Reluctant Relations:

An Ethnography of ‘Outreach’ in a Post-apartheid City

by

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A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Department of Anthropology
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation focuses on performance, moral practice, and self-respect in an urban South African setting. Taking as its point of departure the emergence and rapid expansion, in the 1990s and 2000s, of an outreach organization I call Jesus People Pretoria (JPP), it discusses this NGO’s attempt to create a ‘moral community’ in the post-apartheid city from the diverse vantage points of its Afrikaner leaders, its clients, and—most emphatically—its lay workers, the majority of whom are black women. Gradually moving from the everyday stage of outreach labour towards women’s gendered performances within and beyond the work environment, it proposes that at stake in the making of the JPP moral community is the negotiation of self-respect, which hinges upon the degree to which interactions imply the fostering or refutation of mutual respect, or the measure of the ‘equality’ of the exchange. As an urban entity deeply entwined in and illuminative of South Africa’s broader post-apartheid ironies, including ongoing race-based differentiation and the pervasiveness of HIV/AIDS and death, predominantly moral practice here remains but ambivalently constituted. Yet this does not denote the absence of the moral but temporarily rests it in the region of the indistinct, the unresolved, in the moment of its apparent impossibility or unachievability.
For KS

Ndzi khense ngopfu
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Figure 1 – Map of Pretoria and surrounding townships
INTRODUCTION

This dissertation focuses on performance, moral practice, and self-respect in an urban South African setting. Taking as its point of departure the emergence and rapid expansion, in the 1990s and 2000s, of an outreach organization I call Jesus People Pretoria (JPP), it discusses this NGO’s attempt to create a ‘moral community’ in the post-apartheid city from the diverse vantage points of its Afrikaner leaders, its clients, and—most emphatically—its lay workers, the majority of whom are black women. It draws on data collected over a combined eighteen months of fieldwork (May-June 2005, June 2006-June 2007, September-November 2007) in South Africa’s administrative capital, Pretoria, and its surrounding townships, including Atteridgeville, Mamelodi and Soshanguve.

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My first encounter with South Africa unfolded in May and June 2005 over the course of a preliminary research trip, during which I sought to establish more clearly the topic and questions I would investigate for my doctoral research. I arrived armed with a Master’s degree from the Memorial University of Newfoundland, for which I had considered in some depth the narratives of South African immigrants in Canada (deGelder 2004). In brief, the research I had conducted for my MA chiefly concerned the experiences of white (Afrikaner and English-speaking) South Africans; of those who had been able to afford an international move and whose motivations for leaving South Africa—however complexly constituted—had often been ‘political’ in one way or another. It was either the discursive frame of ‘absurdity’ (for those who had left pre-1994) or that of ‘loss’ (for those who had left after 1994) within which many a white South African expatriate had cast his or her experience that had engendered in me a curiosity regarding how—if at all—these two heavily politicized sides now, a good decade following the end of formal
apartheid, managed to live together in South Africa and were possibly attempting to build bridges between each other, and others who formed part of the so-called ‘rainbow nation.’

I had in mind to hone in on these matters through a study of religious action; through a consideration of the interface between ideology and practice in a Christian site that would be recognizable, from the start, as ‘distinctly post-apartheid’—or more precisely, that would be thus characterized by its people or followers. In light of the historical entwinement of the political and religious spheres, which in South Africa (as elsewhere) had its precursors in colonial and missionary endeavours, but which there uniquely culminated in the system of apartheid (1948-1994) (see e.g. Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1997; du Toit 1983, 1985; Elphick and Davenport 1997; Giliomee 2003; James and Schrauwers 2003), my interest was as much in the country’s white, especially Afrikaner Calvinist churches (Crpanzano 1985; Weisse and Anthonissen 2004) as it was in Christianity’s ongoing indigenization (Comaroff 1985; Meyer 2004; Robbins 2004a). If the former were experiencing a time of rapid change—indeed, of ‘loss’—how were their members engaging with it? Did segregation constitute a moral concern, and how was it being addressed? What sorts of efforts—e.g. multiracial, multilingual worship services, volunteer efforts aimed at poverty alleviation or AIDS care—might be identified, and how were these received? How would people portray such actions and convictions in relation to their memories of apartheid?

With the aid of an Afrikaner-Canadian interlocutor who had previously pastored in Pretoria’s inner city—still popularly known today as the ‘Afrikaner city,’ the heart of the apartheid administration, the site of numerous Calvinist churches; yet an inner city that within a decade had witnessed a massive demographic shift—I eventually settled on JPP, in one of whose low-income housing facilities I was also offered accommodation. Coincident with apartheid’s end, JPP was launched in 1992 as a new arm of the then still sizable Dutch
Reformed Church (DRC) in the inner city. Initially established by a small group of DRC pastors and other congregants to attend to the needs of so-called ‘poor whites,’ by the mid-2000s JPP had grown into a sizable interdenominational and ‘ interracial’ non-profit development body, one that formed a principal node in the broader faith-based outreach network that had sprung up in the inner city following apartheid’s demise. Although a number of JPP’s employees continued to be members of the DRC during the period of my research, in an important sense this NGO and the outreach network within which it operated formed a (more or less) conscious, religiously independent response to what apartheid had been and the legacies it had left in its wake, which over the course of the 1990s and 2000s had grown ever more apparent as the demographic shift had unfolded.

This latter process, however, constituted but one of a number of influential factors that moulded JPP into the outreach body it was when I arrived in 2006. In addition to the mostly Afrikaner men and women who managed the organization’s programs and other activities (who, as white persons, had by then become a minority in the organization), JPP’s tremendous

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1 In South Africa the English term ‘Dutch Reformed Church’ usually refers either to the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk (NGK), the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk (NHK) or the Gereformeerde or so-called Dopper-Kerk (GK). Notwithstanding these churches’ differences, in this work I collectively refer to these Afrikaner churches as the DRC. Whilst this choice may be reasonably challenged, it is informed by the difficulties entailed in the translation of the originally Dutch/now Afrikaner terms (languages that include particular Reformed vocabularies with reference to the historical and contemporary processes along which Calvinist Christianity developed in each country), the importance of protecting interlocutors’ identities, and the fact that the dissertation does not aim to present an analysis of a specific Reformed church or even, of Calvinism in South Africa.

2 This initial objective was not unusual in view of the ‘poor white question’ that had been occupying the Afrikaner middle/upper classes since the early 1900s. In brief, the discourse on this ‘problem’ originated from the migration of rural white people to cities in the early 1900s and the substantial poverty amongst those who remained in the rural areas. In the 1930s and 40s this population became the prime target of the Afrikaner elite in rallying support for the nationalist—apartheid—cause, resulting in the cross-class alliance that led the National Party (NP) to victory in 1948 (O’Meara 1983). Yet, while the NP largely achieved its goal of improving the situations of poor white persons by the 1960s (Hyslop 2000), those who failed to be ‘liberated’ from poverty and state welfare came to be marked as aberrations to the norm of white prosperity under apartheid (du Plessis 2004). It was, then, this allegedly ‘deviant’ population that JPP first set out to work with.

3 Collectively, JPP and its sister-organization Faith In Action (FIA) formed the main organizational bodies in the inner city’s outreach network. Since the early 1990s, however, many more ‘sub-bodies’ had been established by the two NGOs or had become otherwise involved (e.g. churches, other NGOs). By the mid-2000s the outreach network’s reach had grown substantial. Its institutions and activities ranged widely, from ‘houses of safety’ for children, teens and homeless persons, a second-hand clothing store, food parcel programs, and a series of annual events.
diversity was apparent both in the clients it sought to attend to and its mostly lay personnel, many of them women, whose outreach labour tended to be motivated first and foremost by the need to support kin ‘back home,’ in the townships. Over the course of my fieldwork with JPP therefore, three broadly delineable ‘groups’ or ‘classes’ surfaced, characterized respectively by being (1) Afrikaner and occupying a dominant position within and beyond the organization; (2) clients of outreach and occupying a marginal social position; and (3) (female) lay employees, and occupying a low-paying JPP post and a relatively marginalized social position. Along these same conceptual lines, the first category of persons tended to reside in Pretoria’s as of yet chiefly white suburbs; the second in one of the inner city’s homeless shelters, overcrowded apartment complexes or on the street; and the third ‘between’ the inner city (the site of their labour) and one or another township or former Bantustan (locales where they had spent their youths and where many of their relatives still lived).

Within this complex post-apartheid setting I carried out the majority of my work with the organization’s female black employees; a development that significantly informs the arguments I make in the dissertation. This held true on two levels, firstly in terms of the fieldwork I conducted at JPP and in the outreach network (wherein a Pedi woman I name Toko, originally from Soshanguve, played a central role) and secondly in relation to my living arrangements with two women from Mamelodi I call Nyeleti (of Shangaan heritage) and Maya (of Ndebele heritage). Beyond the research period, this experience aids my attempt to problematize a reading of JPP as a moral community, which for the Afrikaner leadership tends to be more or less ‘assumed’ and for clients of outreach rather ‘inconsequential.’ Thus, what my work with black women friends at JPP allows me to do is to examine JPP not as a holistic, bounded community but as a moral community tentatively, even fearfully in the making; as one that is better

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4 In reality the boundaries between these groups were quite porous, particularly between JPP’s lay workers and clients. In addition, although the majority of lay workers were black, a few were white whose circumstances approached those of the ‘poor white’ population.
conceptualized through the paradoxical simultaneity of the business of ‘mending social fractures’ and that of ‘fracturing attempts at social and communal healing.’ Attending closely to the subjective experiences and critical performances of the NGO’s female lay workers, in other words, helps me to avoid assuming a priori the organization’s moral value (or lack of it), but instead provides a lens through which both the sincerity and irony of this post-apartheid effort can be acknowledged. In sum, the objective of this dissertation is to conceptualize how the JPP moral community is incessantly produced, reproduced, resisted, and possibly transformed through the words and actions of those who traverse and labour within it, especially those of its female black employees who have, in many ways, come to form the bedrock of its activities.

**Interpretive Choices: Some Preliminary Notes**

Beyond its high rates of HIV/AIDS and crime, South Africa remains most powerfully associated today with that infamous concept and practice, ‘apartheid’ (Afrikaans, lit. separation). Carved into a geographically unified but socially deeply segregated country by the British and Afrikaners in 1910, the apartheid slogan upon which the NP rose to power in 1948 and which it instantly put to work proved so radically damaging that it would be morally wrong to erase its memory, even if apartheid formally ended in 1994 with the country’s first democratic elections. A comparable, but more specific point is made by Didier Fassin, who in his book *When Bodies Remember* (2007) explicitly connects South Africa’s history of institutionalized racism to the devastation wrought by HIV/AIDS in the present. “[A]re the two realities as separate from each other as is often suggested…?” he queries; “[D]o they tell two different stories…?” Fassin’s answer is a clear, straightforward ‘no.’ HIV/AIDS cannot be considered separately from

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5 I address the presence and recurrent evocation of irony at and beyond JPP in some detail below. Preliminarily, note that irony bears a particular relationship to performance, which by definition implies that the spoken and enacted is always accompanied by the unspoken and hidden (Kulick 2005; Tyler 1978), and as such may be powerfully characterized by irony.
apartheid; the two constitute one reality; a reality attested to by the ways in which AIDS-riddled bodies ―remember‖ (Fassin 2007: 3, 5).

Fassin’s title is, of course, purposely ironic: in it the common perception that bodies, those generic ‘things’ emptied of life, are not able to think or remember is capsized, turned on its head. In the ethnography the entanglement of the horrors of apartheid and its legacies comes startlingly to the fore, both via attention to the politicization of HIV/AIDS under Thabo Mbeki’s rule (Posel 2005) and through detailed attention to AIDS sufferers’ experiences. To reframe Fassin’s interpretation slightly, it could be argued that through infection with the HI-Virus South African citizens’ bodies ‘perform’ the apartheid past in the present, displaying the full measure of damage its experience engendered.

I may, I realize, be faulted here for imbuing Fassin’s fine analysis with a concept—that of performance—he perhaps purposely stayed away from. Yet I propose it here because I value Fassin’s argument more broadly: that the South African present and the lives of those who traverse it cannot and should not be read without due acknowledgment of the recent and more distant pasts. Otherwise put, I am proposing a reading of one instance of the post-apartheid present—that which I encountered at JPP—through which it becomes apparent how apartheid’s

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6 As readers will note in Chapter 2 (my rendering of the outreach network’s HIV/AIDS project), I also found disconcerting the idea of interpreting AIDS sufferers’ lives and actions in terms of anthropological conceptualizations of performance. However, this in itself seems telling, since (as indicated) dramaturgical analysis must perforce contend with the inconsistencies, paradoxes and ironies performances denote or imply. As Michael Lambek (with Paul Antze) has suggested, illness brings irony to the fore, though the uses of irony in dealing with illness remain marginalized in Western biomedicine, which “takes pathology literally” (Lambek 2003: 2). In one sense, the hesitation to evoke the performance concept or explore the ironies and satirical commentaries entailed therein in relation to HIV/AIDS illuminates the ongoing dominance of biomedical approaches and its (fear-filled) biases.

7 This valuation of the past may seem obvious, since anthropologists have long recognized that “history is not simply something that happens to people, but something they make… within… the very powerful constraints of the system within which they are operating” (Ortner 1984: 159). In this process furthermore, memory occupies a central role (Antze and Lambek 1996). In contexts deeply etched by violence, however, the past often forms an intensely contested site, engendering the burdening of (collective) memory through its association with victimhood (Das 1997). In post-apartheid South Africa, two significant ways this has unfolded are via the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Ross 2003) and ex-President Mbeki’s specific evocations of the colonial and apartheid pasts in relation to HIV/AIDS (Fassin 2007). At once celebratory of ‘change,’ such dominant uses of history risk marginalizing the intricate ways past violence remains salient and how the experience or knowledge thereof is (or is not) talked about, managed and embodied in the everyday.
legacies are continually enacted, or performed, in the current moment. If ‘AIDS bodies’ form a particularly poignant example of the continuation of the past in the present, those of others do as well, be it in ways not as overt (or overtly disconcerting) as in the cases of those who are dying of AIDS. In this respect apartheid was not just a bureaucratic policy that prescribed and indexed human value and rights unequally; in the almost half-century of its institutionalization it managed to mould how people perceived of themselves, their valuation as people who were part of one or another collectivity, and the rights they could—and could not—claim as part of that valuation.

Apart from the HIV/AIDS literature, the performance concept has enjoyed a notable trajectory in social science scholarship on South Africa; one that remains rooted in a concern with the race- and class-based structures of inequality and suffering colonial capitalism and apartheid generated. Drawing inspiration from the Marxist theories developed by the historian Shula Marks and her students in the 1960s and 70s (Marks and Rathbone 1982; Saunders 1988), scholars sought to conceive and possibly transform the conditions of marginalization and poverty the vast majority of inhabitants suffered by querying, via a political economy lens, to what extent their subject matter could be said to illuminate a culturally specific form (or forms) of resistance or opposition. In this way the performance notion came to be employed not just in relation to the study of music, song and dance (Coplan 1987, 2007 [1985]) but also with reference to religious (indigenous Christian) ritual and practice (e.g. Comaroff 1985; Kiernan 1984, 1988; McAllister 1980, 1991). By apartheid’s end, a tradition of analyzing indigenous or black performance—theatre, music, song, dance, oral narration—as broadly symbiotic with political engagement or resistance or at least as intricately transformed by centuries of socio-political and economic upheaval had become well entrenched in the literature on South Africa (e.g. Allen 2004; Erlmann 1996; Gunner 1994; Hofmeyr 1994; James 1999; McAllister 2006).
One commonality in these works lies in their emphasis on the distinctiveness of the rituals and performances they examine; in their concentration on, to evoke Roy Rappaport’s concise definition, “performance[s] of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers” (Rappaport 1999: 24). In some contrast, the performance concept I employ is incorporative of, yet reaches beyond those of ‘more or less invariant sequences’—such as those observable in religious practice, political spectacle or public performance—to those regarding what might be called, following Erving Goffman, the ‘presentation of the self in everyday life’ (Goffman 1959), or via Victor Turner, the ‘social dramas’ encountered in the everyday (Turner 1974, 1980). Within this approach I attend specifically to the gendered performances of JPP’s black female employees, the (apparent) incongruities entailed in their and others’ moral actions, and the value of self-respect to the interpretation of both. Without further ado then, I turn to the theoretical framework upon which the dissertation is built and from where it draws its interpretive inspiration.

**Performance, Moral Practice, Self-respect**

Much of this dissertation focuses on the significance of (gender) performance and moral practice (and the links between them) for considerations of self-respect in contemporary urban South Africa. In the following sections I offer brief discussions of the three terms that in sum comprise the conceptual framework, which I will be referring to throughout.

**Performance**

In this dissertation, I use the performance concept in two ways. First, in the broader, background sense, and comparable to Belinda Bozzoli’s dramaturgical rendering of popular struggle in Alexandra township in the 1980s (but without the focus on intense political strife; Bozzoli 2004), I consider ordinary social settings, relations, interaction and conflict from the
metaphorical vantage point of the theatre or stage. I do so with reference to the work of the sociologist Erving Goffman on the one hand, and that of the anthropologist Victor Turner on the other.

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) Goffman summarized his employment of the perspective of theatrical performance as follows:

> I shall consider the way the individual… presents himself and his activity to others, the ways in which he guides and controls the impression they form of him, and the kinds of things he may and may not do while sustaining his performance before them (Goffman 1959: xi; see also pp. 15-16).

Goffman further delineated his project by distinguishing between two sorts of ‘sign activity’: expressions *given*, and expressions *given off*. The first involve “verbal symbols or their substitutes which [a person] uses admittedly and solely to convey the information that he and the others are known to attach to these symbols,” summed up as “communication in the… narrow sense.” The second comprise “a wide range of action that others can treat as symptomatic of the actor, the expectation being that the action was performed for reasons other than the information conveyed in this way” (1959: 2). Goffman is chiefly concerned with the second, “more theatrical and contextual” kind of communication, the “non-verbal” expressions given off, “whether [it] be purposely engineered or not” (1959: 4).

If *The Presentation of Self* was published at a time when disciplinary boundaries remained in force to a much greater degree than they do today, little imagination is required to begin to draw links between Goffman’s dramaturgical analytics and the performance-inspired anthropology Victor Turner initiated around the same time. Though perhaps best known for his re-examination of Arnold van Gennep’s threefold structure of rites of passage and his emphasis on the liminal as a state wherein persons are ‘in communitas’ (Turner 1969; van Gennep 1909), Turner’s exploration of ordinary conflict as ‘social drama’ in a Ndembu village reveals his concern with the everyday as a site thinkable from the symbolic vantage point of the theatre or
stage (Turner 1974, 1980). Arguably, the main theoretical disparity between the two approaches lies in Turner’s insistence on conceptualizing social dramas in terms of processual stages—breach, crisis, redressive action and reintegration—versus Goffman’s attention to individual-action-as-performance. If Goffman stressed the location of the person in relation to the ‘team’ she or he joins in “staging a single routine” (Goffman 1959: 79), Turner’s focus was on the social contexts and structures within which social dramas unfolded. While the first two chapters of the dissertation—those that examine particular events and sites in JPP’s outreach labour—employ a Turnerian perspective, in the latter four—wherein I am more directly concerned with the lives and enactments of the organization’s female lay workers—Goffman’s contributions come more strongly to the fore.

The second manner in which I use the notion of performance is with reference to theories of gender performance and performativity, paying close attention to how gendered positions (and conditions) intertwine with locally salient notions of race and class. Writes Goffman:

A status, a position, a social place is not [only] a material thing, to be possessed and then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be enacted and portrayed, something that must be realized (Goffman 1959: 75).

If Goffman here is not entirely wrong, he is not altogether right either (hence my insertion ‘only’), for patterns of ‘appropriate, coherent, embellished and well articulated conduct’ are of course culturally specific (as Turner more effectively showed than did Goffman), and are powerfully shaped by local experiences and conceptions of race/racism, class/economic marginalization, and gender/gender violence and oppression. The materiality of these issues and the complexity of their embodiment are matters Goffman did not, on the whole, explicitly attend to; hence the need to augment his approach—with relevance to the latter four chapters—by
attending to the dialectic between performances and the wider structural contexts wherein they occur.

To complement especially Goffman’s analytics of performance, an analytics that hones in on ordinary social relations as emblematic of dramaturgical action, yet that still “presuppose[s] the encompassment of each performance by a single, bounded social interaction” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 61), I refer to performance theory as it emerged out of two traditions: feminist anti-essentialism (or the theory of gender performativity) and practice theory. The first, influentially developed by Judith Butler (1990, 1993) via re-readings of John Austin’s speech act theory (1962) and Michel Foucault’s *History of Sexuality* (1978), proposed that sexual identity derived from dominant conceptions of gender, and that gender was discursively constituted. Alternatively, practice theory entered the anthropological domain more directly, via Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of the *habitus* (1977, 1990), Marshall Sahlins’s elaborations on cultural history (1976, 1981) and de Certeau’s treatise on everyday acts (1984).

