

Everyday Experiences and Aspirations in Selected Lower Class Townships of Johannesburg

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the journalese narratives by Dibetle and Harber and Vladislavic's fictional depiction of a selected Johannesburg lower class township experiences. The paper draws on concepts about walking in the city, everyday city cultures and imaginaries of city and township life discussed by critics such as De Certeau, Mbembe, Dlamini and Nuttall. It examines the nature and presence, in the selected townships, of the intersection between the colonial and apartheid social, spatial and historical influences, and that of the post-apartheid multi-racial transformation agenda in determining the township residents' everyday practices, sense of belonging and identities constituted as they make meaning of their specific township experiences. The paper examines the residual effects of colonial and apartheid discrimination on the city and how its opening to multi-racial democracy has mapped the lower class townships as a bleak and marginalized space, which nevertheless is paradoxically constituted by some residents into a radiant and liveable space.

INTRODUCTION

Johannesburg's transformation from an apartheid to a post-apartheid city, most evident in the restructuring of inner city spaces such as Hillbrow, and the influx of foreign African migrants, mapped the city into an Afropolis (Mbembe and Nuttall 2008: 26-26; Nuttall 2009: 42). The transformation of Johannesburg into a multi-racial and opened up city that is defined by the presence of old apartheid social and spatial influences, experiences of migrants from other parts of the country and those from the rest of the African continent and the influence of global capital and consumption patterns have indeed assisted in mapping contemporary Johannesburg as a cosmopolitan African city similar to other Afropolises such as Cairo, Lagos, Kinshasa and Nairobi (Pinther et al. 2012). Interestingly, Chato (2013) draws on the experiences of female migrants from other African countries to explore the paradoxical existence of hope and despair and the presence and absence of opportunities in inner city spaces such as Hillbrow, to outline the way these migrants ended up occupying what she terms in-between spaces between the lower class townships and Johannesburg's Central Business District (CBD). The image of this Johannesburg is represented in early post-apartheid texts such as Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001) and *Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked* (2006), Mpe's

Welcome to Our Hillbrow (2001) and Moele's *Room 207* (2006). Nevertheless, contemporary Johannesburg, as noted in studies, such as Tomlinson's (2003), Bremner's (2004), and Nuttall's (2009), is marked by the existence of glaring post-apartheid social and economic disparities, the residents' grappling with fear of crime, and the constitution of Johannesburg into new wealth based divisions. Thus, Johannesburg's inner city and suburban experiences have received a considerable literary and academic research focus, as attested by the above cited literary and academic works. However, as asserted by Mbembe and Nuttall, Johannesburg's lower class and mainly Black townships have received little attention in these studies:

Far less attention has been paid to the imbrication of city and township and, in spite of unequal social relations, to township dwellers' practices and imaginations of city-ness or the place of the township in the making of the city's many identities (2008: 13).

Nevertheless, the apartheid-created Black South Western Township (Soweto), as noted in the chapter "Soweto Now" by Mbembe et al. (2008), which examines the way the township is lived and imagined by some of its residents, has received notable academic research interest. The existence of this gap between the study of the everyday experiences and aspirations of the residents of Johannesburg's Soweto' and other lower class townships makes this research im-

perative. This researcher is therefore spurred, in this paper, by the view that there is still need for a study of literary and cultural narratives about other Johannesburg townships.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines contemporary narratives about experiences in some Johannesburg townships, other than Soweto. A literary and cultural studies' survey method is used to examine Dibetle's (2010) and Harber's (2011) journalistic narratives and Vladislavic's (2003) fictional depiction about the selected Johannesburg township experiences. The paper also employs theoretical concepts, which focus on walking in the city and the imaginaries of Johannesburg city and township life, as discussed by critics such as De Certeau (1984), Mbembe (2008), Dlamini (2009) Nuttall (2009) and Chato (2013). Both the literary and cultural survey methodology and theoretical framework assist in the examination of the nature and presence, in the selected townships, of the intersection between the colonial and apartheid social, spatial and historical influences, and that of the post-apartheid multi-racial transformation agenda, in determining the township residents' everyday practices, sense of belonging and identities. It also discusses these real-life and fictional Johannesburg township experiences in an effort to establish the post-apartheid lower class township's mapping as a space where the bleak and radiant are intertwined.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The City and the Lower Class Township

