

Bekezela

Reclaimers of Johannesburg
Récupérateurs de Johannesburg

The French Institute of South Africa and IFAS-Research has given carte blanche to Mark Lewis to create a series of photos about the reclaimers of Johannesburg, accompanied by Luyanda Hlatshwayo, member of the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO). The texts that come with each portrait are the direct testimonies of the photographed subjects, collected by the French Institute of South Africa and IFAS-Research teams.

All photos © Mark Lewis

Layout & Printing: Werner Prinsloo

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Reclaimers making their way to the buy-back centre

Foreword

BEKEZELA is the name of a school in central Joburg in the shadow of the M1 motorway, long abandoned and now occupied by approximately 300 waste reclaimers and other informal workers. Bekezela, the isiZulu word meaning ‘to endure’ or ‘to persevere’, represents two key qualities, amongst many others, needed by reclaimers to withstand their harsh living conditions and body-breaking labour.

There are many survivalists in Johannesburg whose labour forms part of a complex informal economy. Of these, few toil harder than the reclaimers: men and women who daily cross the city by foot to salvage recyclable materials from Johannesburg’s discarded waste. It is extreme physical labour. Long before sunrise each day, they ride their trolleys skateboard-like to the sidewalks of suburbs and industrial sites to sort through waste bins. They load many kilograms of paper, plastic, glass and cans into gargantuan bags carefully balanced on their trolleys. Their bodies strain against these loads, which they pull for many miles to informal sorting spaces close to where they live. And on weekends they drag multiple bags of sorted materials to buy-back centres where they are paid by the kilogram.

These portraits of waste reclaimers show the spaces where they live, often constructed and refashioned using objects and materials they collect through their work, that come to decorate and furnish their homes. In a city that seethes with inequality, these are lives that are lived simultaneously on the edge of and at the very centre of Johannesburg. In a similar way, this dual existence is echoed through that which has previously been discarded and abandoned now made familiar and personal once again to create intimate space.

Mark Lewis
Photographer

Avant-propos

BEKEZELA est le nom d'une école située au centre de Joburg, à l'ombre de l'autoroute M1. Longtemps abandonnée, elle est désormais occupée par près de trois cents récupérateurs de déchets et autres travailleurs informels. Le mot *bekezela* — qui signifie « endurer » ou « persévérer » en isiZulu — évoque deux des nombreuses qualités qui sont indispensables aux récupérateurs pour supporter leurs dures conditions de vie et le travail qui brise leurs corps.

À Johannesburg, nombreux sont ceux qui se battent pour survivre et dont le labeur relève d'une économie informelle complexe. Peu travaillent aussi dur que les *reclaimers*, ces hommes et ces femmes qui arpentent quotidiennement la ville pour récupérer des matériaux recyclables dans les ordures abandonnées. C'est un travail physique extrême. Chaque jour, bien avant le lever du soleil, ils pilotent leurs *trolleys* à la manière de skateboards sur les trottoirs des banlieues et des sites industriels pour aller trier le contenu des poubelles. Ils chargent des kilos de papier, de plastique, de verre et de boîtes de conserve dans des sacs gargantuesques, soigneusement placés en équilibre sur leurs chariots. Les corps sont soumis à rude épreuve par ces chargements qu'ils tirent sur des kilomètres, jusqu'aux espaces de tri informels proches de leur domicile. Et le week-end, ils traînent des sacs de matériaux recyclés jusqu'aux centres d'achat où ils sont vendus au poids.

Les portraits présentés ici donnent à voir les lieux où vivent les récupérateurs : des lieux souvent construits et réaménagés avec des objets et des matériaux collectés dans le cadre de leur travail, et qui viennent décorer ou meubler les logements. Dans une ville qui bouillonne d'inégalité, ces hommes et ces femmes mènent une vie située tout à la fois en périphérie et au centre même de Johannesburg. Leur existence duelle trouve ainsi un écho dans tout ce qui a été jeté et abandonné, ces objets redevenus familiers et réappropriés pour créer un espace d'intimité.

Mark Lewis
Photographe

Preface

Here's a puzzle. Very few South African municipalities have programmes to collect recyclable materials and only 10,8% of the country's urban households separate their waste. However, South Africa has recycling rates comparable to European countries for some materials. How can this be?

This question can only be answered if we look beyond official statistics and programmes and allow ourselves to see and value the tens of thousands of reclaimers who extract reusable and recyclable materials from the waste stream. This is because it is reclaimers who collect 80-90% of the post-consumer packaging and paper that is recycled in South Africa.

Long before recycling featured in South African policy discussions, reclaimers in Johannesburg and other municipalities established a sophisticated "separation outside source" system to separate, salvage and revalue recyclables that residents buried in their trash. This required deep knowledge of the sector and a tremendous amount of intellectual labour.

Yet, instead of being respected for their crucial contributions, reclaimers have been treated as social and economic outcasts and have been denigrated, harassed and criminalized by residents and policy-makers alike. Although every person who lives in Johannesburg sees reclaimers virtually every day, they suddenly become invisible when the municipality develops policy and programmes.