In view of the anthropological effort to theorize gender, the main contribution of practice theory has been its dialectical approach to how the socially constructed/structured comes to have the force of the given in individual (women’s) lives.

As Rosalind Morris reasoned some years ago, one effect of performance theory on the gendered anthropological project can be summarized thus:

[We might call it] the anthropology of making difference [which] focuses on the ways in which cultural orders construct gender and create subjects. Often, it includes detailed discussions of bodily techniques and of ideological or symbolic representations that motivate… particular forms of difference… Frequently, it focuses on rites of passage in which gender is publicly marked (Morris 1995: 573-74).
Morris’s emphasis on ‘bodily techniques’ or ‘bodily habits’ (cf. Mauss 1992 [1934]) is helpfully elaborated on by Cecilia Busby in *The Performance of Gender* (2000), an evocative account of the everyday lives of men and women in a South Indian fishing village:

The body is itself materially altered by its history, by the ways in which it learns to move, by its interactions with others and with its cultural and physical environment. Performances, practices, constitute the body, not simply through representation or understanding but in very real and material ways. Differences between male and female bodily styles are not simply ‘show’, a conscious ‘acting out’ of femininity or masculinity—rather they are ingrained and largely unconscious dispositions of the body (Busby 2000: 18; emphases in original).

Against the backdrop of the array of uses to which ‘gender performance’ has been rallied, this dissertation forms an instance of ‘the anthropology of making difference’; of how the (post-)apartheid urban order constructs and reproduces not just racialized and classed, but equally gendered subjects. Although I engage with women’s memories and expressions regarding marriage and death, and even as I attended multiple religious ceremonies and other events (baptisms, *lobola* [Zulu, bridewealth] and other marriage-related occasions, funerals), I do not single out such rites for analysis but situate insights and narratives pertaining thereto in the region of the everyday, as these were mediated within and beyond JPP, in an effort to capture how such gendered markings and others bear upon women’s contemporary lives and may be subtly reiterated and/or rejected in the process. Ultimately, this preoccupation with the everyday matter of being a woman is what returns us to Goffman’s concern with the ordinary performance of the self as it daily, unceasingly, cannot but unfold.

*Moral Practice*

In anthropology, the explicit analysis of local conceptions and practices of morality and ethics is relatively recent. More commonly, the focus of one or another study being not on local

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8 Marcel Mauss’s theorization of the ‘techniques of the body’ (1992 [1934]) forms a precursor here, as it does in Bourdieu’s study on habituated practices (1977). Although the gender dimensions and implications of Mauss’s insights have not been widely pursued, he recognized the ways the body and its movements are engendered when he noted that the techniques of the body are conditional upon sex and age (Mauss 1992 [1934]: 462).
moralities as such, anthropologists tend to evoke ‘the moral’ or ‘morality’ in ways akin to the notion of ‘culture’ or ‘the cultural’: as a set of shared values that underlie and motivate particular practices. As Jarrett Zigon has noted, the latter usage renders confusing the matter of whose morality it is that is under scrutiny: that of the people being studied, or that of the anthropologist (2007: 132)?

A related issue pertaining to the examination of moral frameworks and action is many anthropologists’ sense that morality has been an object of investigation all along, whether via a focus on culture, religion, kinship, exchange or gender (Parkin 1985: 4). Some years ago, James Laidlaw suggested that this conviction is in part attributable to the discipline’s Durkheimian origins (2002). In his critique of Kantian morality, Emile Durkheim replaced the ‘moral law’—as both the origin of and foundation for moral conduct—with ‘society.’ Conceptualizing the moral as congruent with the social allowed Durkheim to substitute Kant’s philosophy of morality as a universal notion, enacted through the deployment of practical reason, with a view of morality as socially constituted; as variable across time and space according to different societies’ structures (Durkheim 1953: 35-62). Moreover, each individual member of a society is obliged and compelled to follow its moral rules due to the sheer force held by that society (Durkheim 1957: 206-9). For Durkheim, the social (society or culture) was the moral, making it difficult to carve out a separate sphere for the study of the moral—an anthropological inheritance that goes some way to explain why a theoretical and methodological framework for the study of morality failed to materialize in the previous century (Faubion 2001; Laidlaw 2002).

In the emergent literature on morality and ethics, two (not entirely separate) investigative trends may be delineated, the first concerned with moral reasoning and choice, the second with the formation of the ethical-moral subject through the development and nurturance of certain
dispositional capacities. The moral reasoning and choice approach, advanced by Signe Howell (1997: 14-16), envisions the moral domain as a chiefly conscious one; a position endorsed (with thoughtful qualifications) by Joel Robbins in his study of the ‘Christian culture’ of the Urapmin in Papua New Guinea:

Having defined the moral domain as one in which actors are culturally constructed as being aware both of the directive force of values and of the choices left open to them in responding to that force, we have to recognize that it is fundamentally a domain that consists of actions undertaken consciously (Robbins 2004b: 315).

Alternatively, the dispositional/virtue ethics trend, inspired by neo-Aristotelian or Foucaultian approaches, focuses on the processes by way of which people are enabled to become proper moral persons. As summarized by Saba Mahmood, this approach is “always local and particular, pertaining to a specific set of procedures, techniques, and discourses through which highly specific ethical-moral subjects come to be formed” (2005: 28). In this conception persons ‘become moral’ not via adherence to norms or rules, but by training the self or being trained in a certain set of practices, such as spirit mediumship among the Sakalava in Madagascar (Lambek 2002) or listening to tape-recorded Islamic sermons in contemporary Egypt (Hirschkind 2006).

Evocative of both sets of literature, the perspective on moral practice employed in this dissertation is further provoked by Zigon’s theorization of what he calls the ‘ethical moment’—the moment of moral breakdown or problematization (cf. Faubion 2001; Foucault 1984):

[The ethical moment] is the moment in which ethics must be performed. In this way… I make a distinction between morality as the unreflective mode of being-in-the-world and ethics as a tactic performed in the moment of the breakdown of the ethical dilemma. […] But there is a paradox to ethics. For when something… breaks down, it becomes disconnected from its usual relations in the world… The ethical subject no longer dwells in the comfort of the familiar, unreflective being-in-the-world, but rather stands uncomfortably and uncannily in the situation-at-hand… Thus, the primary goal of ethics… is to move back into the world; to once again dwell in the unreflective comfort of the familiar. […] But this return from the ethical moment is never a return to the same unreflective moral dispositions. For the very process of stepping-out and responding to the breakdown… alters, even if ever so slightly, the aspect of being-in-the-world that is the unreflective moral dispositions. It is in the moment of breakdown… that it can be
said that people work on themselves, and in so doing, alter their very way of being-in-the-world (Zigon 2007: 137-38).

In Zigon’s view the ethical moment demands the subject’s consciousness; contrastively, the mode of being-in-the-world is characterized by the ‘unreflective’—what I would be more inclined to call ‘comfortable’—familiarity of moral dispositions. One social reality Zigon’s work leads us to conceive is the intricate manner in which ethical moments and moments imbued with the familiarly moral exist side by side in the process of daily living. We constantly, as it were, move back and forth between the intense consciousness our ethical dilemmas require of us and the comfort our moral dispositions allow us to enjoy; this, Zigon emphasizes, holds true even under conditions where the experience of moral breakdown is socially prominent, affecting a collectivity of persons (2007: 140-42).

Moments of moral breakdown can last for extensive periods; can be present in a person’s life from the time of birth onwards—as with the younger generation of Urapmin Robbins describes (2004b)—urging constant ethical attention or intervention. Such a time also typified the often harried post-apartheid domains I investigated, where amidst the omnipresence of socially and individually experienced uncertainty and tension moments of the familiarly moral were at times exceedingly hard to locate. Precisely because instances of moral breakdown were so pervasive, ranging from entrenched conflicts at work, to concerns regarding the wellbeing of oneself, one’s kin and friends, entangled as these were with such broader issues as racism, poverty, the HIV/AIDS crisis and so forth, it would be challenging (and even precarious in view of the analytical process) to lift such ethical moments out of the busy flow of everyday life and labour. In fact, frequently the two—moral breakdown and the comfortably moral—occurred at once, as when, for instance, a woman would be preparing a communal meal whilst agitatedly relating a fight she had had with her manager, or her son’s failure to study for his exams.
What I take from Zigon and Robbins, then, is their accenting of social and individual experiences of moral breakdown as potentially generative of novel moral practices, and as urging their constant evaluation and reinvention. What I do not precisely hold to is the (especially Zigon’s) rather strict analytical separation between conscious ethical action and ‘unreflective’ moral dispositions. Instead I wish to emphasize their enmeshed, even ensnared nature: the manner in which instances and knowledge of breakdown interlock with the enactment of moral dispositions in such a way that they become virtually—or often appear—inseparable. My concern thus lies with the *simultaneity* of how the enduring presence of uncertainty and moral urgency has shaped interlocutors’—especially women’s—dispositions in myriad ways and the means by which these social actors are continually engaged in addressing and re-moulding such experiences.

Therefore, in reflecting on a site disconcertingly witness to the apartheid past and its ongoing signification in the present, the concept of moral practice I evoke (yet more as an ideal than something realized; see below) approaches that proposed by Aristotle—*phronesis*—as perceptively elaborated upon by Michael Lambek (2002). Phronesis, or “the ethical dimension of action (praxis),” is “based on the cultivated predisposition to do the right thing in the circumstances” (2002: 16). It is the “situated, continuous exercise of moral judgment” which transcends “the role of individuated, selfish will and calculating, alienated reason—so common in subsequent theories of praxis—in favour of cultivated dispositions toward doing good” (2002: 238). Of import here is how the notion of phronesis illuminates at once how moral practice is learned and refined over time, and how this activity forms a daily—and often rather mundane—preoccupation. At the same time, phronesis moves us away from the tense scholarly (as opposed to ordinarily cogent) playing field of the agency-versus-structure dichotomy toward a conception that attends not just to the structural constraints people face in everyday life, but
equally to the means by way of which they (are able to) reckon with and negotiate such limitations.

*Self-respect*

Over the course of my fieldwork, there were a good number of (gendered) performances I beheld—and was at times asked or obliged to take part in—the moral character of which, at best, had me curious or puzzled. How could caregivers who daily attended to the needs of AIDS sufferers laugh themselves into stitches over the havoc the illness wrought in and on patients’ bodies? Why, in view of many women’s negative experiences with romantic and sexual relationships—as also attested to by the frequency of female-headed or matrifocal households—did many yet insist that it was a woman’s ‘duty’ to ‘look after the man’? How could so-called ‘hobos’—street or homeless persons—be now an object of pity, then of ardent hilarity? Deeply paradoxical, during these and other occasions my own senses of the moral appeared to diverge rather radically from those of my interlocutors.

Beyond situating these and related questions in the wider socio-structural contexts of JPP and women’s lives, this dissertation seeks to provide some answers via an in-depth engagement with the notion of self-respect. Yet even less than the concept of morality has that of (self-) respect been an object of anthropological inquiry. Predominantly in the existing literature, ‘respect’ denotes a person’s deference to seniors and others who are imbued with the capacity to exercise power over those of lesser status, as in Sjaak van der Geest’s work on relations between the Kwahu elderly (or elders) and their grandchildren in Ghana (2002, 2004a, 2004b), or Yvonne Treis’s paper on the ‘respect language’ engaged in by Kambataa women in Ethiopia whilst communicating with their in-laws (2005). That comparable notions continued to be valued in urban South Africa was attested to by women’s insistence that their teenaged and younger children call me ‘Aunty Mieke’ instead of ‘Mieke,’ ‘so that they will respect you.’
Regarding appropriate relations with in-laws, I could not help but be struck when once, upon helping Toko with her driving lessons and being dressed comfortably rather than prettily, she asked me whether I would visit my boyfriend’s parents ‘dressed like that.’ Tellingly, she found my positive response exceedingly funny.

Clearly, respect forms an intimately relational concept and practice; i.e. it is established in relation to the persons, communities, broader societal structures and spiritual entities that make up people’s life-worlds. In a few works alternative from the ones mentioned above, the relational qualities of respect are attended to via examining how marginalized subjects ‘search for respect’ (Bourgois 1995) or seek to build and maintain ‘respectable lives’ (Ross 2010) in highly constrained socio-economic environments. Arguably, of concern in these studies is not primarily the negotiation of respect within the collectivity and its kin structures (though clearly this does enter the equation) but rather that which unfolds in relation to the wider social arena. Thus Philippe Bourgois, in his account of the lives of drug dealers in East Harlem, elaborates on the ‘inner city street culture’ his interlocutors participate in—“a complex and conflictual web of beliefs, symbols, modes of interaction, values, and ideologies that have emerged in opposition to exclusion from mainstream society”—which, he argues, offers “an alternative forum for autonomous personal dignity” (1995: 8). In an affecting study, Fiona Ross (2010) considers how residents of The Park, a shantytown on the outskirts of Cape Town, evoke the Afrikaans notion of ordentlikheid (decency) in articulating their efforts and accomplishments to live respectably, decently, with dignity in the face of the ‘rawness’ of everyday life (cf. Agamben 1998).

In another recent publication, Pnina Werbner discusses the mothei (Tswana girls’ puberty ritual) as one that endows novices with seriti, a quality implying “an active sense of autonomy, dignity, respect, and self-respect” (2009: 441). Instead of abjection, she writes, the mothei puberty ritual moves a young woman toward becoming a gendered, ethical subject and responsible agent who achieves self-mastery through performative acts of
respect for her elders and the ancestors while herself becoming the subject of respect (Werbner 2009: 456).

Importantly, Werbner situates her analysis in relation to the growing tendency to abandon the ritual in the name of ‘progress’ and ‘modernity’:

It would be pointless to argue that a ritual such as the mothei serves an important practical function in any simple… way. Women… cooperate with one another in churches and to help with funerals and other celebrations… They express their worth through… participation in elected village committees. Young girls are given status, seniority, and dignity at school… Pupils are educated there about the risks of pregnancy, unprotected sex, and HIV/AIDS… [Y]oung high school graduates expect to leave the village and seek work in town. They anticipate that the village will no longer be the centre of their social universe.

Nevertheless… Tswapong live in an out-of-the-way place on the margins of Botswana… In an increasingly competitive job market, young school graduates are at a disadvantage. Many village women are single mothers, “destitutes” (welfare recipients) living on state food rations. To the extent that recognizing one’s worth means recognizing one’s distinctiveness, uniqueness, self-mastery, ethical subjectivity, and autonomy, rituals such as mothei may be said to dignify women as individuals, despite their poverty, and to establish their place in a society of women (Werbner 2009: 455).

To greater or lesser extents in each of these studies, respect risks conflation with (ostensibly) analogous or related notions, such as dignity, decency, respectability, ethical subjectivity, self-respect and autonomy. Besides the complexities of translation, this issue, as Ross points out, is complicated by the manner in which such concepts are variously and conflictually perceived in local settings (2010: 36-43). In addition, with reference to the symptomatic links drawn between (self-)respect and individual autonomy in Bourgois’s and Werbner’s analyses, the subtle means through which discourses of rights, liberation and human freedom have managed to ‘invade’ and reshape local imaginaries of respect should be noted (cf. Englund 2006; Keane 2007).

To convey how I imbue with meaning and engage with the concept of self-respect, I digress briefly from the theoretical discussion to call to mind a conversation I once had with Promise, a 33-year-old Pedi woman I met at JPP in 2007, where she was carrying out the practical component of her Social Work degree. In many senses, Promise’s experiences were
typical of many of the women I worked with who had been raised in the townships adjoining Pretoria and/or in the ‘rural areas.’ Born into an impoverished family in 1973 in Bushbuckridge, a town presently skirting the border between Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces, her father left the family (including Promise’s mother and two younger brothers) when Promise was eight to ‘look for work’ in Pretoria. When many years later ‘he and my mom reunited,’ the family moved to Soshanguve, where Promise fell pregnant at the age of sixteen. If this experience and her ‘traditional’ marriage, at twenty-one, to the father of her daughter (and the subsequent birth of two more children) prevented her from ‘getting educated,’ so also did her father, who ‘has this belief that girls are not supposed to go to school. They are supposed to get married and raise the children.’ It was these combined factors and her husband’s recurrent joblessness that had warranted the harsh disparity between Promise’s family’s circumstances in a Soshanguve shack settlement, versus her brothers’ upwardly mobile lives in Johannesburg and Pretoria.

Against this backdrop Promise evoked the idea of ‘self-worth’ or ‘self-respect’—which she distinguished from ‘pride’—in two ways, in relation to both those of higher and lesser status. Following the revelation that she sometimes calls her brothers for help, she switched her narrative to talk about how her shack is ‘not bad,’ in contrast to that of her neighbours, which has ‘large spaces between the walls and the roof.’ Her relatively better-off situation, she went on to say, has led her to keep an eye on these neighbours and assist them when she can by sharing her own bread or pap (Afrikaans, stamped corn) and providing them with blankets. But this giving, she instantly further noted, is deeply problematic, for despite her neighbours’ ‘thankfulness’ she is intensely aware of the fact that they never ‘ask for help’; that whenever she enquires after their wellbeing or offers them something ‘they look down like this, they won’t look into my eyes.’ Yet this affective enactment is one she is deeply familiar with due to the indebtedness that marks her relationship with her brothers: ‘I know that feeling! There have
been many times, I was so embarrassed, many times I lost hope. I didn’t want to call [my brothers]! I didn’t want to be dependent on them.’ And then: ‘I don’t know what you call this thing… It’s not pride, I don’t know what you call it… It’s like, self-worth or self-respect… It’s not good to always receive and never give in return, it’s not right!’

In contrast to Ross’s interlocutors’ expressed concern with *ordentlikheid*, the women (and others) I worked with rarely, if ever, spoke of self-respect or self-worth; indeed Promise’s pensive commentary was exceptional, even unique. Yet to my mind, this is precisely why it is so important, and why I rally her words to the delineation of my theoretical outline. Most importantly, Promise’s exposition foregrounds the relational quality of the means via which self-respect is constituted, whilst rebutting the idea that it bears similarities to pride. If, in popular usage, pride sometimes tends to be associated with self-respect (and hence with dignity), alternately it implies arrogance, conceit or superiority—precisely the connotations Promise wanted to get away from. Relatedly, the confutation of pride highlights the risk of imbuing the notion of self-respect with (excessive) individual autonomy or freedom, which may engender the denial of the relational means through which this status is negotiated. Accordingly, when I suggest the concept of self-respect I refer to the relational, often contested *practice* of perceiving or calculating social interactions according to the manner in which they favour certain persons or social or spiritual entities over others. At stake in the gaining and maintaining of the quality of self-respect, I posit, is the degree to which interactions imply the (at once material and symbolic) exercise of mutual respect between the different actors/parties present—and relatedly, given its frequent ‘failure,’ the means subjects have at their disposal to ensure the safeguarding of their own senses of self-respect.
Refractions: Construing the JPP ‘Moral Community’

On one level the post-apartheid appearance of JPP in Pretoria’s inner city signifies transition, invention, adaptation. This is attested to, for one, by the concurrence of the demise of apartheid and the establishment of this locally-driven NGO in the early 1990s, and equally by the ‘interracial’ makeup of its staff members and clients. This perception also blends in with the celebration of ‘change’ that had South Africa in its grip following apartheid’s end—a development to which academic observers have not been impartial.

Simultaneously, it is in the very attribution of purported novelty that JPP emerges as a deeply contradictory, ironic, at times even scathing entity. Perhaps most palpable in this respect in 2006/07 was the almost complete absence of spontaneous, literal reference to the apartheid past, let alone its occasional discussion. Irony further typified this NGO’s ideological representation of itself as a ‘God-loving community in the inner city,’ since on a practical level this community by and large did not exist, as indicated by the radically divergent sites and circumstances outreach staff returned to at the end of each workday. This stark reality was further reiterated in and through JPP’s organizational structure, which comprised a relatively small group of Afrikaners in managerial posts and (mostly) black persons in lay positions; a state of affairs that had my flatmates, Nyeleti and Maya, and others mockingly refer to the former’s offices as ‘the Parliament.’ What these and other incongruencies engendered was the recurrence of subtle as well as overt sarcasm, satire and contrariness amidst the ebb and flow of daily outreach labour.