The complex nature of any city is often expressed in its multiplicities (Mistry 2009: 50). These multiplicities are evident in the residents' daily experiences and aspirations in relation to the trajectories of their residential areas. According to Nuttall (2009: 2), this multiplicity also includes the shifting ways in which separated spaces or concerns can be "drawn together and, over time [become] entangled". These multiple characteristics are also existent in lower class townships as noted by Khunou that: "In the township, there is a strong sense of community of continuity and certainty" (Mbembe et al. 2008: 240). Further multiplicities are evident in the res-

idents' class, citizenship and especially their gendered condition, as noted in Chato's (2013) examination of the various and marginalised life experiences of African women migrants in Johannesburg's Hillbrow, Berea and Yeovil inner city suburbs. These multiplicities are evident in Dibetle's (2010) journalistic depiction of the everyday experiences and sense of community in Kagiso Township, as well as Harber's (2011) documentation of the way some Diepsloot residents constituted a home and a sense of belonging in this space that started off as a squatter camp. Fictional townships, such as Vladislavic's (2003) Hani View, also afford the readers a chance to enter into the contradictory interiors of some of the post-apartheid era built spaces. Hence, the space of the city, especially that of Johannesburg's lower class townships, deserves further research to examine how residents negotiate with the various historical legacies, everyday demands and socio-economic expectations within the city's ever-changing and multiple trajectories.

The South African racialised township is a product of colonialism. The growth of the colonial economy, especially the late 19th century mining boom, necessitated the establishment of workers' settlements. This led to the growth of slum settlements along the gold reef belt in the present day Johannesburg areas. The slums, perceived as black spots and native problems, irked the powerful White rate payers associations in Johannesburg, which then lobbied the city authorities to introduce laws that restructured the city along racial lines (McCarthy 1991; Mabin 1992; Parnell 2003). Laws such as the 1923 Native Urban Areas Act and the 1936 Land Act marked the beginning of a long history of a segregationist urban social and spatial engineering where Black labourers and other residents were relocated from the city centres to the margins of the cities (Parnell 2003). These marginalised settlements were later formalised into Black townships such as Kagiso, whose journalese reportage is examined in this paper. The Nationalist Party's post 1948 introduction of apartheid laws strengthened the already existing racially-based capitalist urban spatiality (McCarthy 1991; Mabin 1992; Parnell 2003). Furthermore, the post 1950s relocations and social-spatial engineering, such as the destruction of the multiracial Sophia Town and the expansion of Soweto, are significant in the mapping of Johannes-

burg's trajectories. South Africa's cities are thus marked by social and spatial oppositions such as 'the suburbs' versus 'the township' and segregated cartographies. This has resulted in relational linkages, mostly evident in South America, where slum settlements exist side by side affluent suburbs or on the peripheries of huge cities (Varley 2010). These urban settlements are, nevertheless, characterised by some form of "separation and connectedness" Nuttall (2009: 33), thus mapping the way cities are lived and imagined.

This side by side existence of the formal and the informal has resulted in various socio-economic concerns. The lower class township is overcrowded by job seekers and ridden with poverty. Varley (2010) argues that the existence of formal and informal houses usually disturbs spatial form and order. Mbembe and Nuttall, focusing on Johannesburg, describe this spatial juxtaposition as indicative of the "uncertainty, spectrality, and informality evident in contemporary Johannesburg" (2008: 4-5). Urban poverty and informality are also closely linked with environmental problems (Beal et al. 2000). However, residents of these townships have multiple identities, for example, as victims of past historical inequalities that excluded them from the cities; as perpetrators of environmental degradation as they heavily pollute their surroundings and disregard various environmental concerns; and as pro-active residents who can sometimes engage in activities seeking to 'fix' their environments (Beal et al. 2000). In addition, Curruthers' (2008) study of the environmental history of Johannesburg's upper class Dainfern golf estate and its neighbouring lower class Diepsloot township, outlines how environmental discourses about Diepsloot often fail to take into consideration the connection between unequal distribution of wealth and the way residents relate with the environment. This intersection between poverty, unequal wealth distribution and environmental concerns, plays a significant role in the way Johannesburg's lower class townships are built, mapped, experienced and even imagined.