This has had devastating effects for reclaimers in Johannesburg. Rather than building on the reclaimers' highly efficient system, the City's *Pikitup* waste management utility created completely new recycling programmes run by private companies and cooperatives of unemployed community members who have never worked in the sector. As a result, reclaimers' have experienced significant decreases in their access to materials, working conditions and incomes. Many are forced to sleep rough in order to "beat the trucks" to the recyclables to salvage what they can.

Despite these trying circumstances, reclaimers are still much more effective at collecting recyclables than the municipality's expensive separation at source programme. Extrapolating from a study of reclaimers in two suburbs, it is estimated that it takes Johannesburg's 8,000 reclaimers a mere 28 days to collect the same amount of recyclables as *Pikitup* and its

contractors collected in an entire year. Through the African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), reclaimers in Johannesburg are also leading the way in developing inclusive, locally appropriate programmes to collect recyclables by partnering directly with residents.

Since ARO was formed 5 years ago, reclaimers from South Africa and neighbouring countries who work in Johannesburg's streets and the landfills have united to demand that they be recognized as the core of the existing recycling system, paid for the service they provide to the municipality and industry, and participate as equals in policy and planning processes.

ARO played an important and direct role in the development of the "Waste Picker Integration Guideline for South Africa" which states that municipalities should collaborate with reclaimers to develop recycling systems that strengthen and improve reclaimers' role in the sector. In other national policy developments, municipalities are now required to integrate reclaimers and industry must pay reclaimers as part of Extended Producer Responsibility.

However, the words written in these documents will not lead to real change until there is a fundamental transformation in how municipal officials, industry representatives and residents see and engage with reclaimers.

Bekezela makes an important contribution in promoting this shift. Through the text, reclaimers communicate directly with the readers, telling us about their lives, loves, fears, dreams, visions for the future and what they are doing to make those visions real. The reclaimers' words are complemented by Mark Lewis' stunning photos that capture women and men who work as reclaimers not just as dignified workers and service providers, but also as multi-faceted human beings. *Reclaimers of Johannesburg* opens our eyes to see what has always been right in front of us, reclaimers in their full, rich humanity, who through their work compensate for our wasteful ways and create a more sustainable future for all of us.

Melanie Samson
Associate Professor of Sociology, University of Johannesburg



Nomsa Zozi (2021)

2012, that's when I started this job of recycling. I was looking for a job and I didn't find a job, so I started to do what we call 'shoplifting'. So, I got arrested. So, when I came out [of prison], I tried again shoplifting, then I got arrested again, maybe I think 6 times. [...]

So, I thought to myself: "No, I must leave this job to find a better job." I met another lady on the street. She was pulling the trolley, so I asked her some questions. How to collect these things? After collecting, where do you sell the stuff? This lady explained to me: she goes around the CBD, opening the dustbins, looking for papers, bottles, everything. The next day, I joined her, went with her, so that's how I started.



Nomsa Zozi's home (2021)

After, I see what is happening there, what she is collecting, then I learned a lot, then I go alone, and try to collect, then I found my places where I go and collect. Like Monday, I must go to this place to collect, Tuesday, I must go this place to collect.

The reclaimers are playing a big role in society and for the environment of South Africa. Because they reduce the pollution. Also, the municipality has less materials to send to the landfills, because most of the materials are recycled, as we go and sell to the buy-back centres.

I come from Johannesburg. I became a reclaimer in 1993 on Carr street. There was no work anywhere. I support my children. I got six: five boys, one girl.

Reclaiming is very important to me, because nobody is gonna hire me now. That's the only thing I can do, that's why it's very important.

Finding white paper makes me happy and cold drink cans, aluminium cans.

We are living our life.



Selina Tsotetsi (2021)



I became a reclaimer in 1991. I was a worker. I was supporting my family until my wife passed away. And I've got four children. When my wife passed away, I couldn't support them. By that time, I earned maybe 35 Rands a day. And I was supposed to go home and spend that money to buy for everyone.



David Ralikhomo (2021)

Today, I've got friends who are working with me, helping me. I've got brothers there, you see? This is our waste disposal. So, I'm happy with that.

What I'd like to say is that maybe, people with money, you see, can come and sponsor people here, because we are just on our own.



Found ornament, echoing Fragonard's The Swing, in reclaimer's home (2021)

I started recycling in 2008. I started carrying boxes on my head, because before there were no trolleys. But as the time went by, I bought a trolley. Now, I am working with a trolley and a bag. As you see, all these things are mine.

Walking long distances to collect the boxes and plastic bottles and all these things is hard.

People from the community around here are busy fighting against us. They say we must keep the place clean; we keep the place clean, but they are still fighting. They say they want to give us a place, but they don't. Always coming and fighting with us. We don't understand.



Joseph Mhlonga (2021)

We don't have a place. Sometimes, when I'm not here, they come and destroy our things with the caterpillar and the trucks and they dump everything. We start again to build because we don't have nowhere to go. We have to stay here.

Nothing can make me happy.

All I want is to get a place to stay, that can make my heart happy.

Ngigale ngo 2010. Ngishonelwe abazali futhi bengukulisa usisi oncane wami. Uma ngihambe la ngize vele kanjalo. I-reclaimers, Ubalulekhe kakhulu ngoba yithi esiklinayo vele la. Aksena ma-papers ma-books estradini sokuclean. Ngizosebenza i reclaimer as long ngitholile loku okuncani hayi.