As do developments in South Africa more generally, in view of the hope-filled prospect of change that characterized the mid- to late 1990s. For common at present is the sense that the promise of democracy has by and large failed to deliver; that for the vast majority of South African and other inhabitants little, if anything, has changed. Relatedly, criticism of the African National Congress (ANC) government has been rife, whether due to alleged corruption and fraud (Hyslop 2005), the ‘denial’ of the viral aetiology of HIV/AIDS (Fassin 2007; McNeill 2009; Posel 2005), concerns over the upsurge in violent crime (Buur 2006; Ran-Rubin 2008; Wardrop 2009), sexism (Hassim 2009), xenophobia (Sharp 2008), and most recently the lack of ‘service delivery’ (Burger 2009). In the face of purported ‘liberation,’ the experience of such disappointed hopes emerges deeply paradoxical and takes on sardonic qualities.
Irony is, of course, far from trivial; on the contrary, its evocation poignantly “speaks to, of, and from the human condition.” In brief, irony realizes the limitation and ambiguity of praxis. Thought and agency run up against constraints, external ones of fate and circumstance and internal ones of ignorance, confusion, and contradiction. External and internal constraints on knowledge force us to speak with an assurance we do not have. Irony is a recognition of this fact (Lambek 2003: 3, 5).

Irony cuts in ways that foreground uncertainty, indeterminacy, ambivalence (see also Fernandez and Huber 2001). It surfaces in the recognition of the limits of one’s own knowledge and that of the Other. At stake in the interpretation of irony are the questions of the balance between literalism (or ‘seriousness’) and irony, and where, how and why the evocation of each unfolds as it does. In dealing with these matters it is also crucial to remember that the rallying of irony does not denote the ‘failure’ of human agency, but rather illuminates its “fundamental undecidability.” As a “stance that gives ambiguity, perspective, plurality, contradiction, and uncertainty their due,” irony needs to be acknowledged as one of agency’s fundamental components; one that guides us away from its flawed interpretation as something necessarily individually realized or achieved (Lambek 2003: 3, 7).

Not insignificantly, it was the pervasiveness and regular evocation of irony within and beyond JPP that hovers behind my choice to frame the current work in terms of dramaturgical analysis. Following Goffman and Turner, I metaphorize JPP’s labour as a performance; as a dramatic activity that illuminates the impulse of some Afrikaner Christians to create a moral community in the post-apartheid city, and that hence speaks to ‘their’ ideological response to what apartheid was and is, or remains. Yet this responsive drama is staged not just by these acting subjects but also by others, upon whose performances the ‘success’ of the JPP production notably depends. The words and enactments of these others (including but not limited to the group of female black employees I hone in on) underscore how JPP’s efforts are perhaps best
interpreted via the lens of dramatic action. In this vein, in the latter chapters I pay close attention to the life stories, memories and ongoing concerns that shape and occupy women, which upon initial reading may appear somewhat removed from the everyday practice of outreach. Yet in the final analysis, I posit that these elements—and the gendered performances via which they are enacted—are not thus distant; that they in fact powerfully contour JPP’s efforts in the post-apartheid city. What the often contrastive performances of JPP’s Afrikaner leadership and its lay staff signify is how variously cultivated and conceived notions of moral practice encounter one another in the inner city, and how these different actors mediate the JPP moral domain, at times via ironic suggestions, at other times by way of articulating concerns by means devoid of paradox and satire.

In linking the performances of members of the imagined JPP community and those alternately earnest and sardonic enactments that summarily comprise it to moral practice, the question arises whether or to what extent we can fairly imbue ironic performances with moral value. Where within the complexly tense environment of JPP, in other words, are we to locate moral action? Whilst Goffman posited that every performance carries its own moral claim (Goffman 1959: 13)—which, taking an extreme relativist position, may well be undeniable—others have argued that irony portrays the limits of moral action, or conveys how moral knowledge collapses in on itself. Yet here I would like to reiterate the point noted earlier that if irony recognizes the constraints of and on human knowledge and agency, it does not thereby deny their significance, but instead situates them in the realm of the uncertain, the ambiguous, the undecided. Comparably, I venture, the at once irksome and playful presence of irony does not imply the utter absence of the moral, but temporarily rests it in the region of the indistinct or unresolved. In the performance of irony, phronesis, that ‘cultivated predisposition to do the right
thing in the circumstances,’ is not repudiated but is—in the JPP context rather frequently, though not definitively—(knowingly) suspended until a future time.

This observation finally returns me to the dissertation’s central objective: to construe how the unbounded, continually transforming entity that considers itself to be the JPP ‘moral community’ is produced, reproduced, resisted, and potentially transformed through the words and enactments of those who traverse it. In the chapters that follow I neither assert nor deny the prospect that JPP constitutes a moral community of sorts—a matter that, via comprehensive engagement with female black interlocutors, is left rather unresolved. Instead I focus on the productive spaces and encounters in the middle, where people cannot but at once perform the self (i.e. their own moral predispositions) and the particular morally-imbued roles JPP urges them to take on and ‘make their own.’ What emerges imperative within these materially and symbolically loaded sites and moments is the negotiation of self-respect, which hinges upon the degree to which interactions imply the fostering or refutation of mutual respect, or the measure of the ‘equality’ of the exchange. This apparently mundane activity, we will do well to note, is yet vital to the cultivation of phronesis, which “affirms dignity and self-respect as central aspects of human practice” (Lambek 2002: 16).

Made apparent through irony, given the frequent, alternately unintentional or indifferent refusal to respect the Other in the constrained JPP encounter, it is not surprising that predominantly, phronesis here remains but ambivalently constituted. If anything, JPP’s gradual attentive turn from ‘poor whites’ to ‘suffering blacks’—a category incorporative of clients and lay workers—denotes the increasing, yet equally apprehensive recognition on the part of the organization’s Afrikaner leadership of the appalling circumstances apartheid (and colonialism before it) engendered and its legacies in the current moment. Arguably, this ‘contradictory consciousness’ (Crehan 2002; Gramsci 1971) is not resolved but only compounded by the
evident and not unfathomable hesitation and hostility the NGO’s female lay workers habitually express. What these thoughts in their sum attest to, however, is not the impossibility of phronesis, but rather its transitory delay in the moment of its apparent impossibility or unachievability. In this reading JPP forms an audacious, even ‘ridiculous’ entity/activity that in and through its idealized denial of apartheid values and practices refuses to let go of the likelihood that phronesis is viable and indeed—at some future point—realizable.

Organizational/Representational Matters

The dissertation is divided into two parts, the first consisting of two chapters, the second of four. In Part One I introduce Pretoria’s inner city, past and present, through an examination of the annually celebrated Feast of the Clowns, focusing on how the figure of the clown is evoked and manipulated by variously positioned JPP actors (Chapter 1). I then move on from this ritualized moment/persona to the everyday stage of outreach labour via an analysis of the outreach network’s HIV/AIDS project, turning from the ‘ideological communitas’ of the clown feast to the contestations clients of outreach engage in as particularly marginalized actors in the JPP moral drama (Chapter 2). Broadly tracing the trajectory of my research, Part Two gradually hones in on women’s practices, words and lives through considerations of gendered performances of ‘hard laughter’ (Chapter 3), conceptions of city-township relations (Chapter 4), memories and negotiations of sex and marriage (Chapter 5), and finally, the pervasiveness of death (Chapter 6)—each of which subject I link to and situate in the context of women’s JPP labour.

In producing this dissertation, one option I had was to write an ‘institutional ethnography’; one that would, by and large, remain focused on JPP and the faith-based outreach network within which it was situated. Such an ethnography would have had to attend in considerably more depth than I do here to JPP (and other nodes in the network) as an
organization, its emergence, and the ideas and Afrikaner figures that played a key role in its establishment. As noted, the main reason I did not do so is due to the majority of my fieldwork having been conducted with black outreach employees. Yet I also admit substantial hesitation at facing the complex question of the ‘white’ and especially ‘Afrikaner response’ to apartheid’s end (of which JPP may be said to form an instance; hence I do not avoid the matter entirely). If, as the social historian Jonathan Hyslop posited some years ago, the end of apartheid signified the collapse of the *myth* of the Afrikaner community (Hyslop 2003), arguably the post-apartheid moment is that much more revelatory of its breakages and divisions.

Yet as with the Afrikaners I worked with at JPP, neither did the women in this ethnography belong to or form a ‘community’ in the traditional, bounded sense of the term. Along with almost every other black adult who lived in or traversed the inner city, whether drawn by work, educational opportunities or otherwise, they came from ‘away,’ from ‘that side’ as they preferred to say, often with a wave of the hand in one or another direction accompanied by geographic evocations ranging from specific townships, former Bantustans and provinces to other African countries. Their histories varied accordingly, and aside from the ‘obvious’ identifications of being black and a woman, commonly included references to ‘ethnic culture’ or ‘tradition’ and church affiliation. In general, it could be argued that whilst the first (and second) identification mattered more in the inner city in view of women’s labour for and with Afrikaners, the second, third and fourth, situated as these were in extensive kin networks, were predominantly salient in the townships and rural areas of women’s childhoods and early adult lives.

In addition, the outreach environment formed one that was ever in motion, ever transforming in concert with the comings and goings of its employees, volunteers and clients. Thus, while some interlocutors had known each other for years by virtue of the time they had
spent at JPP and had opened doors for relatives and acquaintances to also gain employment there, others had arrived recently, more or less coincident with the onset of my fieldwork. The relationships women sought to foster with each other can, in one sense, be reasonably described via the concept of ‘sisterhood,’ by way of which both closer and more acquaintance-like friendships came to be imbued with a sense of fictive kinship: ‘We are sisters’ (descriptive, explanatory); ‘My sister’ or ‘Sesi’ (Sotho, sister; also a common name) (forms of address). Yet such connections, however intimately once portrayed, could for various reasons rather quickly turn around and grow cold, even outright vicious, sometimes producing situations of great uncertainty for those involved.

In its sum, the environment in which I worked was ‘hard’ in myriad ways, making for difficult fieldwork. Entangled with the ever-present but rarely explicitly addressed racial differentiation and tension at JPP and beyond, there was the poverty—ranging from ‘barely able to make ends meet’ to sheer hunger—of many, the ambiguity and at times blatant oppressiveness or danger of the intimate relations women friends were involved in (cf. Wardlow 2006), the regularity of death in the inner city and townships (see Chapter 6), and the perpetual (fear of) violence and crime (cf. Bähre 2007). In such a climate, the quest for survival often goes hand-in-hand with the signification and attribution of blame. People are understandably wary of each other, and in no small manner of ‘researchers,’ those advantageously positioned persons who choose to spend time among them.

As noted, and as fieldwork fragments elsewhere in the dissertation will show, my 2006/07 stay at JPP entailed an encounter with the politics of the past and present as these have come to be inscribed on South Africans’ social and personal lives and bodies. Not infrequently, this encounter impelled ‘contradictory’ engagements on my part that, I knew, always unfolded under the vigilant, circumspect eyes of JPP’s employees and clients. Expectedly, central in the
negotiation (or provocation) of fieldwork ethics at JPP were the ins and outs of how I navigated the racial politics between the NGO’s Afrikaner leaders and other staff and its black workers. Yet beyond this fault-line there existed others, such as the subtle disparities between black staff and clients (see Note 4) and the often divergent experiences and interests of the organization’s male and female workers.

The management of fieldwork ethics (and its failures) is not finalized when researchers withdraw from the field, but comes to involve novel demands in the process of ethnographic writing. The fieldwork ‘completed,’ we turn from the daily task of negotiating our research sites to one wherein we must yet contend with the same limited or constrained circumstances we encountered in the first place. The ethics of representing others and interpreting their actions urges us to think beyond the matter of protecting our interlocutors’ identities (important though this be; I address this matter below) toward a judicious engagement with the theoretical models at our disposal and how these operate differentially to cast persons and collectivities in a certain light. In this respect, if my employment of the performance concept derives markedly from the encounter with irony and the ways certain knowledge is, to paraphrase Don Kulick (2005), ‘barred from literal performance,’ I further evoke it as a means to acknowledge the intrinsic partiality of the anthropological knowledge I nonetheless seek to produce. Within this approach the concentration on moral practice does not imply the idealization of JPP, but instead allows for the appreciation that where the clashing of moral sensibilities is patent, this does not perforce denote the absence of the moral. Rather otherwise, it highlights the incongruous processes via which the articulation of moral value is at once delayed, yet also (re-)cultivated—through practices of (dis-)respecting the Other—during moments and periods deeply etched by the experience and knowledge of moral breakdown.
Regarding the usual disclaimers pertaining to the safeguarding of people’s identities, I have changed the name of each interlocutor and have, in the odd case and where this seemed reasonable, attributed general insights to particular persons. Other than major place names—in inner city Pretoria, townships, state hospitals—the same counts for the NGO locations, residential neighbourhoods and (occasionally) smaller towns I traversed or which otherwise emerged significant. I have however retained the ‘cultural’ or ethnic identifications interlocutors suggested to me—predominantly traced through the father’s line—and make a point of mentioning these, obviously not to re-inscribe the apartheid value of separate ‘nations’ but to highlight how—not unlike in the past—this notion remains salient, not just in rural settings but also in urban contexts characterized by substantial diversity. This facet was attested to, for one, by the linguistic diversity detectable at JPP, which beyond the commonly spoken English, Afrikaans and Pedi (Northern Sotho) also included Shangaan (Tsonga), Tswana, Southern Sotho, Zulu, Xhosa and yet other languages.\(^\text{10}\) Within this multilingual domain most of the research was carried out in English; to a lesser extent, I also utilized my limited knowledge of Afrikaans and Pedi.

Lastly, a note on the convoluted issue of consent in anthropological (and other) research. At the heart of this issue are located two interrelated questions. The first, pertaining to the problematically formulated concept of ‘informed consent,’ is how I (can) know or be assured that the persons I write about are aware of my research activities and analytical intentions, and have agreed to participate therein. This question, anthropologists well know, is flawed not merely because it assumes interlocutors’ access to and knowledge of Western-derived scholarly endeavours and research processes, but equally because—via e.g. consent forms—it serves to protect researchers and universities far more than it does that of ostensible ‘research

\(^{10}\) Following local usage, I refer to ethnic identifications and languages by their root names: *Tswana* rather than *Batswana* (the Tswana people or nation); *Xhosa* rather than *IsiXhosa* (the Xhosa language).
participants.’ The second question emerges from the faultiness of the first, and queries how interlocutors’ sanctioning of a certain project may be alternately established and how their wellbeing may be simultaneously assured; a question the answer to which, without being excusatory, in one sense cannot but remain ambiguous, due to the processual nature of fieldwork and its aftermath.

At and beyond JPP, in the inner city and the townships of women’s childhoods and youths, research— that privileged domain of the few and far between— was, frankly, not considered all that important. It was not important chiefly because multitudinous other daily concerns— provision of basic needs, keeping one’s family safe, managing one’s relationships, taking care of the ill, attending to deaths and so on— formed matters of much greater consequence. Hence, much as I sought to ensure that people knew that I was carrying out research (i.e. by presenting myself as an anthropological researcher, from the University of Toronto in Canada, etc.), I was repeatedly confronted with the illogicality of the notion of ‘informed consent’ in my fieldwork milieu. Yet individual persons’ approval of participation in a research project, I would (with some hesitation) suggest, may be established through the forging of trust relations during the fieldwork period and—if at all possible—to their upholding, or maintenance, beyond it. In relation to the post-fieldwork writing process, this practice imputes the researcher with the responsibility to write in such a manner that not merely interlocutors’ identities, but indeed their very self-respect is wholly preserved.
PART I

Contextualizing Outreach Labour
CHAPTER ONE
Performing the Post-apartheid City

Prologue

In late August 2006, some two and a half months after my arrival in South Africa, the annual Feast of the Clowns was celebrated in Pretoria’s inner city. Although in the weeks leading up to the event several Afrikaner acquaintances had informed me of the upcoming festivities, urging me to attend, my first sight of anything having to do with clowns was—out of all places—in the bathtub of the flat I had come to share with two black outreach workers. On the Monday on which the festival was to commence I arose in the morning and proceeded to the bathroom, only to come across several brightly coloured clown suits floating in a mixture of dishwashing liquid and water.

I encountered my flatmate Nyeleti, a Shangaan woman from Mamelodi township, in our small living room, where she was occupied hanging up yet more clown suits to dry on the laundry ropes stretching from wall to wall. A number of curly, colourful wigs were neatly arranged across the top of the old couch. When Nyeleti saw me, she started laughing.

‘…Nyeleti, why are you doing this?’

‘I am doing it for Sandy. She’s too lazy to do it!’ Followed by more laughter. And then, in a more serious tone: ‘She’s paying me fifty bucks [Rand; approx. $6.25 CAD]… But it’s okay, I just do it for the money.’

I felt decidedly uncomfortable about the fact that it was Nyeleti who was washing the clown suits, and it was not merely the small payment that bothered me. Since moving to the inner city, I had witnessed her doing her Afrikaner manager Sandy’s laundry on an almost weekly basis. Nyeleti would come home after a day’s work hauling a large sports bag filled with Sandy’s dirty t-shirts, pants, and undergarments. On those evenings, kneeled beside the bathtub,
she would vigorously scrub and rinse Sandy’s clothes, then hang them up to dry. The following
day she would iron each item of clothing, carefully fold it, and repack it in the bag before
returning the whole lot to her manager. For this informal labour she was paid R100 ($12.50) per
month.

Nyeleti and I had spoken about the matter before, and she was well aware of my unease.
Why could Sandy not do her own laundry? Was it not insulting, to say nothing of oppressive, to
ask a black woman at one’s place of work to be one’s ‘domestic on the side’ (cf. Cock 1989)?
And why did Nyeleti consent to engage in this informal economic activity that had, it appeared,
now come to include clown suits as well?

However, while these questions were once again running through my mind that morning,
Nyeleti’s attention was already turning elsewhere. Our other flatmate Maya, a young Ndebele
woman also from Mamelodi, had just arrived back at the flat carrying our breakfast under her
arm: a loaf of white bread from the nearby variety store. Witnessing the transformation of our
living room into a myriad of colour, she grabbed one of the wigs off the couch and, pulling it
over her braids, started to dance seductively to the music playing on the TV. ‘This is the kind of
clown I’m gonna be!’ she declared, making Nyeleti burst into howls of laughter.

But Maya’s sexually charged clowning was short-lived. Moving into the kitchen to
prepare bread and coffee for breakfast, she announced: ‘Aowa [Pedi, no] I’m not gonna be a
clown, I hate it! I wish I could just go home this weekend!’

‘Why don’t you want to be a clown?’

‘The paint, it makes my face break out, I hate it!’

**Introduction**

The Feast of the Clowns, a week-long festival organized jointly by Jesus People Pretoria (JPP)
and Faith In Action (FIA) in Pretoria’s inner city, is celebrated each year at the end of August.
Its history is relatively recent: the first time it was held was in 2000, and then only for a day. Nevertheless the event proved popular and experienced rapid growth, such that when I observed it in 2006 its festivities carried on for a full week, commencing on a Monday and ending the subsequent Sunday. As in the preceding couple of years, the first five days of the festival generally saw presentations in the mornings at different locations in the inner city, addressing such socially pertinent topics as ‘children’s rights,’ ‘gender justice,’ ‘the challenge of prostitution’ and ‘AIDS justice.’ Alternatively, the afternoons and evenings presented participants and spectators with a variety of performances, including the locally popular Kwaito, Hip Hop, Jazz, poetry, clowning, miming and drama.

In addition to these activities, the two highlights of the festival were the March of the Clowns on the Saturday and the closing celebration the Sunday following. The march consisted of a procession of clowns, mimers and tricksters accompanied by an impressive, though perhaps less disguised, crowd of inner city inhabitants and other interested parties. It began at Burgers Park (‘our Central Park,’ as one outreach leader once almost proudly described it to me) and slowly wound its way toward Church Square, where it made a boisterous, triumphant circle before returning from whence it came. The closing celebration occurred during a church service the next morning and incorporated, amongst the more usual elements, a mime act.

Already some weeks earlier my curiosity regarding this week-long ‘celebration of foolishness’ had been piqued by some conversations I had had with two Afrikaner contacts in the inner city. Johan, a pastor of a local Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) and fulltime managing employee of JPP, once alluded to the festival’s constituting a ‘rite of reversal, like how they did

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1 Kwaito is a music genre that emerged in South Africa’s townships (especially around Johannesburg and Pretoria) in the early 1990s, coincident with apartheid’s end, and forms a blend of house music and African sounds. The term is thought to have originated from the Afrikaans word *kwaai*, which in its traditional form means ‘angry’ or ‘strict,’ but which via its incorporation in the *Tsotsitaal* vocabulary (tsotsi [Pedi/Tswana, hooligan or thug]; taal [Afrikaans, language]) is imbued with the meaning ‘cool.’ Relatedly, another *Tsotsitaal* term derived from kwaai is amakwaitosi, meaning ‘gangster.’ For discussion of Kwaito’s emergence, rapid spread and ostensible ‘intentionally apolitical’ nature as a genre representative of music ‘after the struggle,’ see Hansen 2006; Steingo 2005.
it in the Middle Ages,’ although he had not elaborated further on the matter. Some time later I was having coffee with Andrea, the child psychologist who headed JPP’s Therapy Centre, and she explained its meaning thus: ‘There was a feast in the Middle Ages, you know, that feast when kings and pastors dressed up as clowns so they could bring laughter to the people.’ Hesitating for a moment, she then continued, ‘…Or was it priests? I think it was from the Catholics so it must have been priests. They dressed up as clowns and walked through the streets. But actually I don’t know all that much about it.’

