xenophobic violence. In his ethnography of life in the Diepsloot shack lands, Anton Harber (2011) described the complicated plans, processes, and expectations of state housing in the settlement. He showed how the many layers of government work with and against each other in response to the demands for state housing among the residents. He noted how people working in the built environment sector understood what needed to change but were prevented from acting on their innovative plans and schemes because of the expectations of local residents and housing department officials. In one instance, he described how an NGO forwarded a set of well-considered plans to improve the settlement through the upgrading of public spaces to increase safety and pedestrian and transport flows. However, residents objected to the proposed intervention on the grounds that it could delay the delivery of RDP houses, which was their priority. Meanwhile, the authorities could not reconcile the public-space focus of the NGO's plan with their interest in *in situ* upgrading and the delivery of RDP housing (2011: 180).

The book shows how the emphasis on the promise of the suburban house as the source of a better life has led to the privatisation and individualisation of the concept of development at the local level. Harber's ethnography also indicates how the focus on specific products, such as RDP houses, can distract people from investing in the places and dwellings which they currently inhabit. Residents who were surveyed for the book expressed the view that the current built environment was transitory, which is how the state also sees it, and thus not worthy of improvement through the upgrading of shacks or streets.

In his writing on the "native towns" of colonial Africa,

1. This rationale for protests is so widely known in South Africa that all relatively small-scale protest actions in informal settlements and townships are now generally termed "service delivery protests".

Frantz Fanon spoke extensively of this kind of state of mind. He argued that the inequalities produced under colonialism had caused Africans to dream of settler suburbia, desiring a form of freedom that would liberate them from the misery and poverty of their dilapidated neighbourhoods. Fanon wrote of how the colonised man would lie awake; filled with desire, lust, and anger as he compared his hovel to the luxury of life in the settler suburbs. This is how Fanon expressed it in 1961:

“The look that the native turns on the settler town is a look of lust, a look of envy; it expresses his dreams of possession: to sit at the settler table, to sleep in the settler bed, with his wife if possible. The colonised man is an envious man. And this the settler knows well; when their glances meet, he ascertains bitterly, always on the defensive, “They want to take our place”. It is true, for there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself up in the settler’s place.” (1961: 64).

In Diepsloot, Harber quoted the lyrics of shack-town rappers which expressed similar dreams, fears and fantasies. As one song has it:

*“I wish I would wake up one morning,
And find myself in the suburbs,
Dressed like a king,
My wife with a ring on a finger...
But now every time I wake, I’m in forest,
My eyes can’t see clearly,
The Devil is here taking people away,
Leading them to danger.” (2011: 69)*

The notion that the better life is out there, far away, in the new suburbs, imposes a kind of temporality on everyday life, with residents ever hopeful of escape. People feel they need to bear the drudgery of the here and now as they wait for the better life that the government will deliver. Being on the housing list offers such hope for the future. It means that the individual concerned has not been forgotten; that they are standing in line for the gifts of freedom, especially the free-standing RDP house on a pavilion plot. There is thus no need to invest in incremental improvements in the local neighbourhood, because these do not represent the future. Harber (2011) lamented this attitude and suggested that it was limiting the capacity of people to embrace *in situ* upgrading. In this sense, it seems that the

utopian thinking of the government in relation to the built environment has been internalised by residents, creating a life of anticipating the moment when everything will change with the gift of domestic infrastructure. In the meantime, it is necessary to engage in insurgency, in *toyitoyi* (protest dancing), to ensure one is not forgotten. For the rappers, this is a world of waiting where death is close at hand. It seems that: “There is no future in this land, People are unemployed, Poverty is stubborn, Death attacks everyone” (2011: 71) and relief is only temporary in this vale of sorrows: “After tears, we dance and dance, After tears we party and party, After tears we drink and drink, After tears” (*Ibid*). Meanwhile, there are no intermediate horizons in everyday life, only an elusive future, which may bring the gift of suburbia and security, and an immediate moment with death and danger always just around the corner. The imaginaries of the here and now, and the “better life” hereafter, as many of the Diepsloot rappers imagined the suburbs, define the structure of feeling for many residents of post-apartheid shack settlements, where the RDP house is the ultimate gift of liberation.