I started as a reclaimer in 2010. I lost my parent and I had to raise my young sister. That's how things were when I arrived to this place. The reclaimers are important because they clean. They take all the papers away from the street so that it's clean. I will work as a reclaimer as long as I can get a little something for me.



Thabo Mondlan (2021)



125 Mexico

• Notario

10 Sipre

4 A pine

~~A pine~~

3 Matte

• Richy

6 Dean

5 Guino

• ...

• ...

• ...

• ...



Mantoa Khoali

I'm from Lesotho. I started reclaiming in 2016. Before, I was working in the kitchens as a maid, it wasn't easy. I am a mother. I have family in Lesotho, so my boss didn't want me to visit home. Like... he would just say: "Make a phone call". No, as a parent, there are sometimes when you have to see your child, your family, face to face. They need your attention, not somebody else's.

With my job, I support my mother, my child, and some of my brothers, niece, yeah, because they are not working.

Recycling is good. We are helping the government; we are saving the environment. But there's some people, I don't know how they take us. Yes, we are dirty when we go to work, the reason of being dirty is: people mix, they don't separate, they mix everything inside one bin. So, what I'll ask is: they must take us as human beings, not criminals, we are feeding our families through that job. They call it rubbish, but for us, it's gold.

And the taxi drivers... I don't know, they just hit you... We make sure that we don't just ride our trolleys in the middle of the road. But they just come from where they have to move or park the cars where we have to pass. It's not good. We are human beings, we have to treat each other like human beings.

I am upset about how the city of Johannesburg is treating us. Like, there was a time when we were doing registrations. They said every reclaimer, we want them to register, but issuing the cards, they said they will issue them to South African citizens only: why? Because, we are playing a major part, even if we are not South African citizens.

During this Covid pandemic, last year, when it started, we didn't know what this was and how long it was gonna take. We were not prepared; we were not ready. We had material, but we did not sell the material. We had nothing. When they distributed the food parcels, they said they were given to people with IDs: why?

Before, I was thinking: in Africa, I'm welcomed in every country. But I noticed that I was mistaken. Where I belong is Lesotho. Because I have the passport of Lesotho. If the government of Lesotho didn't do anything for us, we were supported by ARO (African Reclaimers Organisation). Such amazing work. And it doesn't have funds, but our coordinator is trying all his best to see that our lives change for the best.

Please, I'm pleading to the residents, they must take out the bins early, before the truck. Because if they take the bins, like when the truck is here, it's when we leave. This is my work as a reclaimer; how I take my child to school. My child is doing great. He was supposed to be in grade 11, which is matric this year, but because of Covid, he didn't write the final exams last year.

If they don't take the bins on time, I just go to the location and come back empty-handed. And they must separate at source. Please, they must take us as human beings and treat us like workers.



Found objects decorating reclaimer's home (2021)



Beauty Dube (2021)

I became a reclaimer, because I didn't have a job. And then, I thought: picking rubbish is better than... anything. So, I became a reclaimer in 1993, from picking up the dustbins. I was suffocating about the money, that's why I was busy picking up the plastic. I tried to push from that time until now. But for now, it is a little bit better.

Other people must see what we're doing, they must appreciate what we're doing. [...]

Today, I'm upset because of this Covid-19. We're scared, even if we're working. We're scared to go inside the dustbins, you understand that? [...]

I'm happy because I do manage to go and pick up the rubbish. [...]

To other people, I just say: you have to take care of yourselves. You're supposed to sanitize and do everything the government is saying.



Beauty Dube's home (2021)



Luyanda Hlatshwayo (2021)

This series of photos we are doing portray fathers, mothers, children; everyone is someone's child.

For me reclaiming created something to fight for, to fight for the reclaimers around me, and at a wider scale to save the environment. Small stones on water make huge waves, but there is no recognition for these small stones.

I started fighting for this cause when I saw the inequalities. I saw the inequality when I found myself right in the thick of it. The inequality pushed me to act, the social aspect of it. Reclaimers have serious social issues, you know, that are not attended to. And the reclaimers have probably become 80% of the people that are living in informal settlements in Johannesburg.

Somehow, I feel it's a calling, you know, I really feel it's a calling. I wake up jumping every day, I still ask myself: "How am I able to do that?" But yeah, it's a calling for me.

I have a beautiful daughter and a perfect partner. My daughter is still small, and is more into the toys that I bring back. She doesn't understand what doctors or lawyers do. But as time goes on, she's going to ask and I'll give her all these answers about my job. I want to transmit to her the value of humanity. Rather than being a doctor of whatever else, be a humanitarian. Even if I were to die today, I'm not gonna die, I think that's the value: there is nothing more important than being a human.



Reclaimer's home, Bekezela, Newtown (2021)





Reclaimers' homes, 14th street, Fietas (2021)

I think I became a reclaimer in 2008. I was having a problem at home, with my family. I left home because it was terrible there, you see. I left home, I came here to make a living, but when it's the week-end or maybe month end, I try to go home and visit them to see how they live and for them to see that I'm still alive.

With my work, I sustain my children and my grandmother because my mother died a long time ago; even my father died when I was a young kid. So, I'm supporting my family and my kids in Mpumalanga.