There exist significant ideas that focus on the township's experiential spaces. There are studies about the "rhythms and sense" (Mbembe et al. 2008: 239) of township life from the period which witnessed South African mining and industrial modernisation up to the post-

apartheid dispensation. For instance, Dikobe in *The Marabi Dance* (1973) and Coplan in *In The Township Tonight* (1985) focus, from a fictional and cultural studies perspectives, on urban Black South African migrants' miserable lives under apartheid and how they constituted resistant and creative identities through different community making practices, music and theatre. According to Dlamini (2009), the distinctly African everyday experiences, such as drinking at shebeens, playing football and listening to Zulu Radio shaped the urban African communities' social trajectories and later on "native nostalgia" about the apartheid townships. Kwaito music, a post-apartheid urban youth music genre, later played a huge role in defining the soundscapes dominating the post-apartheid lower class townships' creativities. Livermon (2008), drawing on contemporary urban mobilities, states that the circulation of Kwaito music through the commuter taxi drivers' radios established connections between the lower class townships, the city and the northern suburbs. Thus, while the lower class township's condition is mapped in cultural geographic discourses as an overall bleak space, it is nevertheless occupied by resilient residents who also connect with their city in various ways.

The concept of mobility and connecting the city's spaces is also pertinent. De Certeau's notions on "Walking the city" (1984), where ordinary pedestrians subversively create their own thoroughfares, travel patterns and imaginaries of the city, are significant. A better understanding of the nature of the everyday experiences and aspirations of contemporary Johannesburg's lower class township residents can be gathered from the resultant mobility patterns. The township residents are continuously engaged in multidirectional movements into the city centre and back (Nuttall 2004). However, as noted by Livermon (2008), the car facilitates the most notable means for private and public circulation of music and other everyday encounters in Johannesburg, thus extending on De Certeau's idea of walking in the city by underscoring auto mobility and urban experiences. Mobility and automobility have a bearing on the way Dibetle (2010) narrates the social-spatial experiences of his township Kagiso, as discussed later in the paper. Thus, the impact of movement, in whatever form, is crucial in the study of how residents express their aspirations and shape their townships into liveable spaces.

Dibetle's Multiple but Connected Experiences in Kagiso Township

The story "But I live in Kagiso", is a journalistic piece in which the writer celebrates his township, located to the west of Johannesburg's city centre. The story dramatically begins with and ends with the Islamic chant "Allahu Akbar", thus depicting the soundscapes that signal the multiple experiences characterising the daily life in Kagiso. This is reminiscent of Dlamini's (2009) nostalgia about the unifying Zulu Radio sounds of his apartheid township. The 5: 30am chant calls on Moslem residents to start their prayers, and also marks the break of day for the township's employed and unemployed residents. Furthermore, the late afternoon chant marks the end of a full day's experiences in Kagiso Township. The reportage, however, is enunciated in a manner reminiscent of Nuttall's (2009) ideas on urban entanglement. There is a narrative connection between the call for prayer and images of township misery and the gloomy start to the day; for the call "marks the beginning of another long day mired in poverty and unemployment". The overburdened workers' hectic travels from Sonapi taxi rank to the workshops in Johannesburg are also linked with a sense of hope, for the workers "carry the hopes and wishes of thousands of family members who depend on those few...fortunate enough to have a job". This township, just as Diepsloot, is, therefore, documented as a marginal space that is nevertheless characterised by inter-related conditions such as the existence of high unemployment and misery, the constitution of hope and a vibrant criss-crossing of the city's various spaces.