Johan and Andrea’s allusions to ritual inversion and the ‘Feast of Fools’ of European popular culture in the Middle Ages (Bakhtin 1984 [1968]; Gilhus 1990) had me intrigued. How—if at all—did the Feast of the Clowns form a rite of reversal, at least in the eyes of some? What precisely was imagined or urged to be reversed or otherwise transformed, by whom, and why in this urban space, at this moment in South Africa’s turbulent social history? What might be the role of black outreach workers like Nyeleti and Maya who, in anticipating the occasion, merely reacted with laughter and mockery?

Focusing on the clown procession and the mime act during the closing ceremony of the festival, in this first chapter I highlight some of the key ways the Feast of the Clowns constitutes a performance of the post-apartheid city. During the festival, I argue, both the inner city’s past—as a realm controlled by white South Africans (especially Afrikaners)—and present—as a site where social suffering in its various guises dominates everyday life—are condemned, and the need for their transformation confirmed. Intended to be ‘critical’ (cf. Mitchell 1992: 19), this performance is envisioned by outreach leaders firstly via reference to the Feast of Fools—a notion that highlights an Afrikaner concern with transforming Calvinist religious structure and ethos—and secondly through the Christ figure, whose ‘radical’ actions as narrated in New Testament accounts are reinterpreted as suggestive of how contemporary social concerns may be
approached. Yet simultaneously, a host of subtle evocations during the festival—as, for example, related in the Prologue—indicate how this performance was itself subject to critique, revealing the range of ways the Feast of the Clowns is locally conceptualized and tempering any straightforward reading of it as effectively reversionary or transformative. Hence, in an attempt to recognize both elements, I here conceive of the predominantly Afrikaner-orchestrated event with reference to Victor Turner’s notion of ‘ideological communitas,’ that “positive torrent of explicitly formulated views on how men may best live together in comradely harmony” (1969: 134). In this interpretation the festival and its clown figure signify outreach leaders’ morally-imbued call for a shift in conduct or comportment, one that is meant—but frequently fails—to correspond to a shift in the ways participants interact with each other and others outside of the network.²

Moving beyond the festival, my second objective in this chapter is to begin to locate my ethnography both spatially and temporally, particularly with reference to JPP, which formed my primary fieldsite. Thus, what I hope an examination of the Feast of the Clowns will allow me to do furthermore is to introduce, by creative means, the historical, socio-political and ethnographic contexts within which my fieldwork unfolded. The chapter begins with a brief synopsis of the major historical and contemporary events and processes that have tugged and fated inner city Pretoria into becoming the kind of urban space it is today. I then move on to describe and analyze the clown festival, focusing on its usage of certain historical and religious images as it performs the post-apartheid city. The chapter is concluded with some anticipatory

² Turner situates his theorization of ideological communitas by using as ideal reference points the distinction between “preliterate and preindustrial societies” and “complex and literate societies,” whereby the former’s egalitarian model of ‘normative communitas’ (i.e. the existence of liminality and structural inferiority in such cultures) becomes one of ideological communitas in the latter. Clearly in the Feast of the Clowns, a post-apartheid, interdenominational, ‘interracial’ urban event, we encounter an instance of the latter; of the staging of what can alternatively be called a ‘utopian model of society’ (1969: 131-140). Moreover, because ideological communitas involves the explicit formulation of the utopian vision, its analysis requires attention to both verbal and body praxis (cf. Jackson 1983, wherein he critiqued anthropologists’ tendency to interpret embodied experience in terms of linguistic and cognitive models of meaning, arguing instead for a foregrounding of body praxis).
notes regarding Nyeleti, Maya, and other black women’s performances of the self during the festivities by highlighting how their words and actions illuminate the event to be ideologically motivated more than practically effective. ³

The Weight of Legacy: Pretoria in Historical Context

Up to the 1990s Pretoria was the citadel of white, Afrikaner supremacy, the seat of bureaucracy, the centre of control and censorship in its myriad forms, the heart of the apartheid order. Yet even at the height of the apartheid years it had its many marginal groups hanging in a tenuous pluralistic balance (Krüger 2003: 92).

I hated Pretoria then [during apartheid] because, this is the place where apartheid was the worst. (Tshepo, March 2007)

Pretoria, South Africa’s administrative capital, was founded in 1855 by the Voortrekker leader Marthinus Pretorius, who named the Boer settler town after his father, Andries Pretorius. Nestled in a valley between the ridges of the Magaliesberg range, the new settlement consisted of a number of agricultural plots centred around a church on the town’s main square. “During this period,” writes Karel Bakker, “the humble town centre was the spiritual heart of the white settlement, bustling with activity, but simultaneously a religious and cultural bastion for the Boers” (2002: 119). The area of the Transvaal where Pretorius had decided to settle had long been traversed and inhabited by indigenous peoples like the Pedi, the Tswana and the Ndebele;

³ As noted in the Introduction, the inner city’s outreach network had grown and transformed tremendously in both scale and concept since the early 1990s. Significantly interdenominational and ‘interracial’ in the mid-2000s, what is important to remember in the current chapter are its white, Afrikaner-Calvinist roots, which remain apparent through the network’s two largest players: JPP (which employs some 150 people) and FIA (with almost 100 employees). Despite notable differences between the two NGOs—while JPP’s ties to the DRC and URC (Uniting Reformed Church, established through DRC mission work) remain more or less in place, FIA engages more with other denominations, including the Anglicans, Catholics, Lutherans and Methodists—what they had in common was that they had both been founded by Afrikaner pastors and members of the DRC. If, as conversations with these and other outreach leaders made apparent, the establishment of two separate organizations had initially been due to their ‘different visions’ and ‘target groups,’ over the course of fifteen years they had grown closer together, and ‘networking’ and ‘partnering’ formed daily activities through joint programs, meetings and other events, such as the Feast of the Clowns. Because the idea of the clown feast was first proposed by Afrikaner pastors Johan (of JPP) and Sam (of FIA), I spend substantial space in this chapter examining how the festival speaks not just to outreach leaders’ concerns with such issues as poverty and HIV/AIDS, but equally implies a novel stance on the racially segregated, male-dominated sphere that once—and in many areas still does—formed Afrikaner Calvinist Christianity.
increasingly, the black fiefdoms nearest to the settlement were subdued, their lands added to the
town.

In 1867 diamonds were discovered in the Transvaal, and less than two decades later
tremendously rich deposits of gold were found along the Witwatersrand reef. Mining
development became crucial to colonial expansion, requiring large quantities of capital and
labour, the latter of which was supplied by black migrant workers. With the influx of wealth-
seeking investors, merchants and ever greater numbers of black labourers, the cities of
Kimberley and Johannesburg expanded rapidly through the first years of the southern African
gold rush. While Britain had previously tried to exert its influence over the Boer republics of the
Transvaal and the Orange Free State (1877-1881), the newly discovered wealth potentially
threatened British interests in southern Africa as a whole. William Beinart asserts that “[o]ther
European powers, such as Germany, were spreading their wings and extending their interests.
[Paul] Kruger had established a rail link with Portuguese-held… Mozambique” (2001: 64).
Consequently the British (especially through Cecil Rhodes) pressured the rural Afrikaners,
whom they thought incapable of managing capitalist industrialization, for control of the region.

The South African (or Anglo-Boer) War of 1899-1902 led to the dissolution of the South
African Republic (Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek [ZAR], or the Transvaal, of which Pretoria had
been the seat of government), strengthening British hegemony in the region. As a number of
scholars have pointed out, the war left Afrikaners with a deep sense of injustice about British
intervention and war tactics, a matter that came to play a significant role in the development of
Afrikaner nationalism during the first half of the 20th century (Brink and Krige 1999; Dampier
2008; Grundlingh 2004; Stanley 2006; Stanley and Dampier 2007; van Heyningen 2008). When
Boer generals resorted to guerrilla warfare after their initial successes in 1899,

British generals responded with a scorched-earth policy, burning farmhouses and
collecting women and children into concentration camps, where the death rates from
disease were very high. About 28,000 Boer civilians died; Boer losses in battle, at about 7,000, were light in comparison (Beinart 2001: 65-66).

In all, approximately one-tenth of the Boer population lost their lives in the war.

The subsequent establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, which witnessed the Boer republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State gather under one banner with the British Cape and Natal colonies, was achieved on the basis of a number of compromises. One of these, “the clumsy solution for the new country’s capital, with the executive and civil service based in Pretoria… and Parliament sitting in Cape Town, over thirteen hundred kilometres away,” ensured Pretoria’s status as capital city (Ross 1999: 81). The Union’s infamous Natives (now Black) Land Act of 1913, designed to allocate black land to whites, led to approximately 87% of the country being declared ‘white land’ and the remaining 13% (initially 7%) ‘African reserves’ (1999: 88).

Bakker writes that the black settlements in and around Pretoria were initially “tolerated and visited as tourist sites,” but that by the 1940s and 50s they had come to be identified as “black spots” needing to be removed (2002: 120). Such notions, of course, dovetailed with the rise to power of the Afrikaner National Party (NP), which emerged victorious in the 1948 elections under the slogan ‘apartheid.’ As elsewhere in the country, in Pretoria the NP’s Group Areas Act, introduced in 1950, initiated the notorious forced removals of thousands of black, Coloured and Indian persons, who were carted off from their residences to such newly established townships as Atteridgeville, Mamelodi or Laudium, or to one of the Bantustans or Homelands.

In conjunction with the Group Areas Act the NP also developed an urban planning model, the ‘Apartheid City,’ which was to guide all future regional and city planning. It is worth citing Bakker at some length:
The Apartheid City plan located various race groups around the city core, with open and industrial buffers between them. The city centre was now defined as a ‘neutral’ economic hub… where all races could be economically active during the daytime… Urban land could only be owned by whites—all [black] land was appropriated, and the people were stripped of their South African citizenship. [Black] areas at the edge of the centre were demolished… The outlying ‘townships’ were defined as sleeping towns for temporary ‘Homeland’ workers, with very little infrastructure and amenities. […] ‘Edge developments’ on the boundaries of ‘Homelands’ were to discourage black urbanization further whilst providing access to cheap labour and bolstering the ‘Homeland’ economies. Pretoria together with its ‘Edge developments’ became one of the most ‘successful’ examples of this planning model (Bakker 2002: 120-21).

As the quotation from J.S. Krüger at the head of this section implies, the implementation of the Apartheid City model was never complete, never total. Yet as Bakker indicates, and as my interlocutor Tshepo so succinctly remembers, in a sense Pretoria became the Apartheid City *par excellence*. During the years of apartheid Pretoria’s city planners and developers “continuously rebuilt the existing building stock of the centre and added a high density living component to the east [Sunnyside]… which for a while acted as a new centre of cultural activity.” Other mass housing projects were implemented on the city’s western edge to accommodate the ‘poor white’ population (Danville), whilst the northern and eastern suburbs were advocated as ideal sites for nuclear family life; as model neighbourhoods to “promote and sustain the benefits of Apartheid life” (2002: 121).

**South Africa and Pretoria in Transition**

The Afrikaner dream was not to last. If the apartheid state had initially turned internal boundaries into “geopolitical instruments for creating racial and tribal areas, and [had] presented these boundaries as ‘protective shells’ for the ‘different nations’ found in the country,” by the early 1980s, due to growing international condemnation of, internal resistance to and the economic cost of the Bantustans, the state acknowledged the failure of its Bantustan policy (Ramutsindela 1998: 292). Following this acknowledgment, in 1982
nine development regions were demarcated, which transcended the boundaries of the four provinces of the Cape, Natal, Orange Free State and the Transvaal. The boundaries of these regions also transcended those of the [Bantustans]. Although the state presented these regions as necessary for economic growth, job creation and the provision of basic needs… the political motive was to lay the foundation for a confederation of states… Other motives… included the search for strategies to incorporate blacks, [C]oloureds and Indians within central state institutions, while retaining race and ethnic identity as the basis for political representation (Ramutsindela 1998: 292).

As others have similarly suggested (e.g. Khosa and Muthien 1997), the NP demarcated these nine regions with the aim of laying a foundation for regionalization in a potential post-apartheid South Africa—an attempt that was in direct conflict with the ANC’s vision of a unitary state.

The need to restructure South African territorial space due to the geographical dismemberment apartheid had caused was tabled in 1993. The dismantling of the four apartheid provinces in favour of non-racial ones was deemed necessary because, although Africans were enclosed within them, they were not part of them, since black areas continued to be administered by the Bantustans and other structures (in this vein the nine development regions outlined in 1982 had engendered little change, despite the spread of regional boundaries to embrace adjoining provinces and Bantustans). Negotiations at the Convention for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA) and later at the Multiparty Negotiating Process (MNP) emphasized that the transformation process was intended to replace the exercise of governing on the basis of race with one based on geographical regions, whilst simultaneously strengthening the nation-building process (Christopher 1995). During this process the ANC and other parties and organizations submitted proposals outlining the form the post-apartheid state should take, including its internal boundaries; interestingly, a large number of submissions took the development regions of 1982 as their point of departure, a position that was also endorsed by the Commission on the Delimitation/Demarcation of Regions (CDDR, the body constitutionally charged with the task of outlining new provinces). Writes Ramutsindela:
The adoption of the 1982 development regions as a geographical base for new provinces resulted in a spatial resemblance of both apartheid regions and post-apartheid provinces… The… implications of the process of demarcating new provinces on the basis of apartheid development regions were that ethnic groups in most of the [Bantustans] were enclosed into new provinces, without changing the pattern of (African) population composition and distribution; as evidenced by the concentration of the Zulu in the new province of KwaZulu-Natal, the Xhosa in Eastern Cape, the Tswana in North West, and the Sotho in the Free State. Furthermore, the [Bantustan] character—low levels of urbanization and high unemployment—is visible in provinces such as KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Northern Province [Limpopo], North West and Mpumalanga, which carry a greater proportion of former [Bantustans] (Ramutsindela 1998: 293).

Along with the demarcation of novel provincial boundaries, a central concern was that of new municipal borders—ones that would, in urban areas, directly counter the NP’s Apartheid City model. In Gauteng Province this process—allocated to each of the nine newly established provinces following the first democratic elections on April 27, 2004—was finalized in 2000 with the establishment of three Metropolitan Municipalities (City of Johannesburg, City of Tshwane and Ekurhuleni) and three District Municipalities (Metsweding, Sedibeng and the West Rand). Incorporated into the City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, Pretoria proper (i.e. the inner city and surrounding suburbs) is currently administered by the same municipal body that also oversees the townships of Atteridgeville, Eersterust, Ga-Rankuwa, Hammanskraal, Laudium, Mabopane, Mamelodi, Soshanguve, Temba and Winterveld, some of which were formerly governed through the Bantustan policy. This redrawing of municipal borders has ensured that, according to the 2001 Census, the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality presides over an area of over 2,000 square kilometres with some two million inhabitants; by contrast, the population of the city proper is approximately one million (cited in City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality 2004: 14).  

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4 These population numbers likely represent an underestimation, since myriad informal or unregistered dwellers never participated in Statistics South Africa’s 2001 Census. Moreover, since the Census took place the population of the city and its suburbs and townships can be expected to have significantly increased due to ongoing urbanization. The next South African population count is scheduled for 2011.
As elsewhere within and beyond South Africa, the carving out of the new Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality has generated considerable conflict regarding the potential name change of ‘Pretoria’ to ‘Tshwane.’ In brief, ‘Tshwane’ is the Tswana name of the river that flows through the city, which is known in Afrikaans as the ‘Apies.’ The origin of the river’s Tswana name is unclear, with some claiming its meaning to be ‘place of the black cow’ (in Tswana, *tshwana*), derivative of ceremonies whereby a black cow was sprinkled with water from the river to end a drought, whilst others hold that it was named after Tshwane, a son of Chief Mushi, the Ndebele leader who settled on the banks of the river a century before the arrival of the first Voortrekkers in the early 1800s. Following the City Council’s vote on March 8, 2005, ‘Tshwane’ could become the city’s new name pending approval by the central government—a contentious point that at the time of writing remains unresolved. If it is considered by many as a way to recognize that peoples of non-colonial origins represent the majority in the city, the notion that the city was first established as ‘Pretoria,’ the uncertainty over the origin of the name ‘Tshwane,’ and the argument that no form of jurisdiction existed in the area prior to Pretoria’s formation are cited by those who oppose it.

More importantly for my purposes, amidst this symbolically laden conflict, apartheid’s end and the inauguration, first of Nelson Mandela as State President in 1994 and second that of Thabo Mbeki in 1999, generated massive social change countrywide. As in other South African cities, in Pretoria it was the inner city that (initially) witnessed the most dramatic transitions, and that at an exceedingly rapid pace. Over the course of the 1990s the majority of the city centre’s

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5 One approach to the study of names and naming has unfolded via discussions of assertions and changes regarding specific place names, often in light of local and national ‘identity politics’ (e.g. Hill and van Heerden 2003). It is in view of such studies and Charles Taylor’s thesis on the ‘politics of recognition’ (1994) that the matter of the potential name change of ‘Pretoria’ to ‘Tshwane’ needs to be conceptualized.

6 In the dissertation, my general choice of using the name ‘Pretoria’ to refer to both the inner city (consisting of the neighbourhoods Pretoria Central [the Central Business District or CBD], Sunnyside and Marabastad) and its as of yet predominantly white suburbs, and to the different townships by their individual names, follows from the common practice of my interlocutors—both black and white—who in 2006/07 continued to refer to the different regions of the Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality in that manner.
white inhabitants (other than ‘poor whites’ and elderly persons unable to afford to move) relocated elsewhere, whilst black South Africans and others moved in en masse. The high density housing projects Bakker refers to, built during apartheid to accommodate white urbanites, are nowadays inhabited by black citizens, internal migrants and migrants and refugees from beyond South Africa’s borders. Many of the generally overcrowded buildings exist in various states of disrepair, whilst others have been officially declared (by the City Council or the Municipality) ‘uninhabitable for human life.’ Once again, the threat of being removed from one’s place of residence has become a source of constant anxiety for many.

Concisely, this was the inner city where I encountered clowns on the street and mimers in church in late August 2006. It was an inner city wherein JPP, FIA, and a host of other institutions involved in outreach were trying to make sense of and attend to the particularities apartheid’s end had engendered in ‘their’ urban area, and concurrently one wherein numerous black South Africans and others were staking a claim as ‘autonomous’ persons (or groups); as individuals (or collectivities) who, in concert with and sometimes beyond their accountabilities to kin and community, were asserting themselves as ‘democratic, rightful’ citizens of the ‘new South Africa’—and if not as citizens, at least of being ‘democratic,’ and therefore ‘rightful.’

**Clowning Around in the Inner City**

On Saturday morning, the day the March of the Clowns was to take place, Nyeleti and Maya left early to meet with their co-workers in advance of the procession. Since, unlike my flatmates, I was not ‘required’ to be a clown I made my way toward Burgers Park a bit later accompanied by Maya’s six-year-old niece Ntombi, who had spent the night at our place. Nearing the corner of the side-street from which the procession was to depart, Ntombi spotted a throng of kids crowding around three clowns busily painting the children’s faces. As we awaited her turn, an eager clown handed us the day’s program and an ‘invitation to the feast.’ ‘The Feast of the
Clowns is a celebration of the city and its diverse people,’ I read. ‘It wants to bring joy into the city streets. It wants to cry about the things that make the city sad. It wants to remind us of battles still to fight, for some sleep cold at night, and others die too young.’ And a bit further: ‘Jesus was the harlequin that looked like a fool to the powerful and religious, because he always did things out of rhythm.’

Ntombi and I found Nyeleti and Maya’s party standing some ways off to the side, awaiting their cue to join the procession. Nyeleti’s face, paint and all, bore a serious expression as she eyed the Tshwane Metropolitan Police arranging and rearranging their motorbikes and vehicles at the head of the street. Several clowns were running up and down the crowded lane in an effort to get the participants organized: the police up front, the musicians directly behind them, followed by four clowns holding two large banners, announcing Feast of the Clowns! and It Takes a Community to Raise a Child. We obediently trailed a red-wigged clown wearing immense shoes, who instructed us to remain in our place in the parade behind the leading banners ‘at all times.’