Reclaiming is useful because I make a living with my cardboard and with my plastic. I make some cents for sure, but life is terrible, it's terrible ...

I'm glad when I go to work with my trolley, nothing wrong. When I'm working with my cardboard, nothing is going to disturb me. I'm alright with my work for sure.

If I can, I would get a place, or get material to build another fresh zozo [shack]. Or you can take me to stay somewhere, but I don't want to stay further away, because I work in Park station, 15 minutes away. But life is terrible here. I wish I could get another place, a good one; then, when the rain is hitting, it's not going to be a problem for sure.



Vusi Maseko (2021)



Front door of reclaimer's home, decorated with French Vogue pullouts (2021)



Hezekiel Nchaba (2021)

Lebitso la ka ke Hezekiel Ncaba. Ke tswa ko Lesotho. Ke kgale ke qadile ho ba mokgerezi ka 2012. Mosebetsi wa ka o bohlokwa ha holo hobane o a mphidisa. Ke kwatisa mohlomong ke batho ba ba ka fihla ba nka mosebetsi wa ka. Ke tena ke dikoloi ko tseleng, ko dipavament. Ntho ye e nthabisang ke ho phomola.

My name is Hezekiel Ncaba. I come from Lesotho. I started reclaiming in 2012. My work is very important because it is my livelihood. What upsets me is perhaps people who threaten my work. I am also upset by cars on the roads and pavements. What makes me content is rest.





Nyete Skete (2021)

I became a reclaimer in 2012.
I appreciate working here.

Ke qadile ho kgereza ka 2009 hobane ke bone mosebetsi o ntshokodisa [ka bona hore...]
Mosebetsi o ke tlamehiele ke o etse ke ona o... Ke fepa bana le batswadi. Ntho ye bohlokwa ko mesebetsing wa rona, gore fela: re a cleana, re phutha rubbish. Re ya e enka, re ile ho ekala, go nne ya re thusa. Nna mosebetsing wa rona ha hona ntho ye e ntenang. Ke proud ka nna. Le he motho a ka buang ke tsamayang ko tseleng; Ke a tseba ho re nna ke etsang. Ntho ye e nthabisang ke ho bane ha ka hirwa. Ha ke kgathetse – ke a phomola. Ha ke theohetse – ke ba le tshetele.

I started this hustle [reclaiming] in 2009 due to my struggle with employment. I figured that the work that I could do was reclaiming. I support my family with this work. What is important about our work is that we simply clean, we sort and collect rubbish and we recycle it; that is our livelihood. Nothing annoys me in our work. I am proud of myself. It doesn't matter what people say, I know what I do.

What makes me content is that I am self-employed. When I am tired, I rest. When I work, I am rewarded financially.



Thabo Mohadi (2021)