The cyclical narrative links the past with the present and, thus, maps Kagiso's temporal connectedness. The author goes back in history to show the genealogy of Kagiso's marginalisation and then intertwines it with its marginality in contemporary Johannesburg. The reporter entangles the historical and the contemporary by describing this township's roots as a bleak and low class miners' slum. He juxtaposes this with Kagiso's contemporary bleakness which is evident in the ever-present stench from the nearby South African Breweries' District West Depot. The township's other iconographical spaces, such as the local beer hall, "Kobareng (The Bar)" and the Excel filling station, in the past called Trek, are inflected with nostalgic memo-

ries. The township's senior citizens are ever present at the bar and the author describes his recollection of the filling station's role as "the only outlet in the township that sold ice in the un-electrified apartheid township". The reportage, thus, depicts the intertwining of the stench and the residents' desire to live fully; the presence of historical and contemporary imaginings of spaces and encounters; and the presence of past and present rhythms in Kagiso daily experiences. This is akin to ideas by Mbembe and Nuttall (2008) and Livermon (2008) cited above, thus indicating the constituted vibrant and multiple urban identities.

Dibetle, nevertheless, affirms his connection with this township. He asserts that: "This is my Kagiso- and I live here" and recounts his family's history of migration from the apartheid homeland of Bophututswana to Kagiso in 1988. Here, the reporter asserts his presence and sense of belonging in an embracing tone, which resonates with Mpe's in *Welcome to our Hillbrow* (2001). The narrative about his family's migration into and construction of home in this lower class township highlights the larger sense of connectedness and pride possessed by some of the residents. The author also outlines his and other residents' aspirations to improve their life styles in this township in a way typical of the sense of continuity and locatedness ascribed to the township by Mbembe et al. (2008). This, therefore, confirms the residents' desire to make meaning out of their otherwise bleak urban conditions in order to constitute resilient and hopeful urban identities.

The writer uses the trope of mobility (De Certeau 1994) and automobility (Livermon 2008) as indicated by the invitation: "Come drive with me down Kagiso Drive" to portray Kagiso's spaces. These are marked by the presence of personal, community and historical memories. Although De Certeau's (1984) postulations on walking the city, which are among other issues, significant for valorising the ordinary resident's creative and resistant agencies, and Livermon's (2008) discussion on the role of the car in circulating cultural practices such as township music, appear to be out of sync with the journalistic portrayal of the Kagiso experiences, both are relevant in their expression of the agencies and mapping of the creativity of the urban residents in their everyday experiences. Thus, the drive through enables the writer to depict how the

urban resident creatively and vividly maps the township's socio-spatial tapestry.

The drive indeed takes us through various spaces. These include the isolated Zulu Hostels, which enable the author to recollect the 1990s wars between the supporters of different South African political parties during the transition from apartheid to democracy. It also passes the derelict Kagiso Sports Complex from where past famous sportspeople developed their skills. This shows how the present bleakness cannot overwhelm past glories. In addition, the travel around Kagiso also enables the reader to explore the presence of the bleak and hopeful in the township's social spaces. The author drives past spaces appropriated by contemporary youth gangs, such as the ABSA Gang, which specialises in muggings and petty thefts, as well as spaces transformed into weekend urban Kwaito music scenes. The beauty and hope arising from these social spaces is documented in some of the youth's creative engagement with urban kwaito music and their aspirations to enter the music industry. This underscores the reporter's and other residents' "sociability" (Livermon 2008: 275), their connection with their township and the city of Johannesburg, and the multiple ways in which this township is both a lived space and a space of aspirations and memory-making.

The Side by Side Existence of the Formal and Informal in Harber's Diepsloot

Harber's *Diepsloot* (2011) describes the lower class residents' socio-spatial and economic struggles, and constitution of belonging and aspirations in their everyday life experiences in Diepsloot township. This township, which rose from the 1991 transit squatter settlement created on a private property called Zevenfontein Farm, in northern Johannesburg, but is not included on the city's official map, is depicted with its poverty and slummy conditions. Also depicted is the presence of civic organisations, such as the South African National Civil Organisation (SANCO) and the nature of township's local government politics, where the African National Congress (ANC), Democratic Alliance (DA), Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) and the South African Communists Party (SACP) compete for political control. Harber also documents the township's architectural image, which shows the formal township sections of Diepsloot West Exten-

sions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9 living side by side with the informal slummy shacks. At the same time, he underscores the residents' attempts at creating a community and sense of belonging in this township.