A sense of excitement took hold as we began marching down the road and turned the corner into Van Der Walt, a main thoroughfare in the inner city. Glancing around, I estimated that at least a thousand people were taking part in the procession, though many more joined our ranks as we made our way through the streets. Despite the small distance between Burgers Park and Church Square (about a kilometre and a half) the parade moved along but slowly, taking over an hour to make its animated circle through Pretoria Central. It certainly was a noisy and cheerful affair: clowns’ and others’ singing, shouting, dancing and laughing mixed with the drums and trumpets of the musicians as banners and posters bounced up and down among the boisterous crowd. About halfway through the march, when I happened to be walking next to Toko, the Pedi social worker whom I had been accompanying to the Support Group meetings of
one of the outreach network’s AIDS hospices, we were suddenly and enthusiastically joined by some of the hospice’s patients, their faces decorated with brightly coloured suns, hearts and dots.

And thus we marched on. Besides the throng of exuberant clowns, mimers and jokers, the traffic-stopping police, the music and the din, curious onlookers (and some frustrated drivers) had the opportunity to witness the parade’s messages boldly displayed on vibrant banners. Some of these evoked religious themes, as in Jesus Loved the Poor, or People in Power, Like a Flower—Here Today, Gone Tomorrow (based on Isaiah 40: 21-24). Others, like the one mentioned earlier, focused on children and childhood: Children Must Be Seen and Heard! Yet others sought to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS: My Friend with AIDS is Still My Friend, If One Suffers, We All Suffer, and It’s Cool to Wait. More general statements included We Celebrate Our Diversity and Justice for All.

The March of the Clowns, a morning affair, attracted a considerable following. Three stages had been erected near Burgers Park, on which some fifty different bands, solo artists and other performers entertained spectators throughout the afternoon and evening. At one point I ran into a smiling clown who turned out to be Johan, his two small children in tow. ‘So, what do you think of our feast?’ he inquired, followed immediately by an enthusiastic ‘There’s at least ten thousand people here!’ I could see that indeed, people continued to stream towards the park (some weeks later I learned that the official estimate had been about twelve thousand people). Maybe it was partly due to the large turnout that the festival’s key symbol, printed on many a pamphlet, t-shirt and poster, increasingly came to resonate with me as the day wore on: a lone clown glancing, a somewhat forlorn expression on his face, toward the city he is holding in his arms.
The following morning the festival was ceremoniously brought to a close during a church service held in a Methodist church building\(^7\) that, amongst such more familiar elements as singing, preaching and tithing, also incorporated a clown act. More precisely, and in contrast to the boisterous clowns of the previous day, this was a performance of mime, enacted in utter silence. Just before the mimers took to the ‘stage’—the area between the altar and the pulpit—Sam, a youngish Afrikaner pastor and key figure in the organization of the preceding week’s festivities, spoke these words by way of introduction:

Why the image of the clown for the Feast of the Clowns? We see clowns as in the Bible passage by Paul where he says, ‘For Christ’s sake I make myself a fool.’ Fools were a big part of Greek theatre, and another word for ‘fool’ is actually ‘moron.’ Sometimes we use the word ‘moron’ badly, but it also means ‘clown’ or ‘fool.’ It’s a good thing for Christians to become clowns for Christ!

Other than the occasional cough, rustle or giggle from the audience, stillness then descended upon the gathered as three clowns entered the sanctuary via the doors hedging the pulpit on left and right.

The first clown to come in—a young black man wearing a colourful jacket, his face painted white—lowers himself in front of the altar onto the kneeling bench, where he remains seated for much of the performance. He is immediately followed by two others—one black, one white—dressed in full clown suits, their painted faces accentuated with large red lips and round red noses. Both clowns enter the sanctuary carrying a large plastic box. The white clown, a woman, has a cardboard sign pinned onto her chest that reads BLACK; correspondingly, the sign on her box says THE BLACK BOX. The box belonging to the black clown, a young man, reads THE WHITE BOX, matched with a sign on his chest displaying the word WHITE.

\(^7\) See Note 3 regarding FIA’s connections with white Protestant churches in the inner city other than the DRC. Whilst the church service took place in a Methodist building, it did not exactly amount to a ‘Methodist service,’ not just because the liturgy and practices illuminated an amalgam of Christian elements but also because the gathered formed a mix of Methodist and Dutch Reformed congregants and outreach employees who normally attended other churches. Although present and taking part in the service, the church’s senior pastor did not lead it; instead it was headed by Sam (of FIA), Johan (of JPP) and Martie (also of JPP). Notably also, DRC services across the inner city had been cancelled for the morning event, which was attended by between 500 and 600 people.
Upon opening their boxes, each clown takes out a purple toy noodle, with which they begin to beat one another. Returning to their boxes after this symbolic fight, they proceed to show the audience what else they have brought with them. Matching their signs, the white clown’s box turns out to be filled with black balloons and the black clown’s box with white balloons. Each clown begins to blow up more balloons, all the while playfully bouncing and kicking them around.

In the midst of their play a fourth clown—a young black woman—emerges from one of the doors beside the pulpit, carrying a box entitled THE TREASURE BOX. Her arrival interrupts the other clowns’ play; seating herself between the two she nods and smiles at them in a friendly manner. They in turn come to visit her, offering something of themselves: a white balloon, a black balloon. The new clown accepts these gifts with a hug and a kiss, putting the balloons in her box.

The fourth clown then pulls something out of her box: a black and a white balloon tied together. Walking over to the black clown, the latter initially refuses to accept her gift, eyeing her warily and pulling out two white balloons instead. The new clown, however, wants nothing to do with the white balloons; after some time she manages to convince the black clown to accept her balloons. The two then hurry towards the white clown, whereupon the scene is repeated. The three clowns proceed to display happiness and sharing by dancing around the altar together, and by giving each other lollipops.

Thus far the first clown to have entered the sanctuary has remained quietly seated on the kneeling bench, a sad expression on his face. In their exuberant dance around the altar, the other three clowns suddenly notice him and move towards him. The sad clown lifts up his arms towards them, indicating that he has nothing to give. The fourth clown proceeds to teach the black and the white clown about sharing by instructing them to hand over their lollipops to the
sad clown. This act of giving proves exciting: they begin to jump up and down, beckoning for the sad clown to join them, to dance with them. A smile breaks upon the sad clown’s face as he stands up; together, the four dance around the sanctuary before disappearing through the doors from whence they came.

Imagining Transformation

Notwithstanding its short history, the Feast of the Clowns did not arrive on the Pretorian stage out of nowhere. When Andrea and Johan drew the link between the Feast of the Clowns and ‘that feast when [priests] dressed up as clowns so they could bring laughter to the people,’ they were referring to the legendary Feast of Fools of European popular culture during the Middle Ages. The affective shifts in personal and societal conduct called for during the contemporary clown festival are significantly imagined by outreach leaders through the recollection and evocation of this historical event.

The Feast of Fools, in which those of lesser ecclesiastical status in the Catholic hierarchy\(^8\) parodied their religious superiors (and the masses), took place roughly from the end of the 11\(^{th}\) to the 16\(^{th}\) Centuries. Given some spatial and temporal variance, four different elements usually characterized the feast: a procession to the church, Mass, ‘carnivalesques’ in the church, and theatrical performances and carnivalesques outside the church (Gilhus 1990: 26-27). One condemnatory letter, written in 1445 by the Theological Faculty of Paris and addressed to “the bishops and chapters of France,” described the occasion as follows:

\[^8\text{It is significant that the contemporary clown festival is partly imagined by its leaders—descendants of European migrants—through the evocation of a European historical event; one the majority of black participants had little to no knowledge of, thus instantly complicating leaders’ idealized notion that the festival’s message of transforming church hierarchy is—or should be—transparent to all. Furthermore, in the case of the Pretorian event it is interesting to note how Afrikaner Reformed and other outreach leaders draw a parallel between the hierarchies of the Medieval Catholic Church and those apparent in local Calvinist churches. If, however, one of the Protestant Reformation’s foremost critiques of the papal church pertained to its hierarchical structure and practices, this should not prevent us from acknowledging that in the roughly five hundred years since then significant hierarchies have also developed in numerous Protestant denominations, including Calvinist ones.}\]
Priests and clerks may be seen wearing masks and monstrous visages at the hours of office. They dance in the choir dressed as women, panders or minstrels. They sing wanton songs. They eat black puddings at the horn of the altar while the celebrant is saying mass. They play at dice there. They cense with stinking smoke from the soles of old shoes. They run and leap through the church, without a blush at their own shame. Finally they drive about the town and its theatres in shabby traps and carts, and rouse the laughter of their fellows and the bystanders in infamous performances with indecent gestures and verses scurrilous and unchaste (cited in Gilhus 1990: 24).

Not surprisingly, in its excessive form the Feast of Fools was never approved by the religious authorities; on the contrary, “it was restricted and regularly forbidden” (1990: 25).

In his paper, Ingvild Gilhus focuses specifically on the relationship between the Feast of Fools and the Catholic religion. The feast’s objective, he writes, was the inversion of status, as in the subdeacons’ performance of those duties that properly belonged to their religious superiors. Yet “[a]s the lowest in the hierarchy were exalted, their behaviour was simultaneously characterized by the typical ludicrous reversals of clowns. Therefore the priests were not playing the part of real ecclesiastical authorities, but of ecclesiastical authorities playing clowns” (1990: 30). In essence the subdeacons’ ridiculing of the hierarchical papal Church, Gilhus suggests, sought to manipulate the religious and social systems of the day and thereby to effect a sense of egalitarianism among participants and spectators, if only temporarily. This end was realized through the symbolic inversion of such powerful oppositional logics as human/animal, male/female and spirit/body; hence the caricaturing of the animal (specifically the ass), the feminine and the body during the Feast of Fools.

But in the symbolic repertoire of the Feast of the Clowns, it is not only the Feast of Fools through which transformation is imagined. A second compelling image is drawn upon: that of

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9 In exploring this relationship Gilhus distinguishes himself from Mikhail Bakhtin, who in *Rabelais and His World* (1984 [1968]) argues that “the comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages… are not religious rituals like, for instance, the Christian liturgy to which they are linked by distant genetic ties. The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer… All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere” (1984 [1968]: 7). See also the Introduction to Peter Stallybrass and Allon White’s *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (in Lambek 2002: 275-287), wherein the authors discuss Bakhtin’s ‘self-conscious utopianism’ about carnival in *Rabelais and His World*. 
the Christ figure in the Gospels, and the apostle Paul’s rendering of the Christian message as ‘foolishness to the world’ in his New Testament letters. Here the figure of Christ appears as a harlequin, a divine-yet-human being who ‘looked like a fool to the powerful and religious, because he always did things out of rhythm.’ William Mitchell’s definition of clowning as “public performance characterized variously by burlesque, buffoonery, nonsense, and irony”—indeed, as “criticism”—is useful here (1992: 19). Clowning, the message makers of Pretoria’s modern-day clown festival suggest, is what Jesus spent most of his time doing while he was on earth. In the Feast of the Clowns the image of the clown thus also crucially symbolizes the Christ figure: alongside allusions to the charade and absurdity of religious authority, it is he who emerges as the ultimate clown.

During the Feast of the Clowns, the symbolic egalitarianism once enacted during the Feast of Fools and the ‘oppositional’ practices of the Christ figure blend together in the way the contemporary festival is envisioned by its organizers. In the figure of the clown, the notion of inferior clergymen satirizing Catholic authority merges with that of Jesus healing on the Sabbath and befriending ‘sinners.’ This fusion, I suggest, speaks to the inner city’s past and present, to the multiple ways this urban sphere has imprinted and continues to imprint itself differentially on people’s lives, and—especially—to how white outreach leaders imagine change to be possible. Relatedly, because the Feast of the Clowns seeks to bring these intertwined images and their contemporary meanings to life in practice, they play an important role in faith-based outreach’s performance of the post-apartheid city.

Performing the Post-apartheid City

Pretoria’s Christian roots run deep, stemming back to the time of the Voortrekkers, to the very first years of the settlers’ town existence. In an exhaustive study entitled Sweeping Whirlwinds and subtitled A Study of Religious Change: Reformed Religion and Civil Religion in the City of Pretoria’s Christian roots run deep, stemming back to the time of the Voortrekkers, to the very first years of the settlers’ town existence. In an exhaustive study entitled Sweeping Whirlwinds and subtitled A Study of Religious Change: Reformed Religion and Civil Religion in the City of...
Pretoria (-Tshwane) (1855-2000) (2003), Krüger describes in detail the vast influence Calvinist Christianity has wielded over the city. In broad terms, the Boers’ religiosity developed in tandem with those major historical events and processes noted earlier: the rise and fall of the Boer republics in the context of British colonial interests, the South African War of 1899-1902, the establishment of the Union in 1910. Like other historians, Krüger also emphasizes the important role of Reformed religiosity and culture in the development of Afrikaner nationalism (or ‘Afrikaner Christian Nationalism’ as he prefers to call it). Apartheid, which came to be “rigidly centralized” in Pretoria, was a “Calvinistically legitimized order” (2003: 204; see also Adam 1985, Giliomee 2003, James and Schrauwers 2003; Seegers 1993).

It should come as no surprise, then, that Pretoria is a city filled with churches. Alongside the old bastions of Afrikaner religious life (the Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk, the Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk and the Gereformeerde or so-called Dopper-Kerk) a plethora of newer denominations, Protestant and other, have also increasingly come to dot the cityscape (see Krüger 2003, who makes a brave attempt to wade through this mass of Christian diversity). Krüger is likely correct in arguing that Pretoria’s churches, especially those of the Calvinist blend, have witnessed quite dramatic membership declines in recent decades. Nevertheless, drive through one or another of the city’s still predominantly white suburbs on a Sunday morning and it will be hard to avoid a church parking lot filled with cars or a congregant on his way to church, a Bible tucked firmly beneath the arm. Even if, as Krüger also notes, people are increasingly opting for evangelical or Pentecostal alternatives, the fact remains that many white Pretorians continue to be affiliated with one denomination or another.

\[^{10}\] Interestingly, only once during my fieldwork or in interviews with Afrikaners did someone refer to the South African War and the large numbers of civilian deaths it entailed. This might be attributable to the tense ‘interracial’ atmosphere within which much of my research unfolded, within which neither white nor black outreach workers tended to converse or engage in debates about local history or past and present-day political processes.

\[^{11}\] On my choice to collectively refer to these denominations as the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC), see Introduction, Note 1.
In Pretoria’s inner city, the scene changes. Concurrent with the demographic transition, the white churches have experienced a severe process of emptying, to the extent that by the time of my arrival congregations that previously boasted hundreds or thousands of adherents formed now but faltering Christian communities. A poignant example is that of the DRC, where I sometimes attended worship services. In ‘the old days,’ people would explain, the four major DRC’s in die binnestad (Afrikaans, inner city or lit. ‘inside the city’) were enormous, some counting up to five thousand members and supporting ten or more pastors. But then people began to leave. And they continued leaving until, in 2000, the four congregations had no option but to amalgamate into one and coordinate pastoral duties. In the mid-2000s the vast majority of this denomination’s inner city members were elderly, relatively impoverished Afrikaner ooms and tannies (Afrikaans, uncles and aunties, denoting respect). Worship services continued to be held on most Sundays in each of the four churches, frequently led by clergy whose ‘other job’ or fulltime position was with the network of faith-based outreach (at JPP or elsewhere). ‘I guess we’ll just keep going with it until they’re all dead…’ one of these pastors once commented to me after a service, followed by a tired laugh—a statement that had me quite shocked. And another: ‘These people are old and poor, what can we do? They also need Jesus but they need Jesus in Afrikaans!’

Such comments sharply reveal the rapid pace at which Reformed Christianity is becoming an element of the past in the city centre, an irrelevancy—a process of which Calvinist (and other Protestant) pastors and leaders active in outreach are well aware. At times these

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12 Partially a literal emptying, the process I am writing of here can (and should, appropriately) also be conceptualized in terms of an ‘emptying out of meaning,’ of ‘becoming meaning-less.’ While I do not address this matter extensively, by the end of the chapter it should be apparent that the Feast of the Clowns (and JPP and the outreach network more widely) as a chiefly Afrikaner-orchestrated affair can be thought of as one responsive form to the bareness and senses of loss that have come to imbue the Afrikaner Calvinist ‘world’ in the inner city (cf. Jack Kugelmass’s The Miracle of Intervale Avenue [1996] regarding the ‘last’ synagogue in a South Bronx neighbourhood experiencing rapid demographic and other transitions).
employees summed up the issue in three biting yet illuminating words: ‘Adapt or die.’ And this is, of course, where the clowns come in.

To reiterate, for the festival’s message makers the clown figure denotes the possibility of relieving social hierarchies and forging egalitarianism—in Turner’s words, of attaining an “ideal structureless” urban domain (1969: 134)—via reference to the Middle Ages’ Feast of Fools and the ‘rebellious’ activities of the Biblical Christ. During the modern-day event this figure is multiply enacted, most significantly during the clown procession and through its inclusion in the worship service. For Afrikaner and other white outreach leaders, one prime message of the festival, one that is ideally aimed at ‘everybody’ but that speaks chiefly to the inner city’s white minority, is that the hegemonic influences of Reformed Christianity need to be broken down, altered; that the religious institutions and practices that so pervasively structured Pretorian life during apartheid and that continue to survive beyond it must be undone. Beyond this message (but entwined with it) lies another, one through which the concerns of the black majority come to be incorporated in the event more directly: that the inner city’s current composition and all that it entails—rampant poverty, sickness and other forms of social inequality—is in large part due to the structural violence imposed by apartheid, and is equally in need of transformation. To borrow from John Austin’s theorization of performative utterances (1962 [1955]), in this sense the clown performances—involving both discourse and praxis—are illocutionary in that they (intend to) carry out certain acts: the acts of transforming the religious-cultural structures and demeanours associated with white dominance, as well as the myriad formations of inequality and social suffering the apartheid order left in its wake and continues to engender.

To begin with the mime act, the mere appearance of the mimers during the church service already formed an intervention in, and performative rewriting of, ‘Reformed practice’ in
the inner city. When I interviewed Martie, an Afrikaner outreach leader at JPP and pastor of an inner city DRC, she expressed the issue as follows:

When we defined the need of [our organization], it was because the [inner city] congregation [we were part of] was in the DRC and the structures of the DRC are very slow. You know it’s like, you can’t make quick decisions, you can’t move quickly, you always have to go to the Church Council and it takes like two or three months to get a decision on anything, and they don’t decide and they just put it on hold… And then it takes another five or six months… We were just frustrated with the structures of the church.

The clowns who staged the mime act embody and enact the frustration with religious structure and authority Martie here expresses. Although the moment of criticism-in-action—circumscribed by Sam’s urging the gathered to become ‘clowns for Christ’—does not endure (the mimers’ performance lasted some twenty minutes), its significance stretches beyond the performance itself, for it imbues a space traditionally reserved for white, male clergy with the notion that others could, and should be allowed to, bring this sacred space to life as well. Not unlike the Feast of Fools (but not quite like it either), the mimers’ invasion of the sanctuary during the Feast of the Clowns defies what in many of Pretoria’s Reformed churches remains a quite firmly established, authoritative religious hierarchy. It is, then, in large part through the staging of the mime act that the clown festival constitutes a critical performance of the city’s apartheid past and the religious hegemonies that imbued the notion of apartheid with much of its power.

In discussing what he (somewhat ambiguously) calls ‘Reformed aesthetics,’ Krüger writes: “Reformed faith has always been interested in ethics rather than aesthetics, in work rather than play, in organization rather than celebration, in reason rather than myth and ritual, in obedience rather than mystical experience” (2003: 485). Clowns, in other words, do not ‘properly’ belong in the Calvinist repertoire; their presence there would constitute a contradiction, an illogicality. Krüger’s words here strike me as overly assertive, as the kind of
sweeping statement that dangerously fails to take note of the intricate ways ethics may be realized through aesthetic forms, whether these be ascetic (as in traditional Calvinist and wider Protestant liturgical practice) or playful (through engagement with the figure of the clown). In this vein, Sunday’s church service—which also included psalm and hymn singing, preaching and tithing—formed a telling instance of how the ascetic and the playful may be combined in novel, innovative ways.