The socio-economic significance of the RDP house and its promise of a new, better life in the city should also be considered in the historical context of Africa’s national independence struggles against colonialism. Thomas Hodgkin (1956) conveys a vivid sense of the connection between African urbanisation and the continent’s liberation efforts in his classic book, *Nationalism in Colonial Africa*, written on the eve of independence across Africa:

For the truth is that this crystallisation toward nation-states is not simply a choice, a fashion, a passing political tactic. On the contrary, it is the product of all those many factors which have combined, these many years, into the African awakening of our day [...] It is the product of the growth of towns and cities, up and down Africa, into which the disturbed and dispossessed could pour: so that there is scarcely a great conurbation in Africa south of the Sahara that has failed to double and quadruple its pathetic “native slums” over the past few years. It is the product, in short, of the detribalisation and the urbanisation (and, increasingly, now, of the industrialisation) of many million Africans, driven out of the world of their fathers into the world of Europeans, but

not admitted to that new world except on terms of helotry and hunger. (in Davidson 1957:71)

This “helotry and hunger” in a world still “dominated by Europeans” or, in the post-colonial world, by political leaders who take for themselves and their allies but do not share with the masses, incubates nationalist awakening. Such nationalism is felt and expressed strongly in South Africa’s informal settlements, as the above service-delivery protest data suggests. Such settlements and their residents are defined as being “on the outside”, engaged in a perpetual struggle for access to the city. This narrative of an incomplete, yet-to-be-won fight is even invoked in the way in which these townships and informal settlements are named after icons of the struggle against apartheid: Joe Slovo, Chris Hani, OR Tambo, etc. The under-serviced and poorly housed sometimes describe fighting for freedom, for entry into the post-colonial world. They deploy the ethos of *ubuntu* to illustrate their common plight and their capacity to cooperate. They depict themselves as living in alien conditions and in places where they are unwelcome and hounded, where they “struggle together”, working collectively “for success” and “helping each other” to survive. The struggle has a nationalist tenor, making the informal settlements volatile spaces for political activism, sites of protest and seedbeds for oppositional forms of African nationalism. It is in these areas that the promise of the gift of public housing strengthens the desire for access to the city and secure the illusive “cargo” of suburban life, which has been promised for so long but never delivered.

Fractured Urbanism and Citizenship in Cape Town

In the nationalist struggle on the urban edge, where the post-colonial state is implored to liberate the poor, not through the market, but through the provision of a serviced house and a better suburban life, residents can be reduced to inertia, waiting and unwilling to act until they receive what they are due (Oldfield & Greyling 2015). “Why,” they ask, “should we improve this shack or settlement” when it is the job of the government to bring housing? Meanwhile, those who receive such housing and the accompanying services tend to claim that that they

are now citizens with rights, and, as such, have more right to the city than those who are still waiting. All of which can lead to tensions within townships and informal settlements. The sense of belonging and entitlement associated with access to urban infrastructure is called “infrastructural citizenship” by Lemanski (2020), while Bank (2011) has described how unequal access to infrastructure fractured urbanism, with communities at the margins being moulded in competition with each other as they struggled for “access to the city”.