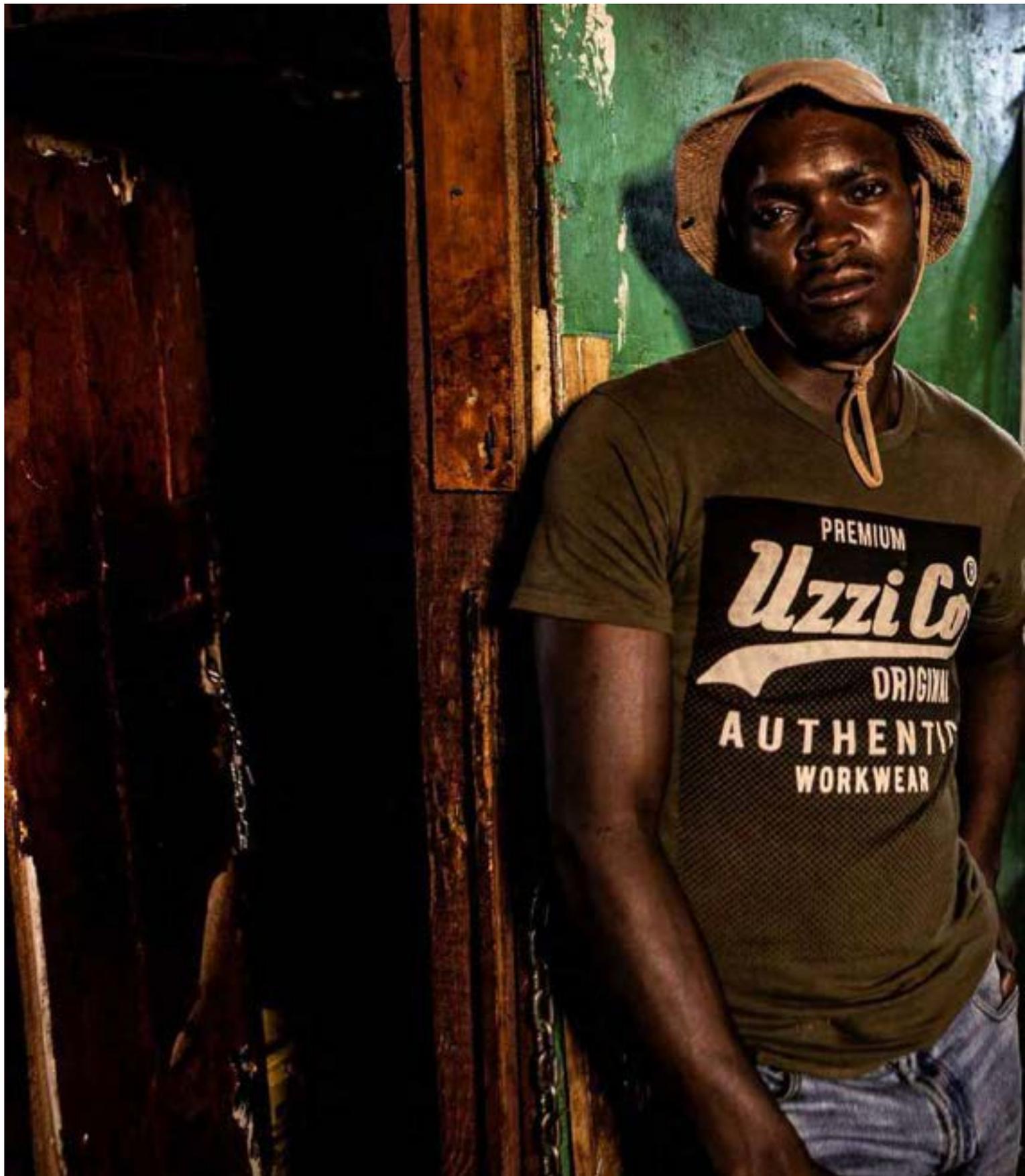


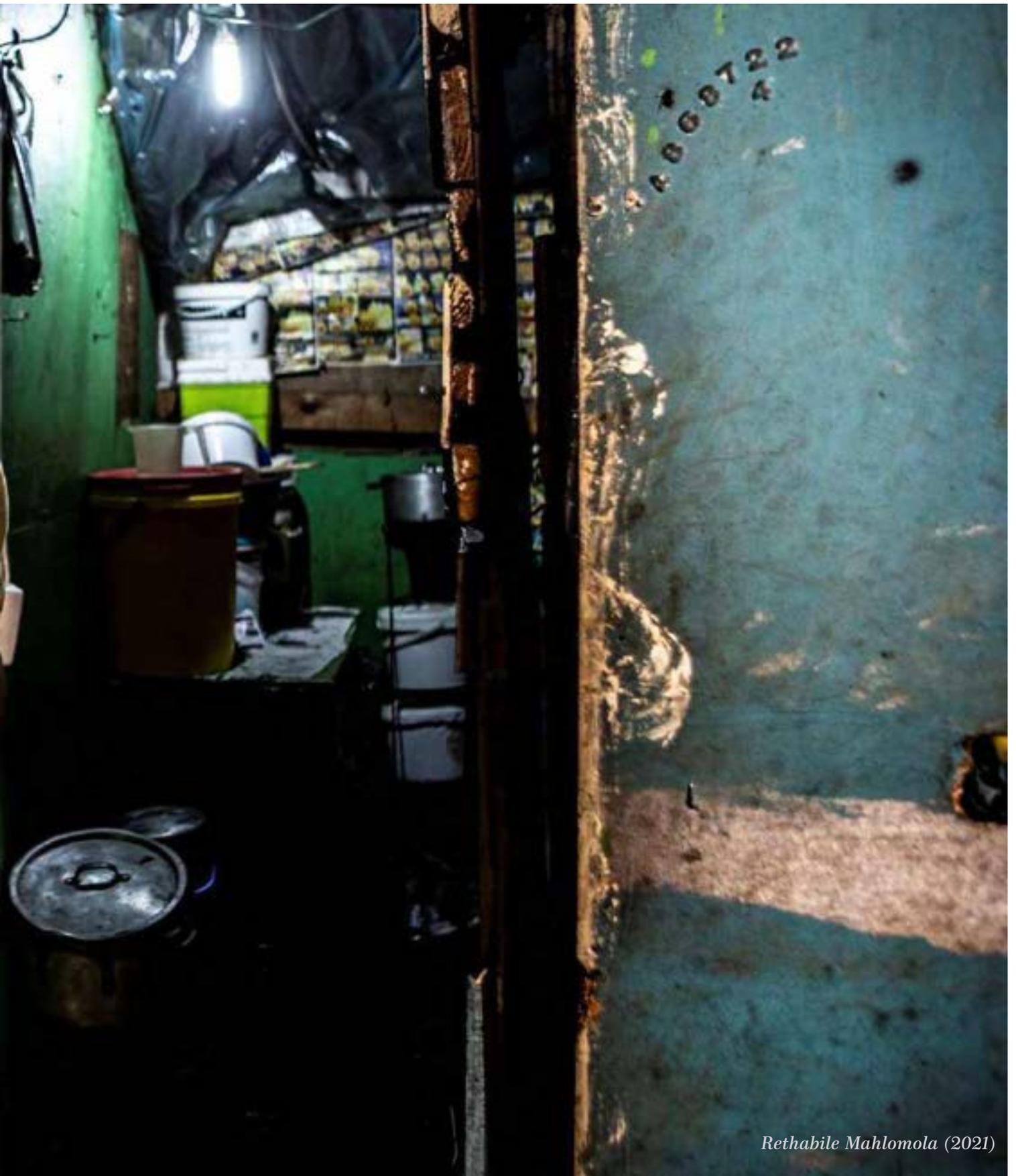
Daniel Retshiditsoe (2021)

I come from Lesotho, Maseru.
Where I come from, my work is right.