This Diepsloot township is disorderly. The formal housing sections consist of small government sponsored brick houses on asbestos, with basic water and electricity supply, popularly known as Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) houses. These, as observed by Harber from his travels around the township, are characterised by informality and serviced by narrow and bumpy gravel roads. This is worsened by the chaotic building of shacks around the townships' formal section and the residents' persistent failure to access basic water and electricity supply, either because of the frequent breakdowns in supply, overload or neglect by city fathers. As noted by Harber, some of the RDP houses are surrounded by small shacks that provide landlords with extra income through the phenomenon called shack farming (2010: 35-36). Thus, the formal and informal live side by side and this township's built spaces are sometimes transformed into profitable enterprises through the establishment of shacks for renting.

Harber examines the significance of this township's location next to an upper-middle class golf estate called Dainfern. He underscores, through the mapping of the Diepsloot-Dainfern juxtaposition, the stark social and economic contrasts marking the geography of the post-apartheid urban conditions in South Africa (Tomlinson 2003; Bremner 2004). Harber reflects on Diepsloot's pervasive poverty, chaos and crime, which frequently culminate in vigilantism. This is noted in Chapter Six entitled "If it's a bloodcase, then we call the police". Furthermore, some of Diepsloot's residents' imaginings on the upper class golf estate of Dainfern, indicate their anxieties and aspirations for translocation into the opulent Dainferns of this Johannesburg. A security guard named Michael Nkosi, narrates his aspirations to leave for such environmentally clean and crime free northern suburbs. Thus, the fragmentation between spaces of the wealthy and the poor is pronounced as dominating perceptions of the post-apartheid urban condition.

The lower class township's history is also marked by earlier campaigns against its establishment. Harber outlines how White residents'

associations, consisting of northern Johannesburg White farming and suburban communities, feared that Diepsloot would erode their properties' value. This resistance also drew on discourses on environmental protection, such as the need to stop the expansion of Diepsloot to protect the bullfrogs that thrive there. This resonates with the early 1900 race and class based divisions (McCarthy 1991; Marbin 1992; Parnell 2003). It is not surprising that Diepsloot is perceived as one of Johannesburg's Black spots.

However, a close reading of the text reveals the existence of pockets of agency in this lower class township. A sense of purpose and desire to make the residents' presence noticed, and hence celebrate the human spirit, is indicative of some of the existing postcolonial lower township resistance. Some residents engage in civic activities seeking to better their daily social conditions. This is ably noted in Philip Makwela's self-initiated mapping of the presence of the township on Johannesburg's official map through the website <http://www.Diepsloot.com>. Political activism is sustained by various ANC councillors, such as Rogers Makhubele, and SANCO's leader, Letsoalo, who shepherd the residents as they vibrantly engage with local governance issues. Further resistance is also evidenced by the presence of landlord entrepreneurship, as revealed by the construction of shacks for rental and the establishment of informal leadership organisations that are consistently at logger heads with the dominant ANC over the distribution of RDP houses and control of the stands in the reception area of the township. These can be perceived as subversive acts by the lower class township residents against post-apartheid class divisions. The lower class, through these acts, are speaking back to the powerful ANC city leadership and government who are perceived as having neglected the ordinary South African citizenry.

The residents also show urban resilience and express a positive urban feel in their activities. Some members of the community, the Safety Forums, patrol the maze of streets in Diepsloot together with the city's police officers to curb crime which dominates the township. Harber joins one of the night patrols, and, in the process, outlines the existing lawlessness that is characterised by frequent murders, other violent crimes and vigilantism. A positive urban feel is also reflected in the established children's

learning centres, one of which is run by a benevolent White woman from Dainfern, thus showing the existence of connections between the two diametrically opposed residential areas. There are also formal and informal retail shops, shebeens, a taxi industry and other economic structures servicing this huge community. A sense of community is also evident in the way the residents meet to discuss candidates for local elections and collectively evaluate applications for service provision contracts with the city authorities. Thus, this township reflects this urban paradox where, continuities and senses of connection with a place are constituted amidst the informality and formality marking this urban condition.