Both perspectives seem relevant in understanding the politics of service-delivery struggles and divisions within informal settlements and RDP housing estates in Cape Town where terms such as *umhlali* (resident), *abaxusi* (tenant), *abemi* (citizen), and *umi* (temporary) were used to differentiate urban residents and their rights to the city. Issue of infrastructures and access to housing have been central to these classifications. These terms create social divisions that are often also coupled with racialised stereotypes in the discourse relating to conflicts over government houses and services. In several places, such conflicts have been exacerbated by delays in the delivery of housing by the provincial government; increased congestion; shifting plans and policies; delayed service delivery; and claims by “Coloured” residents that their lives and livelihoods are being compromised by the government crowding in African migrants from the Eastern Cape in their areas. Similar dynamics applied in areas where settled communities of Xhosa-speaking Africans are densely settled. Those with houses called their tenants and those in informal settlements, *umhlali* (meaning “resident” or “visitor”). This stirred up anger and discontent because they reject being called “temporary” just because they live in shacks. In this context, the term *abemi*, or “citizens”, which is used to describe so-called “permanent” or city-born residents, has increasingly been taken to mean “first to settle” – which, many tenants say, does not necessarily entail being able to claim a birth-right. In a similar vein, the terms *umi* and *umhlali* which are supposed to indicate a less valid claim to residency are widely applied to South Africa citizens who have every right to call themselves Capetonians (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

In Cape Town, many of those who were born in South Africa and had lived in the city for a long time but were

not spoken of as “citizens” felt an abiding sense of resentment. They complained that those using terms such as *umi* and *umhlali* to describe them failed to recognise their histories in the city or, in some cases, their credentials in the struggle. In Duncan Village in East London in the Eastern Cape, a similar divide was noted between the *inzalelwane* (people who were born there) and *abantu bofufika* (newcomers), or “outsiders” (see Bank 2015, 2017). The *inzalelwane*, many of whom live in the backyards, claimed that the municipality favoured newcomers. They said that “this has left those who actually won freedom through the struggle” at the back of queue. They argued that it was time that the proven “struggle families” were rewarded, campaigning for a moratorium on scarce state resources flowing into the hands of *abantu bofufika*. A comparable dynamic was noted in Cape Town where *inzalelwane* families in the yards of historical townships such as Langa argued that the city should ignore the freestanding shacks and only develop housing for families in the backyards. They demanded that a politics of restitution be implemented, under which those who had been there the longest and could prove that they had contributed to the struggle for freedom should be given priority (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

The condition found in Cape Town have become typical across the country as service delivery is limited as demands escalated. Local people have invented new ways to create social differentiation and assert their rights as insiders or citizens over others. The conditions that prevailed under the Covid 19 lockdowns appear to have suspended and defused some of these rivalries and fractures, as those confined to the margins felt a strong sense of unity. Landlords gradually acknowledged that tenants could not always pay their rents and in-fighting over access to housing and infrastructure subsided as families regrouped and the poor felt less divided. This sense of united and marginalisation appears to have resulted in a more outwardly looking orientation and a stronger sense of relative deprivation between those in

the genuine suburbs and those in the townships and shack areas.²

Covid-19, Lockdown and the Malls

In July 2021, after more than a year of government lockdowns in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, widespread rioting, which resulted in the looting of more than 200 malls in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng, erupted. Many of these shopping centres were stripped bare and set alight by youths, men and women, who burst out of urban townships and informal settlements to pillage from supermarkets and malls in their own areas and in neighbouring white suburbs. Three days of looting and burning were followed by further violence as communities reacted to the unrest by setting up vigilante groups to defend their neighbourhoods from gangs of looters. Some vigilante groups killed and beat innocent people as they took the law into their own hands and administered mob justice. It was the worst violence and destruction of property since the advent of democracy in South Africa in 1994.

To understand the violence, it is necessary to recognise that the Covid-19 pandemic has caused losses of jobs and livelihoods, producing record unemployment figures of 34.4% especially among black youth in South Africa, of whom three in four are without work. Moreover, the failure of the state to provide care and protection to poor families when new lockdown measures were introduced in July 2021 added to the anxiety at the urban edge, where many months of lockdown in compressed conditions had taken its toll on local communities, especially among women. The mobilisation of the violence was also triggered by the allies and supporters of Zulu patriarch and former president Jacob Zuma who were seeking to mount a rear-guard action after their leader was shamed and imprisoned for contempt of court. In all of this, social media played a crucial role in both sparking and driving forward the looting.