I'm here from 2004.

I support four people with my work. It is my family.





Rethabile Mahlomola (2021)

Rethabile Mahlomola

Ke qadile mosebetsi dinyaha tse pedi di fetileng hobane ke bone ele [mosebetsi] ona o ka kgonang ho re omphidise. Mosebetsi ona o phidisa nna le lapa lesa ko Lesotho. Mosebetsi ona o bohlokwa. Ntho e nthabisang ke taba ya tjelete. Ke hore ompha tjeletle ka nako ya ka. Ha ho na hore ke emela kgwedi e fele. Ha ho na le mabaka ke kgona ho phetha mabaka.

I started this work two years ago because it's a work that can support me. And with it, I support my family in Lesotho.

What makes me content is the matter of money. I earn money in my own time, I don't need to wait for month end – I can attend to my financial needs at my own time.



Bekezela, Newtown (2021)



Metro Centre, Braamfontein (2021)



Thabiso Mbatani (2021)

I became a reclaimer in 2016. Like now, it's better than to steal.

I would like to say: "Support us, 'cause we are here, in the community".

I'm a security guard, but before, I was reclaiming for three years. I started reclaiming as some of my brothers took me there, because they had stopped me for 3 months at my work. So the guys accompanied me and I worked with them. I used to work during the night, then in the morning I used to take my trolley and go to recycle. I was useful at recycling because I was free at that time but my job now is a security.

My young brother is doing the same job, recycling. I used to complain when we were going to sell those things and sometimes they wouldn't give us the money that we need, you see. That's the problem you load, load, but when you're going there you find little money. But with my security job I'm not going there anymore.

Once I get money, maybe, I will be happy. Because I'm working, there is nothing that I can say, but if I was not working there is a lot I could say, a lot. Sometimes I still accompany my friends recycling to get money, because I can make R100 a day if I want.



Joseph Bayoli (2021)





Postface

Launched in 2019, supported by the Institut français (Paris) and carried by the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS), the *Reclaiming Waste* project was enthusiastically steered by Marie Fricout, Line Relisieux and Éloi Rouillon. Its theme focuses on the men and women that any visitor arriving in Johannesburg for the first time cannot fail to notice: the city's reclaimers. Whatever the weather, these informal recyclers traverse the streets of South Africa's major cities – familiar figures navigating trolleys loaded with salvaged materials, toiling up and gliding down hills in the midst of traffic. It is one thing to glance their silhouettes or notice them as part of the landscapes they occupy. It is another to understand who they are and what they do. And it is still something else to try and understand how their activities fit into the urban economy, how they are regarded by authorities and by city residents, and what they aspire to as individuals.

The project was developed by combining the strengths of the French Institute's Culture Department and IFAS-Research, in association with several key stakeholders who gave us access to the world of the reclaimers. The African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO), which works tirelessly to organise, defend and promote street waste pickers, put us in contact with many people, thanks to the generosity of its president, Eva Mokoena. Without ARO, the dialogue with recyclers would have been more complicated, as would the proposal to accompany them to waste collection and sorting sites. It would also have been more challenging to visit them in their neighbourhoods and photograph them in their homes. We thank ARO for this invaluable assistance!

Various researchers, artists and community activists also made a decisive contribution to this glimpse into the recyclers' universe. Without going into all the details of the *Reclaiming Waste* project (available on the website: <https://reclaimingwaste.org>), we would like to briefly recall its key moments: an artistic workshop and a scientific event held in 2019; a short documentary film and a digital exhibition in 2020; a photographic display on the French Embassy's gates in Pretoria in 2021; and now a book – which further contributes to a greater awareness of and insight into the work and lives of reclaimers working in Johannesburg, as South Africa's largest metropolis. More broadly, this cycle has contributed to a better understanding of the essential role these informal workers play in many of the world's major cities.

IFAS-Research is particularly indebted to the work and commitment of Dr Melanie Samson (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg), a leading expert on the subject, as well as to Dr Chaymaa Hassabo, who conducted field research on informal workers. Johannesburg hosts around 6,000 reclaimers. On a national scale, these workers directly contribute to the valorisation of almost 60% of recyclable materials in South Africa, a figure higher than that of many developed countries (in 2017, these figures were recorded at 45% in the European Union, 43% in the UK, and 35.2% in the US). As for household waste in the strict sense, 70-80% is recycled by reclaimers. Each reclaimer collects an average of 100-150 kilograms of waste – equivalent to the weight of a baby elephant – every day! In doing so,

reclaimers have long provided a critical service for free: they help save up to R750 million a year that would otherwise be needed to treat waste in the country's landfills. It is high time we recognised their invaluable contribution to this effort.

My warm thanks go to Mark Lewis – a tireless observer of Johannesburg life and a sensitive witness to the existence of the humblest, whose lens always finds the right distance with the subjects he photographs, and to Luyanda Hlatshwayo, a member of ARO without whom this book would not have been possible. Finally, I also want to thank Marie Fricout and Line Relisieux, both committed investigators, who interviewed reclaimers in Bekezela, collected their words, and made their images and voices resonate.