But the performance in the church conveyed other messages as well; ones that, for the most, but implicitly related to the critical act of having clowns in the sanctuary itself. At the heart of the mime act were several themes: the deeply vexing problem of race and race relations, for one, and the equally distressing (and intertwined) dilemma of poverty and class-based differentiation. Deploying multiple signifiers—bodies, balloons, lollipops—the mimers enacted both the city centre’s past (by highlighting racial conflict and inequality) and present (by drawing attention to the suffering of the poor). But by evoking these concerns they were not only commenting on former and current sociality in the inner city: they were also demonstrating how such issues ought to be addressed; how local actors might tackle them—a moral demand or urging observers begin to carry out in the act of interpreting the performance. This, the second intervention the outreach network stages through the Feast of the Clowns (and clearly both the mime act and the parade speak to this), is made apparent through the mime act’s central figure—the clown who did not emerge immediately, but whose actions spoke louder than any of the others once she did appear. Initially hidden behind the vestry doors, she waited until the stage had been ‘properly messed up’ by the other mimers before she made her entrance. Her subsequent actions—refusing to fight, teaching the other clowns about giving and sharing—
clearly symbolize those of the Christ figure—that other key image the modern-day clown festival’s organizers draw their inspiration from.\textsuperscript{13}

Following the mimers’ joyous departure from the stage, outreach leader Sam once again took to the microphone and thanked the clowns for their performance. He then asked the gathered to turn to the next song, ‘Jesus Christ is Waiting.’ ‘Every year during the Feast of the Clowns we always realize how little our psalms and hymns speak to the inner city. This is a song that does speak to our situation, so let’s sing it with some passion!’ The song consisted of five verses, each conjuring up the figure of Jesus engaged in an activity ‘in the streets.’ Consider the second stanza:

\begin{quote}
Jesus Christ is raging/Raging in the streets  
Where injustice spirals/And real hope retreats  
Listen, Lord Jesus/I am angry too  
In the kingdom’s causes/Let me rage with you
\end{quote}

Jesus Christ waiting, raging, healing, dancing, calling—whatever the activity, the song’s significance rests in its reiteration of the space wherein the actions occur: the street. As the mime act also indicates, there is work to be done on the streets of Pretoria’s inner city.

This aspect of the mimers’ message, borne out by those present in the church through the act of interpreting the performance and communal worship, is of course not novel; it rather repeats and reinscribes that of the previous day, when several hundred clowns accompanied by a host of supporters marched rowdily through the city’s streets. The March of the Clowns clearly highlights the contemporary features of the inner city more so than the old; it speaks to the city centre’s present conditions rather than to those of the past. During the parade, the business of transforming church structures—predominantly a pursuit a handful of white, Afrikaner clergy

\textsuperscript{13} It could be relevant that in the sanctuary the noisy clowns of the previous day fell silent, becoming mimers. Whilst this aspect of the performance may have been motivated by its occurrence inside a church (i.e. should this space be considered by outreach leaders a sacred realm, one where some semblance of order and decency ought to be maintained), it is equally plausible that a silent, bodily performance might have been deemed able to speak louder than words, or to show the limits of words.
and congregants engage in—falls into the background. The thorny issue of race emerges as a central theme, for clowns, after all, are marvellously able to subvert whiteness and blackness by painting their faces and wearing brightly coloured wigs. But furthermore, the transitions of the 1990s also ushered a range of other (interrelated, but newly specific) concerns into the city centre, chief amongst them poverty and HIV/AIDS, as the parade’s banners and posters loudly proclaimed. By dressing up as clowns and taking to the streets outreach workers and other participants seek (or are asked or demanded; see below) to transgress the flow of everyday life in the inner city, where the powerful—government figures and institutions, members of the ‘new black elite’—daily enact their privileged status alongside, and often in the face of, the urban poor. Through the procession, the Feast of the Clowns thus also critically performs the structural violence and suffering that have come to pervade the inner city in the years following apartheid’s demise.

Conclusion

During Pretoria’s contemporary clown festival, this chapter has posited, Pretoria’s inner city is being critically performed in two broadly delineable ways: on the one hand it condemns the apartheid past, including the religious structures that formed one of its paramount pillars; on the other it denounces current conditions of poverty, sickness, and racial and gendered oppression. This performance is principally motivated by the mostly Afrikaner leaders of JPP and FIA. Indeed, in view of the preceding analysis it is crucial to remember that however expansive and complex these NGOs and the outreach network had grown by the mid-2000s, their roots are to be found in local Calvinist churches that precede the inner city’s current composition, but that have been challenged to radically modify their positions and practices since the 1990s. Over the course of this process the Feast of the Clowns was founded by way of imagining and evoking,
on the one hand, the rites of reversal that once characterized the Feast of Fools of European-Catholic popular culture, and on the other the notion of Jesus-as-rebel, as ultimate clown, the one who healed the sick and cared for the poor.

Mitchell writes that the “identifying aspect of ritual clowning, sacral or secular—other than its capacity for being funny—is its symbolic aspect; its efficacy is [meant to be] more than entertainment.” Ritual clowning’s potential potency “is in its metamessages, often submerged in ambiguity but nonetheless communicated in practice” (1992: 29-30). The clowns’ illocutionary performances and messages are intended to be consequential; to effect transformation. Through the multiply reiterated commentaries on religious, racial, class-based, gendered and medical (‘AIDS bodies’ versus ‘healthy bodies’) hierarchies, the figure of the clown does not merely symbolize the possibility of moral transformation but urges participants and observers to participate therein; to join a wider performance that will ideally outlive the festival itself; that will, it is hoped, endure beyond the moment the clowns take off their suits and ‘become themselves’ again.

To what extent is this aim successful, or accomplished? First, it is plausible that the clowns’ relative or even significant popularity is due to the manner in which the clown figure manages to merge two more or less ‘separate’ agendas: on the one hand the ‘white aim’ of altering church hierarchy and transforming (racist) church ethos; on the other the ‘black concerns’ of overcoming racism, poverty, gender violence and HIV/AIDS. As noted, one major virtue of the practice of clowning lies in its ability to subvert whiteness and blackness; hence the clowning during the Feast of the Clowns can be conceived of as both a disguising and possible inversion of the ‘race’ of the bodies beneath the paint, and as implicitly suggesting that ‘race’ itself is just another surface or disguise. In this reading, the clown performances not only critique racism but attempt to undermine the very idea of ‘race’ itself. In addition, because the
idea of ‘race’ continues to be powerfully salient in present-day South Africa and indeed continues to be evoked as the primary determining factor along which a host of other societal issues are measured, the subversion of ‘race’ during the contemporary clown festival opens the door by way of which such matters come to be incorporated in the Feast of the Clowns’ inventory of concerns.

The perlocutionary effects of the festival’s messages, to once more draw on Austin (1962 [1955]), are indicated, for one, by the enthused participation of many in Saturday’s clown parade and the ‘interracial’ mime performance during Sunday’s church service. And yet—my second point—these effects cannot be taken for granted, for beyond Nyeleti and Maya’s critical commentaries within the privacy of our apartment, other (mostly black, but also a few white) persons I was just beginning to get to know at that time equally expressed their frustration at ‘having to’ partake in the festival’s activities. Whilst the reasons cited varied from ‘I don’t want to be in the inner city on the weekend, it’s so tiring’ (an Afrikaner outreach worker who lived in the suburbs) to ‘I need to be with my kids’ (a Tswana woman from Mabopane township; a concern echoed by Nyeleti) to ‘I don’t like working on weekends, we don’t even get paid for it!’ (a Swazi woman living in Atteridgeville township), the one point each interlocutor implicitly made was that, whatever the clown figure might symbolize, whatever its messages might amount to, the festival did not take priority over their everyday concerns.

Thus, if the Feast of the Clowns constitutes ‘one’ critical performance of the post-apartheid inner city—one that speaks distinctively to, yet manages to merge together various societal concerns—the annoyances of those whose participation in clowning is required but who do not wish to engage in it may be said to form another; one that amounts to a critical assessment of the clown feast itself. The performance the latter evoke is one that concurrently speaks to the ‘impossibility’ of outreach leaders’ visions and the inner city’s ‘emptiness’ in view

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of the reality that many of those who presently traverse this urban space do not think of it or know it to be ‘home.’ Ultimately, it is this subtly or restrainedly expressed—since jobs depended on it—performance that has shaped the current analysis, wherein I have avoided adopting straightforwardly white outreach leaders’ notion that the Feast of the Clowns is appreciably reversionary or transformative. Despite the clowns’ spectacular ability to invert ‘race,’ in the end the success of this performance depends on the acceptance and carrying out thereof by both white and black participants—which is precisely where the clown festival’s intentions were to a certain extent left wanting. Instead, I have suggested that Turner’s conception of ideological communitas is better suited to elucidate the Feast of the Clowns’ aims and accomplishments. In this vein, if the chiefly Afrikaner-originated and managed clown feast fails to achieve practical or ‘spontaneous’ communitas (1969: 132, 138-140), we ought instead to recognize it as a fair attempt—albeit one that, for the most, remains situated in the realm of the ideological.
CHAPTER TWO

HIV/AIDS Outreach as Moral Drama

Dear Virus

I love you my virus, because
You are in me, I concentrate
On the way of
Dreams and life

You migrate
In my body, but the power
Of success is the key
To the way forward, to the
Vision. You will never
Control my body, my life
My mind, my future

Hey dear virus
I will never allow you
To control my entire
Life

Introduction

I well remember the mid-September day I witnessed Ontibile, a young Tswana woman from a rural village some distance away from Francistown (Botswana), recite the above poem\(^1\) in the presence of a group of some fifteen AIDS sufferers, nurses and social workers. The occasion was a Support Group meeting of Ramatla Care Centre, an AIDS hospice located in the heart of Pretoria Central, and I had come out to the event specifically to see how Ontibile was faring at this facility, to which she had been transferred five weeks earlier. The poem, I admit, had me astounded: it was as if I was seeing and listening to an entirely different woman from the one I had first met at Thapelong AIDS Hospice in early July. In the presence of Toko (the social worker I had been accompanying to the latter hospice) and myself, that woman had wept

\(^1\) All of the poems I received from Ontibile and which are related in this chapter she wrote in English, although she also wrote in Tswana, her mother tongue.
inconsolably as she explained the essentials of her story, an enactment contrasting sharply with
the upbeat agentive image she was presenting now.

Some weeks earlier Toko and I had spent much of the Saturday of the Feast of the
Clowns in Ontibile’s company, during which we had first begun to notice a considerable
improvement in her condition. In the midst of the procession, Ontibile had chanced upon us just
as the clowns and their supporters were rowdily circling Church Square. A lively string of
painted dots in the shape of an S adorned her small face, and I noted she was wearing one of the
‘new’ outfits she had recently received from Toko, a gift from JPP’s stock of second-hand
clothing. Although her situation continued to be dire—she had no income, no valid papers, no
family nearby, no ARVs—these difficult circumstances did not deter her from excitedly
partaking in the outreach network’s clown feast. Despite her body’s fragile state she embraced
the chance to dance and clown around, both in the streets and on stage when the opportunity
arose.

Ontibile’s recovery appeared to be due in large part to her recent move from Thapelong
to Ramatla. As she asserted on the Saturday of the festivities, she was ‘no more crying’ the way
she used to cry at Thapelong. Hence when I next observed her performing ‘Dear Virus’ at
Ramatla, it was not only the positive impression she made but also the medium, the style she
engaged in to substantiate this impression, that took me by surprise. Ontibile, I was intrigued to
learn, had begun to write and perform poetry.

In the previous chapter I examined JPP and FIA’s annual Feast of the Clowns,
specifically the meanings of the clown figure during the parade and the mime act, to introduce
some of the key ways these outreach bodies perform and seek to reverse the ‘fate’ of the post-
apartheid city. Instead of being effectively redressive, the festival’s messages, I suggested,
illuminate Victor Turner’s conceptualization of ‘ideological communitas’ (1969), whereby the
extent to which the clown feast forms a chiefly Afrikaner-initiated and orchestrated affair (and indeed concern) also becomes apparent. This argument was further supported by observations regarding the words and enactments of my flatmates and others over the course of the proceedings, whose critical commentaries indicate the ‘failure’ of this ideological communitas to truly transform into or engender ‘real’ communitas. Hereby I set the stage for the remainder of the study, notably the argument that in the contemporary drama of outreach moral practice or phronesis remains but hesitantly constituted. If the clown festival speaks to the effort to cultivate a novel moral practice in the post-apartheid inner city, the achievement of this aim remains (momentarily) situated in the realm of the ideological, the unrealized.

Moving on, in this chapter I step away from a stage filled with clowns in order to enter another: that of the everyday world of outreach, the domain people return to after the festivities are wrapped up. On this stage the moral drama JPP is engaged in becomes more fully apparent than it does during the Feast of the Clowns, when outreach leaders are expressly concerned with celebrating and attempting to ritualize redressive action. Again in developing the proceeding analysis I have found helpful Turner’s work, particularly his employment of the concept of ‘social drama’ to examine interpersonal, communal or societal crises and the means by which they may or fail to be resolved. In brief, Turner argued that a social drama consists of four phases. First, it “manifests itself as the breach of a norm, the infraction of a rule of morality, law, custom, or etiquette, in some public arena.” This is followed by a “mounting crisis,” a “momentous juncture or turning point in the relations between components of a social field—at which seeming peace becomes overt conflict and covert antagonisms become visible.” To “limit the contagious spread of breach, certain adjustive and redressive mechanisms, informal and formal, are brought into operation by leading members of the disturbed group.” The final phase “consists either in the reintegration of the disturbed social group… or the social recognition of
irreparable breach between the contesting parties, sometimes leading to their spatial separation” (1980: 150, 151).

To reiterate, I do not conceive JPP to be a realized ‘moral community’ but rather one that is in-the-making; one that must daily contend with the myriad ironies this project conjures up amidst the sincerity of its intentions. As such, the JPP (and wider outreach) enterprise amounts to a distinctive post-apartheid social or moral drama, with the roots of the breach and crisis phases stemming back to apartheid and beyond, to the colonial capitalist (and missionary) endeavours that were to prove so injurious to and at once reconstitutive of the southern African social arena. That the ‘novel’ social allegiances these historical events entailed are, at present, exceedingly challenging to transform in their turn is attested to by the Feast of the Clowns, that ideologically-imbued redressive performance that in its failure to actualize cannot but imply a “reversion to crisis” (1980: 152). In the current chapter I pick up on this thread by moving from the idealized moment of the clown feast to the daily enacted moral drama of outreach through an examination of JPP and FIA’s HIV/AIDS outreach project. What I principally seek to illuminate is the manner in which the performance of outreach incessantly moves back and forth between breach/crisis and redressive action/irreparable schism.

In sum, in the next pages I hone in on one distinctive outreach venture in the post-apartheid city: that through which the ‘problem of HIV/AIDS’ is addressed. I argue that this effort can be helpfully conceived through Turner’s delineation of the four phases of the moral drama. The virtue of this approach lies in its incorporation of the intentions and practices of

2 What Turner conceptualized as ‘social drama’ I here reframe as ‘moral drama’ in light of the broader aims and arguments of the dissertation. Arguably, this choice is justified by the point made in the Introduction that for most of the previous century ‘the moral’ failed to be explicitly developed as a domain of study due to the influence of Emile Durkheim, for whom the social was the moral (see Introduction, ‘Moral Practice’). That Turner recognized social dramas to be morally imbued is also attested to by his characterization of the breach phase as the “infraction of a rule of morality” (1980: 150).

3 In South Africa the first AIDS cases were recorded in the 1980s, at which time (but especially in the 1990s, after apartheid’s end) the society-wide moral drama of HIV/AIDS thus first became apparent. In the current chapter I do not consider in-depth the various phases this national drama has passed through and returned to in the last twenty-
differently situated persons and collectivities, ranging—in the case presented here—from outreach leaders and employees to what are often the most marginalized social actors in the outreach drama: its clients. The chapter begins with a synopsis of how HIV/AIDS came to form a crisis for JPP and FIA and how these NGOs implemented certain adjustive/redressive measures to attend to it. Shifting focus, I then turn to the outreach navigations of two persons with AIDS I name Abram and Ontibile. Tracing their (and their cases’) movements through JPP and other nodes in the network, I show how whilst personal crises often ensure AIDS sufferers’ entrance into (or initial entanglement in) the project, once they are taken up in it redressive intentions often end up ‘failing’ due to numerous micro-dramas that unfold on the ground level. If on the one hand this failure can be triggered by a client’s lone death and burial—as with Abram—on the other it may be engendered by conflict between outreach workers and clients, as the account of Ontibile will clarify. Lastly, in view of Ontibile’s optimistic ‘Dear Virus’ and her eager clowning with which I began, a final running thread through the chapter pertains to how some of the incongruities and ironies imbuing present-day South Africa are constituted and ‘become real’ in and through the everyday labour of outreach.

**A Crisis Perceived and the ‘Birth of Something’**

In Pretoria’s city centre, the outreach network’s HIV/AIDS project originally involved JPP, FIA and three local churches (Dutch Reformed, Methodist and Anglican), which together opened a clinic (Lesedi AIDS Clinic) and two hospices (Thapelong and Ramatla). Up until the early 2000s, cites one letter (a request for funding), “HIV/AIDS issues [had] been addressed in a very ad hoc manner in the inner city if at all”—a state of affairs the five institutions sought to address, beginning in 2003, by launching a collective response to the illness. Lesedi’s 2003 five-odd years, as this has been amply done (though not often through the lens of dramaturgical analysis) (see e.g. Fassin 2007; Posel 2005). Instead my focus is on JPP’s HIV/AIDS outreach as a moral drama, including the myriad micro-dramas that, in the constancy of their unfolding, summarily make it what it is.
Annual Report, written by its first coordinator, a black nurse named Ruby, is illuminating for its vivid description of the project’s emergence:

On 01/04/2003 I was employed as coordinator of the Lesedi AIDS Clinic. I had no idea what this was all about; all I was sure of was that I have information about HIV/AIDS, organizational skills, and confidence I acquired from my previous employments as a nursing sister and as a trainer at different medical aid companies. The word coordinator was vague but I just accepted the post regardless. Firstly I was welcomed by three men! This was disastrous! Danie, Amos and Johan, no, I expected to find all the ladies who interviewed me! But I knew Martie was on maternity leave and was coming back after three months. I was taken to an office with nothing to work with, no book, and no table no chair to sit on. I had no idea where to start. One of them said to me, “Do you know what you are letting yourself into?” And I really got scared because I realized that this was the birth of something that did not exist but that I must make it exist.

If tacitly, Ruby’s recollections here indicate the extent to which the breach phase of the nationwide HIV/AIDS drama had passed already long before the 2003 initiation of the inner city outreach project: “I have information about HIV/AIDS,” she writes. Indeed by 2003 the illness had turned into a kind of old news; its shattering reality had been subject to radical politicization in recent years, particularly through what had become popularly known—and fought over—as then-President Thabo Mbeki and Health Minister Manto Tshabalala-Msimang’s ‘denial’ of its viral aetiology. If, for some, estimated percentages of infected persons did not speak for themselves, certainly political and public spectacle concerning the illness illuminated how in South Africa HIV/AIDS’s breach had decisively morphed into a—or its—crisis phase.

As the conflict between government and such initiatives as the Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and other public forums and figures—a conflict over the proper course of redressive action—raged on (see Achmat 2004; Leclerc-Madlala 2005; Robins 2008), local and international NGOs and other concerned groups found themselves faced with the task of making

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4 See Note 3 for relevant sources. The ANC’s termination of Mbeki’s presidency in September 2008 may have signalled the end of the deeply embattled approach to HIV/AIDS taken by the ex-President and his Health Minister. If the Mbeki government staunchly refused to distribute ARVs until November 2003 (and then only to AIDS sufferers whose CD4 Counts fell below 200), newly elected President Jacob Zuma appeared to live up to his promise to transform government’s tactic when, in December 2009, he announced that ARVs would be made available to all HIV-positive South Africans (and other legal residents) with a count of 350 or less. (Normal adult CD4 Counts range from 500 to 1200; with seropositivity the count gradually decreases, increasing the risk of opportunistic infections and thus, of death.)
available and implementing the most pertinent aid measures. For the five partnering bodies in Pretoria’s inner city, a main challenge consisted in finding appropriate sites for the planned HIV/AIDS project, three of which were eventually agreed upon and approved. The first, Lesedi AIDS Clinic, came to be located on JPP’s premises, which some years earlier had been taken over from a local DRC. Another former DRC-owned site, a sizable parsonage situated on the outskirts of Pretoria’s Central Business District, was transformed into Thapelong Hospice, whilst one of the inner city’s Methodist churches made space available in an adjoining building for Ramatla Care Centre.

The creation and implementation of novel institutions and tools via which the enactment of adjustive measures was to be realized found further fruition through the activities of newly hired personnel like Ruby, who were faced with the task of, as she put it, ‘making something exist’ that ‘did not exist.’ This interesting turn of phrase and others (e.g. the ironic ‘Do you know what you are letting yourself into?’ and ‘I had no idea where to start’) denote how outreach leaders and others perceived the reality of the crisis and the need for intervention amidst self-awareness or realization of the ‘unknowability’ and maybe even ‘impossibility’ of the project they were about to embark on.