2. The author would like to thank Ndiphiwe Mkuzo, an HSRC intern, for his contribution to the fieldwork in this part of the paper, and his insight and assistance with deciphering the different categorizations of citizens, migrants and tenants in the three settlements discussed here.

One way of seeing the mall looting, outside the framework of elite party-political machinations, is to view it essentially as a series of service-delivery protests. Under this view, the services or infrastructure targeted by the rioters in the pursuit of a better life and suburban citizenship were the malls. In line with this perspective, Mark Swilling (2021) argued that South Africa's political transition has been marked by a dramatic shift in the economy from a model based on production to one based on consumerism and financialisation. He noted that politicians have supported the establishment of malls and supermarkets as a primary way of producing local economic development, in the process promoting a "phantasmagorical consumer culture that has become the secular religion of the new debt-ridden, car-based, multi-racial middle class that loves to 'drive to park-n-shop'" (2021: 3). Swilling claimed that the state was seeking to "herd the urban poor (employed or not) into the proliferating 'township malls' (promoted as local economic development)"; with monopoly capital having joined the state in making the transition to a suburban, consumer-based model of economic development as ubiquitous and convenient as possible. Swilling noted that total retail space in South Africa, which in 1970 covered an estimated 27,000m², had ballooned to 5 million square metres by 2002 and 18.5 million square metres by 2019. He also noted that the amount of food sold via large supermarket chains had risen from 10% of the total in 1992, to 75% by 2017, as part of the socio-economic process of "mallification" (see Swilling 2021).

But it was not only the liberation movement that promised the colonised access to suburban life. The suburban dream was first cultivated in the 1950s, when the apartheid state tantalisingly offered African urban "insiders" (or "city-borners") in the townships special rights, or citizenship which would allow them to emerge as a racially defined working class, capable of productive labour and a modern urban life – although without the benefits of upward mobility and suburban luxuries and privileges, which would remain restricted to whites. The economic and social historian, Bill Freund (1996) called the township model of the apartheid years "sub-suburban" because it offered only the most basic forms of sanitary, segmented modern family life to support industrial labour. In this context, one way to read the

youth uprisings of 1976 in South Africa, which, significantly, started in the heart of Johannesburg at Soweto, would be as a quest for greater access to the suburban opportunities which whites enjoyed and from which blacks were excluded in their improved "native towns". The focus on education and the removal of Afrikaans may be interpreted as a cry from the youth for better access to the modern economy and the wages and upward mobility that such would provide. From this point of view, Soweto 76 was one of the first coherent expressions of suburban nationalism in the sense that those who protested wanted more than political rights and equal education. They wanted to elevate their place in the city.

However, the uprisings of 1976 were ruthlessly suppressed and the murder in police custody of the black consciousness icon Steve Biko stands out from that period as a key event. The largely pro-capitalist, black consciousness-inspired struggle for better education and urban opportunity faltered; and hope turned to despair, anger and rage at the state's ruthless repression. As the popular mood shifted, nothing short of the destruction of apartheid and racial capitalism seemed desirable. The townships no longer needed to be improved but rather made "ungovernable"; and liberation would no longer come *through* education but *before* education. Township socialism eradicated pro-capitalist sentiment; and the consolidation of civic power through branch and street committees enforced the adoption of the credo, "an injury to one is an injury to all". Anyone who broke ranks would face the wrath of the people's courts, while consumer boycotts became a key component of the struggle against the apartheid regime. To defeat white power, communities were encouraged to support local businesses and stay away from the supermarkets. In this era, the comrades of the United Democratic Front (UDF) called the shots, accusing the older generation of fearing resistance and being co-opted by the false promises of a system that did not have their interests at heart.