Sophie Dulucq
Director of IFAS-Research

During the first part of the *Reclaiming Waste* cycle, started with my colleague Éloi Rouillon, our encounter with ARO highlighted one of the association's wishes, which was to work on their public image. It is important to keep this in mind, since it was one of the main reasons why the subjects of this series of photographs agreed to open their doors to us, as a way to contribute to the work that ARO is doing in its fight for the recognition of reclaimers.

With this series of portraits, the reclaimers of Johannesburg, looking straight into our eyes, let us become aware of their living and working environments – the homes of self-proclaimed environmentalists.

These images, for me, remind us that social and environmental struggles are sometimes (or perhaps always) intertwined.

Marie Fricout
Project manager at the French Institute Culture Department

They are strong, resilient, intelligent and industrious. But above all, they are human. They are women, men, from South Africa, from countries in the region; they are young, or not so young, but they all connect through a common cause: collecting and recycling materials from households all around the city of Johannesburg to contribute to the fight against climate change. And it is not an easy task. They fight against the wind, the rain, and the sun every day. They fight against prejudice and bias from local communities and authorities. They fight against uncertainty and precarity. But they never give up.

It is therefore an honour to present this portrait series, and to allow you to discover the human beings behind the clichés and rumours. Strong, determined people, with a powerful message, who try to make a difference in today's challenging world. Visiting reclaimers in their homes and hearing their testimonies, while working on this project with Mark Lewis, was a privilege.

Line Relisieux
Project manager at IFAS-Research

With our thanks:

The team:

Mark Lewis – Melanie Samson – Chaymaa Hassabo – African Reclaimers Organisation (ARO) – Luyanda Hlatshwayo – Sophie Dulucq – Marie Fricout – Eloi Rouillon – Line Relisieux – Werner Prinsloo

The reclaimers:

Paul Lesego – Nomsa Zozi – Nyete Skete – David Ralikhomo – Hezekil Nchaba – Beauty Dube – Joseph Mhlongo – Thabo Mohadi – Thabo Mondlan – Mantoa Khoali – Vusi Maseko – Luyanda Hlatshwayo – Selina Tsotetsi – Rethabile Mahlomola – Daniel Retshiditsoe – Thabiso Mbatani – Joseph Bayoli

Collaborators:

Jennifer van den Bussche (Sticky Situations) – Mzwandile Buthelezi – Alex Cunningham (Boundless City) – Hayley Gewer – Eli Kodisang (ARO) – Melanie Samson (University of Johannesburg)

And also:

Angela – Benedicte – Boitumelo – Catherina – Eli – Emilie – Eva – Helena – Lebogang – Luyanda – Ngkopoleng – Paula – Rico – Saliem – Sophie – Steven – Whitney – and everyone else who took part in the project with us.

Postface

Lancé en 2019, soutenu par l’Institut français (Paris) et porté par l’Institut français d’Afrique du Sud (IFAS), le projet *Reclaiming Waste* a été piloté avec enthousiasme par Marie Fricout, Line Relisieux et Éloi Rouillon. Il avait pour sujet central ces hommes et ces femmes que tout visiteur débarquant pour la première fois à Johannesburg ne peut manquer de remarquer : les « *reclaimers* ». Qu’il pleuve, qu’il vente ou que brille un soleil de plomb, ces recycleurs informels arpentent les rues des grandes cités sud-africaines, silhouettes familières accrochées à des chariots chargés de matériaux de récupération, qui peinent dans les montées et glissent à vive allure dans les descentes, au beau milieu de la circulation automobile. Mais voir ces silhouettes — et parfois, hélas, ne plus même les remarquer tant elles font partie du paysage — est une chose. C’en est une autre de comprendre qui ils sont, ce qu’ils font et ce qu’ils ont à dire. Une autre aussi de saisir comment leurs activités s’inscrivent dans l’économie urbaine, comment ils sont considérés par les autorités et par les habitants de la ville.

C’est en associant les forces du département Culture de l’Institut français et de l’IFAS-Recherche que le projet s’est développé, en association avec plusieurs acteurs indispensables qui nous ont donné accès au monde des récupérateurs. L’association ARO (*African Reclaimers Organisation*), qui œuvre inlassablement à l’organisation, la défense et la promotion de ces travailleurs des rues, nous a mis en contact avec de multiples interlocuteurs, grâce à la générosité de sa présidente, Eva Mokoena. Sans ARO, le dialogue avec des recycleurs aurait été plus compliqué, comme l’aurait été la proposition de les accompagner sur leurs lieux de collecte et de tri des déchets. Il aurait également été plus difficile de leur rendre visite dans leurs quartiers de résidence, d’être invités à leur domicile et de les y photographier. Que l’association ARO en soit infiniment remerciée.