The Interiors of Vladislavic's Hani View Lower Class Township

Vladislavic's "Afritude Sauce" playfully and satirically describes the experiences of a White sanitary engineering consultant called Egan, during his visit to a fictional "RDP project (at) Hani View" (2004: 52) situated on the margins of Kempton Park in this fictional Johannesburg. The story takes us into the fictional interiors of a newly created lower class township through Egan's travel from his hotel room to a meeting with a council official, Milton Mazibuko, to inspect conditions in the newly constructed Hani View extension 1. As in Dibetle's story examined above, the visit enables us, through the motif of automobility, to witness Hani View's poorly constructed infrastructure. The author uses a typical postmodernist playfulness to show how a dangerously placed manhole on the gravel road is likely to damage the main character's car. A commuter taxi and a private car had been damaged in the previous week, much to the displeasure of the residents of this new township, which was named after the anti-apartheid activist, Chris Hani. This danger and other faulty construction practices witnessed in the inspection of Mrs Ntlaka's RDP house, underscore the absurdity of this post-apartheid transformation project.

The housing project is also surrounded by informality. The narrator humorously describes how a squatter camp sprang up on the other side of the road just after the construction of Extension 1. The absurdity of the situation is depicted in the overstretching of Hani View's

resources, by informal settlement dwellers, through their use of the clinic, piped water supplies and education facilities. Furthermore, structurally, this story comes after the story, "Villa Toscana" in the text *An Exploded View*, which describes the experiences of another White male's visit to an upper middle class gated community, possibly Dainfern. This narratively points to the existence of this fragmented Johannesburg condition, synonymous with Nuttall's (2009) notions of entanglement, this time, of odd spaces and old and new wealth-based divisions.

Egan's visit sets in motion Vladislavic's social and political satire. Mrs Ntlaka animatedly shows Egan, in scatological humour, the cracks on the walls, the inadequate sizes of the rooms and the poorly installed plumbing system in her house. This extension of De Certeau's (1984) walk in the city, through the inspection of this township house's interiors, satirises the chaos and failings of the RDP housing project. The walk also enables the readers to witness the anxieties dominating the post-apartheid township dwellers, as evidenced by Mrs Ntlaka's use of expletives. This walk, therefore, reveals the author's criticism of the post-apartheid project's continued dehumanisation of the ordinary township residents.

The township's elite is also subjected to criticism for its complicit in extending old divisions and corruption in post-apartheid South Africa. Egan, in his White and detached 'I am an engineer and not a plumber attitude' shows his lack of an awareness of the distasteful world that some Black residents of this Johannesburg, such as Mrs Ntlaka, live in. He finds it difficult to relate with Mazibuko and other Black civic leaders of Hani View during the dinner scene in the story. The author, thus, shows the racial divisions still plaguing this Johannesburg and ridicules the local township elite for the obscene consumption patterns, as evidenced by the copious amount of food and liquor that Mazibuko and company consume at Bra Zama's Eatery while the Mrs Ntlakas of this township wallow in misery.

Thus, the narrative takes us to the margins of the city and into the interior of the built and lived worlds of mainly Black townships, and underscores Vladislavic's satire on the post-apartheid transformation project.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined the media and fictional narratives about the experiences in the Johannesburg lower townships of Kagiso, Diepsloot and Hani View. It draws on literary and cultural studies to discuss the nature of the social, spatial and historical trajectories of these townships, which are evidently bleak. However, the three narratives are reflective of the residents' agencies and vibrant identities as they seek to make meaning of their urban condition and belonging, as well as make connections with other parts of Johannesburg. The ultimate narrative arch tying the three narratives together is the presence of the lower class township residents' resilience as they negotiate with the various historical legacies, everyday demands and social and economic expectations defining their spaces and impacting on their city's ever-changing and multiple trajectories.

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