Against this background, the ANC government which was voted into power in 1994 turned back the clock to an earlier version of the struggle by embracing consumer capitalism and refusing the united front politics of the UDF and others that demanded socialism. Instead, the

African National Congress explicitly committed itself to reconstructing the dreams of the generation of 1976 who had sought to extend the benefits of suburbia into the townships and expand the realm of black suburbia and economic opportunity. Within the minds of the ruling class, this was to be a state-assisted dream which would be realised in the cities, where, the government imagined, the industrial base would continue to grow and employ workers, spurred by the arrival of foreign capital with the dismantling of the international economic and trade boycott against apartheid. As part of this dream, supermarket and chain-store capital would drive the establishment of shopping malls across the country, not only in cities and townships, or close to informal settlements, but throughout the former homelands too, where citizens would be encouraged to consume and build modern suburban houses. The secular religion of suburban consumption was to be offered everywhere and to all; the citizenship of the supermarket was not to be confined to the leafy middle-class suburbs in this new consumer democracy.

In laying out its own spatial infrastructure of post-apartheid modernity, capital amplified the state policies and directives that supported suburban development by making malls and shopping centres the new cathedrals of liberation; places where ordinary people could access a “better life”. The supermarket conglomerates and major chain-stores provided the stuff and the spaces for consumption across the country in both urban and rural areas, allowing families to pursue their suburban dreams in places far from the serviced RDP sites provided by the state in parts of the cities. Indeed, so prevalent did the opportunities for realising the suburban dream become, many migrants decided to try and pursue it in two places at once. In the city, they responded to the difficulties and inefficiencies of service delivery by joining protests; while in their home villages in the rural areas, they spent their surplus or saved earnings on developing suburban-style family accommodation. In this regard, it is quite possible that black South Africans have built more suburban homes with their own money and social grants in rural areas than the state has built RDP houses with taxpayers’ money in the cities. In all of this, the presence and influence of the shopping mall as an essential aspect of suburbia has been central, shaping the nature of local

advertising, offering a key location for the dramatic action in television “soaps” and influencing the tenor and direction of government policy in several significant ways, including in the latest iteration of the fantasy of suburbia in government policy: the mega-city. This mode of development, which is always anchored around a mega-mall and others shopping complexes, depends almost entirely on investment commitments provided by retailers, rather than any evidence of significant investment in the productive economy or decentralised business parks which are supposed to support the 50,000-plus new suburban homes to be built in these new cities (see Bank, Ndinda & Hart 2018).

For people who have been on housing lists for decades, waiting for half-decent suburban homes and services on pavilion-style plots to be provided by a government they no longer trust, the extended lockdown and residential entrapment in urban townships, shack lands and informal settlements has proved taxing, especially in marginal areas where the denial of citizenship is experienced through the pain of “waithood”. This is a structure of feeling shaped by envy and a desire for change which has been continuously frustrated by the failure to get a decent job; purchase necessities or occasionally even a few luxuries at the mall; or receive an RDP house and services as promised decades ago. So, when the pandemic started, there was already a pall of disappointment hanging over the lives of many urban residents. Then, when the government announced that it would manage Covid-19 scientifically and provide appropriate medical and material support to everyone who needed it, poor city dwellers felt renewed hope that the state had perhaps turned a corner and was taking its public-service responsibilities more seriously. However, cynicism soon mounted in relation to the government’s response amid mounting economic hardship under lockdown and continuing corruption scandals, which included cases of the theft of state funds intended for relief grants and basic medicines for the poor. Hope was dampened and combined with continuous bouts of xenophobic violence and racial skirmishes, which seemed to keep generalised revolt and violence at bay. But then the arrest and imprisonment of Jacob Zuma, who was perceived as a patron and patriarch of the Zulu nation, was leveraged to fuel unrest,

unlocking the door to the mall violence that took place across KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng.