Divers chercheurs, artistes et militants associatifs ont eux aussi contribué de façon décisive à cette plongée dans l’univers des recycleurs. Sans entrer dans tous les détails du projet (consultables sur le site : <https://reclaimingwaste.org>), signalons qu’un atelier artistique et une rencontre scientifique en 2019, un court-métrage documentaire et une exposition numérique en 2020, un accrochage photographique sur les grilles de l’ambassade de France à Pretoria — et aujourd’hui un livre — en 2021 ont constitué autant d’étapes vers une meilleure connaissance des *reclaimers* de la plus grande métropole d’Afrique du Sud. Plus largement, le cycle *Reclaiming Waste* a contribué à produire des savoirs sur le rôle primordial que jouent ces travailleurs informels dans beaucoup de grandes villes du monde.

L’IFAS-Recherche est à cet égard particulièrement redevable aux travaux et à l’engagement de Mélanie Samson (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Johannesburg), grande spécialiste du sujet, mais aussi à Chaymaa Hassabo (chercheuse associée à l’UMIFRE 25), qui a mené une enquête de terrain sur les travailleurs informels. On estime que Johannesburg compte environ 6 000 récupérateurs. Au niveau national, ces travailleurs

contribuent directement à la valorisation de près de 60 % des matériaux recyclables en Afrique du Sud, chiffre supérieur aux statistiques de bien des pays développés (en 2017, les chiffres étaient respectivement de 45 % dans l'Union européenne, de 43 % au Royaume-Uni et de 35,2 % aux États-Unis). Quant aux déchets ménagers stricto sensu, ils sont recyclés à 70 ou 80 % par les *reclaimers*. Chacun d'entre eux collecte en moyenne 100 à 150 kilogrammes de déchets par jour, soit l'équivalent du poids d'un éléphant ! Ce faisant, les récupérateurs fournissent depuis fort longtemps un service gratuit : ils contribuent à faire économiser jusqu'à 750 millions de rands par an qui seraient nécessaires au traitement des ordures dans les décharges du pays. Il n'est que temps de prendre conscience de leur contribution inestimable à cet effort.

Mes remerciements chaleureux vont à Mark Lewis — inlassable observateur de la vie de Johannesburg et témoin sensible de l'existence des plus humbles, dont l'objectif sait trouver la bonne distance avec les sujets photographiés — et à Luyanda Hlatshwayo, membre d'ARO sans qui ce livre n'aurait pas pu voir le jour.

Merci enfin à Marie Fricout et à Line Relisieux, investigatrices engagées qui ont interviewé les recycleurs à Bekezela, recueilli leurs paroles et fait entrer en résonance images et voix.

Sophie Dulucq
Directrice de l'IFAS-Recherche

Dans la première phase du cycle *Reclaiming Waste* entamé avec mon collègue Éloi Rouillon, notre rencontre avec ARO a fait émerger un des souhaits de l'association : travailler sur l'image des *reclaimers*. Il faut garder à l'esprit que l'une des raisons principales qui a convaincu les personnes photographiées ici d'ouvrir leur porte était justement de contribuer au travail d'ARO, à son combat pour la reconnaissance de ces travailleurs.

Dans cette série de portraits, en nous regardant droit dans les yeux, les récupérateurs de Johannesburg nous font prendre conscience de leur environnement. Nous pénétrons bel et bien dans les maisons d'authentiques protecteurs de l'environnement. Il me semble aussi que ces images nous rappellent que les luttes sociales et environnementales sont parfois — ou peut-être toujours ? — inextricablement mêlées.

Marie Fricout
Chargée de projets culturels à l'IFAS

Ils sont forts, résistants, intelligents, travailleurs, mais par-dessus tout humains. Ces femmes et ces hommes, originaires d’Afrique du Sud et de divers pays d’Afrique australe, jeunes ou moins jeunes, ont un but commun : collecter et recycler les déchets ménagers dans toute la ville de Johannesburg, contribuant ainsi à la lutte contre le changement climatique. Ce n’est pas une tâche facile. Ils se battent chaque jour contre le vent, la pluie et le soleil. Ils luttent contre les préjugés et les partis pris des communautés et des autorités locales. Ils se battent contre l’incertitude et la précarité. Mais ils n’abandonnent jamais.

C’est donc un honneur de présenter cette série de portraits et de faire découvrir les êtres humains qui se cachent derrière les stéréotypes et les rumeurs. Des personnes fortes, déterminées, au message puissant, qui tentent de faire la différence dans un monde contemporaine si difficile. Rendre visite aux récupérateurs chez eux et écouter leurs témoignages, lors du travail mené avec Mark Lewis, a été un véritable privilège.

Line Relisieux

Chargée de projets scientifiques à l’IFAS-Recherche

Avec nos remerciements:

L’équipe :

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Les reclaimers :

Paul Lesego – Nomsa Zozi – Nyete Skete – David Ralikhomo – Hezekil Nchaba – Beauty Dube – Joseph Mhlongo – Thabo Mohadi – Thabo Mondlan – Mantoa Khoali – Vusi Maseko – Luyanda Hlatshwayo – Selina Tsotetsi – Rethabile Mahlomola – Daniel Retshiditsoe – Thabiso Mbatani – Joseph Bayoli

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Et aussi :

Angela – Benedicte – Boitumelo – Catherina – Eli – Emilie – Eva – Helena – Lebogang – Luyanda – Ngkopoleng – Paula – Rico – Saliem – Sophie – Steven – Whitney – et tous ceux qui ont participé au projet avec nous.