How does the unknown become (better) known to social actors? How do people go about attempting to realize the purportedly unfeasible? Ruby’s report is illuminative of this process in its description of the plethora of activities and knowledge practices she and others engaged in that first year: “I had to visit all the partners to hear what [were] their expectations of me,” “I had to make sure that staff members of all the partners got training on HIV/AIDS,” “I managed to send our proposal to possible donors,” “Our clinic is fully operational and we work hand in hand with local clinics and hospitals,” “We managed to get InstaMeal from the Department of Social Services,” “We registered Lesedi Clinic with Du Toit Pathologists for all
our laboratory tests for patients.” Each of these pursuits constitutes an effort to foster relations and to bring these to bear fruitfully on the project; through them the HIV/AIDS project is made real and justified, and takes on its own existence. As Ruby explicitly states further on, the wider social spectrum of institutions, programs and activities (some, but not all of which were or are entirely devoted to the illness) is essential to the ‘success’ of the project:

I was faced with the task of establishing networks and relations as one cannot work in a vacuum. Lesedi Clinic is affiliated with a number of churches and organizations that benefit it, e.g. AIDS Consortium where we get all the current information about HIV/AIDS, Red Ribbon Resource Centre where we get all our pamphlets, posters and booklets. We established a relationship with the Uniting Reformed Church (URC), the Catholic Church, the Salvation Army, Tshwane Metro Homeless Council and we are still continuing to form relations.5

The crisis perceived and alleviating measures ready to be enacted, a subsequent question concerns the matter of how this socio-medical moral drama unfolds on the ground level—the subject to which I turn next.

Abram: Persons, Bodies, and the ‘Death’ of the Moral Drama

[T]o have the HIV virus is to have crossed the line between life and death. On one side, there is life, and the thin shadow of death hovers over it; and on the other, there is death with a small patch of life attached to it. This latter is the life of AIDS; this was how I saw my brother as he lay in his bed dying (Kincaid 1997: 96).

Almost as if regardless of the numerous activities JPP, FIA and other institutions engaged in to ensure the maintenance and success of the HIV/AIDS project, these efforts rarely, if ever, surmounted (or, it seemed, could really surmount) the urgent condition that lay at the project’s

5 These networking activities and knowledge practices can also be conceived via the lens of recent anthropological network theory (for an overview see Knox, Savage and Harvey 2006). One influential ethnography is Annelise Riles’s The Network Inside Out (2000), an account of Fijian women’s participation in the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995. In contrast to earlier approaches, Riles’s interest is not in defining the network but in tracing how its various components and their relations are enacted. In The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice (2002) Annemarie Mol takes this analytical trend in another direction through a detailed investigation of the diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis—a disease that gradually obstructs the arteries—at a Dutch university hospital; particularly, her focus is on how the disease is variously enacted depending on site and circumstance. Comparably, we might imagine HIV/AIDS to be multiply enacted by patients, nurses, doctors, social workers and lab technicians. Notwithstanding its contributions, in my view one drawback of this approach lies in its foregrounding of one or another object (atherosclerosis, HIV/AIDS) to the detriment of the analysis of the location and circumstance of the person or collectivity in the context under consideration.
heart: the apparently endless flow of persons who drew on its resources and who, more often than not, depended on it for their survival. Since the social housing complex I lived in was located adjacent to and looked out over Lesedi Clinic, I could with relative ease witness its comings and goings from the vantage point of our second-floor windows. Visibly ill people visited the clinic daily, and the arrival and departure of an ambulance hardly raised eyebrows among outreach workers and others who regularly traversed JPP’s parking lot.

In essence, the main function of the project was to assist and ‘network’ a particular category of persons and bodies: those infected with the HI virus or (more commonly) those whose bodies were being ravaged by full-blown AIDS, as well as the bodies of those who had passed away. Yet where precisely does the distinction between these various entities lie? Although nurses, doctors and social workers never quite articulated the matter thus, this question seemed to hover beneath many of the discussions I observed and participated in regarding people who had AIDS. It was understood that persons and bodies ought to be seen to differently, but how best to assist the extremely ill—the dying and the ‘almost-dead’? What of their desires, should they still be able to express them? What of their rights, even if they were considered to have lost the capacity to communicate? And beyond the ‘point’ of death, what

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6 Needless to say, working with dying persons is not an easy task. Over a 12-month period (July 2006-June 2007) 34 people passed away at Thapelong alone; this number does not include those who spent time in the hospice but who died in one of Pretoria’s state hospitals or elsewhere. Although I recorded people’s situations and experiences to the extent that this was possible—the when, how and why of their traversing the world of HIV/AIDS outreach—often the sheer confusion and relentlessness that permeated this realm left me not just perplexed but also deeply frustrated, as it did many outreach employees. In a sense, I felt, this was not a space for research, for there was always urgent physical work to be done: washing, dressing, feeding and ‘medicating’ people, taking them to the hospital, tracing their families, checking up on those discharged, finding those who had absconded, getting in touch with the undertaker, waiting in a long queue at a government department. Such tasks were moreover frequently challenged due to conflicts between various nodes in the project, outreach workers and patients, and different patients themselves.

Relatedly, these realities also challenge (an explicit use of) anthropological conceptualizations of performance, particularly those that emphasize ‘bodily styles’ and ‘bodily techniques’ as deep-seated and largely unconscious dispositions of the body (e.g. Busby 2000). The stress on ‘unconscious’ is important, and runs up against the unwelcome—and conscious-generating—interruption a positive HIV-test typically signifies (see the argument below regarding moral transformation). Yet as I hope to show, other approaches to performance—Turner’s social drama, but in an alternative sense Erving Goffman’s elaborations on the performance of the self as well—may be usefully employed in the analysis of the illness.
constituted an appropriate, respectful burial? When, in other words, did a sick person become a body, and how should persons and bodies be treated differently?\(^7\)

These questions are pertinent to the moral drama of HIV/AIDS outreach because the project is geared toward redress; toward the alleviation of the crisis of suffering the illness has produced. In and through the effort of preventing casualties, death is condemned (as is HIV/AIDS, its carrier) and life affirmed. In contemporary Pretoria’s transformed inner city, an inner city filled with ‘new’ inhabitants whose kin and home communities are often located at greater or lesser distances from the city, the labour of keeping death at bay takes on special salience. In this urban setting outreach workers and clients tend to be ‘strangers’ to one another, where for the latter to die in the presence of the former is not only considered inappropriate but indeed ‘bad,’ and possibly perilous.\(^8\) Hence in the inner city the moral drama of HIV/AIDS outreach unfolds in a particular way, whereby persons with AIDS are first imagined, then gradually ever more explicitly prescribed to pass through the different dramatic phases in order to finally be ‘reintegrated’ in the kin groups and communities of their origin. Otherwise phrased, if in cases of severe suffering and looming death outreach workers ‘become agents’ for or on

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\(^7\) In his discussion of discrepant roles Goffman mentions that of the ‘non-person’: “…those who play this role are present during the interaction but in some respects do not take the role either of performer or of audience.” In addition to describing the servant as “the classic type of non-person,” he goes on to argue that “there are other standard categories of persons who are sometimes treated in their presence as if they were not there; the very young, the very old, and the sick are common examples” (1959: 151, 152). To draw on Goffman here, certainly on an ideological level and also practically did the HIV/AIDS project seek to counter the conventional ways positive persons may be treated as non-persons in the South African context.

\(^8\) On ‘bad death,’ see Bloch and Parry 1982; van der Geest 2004c. I discuss this concept in greater depth in Chapter 6. Suffice it to say here that when a person passes away in the inner city without relatives at his or her side and whose kin members fail to be traced, it is considered bad and possibly dangerous for the deceased, his or her relatives, and outreach workers as well. Following biological death, the proper carrying out of culturally or religiously pertinent mortuary rites is to ensure a deceased person’s journeying into the afterlife and joining of his or her ancestors—a process for which kin members are responsible. Should this fail to unfold appropriately or not happen at all—implying a neglect of ritual obligations—it may engender the ire and ill will of the deceased and/or his or her forebears in relation to the living (see e.g. Bloch 1971; Brain 1973; Fortes 1976; Goody 1962; Kopytoff 1971; Rasmussen 2000; Straight 2006). Clearly also, Christianity’s indigenization in South Africa and elsewhere has not resulted in the fading of locally salient knowledge of ancestors (Jindra 2005; Weir 2005). Recently, some scholars have begun to investigate HIV/AIDS’s effects on burial practices, relations with the ancestors, and witchcraft allegations (Ashforth 2005; Dilger 2008; Thomas 2007, 2008).
behalf of their clients, this measure is meant to be temporary, since at a person’s incapacitation and death relatives are expected to take on such agentive roles.

Supportive of these points, for instance, is the case of the wheelchair-bound Abram, who according to the nurses had been brought to Lesedi Clinic by ‘this guy’ who had refused to give his name—apparently a neighbour who did not wish to bear the burden of responsibility. That same day he was transferred to Thapelong, where Toko and I encountered him a few days later. Unlike the other patients quietly watching Dr. Phil on the old television in the hospice’s living room, the nurses had put Abram in his bedroom ‘because when he is with the others he screams and cries the whole time.’

We found him sitting crookedly in his wheelchair, quietly staring out of the window. As the nurses had alluded to, our appearance indeed produced tears, although in truth Abram’s crying was more akin to a steady, deeply distraught wailing. At moments such as these Toko’s responsibility was not merely to comfort but also to collect as many details as she possibly could about a patient—a task she commonly launched into following just a few short moments of ‘necessary comforting.’ In Abram’s case, however, she encountered a substantial stumbling block. Amidst his devastating cries, we could tell, he was formulating words and sentences, but Toko was largely unfamiliar with Xhosa, the language he was speaking.

Back to the nurses and patients gathered around Dr. Phil in the living room. ‘Does anyone know Xhosa? Can you help us understand what Abram is saying? Please?’

Ntombi, looking barely older than twenty, reluctantly put her small baby on the rug in front of the television and shuffled alongside us to Abram’s room, steadying herself on the passage walls. Abram had fallen silent, but our return immediately induced further weeping, interspersed with what sounded like a myriad of Xhosa expressions. Seating herself on the edge of one of the beds, our translator first listened to Abram, then tried to converse with him.
'He says… He says many things, what he says does not make sense.'

‘What is he saying, what are the words he is saying?’

‘He says he want to go home now. He says his legs and feet hurt. He says he want to see his dad.’

‘Can you ask him, where is his home?’

‘He only says he want to go home… He says he had the stroke.’

‘Please, can you try to ask him again? Where is his home, where is his family, what’s the telephone number?’

‘…Aowa, what he says… He says Eastern Cape and he says Cape Town, he says he want to go home. …He says again, his feet hurt… Now he is talking about the jail. He says he want shoes, he does not have the shoes. …He says he is afraid of God, God is angry because of what he did, he want to see his dad. What he says does not make sense!’

Ntombi was getting frustrated with the apparently confusing mix of memories and desires (‘non-sense’) Abram was articulating, so Toko said it was fine, she could leave. She would ask Sister Maria, who would be on duty that evening, to try to get more information from him: ‘I think maybe she’s Xhosa.’

The details Toko and others collect from those visiting the clinic or staying in a hospice—frequently a difficult and wearisome task—become part of the project’s activities and artefacts. They become, as it were, objects or props on the broader stage upon which the moral drama of HIV/AIDS outreach is played out. Initially scribbled hastily in a notebook, such details are taken to one office or another where they are formally written up in a report and filed. Then follow meetings—whether of the clinic or hospice, the HIV/AIDS project or the Therapy Centre (a division of JPP)—during which such documents reappear, and where they are briefly or extensively discussed depending on the urgency of a client’s situation. Likewise, Abram’s case
was enacted during a meeting of the Therapy Centre, the site of Toko’s employment; in this process the micro-drama of his circumstance was momentarily brought centre-stage.

Toko launched into her report regarding Thapelong by sharing that two of her clients at the hospice had passed away the previous week, after which she moved on to Abram’s situation:

Toko: Eish! Last week was very hard, two of my clients died. The one is Refilwe, she didn’t die at the hospice but at the hospital, not at Pretoria Academic, they moved her somewhere else. The other one is Femmy. Refilwe died on Tuesday and Femmy, on Wednesday. Femmy’s relatives came with the undertaker to take her home. I’m trying to locate Refilwe’s parents but I haven’t found them yet. Uh… Refilwe always said she was from Bloemfontein but I don’t know… I think maybe Kimberley or Klerksdorp. Someone said that…

Miranda: Why won’t people say where they come from, the sick people?

Toko: …I will have to get a hold of Refilwe’s parents or she will get a pauper’s funeral. The post office is helping me with this. They don’t tell the true place where they come from until they’re almost dead.

Andrea: Alright… Are there any other concerns at Thapelong we need to talk about, Toko?

Toko: [clears her throat] Abram. He is the one in the wheelchair. He is at Thapelong and he wants to go home and see his dad in the Eastern Cape. I got a hold of his aunt in Cape Town. She told me that his parents are both dead and that he has a brother who is in prison in Kimberley.9 So I talked to Sister Matla and Dr. Ntsako. Sister Matla said we need to send him home first, and there his own family can tell him that his parents are not alive anymore. Send him to Mangwaneni in the Transkei. Take him there and there they will tell him. But first he needs to get on medication. He has no papers-

Andrea: [interrupting] Where are we sending him?

Miranda: It should be up to him to decide, where he wants to go!

Andrea: Toko, tell us, what is right in your culture?

Toko: …I’ll speak to Dr. Ntsako.

Andrea: No but, what should we do, what is the right thing to do?

Toko: …It’s not right, it’s rural! There’s no one! Everyone from the Eastern Cape is coming here!

Miranda: And they will just leave him there! Does he have extended family? Where is his family if his parents are dead?

Toko: There is one in Cape Town. That’s the one I talked to, she told me about his parents and brother.

Miranda: What’s the reason why he needs to go home?

Toko: It will be more expensive if he dies here.

Andrea: He says he wants to go home, he wants to die at home.

Toko: Dr. Ntsako says, ‘That area is so rural, it’s in the mountains, it’s bad!’

Andrea: He is in need of a caring facility, a place where he can be taken good care of, but he wants to go home…

Toko: What should I do…? I don’t know! Should I tell him about his parents?

Miranda: He has the right to know. Right now what is happening is not ethical.

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9 It was indeed with the aid of Sister Maria, a Xhosa speaker, that Toko had managed to obtain this information.
Toko: But he is very sick, I think he doesn’t understand things, he’s very confused. And he is always crying. At Thapelong the other patients say he is crazy.

In this scene the question of ‘what to do with Abram’ is discussed by three women: Toko, his social worker; Miranda, an Afrikaner social worker also employed at the Therapy Centre; and Andrea, the centre’s Afrikaner manager. Toko introduces the case by reporting on the current state of affairs, including the activities she has thus far engaged in. She is about to explain a process those working with AIDS sufferers are all too familiar with—Abram needs to get on antiretrovirals (ARVs) before he can go home, but before this can happen he needs to get his papers in order so he can apply for an AIDS grant—when she is interrupted by Andrea. ‘Where are we sending him?’

The ethical doubts and ambiguities expressed here are multiple, appearing jumbled together in a puzzling, even contradictory manner. Initially and characteristically, as I had learned by then, Toko’s way of addressing the matter was to keep back her own thoughts and continue with those activities she daily tackled: apply for an ID and an AIDS grant for Abram; get him on a treatment regimen. These pursuits would take at least some weeks, and who knew what Abram’s condition would be a month from now? Andrea’s question, however, leads her to reveal strong doubts about (eventually) sending her client to the rural region of the former Transkei he appears to be from. She is in agreement with Dr. Ntsako: the rural areas are ‘bad,’ ‘there’s no one!’ Yet she is also aware that it will be costly to keep him in the city for both hospice and government, specifically should he require a pauper’s funeral. Moreover, such interments, which for Toko and many others signify the epitome of a disrespectful, improper burial, are considered the very last resort, to be proceeded with only if relatives cannot be traced

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10 Among my black interlocutors Toko was not alone in holding this at times vehemently expressed view, supporting Achille Mbembe’s thesis that “most social struggles of the postapartheid era can be read as attempts to reconquer [or conquer] the right to be urban” (2004: 391). Apartheid’s end, he suggests, “raises anew the question of how to inhabit the city,” of how to be “at home” there, a question particularly urgent for black persons since the city “has been the dominant site of their exclusion from modernity” (2004: 393).
or if they fail to show up to take a family member’s body home (cf. Bähre 2007: 40, 42; Scheper-Hughes 1992: 249-267).

But what of Abram’s rights—the right to go where he wants to go, the right to know his parents are dead—an issue most fervently expressed by Miranda, though also alluded to by Andrea through her emphasis on Abram’s articulated desire to go home?  

The embodied condition that constitutes Abram’s and other AIDS patients’ suffering emerges as one that is neither ‘fully alive’ nor ‘fully dead’; rather, it uncertainly hovers between these two culturally and religiously perceived domains. Of course Toko, Andrea and Miranda know that Abram is alive, not (yet) deceased, and that as such he possesses or should ideally possess the capacity for action with which humans are typically imbued; yet they are equally well aware that his person-status, his ability to act and make his own decisions, has been severely compromised and may soon be coming to an end. Toko’s recognition of her client’s looming death is what leads her to become an agent for him; to carry out certain redressive activities on his behalf which, she hopes, will result in the recovery of his health and agentive abilities.

In one sense the concerns expressed by Miranda and Andrea regarding the issue of Abram’s rights appear to challenge Toko’s approach. Their questions are rooted in the discourse of rights; a discourse that, in broad terms, can be read as problematizing any situation wherein one person or collectivity assumes the role of agent for another. Thus they query Toko: ‘Where are we sending him?’ ‘It should be up to him to decide, where he wants to go!’ ‘He has the right to know.’ Yet even as these outreach workers berate their colleague for what they perceive to be her presumption that Abram’s agentive capacity has so far deteriorated that she cannot but become his agent, it is important to recognize that their aims do not, in the end, differ greatly

11 Although not overtly in the discussion represented here, in general Toko also put much emphasis on patients’ rights, particularly during the Support Group meetings she led at Thapelong.
from hers. Their final objective is the same: to ensure that Abram’s rights- and responsibility-bearing person-status is sustained; that he remains his own agent. That their approach to this common end differs is attributable to the fact that Toko has met and worked with Abram, whereas Andrea and Miranda have not.

In sum, meetings and discussions such as these speak to the entwinement of the activities outreach staff engage in to alleviate HIV/AIDS-related affliction and how specific AIDS sufferers become or are ‘targets’ of such practices. In and through this interplay, the moral drama of outreach finds expression and is reconstituted over time. As subjects who, often ‘helplessly,’ find themselves embroiled in the theatre of outreach, persons with AIDS are thought of as social actors who should ideally pass through a number of stages. As the account of Abram demonstrates, in the first—that of crisis—AIDS sufferers are commonly considered to be vulnerable and by and large powerless; following the ‘establishment’ of his or her debilitation, the goal becomes to fight that encumberment; to re-ascertain his or her agentive capacity. Yet especially in the case of the poor, amongst whom full-blown AIDS often amounts to “death with a small patch of life attached to it,” the success of this redressive intention can never be guaranteed. In turn, the ambivalence ushered in by death’s constant hovering simultaneously engenders an alternative form of redressive labour: that consisting of tracing the parents and other relatives of the dying. What becomes apparent here is outreach workers’ recognition of the limits of what they can realistically carry out or accomplish: whilst envisioning themselves as temporary agents on behalf of the critically ill, ideally they ‘know’ or consider this role to belong to the latter’s kin. This aspect emerges especially crucial in cases of (near) death, since kin members and other close acquaintances are the only ones deemed able to properly bury deceased relatives and ensure that their journey into the afterlife proceeds in the appropriate manner (see Note 8). This concern also clearly emerges in the discussion about
Abram: ‘I got a hold of his aunt in Cape Town.’ ‘Does he have extended family? Where is his family if his parents are dead?’

In the case of Abram outreach workers’ attempts to locate relatives—other than the aunt in Cape Town—proved futile. His condition began to deteriorate rapidly about two weeks after the Therapy Centre meeting; the next month he passed away, still at Thapelong. Following his death his aunt told carers that she was unable to come to Pretoria to collect him for burial; hence he received a pauper’s funeral. Suggestively, the rapid unfolding of these events implied the ‘death’ of the morally imbued outreach drama JPP and its sister institutions staged in respect of Abram. In the dual ‘failure’ of nursing him back to relative health and locating family members to bury him, redressive intentions were disappointed; neither in Abram’s life nor in his death did the reintegration phase realize.