Conclusion

This paper began by returning to the classic work of Franz Fanon (1961) on the mood in the native towns ahead of the fight for liberation. It noted how the residents of segregated, impoverished, unserved and filthy native towns envied the lives and luxuries that the colonisers enjoyed in the leafy suburbs of their settler cities. Fanon wrote of the desires associated with dreams of liberation, the wish to cross town and occupy the colonial villas and bungalows of the settler class, frolicking in luxury and even bedding the masters' wives. Fanon also gave warning of how easily the revolution and liberation could be betrayed if a small group of educated elites who were willing to adopt the cultural trappings of the former colonial masters took over the suburbs and the state and refashioned it to serve only their needs, leaving the oppressed majority in the native towns where they had been placed by the former settler class. In Fanon's perspective the quest for suburban citizenship is sharply defined in the minds of the colonised because of the way it was used to define their exclusion. Suburban nationalism is thus perhaps not a surprising post-independence aspiration, especially where it is articulate as one of the goals of the liberation struggle.

This paper has argued that, against this background of a desire to inhabit the settler town, the democratic South African state established in 1994 promised liberated citizens a transition away from the compressed and improvised life of the native towns through the creation of decent new suburbs for the urban poor, which were

to be funded by a national housing and infrastructure improvement programme. The promise was well-received, and the expectations of suburban transition were widely expressed at the urban edge. However, the process for delivering the promised improvements and services was to prove partial and flawed, giving rise to widespread frustrations and the creation of new forms of fractured urbanism and socio-spatial sub-divisions. The urban poor started to compete with one another for access to the city and the limited infrastructural improvements on offer from the state. In Cape Town, residents of densely settled informal settlements and townships confirmed the importance of infrastructural citizenship by shaping their own social and political



Figure 1: Imizamo Yethu Township, Cape Town. © Diriye Amey, Wikimedia Commons

identities around access to services. It was found that those who had benefited most from the state housing and service delivery programmes tended to use ideas of infrastructural citizenship to exclude others, while those without access spoke passionately about their histories struggle for the city, which required that they be granted a right to the city, meaning access to suburban citizenship there.

So, there appears to have been two main, quite different responses to the ways in which the Covid-19

pandemic and the government's response to it have exacerbated conditions among deprived urban residents. In Cape Town, it appears that urban divisions at the margins have remained entrenched as the marginalised are still forced out if they cannot pay to stay, which is perhaps why there were more than 1,000 land invasions of various magnitude in Cape Town during lockdown. By contrast, there has been fewer exclusion and evictions in KwaZulu-Natal over the lockdown period, partly because of local activism and popular organisations, including *Abahali baseMjondolo*, a shack dwellers movement that mediates in urban communities across Durban and KwaZulu Natal. There appears to have been less urban fracture in these Zulu-speaking communities on the edges of Durban and surrounding areas than in Cape Town. This together with the provocation of the arrest and imprisonment of the former president, Zulu patriarch and African nationalist, Jacob Zuma; and populist messages which were posted giving warning of the negative impacts of the power shifts among the regional elite in the wake of his imprisonment, seemed to galvanise and embolden the urban poor to storm the malls. These very institutions also deprived local neighbourhood stores and spaza ('corner') shops of

business, while at the same time feeding residents' appetite for mass market consumption. In Cape Town, I asked residents of the Imizamo Yethu informal settlement in Hout Bay why they did not loot the local malls in July. Many respondents said that they were angered by the KZN looting and destruction, especially when they thought about how much assistance they had received from NGOs and the broader community in Hout Bay during lockdown. The humanitarian response of the middle classes in the different cities might have played a role.

Nevertheless, the attitude of many of those interviewed after the mall lootings was not so much one of shame or an acknowledgement of any wrongdoing, but rather one of self-justification, similar to the mood expressed in the wake of ordinary service-delivery protests at which residents assert their right to basic services they claim to have been denied. The view of many of those living in the unreformed "native town", to borrow Fanon's term and image, was that their actions were warranted and comprised a legitimate response to the state's larger failure to fulfil its promise of delivering the infrastructures needed to realise their suburban dreams.

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