Yet this does not denote the ‘end’ of the HIV/AIDS drama, for alongside Abram and many others who die comparably abandoned or alone, there are other clients who do not pass away but who remain living; clients within whom death is successfully, if temporarily, staved off. Amongst these sojourners the possibility of productive redressive action and potential reintegration surfaces more probable; indeed not infrequently redress is or appears to be achieved through the ‘moral transformations’ accompanying AIDS sufferers’ experiences of gaining access to treatment and the support of fellow patients and others. As I hope to show next through the account of Ontibile, however, in most situations the rub lies not here but in the difficulty of achieving the moral drama’s final stage, which (for outreach workers) would witness clients return to and reintegrate in their kin and home communities. In the common ‘refusal’ of clients to act accordingly, the outreach drama tends to result in schism rather than reintegration. Concurrently, it is also at such moments that the project’s ironies come most
patently to the fore, for what nurses, social workers and others perceive as ‘refusal’ is often vastly more complex, and tends to be powerfully constituted in relation to fear.

**Ontibile: The ‘Failure’ of a Poetic Antidote?**

*Basically dying*: Thapelong

As it happened, the start of Ontibile’s traversing the outreach network coincided with my own arrival in the inner city in the winter of 2006, when I first began to accompany Toko on her weekly trips to Thapelong. At one time a DRC parsonage, the building had been purchased by the HIV/AIDS project in 2003, whereupon it had been converted into a twenty-bed facility for “homeless people who are terminally ill.” In the words of one outreach worker, Thapelong’s objective was to provide a space where ‘the poor can die with dignity,’ though in my mind the place came to resemble something more akin to Vita, that ‘zone of social abandonment’ in the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre so hauntingly brought to life by João Biehl and his interlocutor Catarina (2005). The persons who passed through Thapelong’s doors, who wandered its halls and were confined to its beds, inhabited bodies that could no longer conceal the utter misery of the AIDS epidemic. Whatever illnesses the virus manifested itself in from one body to the next, death, it seemed, was always lingering nearby, always hovering around one corner or another. To make matters worse (and in ways disturbingly reflective of patients’ conditions), the place was generally unkempt, and conflicts between and among nurses and patients were common occurrences.

Toko and I were never quite certain who or what might cross our paths at Thapelong: the relative quiet that seemed to imbue the hospice one week could quickly be shattered the next, whether by an upsetting event in one patient’s life, the death of another, or the sudden arrival of yet another. Generally speaking, the Thursday morning Support Group meetings commenced with brief visits to the rooms of the bedridden, where participants prayed and sang hymns in
their presence. Together with the staff and those still able to walk, we would then gather in a circle in the living room or backyard, where Toko would open the meeting with a short Bible passage and meditation and more hymns. Sometimes the meetings were planned, and Toko (or a visiting medical professional) would put a relevant subject on the table for discussion; at other times little had been prepared in advance and the dialogue turned to whatever concerns participants wanted to talk about. In this way many hours were spent conversing not about HIV/AIDS or its symptoms directly (although these were also discussed), but about the many bureaucratic hurdles patients commonly faced: applying for an ID or other legal status, registering for an AIDS grant, getting (and making it to) a hospital appointment.

Ontibile entered this fraught socio-medical domain in early July 2006, where Toko and I first met her on a Tuesday. I remember being struck by how quickly her face changed from one of laughter and giggling to one flooded with tears—a transformation that remains especially vivid, I fear, because it was I who naively asked her the question that produced it. Ontibile had been informing us of her situation—that she was twenty-six, had left her village in rural Botswana in 2002 to study in Gauteng, had been living and working in Atteridgeville (a township on Pretoria’s western edge), and that her CD4 Count was 130—and Toko had accordingly initiated the process of assisting her.

‘If you have a CD4 count that is higher than 200, then you are not allowed to get a disability [AIDS] grant. But if it is below 200 you are eligible, neh? It means your immune system is weak so you can’t work, so there is this financial support. If it is higher than 200 you can work. Are your papers valid?’

‘I have this… [showing us her Botswana ID] In August, for three years I don’t have the papers.’
‘Okay… The way you qualify for the grant is, you first have to get an affidavit at the police station and then apply to Home Affairs to renew your permit. I can write the letters to help you with that. I am here to help you. Okay?’

A momentary silence ensued as Toko and I hastily scribbled things down in our notebooks. Toko, who had come to assume a kind of teacher role in regards to me, had been encouraging me to ask questions, and I decided to seize the moment and pose a question that had been running through my mind. ‘Would you like to go back to Botswana?’

Ontibile’s expression instantly changed, and my anxiety increased as I noticed several large tears beginning to trickle down her thin face. I was vastly thankful for Toko’s presence, who quietly put her arm around Ontibile and let her cry for several long minutes. She eventually spoke, but my query had clearly devastated her: to my dismay she continued to weep through the remainder of the interview. Ontibile proceeded to explain that she feels she cannot go home, since she has not told her kin about her illness. ‘That side’ she is from in Botswana ‘has no electricity,’ she clarified; it is small, rural and poor, and many of the people ‘don’t know about this AIDS.’ ‘She is afraid of stigma,’ Toko later said; ‘I think she has not yet accepted it that she is positive.’

In the following weeks Toko and I saw Ontibile regularly at Thapelong’s Support Group meetings. As promised, Toko wrote letters supporting Ontibile’s application for an affidavit and renewal of her temporary visitor’s permit. In essence these steps were identical to the ones she followed in her counselling work with Abram: when it came to those of her clients who had AIDS, she considered it her primary task to ensure that they would be put on a treatment regimen. State hospitals required a three-month period during which patients were checked monthly to gauge their reaction to one combination of medications or another; hence, in Toko’s
estimation, Ontibile would need to stay in Pretoria for several more months, since she was not yet on ARVs when our paths had first crossed in July.

    Although Abram’s and Ontibile’s medical and other circumstances differed considerably (Abram was confined to a wheelchair, Ontibile was not; Abram’s next of kin had either passed away or were purportedly in jail, Ontibile’s seemed to be alive and well), the ambiguities surrounding clients’ rights in the HIV/AIDS project also surfaced dubiously in Ontibile’s case. Upon our return to JPP’s offices after meeting her, for instance, Toko (backed by Andrea) insisted that Ontibile ‘does not have to tell her parents’ about her status; ‘it should be her choice, it’s not our choice to make.’ Yet two days later, following the Support Group meeting, I observed her suggesting to Ontibile that she look for a social worker who would be able to accompany her to Botswana. Turning to me, she mused: ‘Maybe in four or five months, Ontibile can go home…’

    Amidst this rather mixed set of messages, Ontibile’s stay at Thapelong soon proved laden with conflict as well. Her problems with Sister Matla, she asserted, arose because her medical file was at Kalafong (the state hospital on Atteridgeville’s periphery where she first tested positive): she was supposed to begin treatment on the 29th of June, but now it was mid-July and ‘I still don’t have the pills!’ Thapelong’s patients tended to seek treatment at Pretoria Academic—a state hospital nearer to the hospice—and it was to this massive medical establishment that Ontibile’s file needed to be transferred. ‘But no one will take me to Kalafong!’ Ontibile’s frustration in this regard made sense, though I was less certain of Sister Matla’s allegedly negative role in the whole affair. How could Ontibile hold Thapelong’s head nurse responsible, whose duty it was, after all, to remain on the hospice’s premises and look after the patients?
Aside from the general validity of Ontibile’s argument, my suspicion was that she could at times be quite headstrong, even cheeky, and that this personal attribute clashed in no small manner with the way Sister Matla managed the hospice. This possibility resonated with some of my initial interactions with Ontibile, during which she sometimes appeared to stage an experiment in order to discover the extent to which she could get me to do things for her. ‘Mieke, I’m thirsty!’ she might exclaim, seated on one of Thapelong’s couches; or ‘Mieke, I want a coke!’ Another time she wordlessly tried to take a scarf I happened to be wearing. ‘Don’t let her do it!’ Toko warned me. ‘She thinks you’re rich because you’re white!’

‘Strong enough’: Ramatla

Certainly initially, Ontibile’s early August move to Ramatla proved to be a positive development. Among friends and acquaintances in outreach circles, this ten-bed hospice aimed at “people who are chronic with HIV and related illnesses” tended to be distinguished from Thapelong on the basis of its somewhat different objectives. Ramatla, they explained, was a temporary housing facility whose patients would eventually be ‘strong enough to return to society’ once they had received ‘appropriate guidance’; their medical conditions differed from those of Thapelong’s occupants, who were ‘basically dying.’ Although I witnessed many a transfer between the two sites, that there was some truth to this distinction seemed conspicuously reflected in the material and social conditions differentiating the two places. In contrast to Thapelong, Ramatla was clean and well-kept, and even its Support Group meetings appeared more organized and goal-oriented (and more ‘hopeful’) than did those at its sister hospice.

Importantly, it was at Ramatla that Ontibile first began to write poetry, and it was also here that she became an eager Support Group participant, primarily through the encouragement of Felicia, a white English-speaking South African social worker. At the outset Ontibile’s needs
and desires seemed to align well with Ramatla’s objectives regarding the notions of rights (the right to medication and self-expression as a positive person) and responsibilities (the responsibility to get tested and ‘embrace’ one’s positive status). At Ramatla these were considered pressing concerns, and Ontibile’s efforts to address them with the help of Felicia and others ensured her budding status as a kind of model outreach client. She began to take ARVs—a combination of four medications—on the first of September, and the poem ‘Dear Virus’ powerfully captures her sense of a transforming self; a self progressively moving from being controlled by the illness towards accepting, owning, and even (purportedly) loving it.

During Ramatla’s Support Group meetings Ontibile preferred to sit beside Felicia, sometimes resting her head on the latter’s shoulder and frequently voicing her agreement (and more) with Felicia’s assessments of other patients’ situations. One debate I observed, which turned heated, illustrates well her enactment of this new role. The case concerned Martin, a Zimbabwean refugee in his early thirties who, upon being asked how he was ‘spiritually, emotionally and physically,’ began to talk about an organization he was planning to set up to assist refugees from his home country.

Martin: I want to help the refugees, that’s what I want to do. We are treated bad here! You know I went to Marabastad yesterday, I met some people there. They’re gonna help me, they know someone at Home Affairs. I have an appointment with them next week. But long-term… I’m gonna go to England, that’s my plan.

Felicia: Why do you want to go to England?

Martin: When I was in Zimbabwe I wanted to go to South Africa but this place… it didn’t turn out the way I thought it would. So now my plan is to go to England, that will be a good place, things will work out there.

Felicia: What about your organization?

Martin: The plan is, to run it from there.

Felicia: Martin, have you gone for your blood test yet? Remember in the test we did here [at Ramatla] there was a contradiction between your CD4 Count and your viral load, and we advised you to get tested at the hospital.

Martin: Yeah I went to the hospital on Friday, two weeks back, but the nurses weren’t there so they couldn’t do the test. But I ran into Thembi, remember Thembi? [Martin turns toward Thembi, sitting on his left.] I was walking in the hospital and all of a sudden, there was Thembi! She talked so nice to me, she told me how God helped her with everything, that’s how she got through her divorce, it was her faith-
Felicia: [interrupting] Martin, shouldn’t this be confidential? Shouldn’t you let Thembi decide whether she wants this shared or not?
Ontibile: [nodding strongly] Ee!
Thembi: [laughs shyly]
Felicia: You really have to get your blood test done at Pretoria Academic very soon.
Martin: Yes, yes I will go on Friday again.
Thembi: …The nurses are never there on Friday, the ones who do the tests.
Martin: I will go on the Friday after that, maybe they’ll be there next Friday.
Thembi: But I know for sure they’re never there on Friday, you have to go on a Tuesday!
Martin: Okay I will go on Friday and if they’re not there I will go on Tuesday. But I’m very busy for the cause of the refugees.
Felicia: Martin! Your health is more important than your work, if you’re not healthy you can’t do anything for the refugees!
Ontibile: Ee! You are stubborn, you have to get tested!
Martin: I will go on Friday to make an appointment.
Felicia: Martin, you are not listening! Tell him again Thembi, that the nurses are not there on Friday!
Thembi: You must go on a Tuesday, Martin, or you can’t get the test done.
Ontibile: [laughing cynically] You’re afraid to get tested!
Martin: Okay okay, eish! I will go on Tuesday.
Felicia: Soon?
Martin: Yes, soon, next week.
Ontibile: He’s afraid to get tested!
Martin: [angrily] I’m not afraid!
Ontibile: Yes, you are! You don’t accept it [that you have the virus]!
Martin: Ontibile you know the meds you’re taking, they make you smell!
Felicia: Martin! …You both have to stop it, we’re adults here! And Martin, you will go for your test on Tuesday!

In a further promising development Ramatla’s staff also encouraged Ontibile to contact her relatives; accordingly, following the meeting during which the above discussion ensued Ontibile excitedly informed Toko and myself that she had spoken on the phone with her mother and older sister. She had not seen or heard from her family (nor they from her) for three years, ever since she had chosen not to return home after finishing her classes. She shared that her five-year-old daughter, who was living with her parents, was doing well and had grown very tall (Ontibile giggled: ‘She thinks I’m her sister, that’s what she calls me, sister!’). Perhaps most significantly, she asserted that she was making plans to return home in December: ‘After three months I can transfer my file to Francistown.’ When I carefully sought to ascertain whether Ontibile had discussed her illness with her mother, her immediate reaction was an embarrassed,
wordless grin. Some minutes later she whisperingly acknowledged that she had told her sister, ‘but my parents, they think it’s just TB.’

In these developments the redressive intentions of the HIV/AIDS project were beginning to bear significant fruit; a process Didier Fassin has comparably analyzed by expanding on AIDS sufferers’ experiences of ‘moral transformation’:

Many narratives attest the same transformation in the way of life at the moment when the illness is discovered or in the time that follows. A painful change, sometimes preceded by a phase of denial but which at the same time heralds a new life, a sort of resurrection… In the new life that begins, the pathology is both a burden and a resource for the reconstruction of the self and one’s relation to the world. Its omnipresence as a permanent reminder of the finitude of existence supposes forms of adjustment. The patient puts his or her life in order (Fassin 2007: 248-49).

Fassin is correct in pointing out that in addition to AIDS’s deathly features, those its “most manifest and tragic characteristic,” we should also attend to the expression of its “vital dimension” as it unfolds, for example, in Ontibile’s poetic renditions (2007: 249; see also below). At the same time, he sensibly notes, the new values the experience of moral transformation ushers in—truth, faithfulness, dignity, respect, solidarity—form norms or standards which are not necessarily respected. Words and practices illuminative of a kind of conversion or redress may well emerge precarious; the possibility of their collapse is not inconsequential.

These twin insights we will do well to keep in mind in relation to Ontibile’s outreach navigations, which around mid-October took a sudden turn for the worse. As it happened, that one morning Toko and I were having coffee at JPP’s Therapy Centre when the organization’s secretary unexpectedly rang: ‘Toko, there’s a client here to see you.’ Toko pulled a face, mumbling that she had no appointments booked and would be back soon, only to animatedly re-enter the office a few moments later: ‘Mieke come here, come see who the client is!’ Seated beside the secretary Ontibile laughed in response to our elation, covered her face with her
hands—and promptly began to cry. Conjuring up a familiar scene, her tears shocked us nonetheless.

What had transpired? Her account emerged complicatedly, tacking back and forth from one patient at Ramatla to the next, from one staff member to another. In a convoluted mix of Tswana and English something approaching the following narrative emerged:

Today at Ramatla they told me to pack up and leave, they told me I have to go! I don’t get along with everyone there and they told me I have to go! But I have nowhere to go! …And today I’m supposed to go to Kalafong because I don’t have the pills anymore, they gave me money for the taxi but then Sister Ntsiki took the money back again! […] I don’t know what to do; I don’t know where to go so I walked here to find you…

I fought with Promise because she wanted to watch eTV but I said before I wanted to watch Muvhango on SABC2. And Solomon, he is always picking the fights! They call me a foreigner, they say I am not welcome because I’m a foreigner and I have to go back to my own country!12

Toko and I decided to take Ontibile to Kalafong, though Toko first phoned with Felicia (who, unaware that Ontibile was being expelled, promised to ‘look into it,’ adding that ‘she can be naughty sometimes’) and furthermore insisted on dropping by the hospice. Silence reigned in the car as I drove to Ramatla, mulling over what Toko had insightfully whispered some minutes earlier: ‘I think Ontibile is very intelligent, that’s why she can’t get on with people sometimes.’

To say the least, the scene that unfolded at the hospice rendered Toko and myself all but speechless (cf. Goffman 1959: 139, being accorded a ‘temporary backstage status’). Upon arrival we were told to sit at the table in the communal kitchen, where each person present—nurses, patients, cooks, cleaners—gathered in a circle around us. Sister Ntsiki joined the group in such a state of anger that Toko’s efforts to ask or discuss anything proved largely futile; clearly the mere sight of Ontibile provoked intense resentment in her (she later telephoned to apologize):

12 In light of the recent eruptions of ‘xenophobic violence’ in South Africa (particularly in May 2008, though it has not been limited to that time), Ontibile’s claim about being called a foreigner was likely not unfounded (see Sharp 2008). Tellingly also, the local term for ‘foreigners’ is mokwerekwere, derivative of the Pedi verb kwera, lit. ‘to mock’ or ‘be sarcastic.’
You want to know why I’m kicking Ontibile out; I’m kicking her out for two reasons! The first is, she’s naughty and she has an attitude problem, a big attitude problem! Ramatla is a free service, she don’t own this place, I don’t own this place, nobody owns this place! Ontibile acts rude and it’s a free service, she’s getting everything for free here! She should be thankful instead of creating trouble but that’s all she does, create trouble! The second reason is, there’s a six week limit on staying at Ramatla and Ontibile’s been here for more than two months already. I want her out today! […]

Yesterday I asked Sibusiso to take her to the shelters so she can find a place to stay. He took her to two but no, she don’t want to stay in them! She don’t want to live there! Nothing is good enough for her! But I’m telling you, we’re finished with her here, she’s healthy now, she’s gotta go!

Eventually Sister Ntsiki relented slightly: Ontibile would be allowed to sleep at Ramatla two more nights, giving Toko some time—albeit very little—to arrange alternative accommodation for her. We spent the remainder of the day waiting in long queues at Kalafong’s Immunology Clinic, and two days later, a Thursday, Ontibile had little option but to relocate to Visagie Shelter.

‘My ARVs are my boyfriends’: Visagie Shelter

Although these events signified Ontibile’s departure from the immediate institutional nodes of the HIV/AIDS project, she did not disappear from outreach circles entirely. Managed by the Gauteng Department of Housing, the overcrowded shelter she came to live in was one of Pretoria’s largest. It housed some three hundred men and one hundred women and children, several of whom relied on the network for food parcels, medications, and the occasional low wage job. At six o’clock each morning the shelter’s residents—aside from the elderly, the sick, those unable to walk and women with small children or babies—were forced to leave the grounds until six in the evening, when its high gates once again swung open to allow people in for the night. Other than sporadic donations of bread, pap (Afrikaans, stamped corn) or rice occupants were expected to look after their own basic needs, including food, clothing and blankets. Through Toko’s efforts, Ontibile began to receive food parcels from JPP on a biweekly basis.
Ontibile’s departure from Ramatla coincided with what for me constituted an important development in our relationship, for it was during this conflicted time that she first began to share some of her writing with me. Noticing my interest in her poetry, on the Tuesday Toko and I took her to Kalafong she gave me two poems (typed and printed on one of Ramatla’s computers) and further permitted me to copy ‘Dear Virus’ from her notebook. From that moment, she would occasionally show me her work or text-message a poem to my cell phone.

It was Ontibile herself who proposed a way in which I might go about reciprocating this gift, for on the morning after her first night at the shelter my flatmate Nyeleti woke me at six-thirty: ‘Mieke, you have a visitor!’ Rubbing the sleep out of my eyes, I found Ontibile already seated on the couch in our living room. Nyeleti and Maya quietly went about their morning tasks whilst I, for the second time that week, witnessed Ontibile’s laughter turn to heavy tears as she searched her baby blue handbag for her treatment regimen.

‘Did you have anything to eat this morning?’

‘No… I have to eat before I take the pills but I don’t have food, I don’t have money…’

I prepared toast and instant coffee and sliced some oranges for us to eat. Ontibile, I noted worriedly, consumed the food exceedingly slowly; by the time she finished it was well past eight.

In the meantime the news of Ontibile’s unexpected visit appeared to have done the rounds, for Toko soon showed up on our doorstep. Toko sat with us for a while, allowing Ontibile to finish off a second orange, but then urged us to come downstairs to Lesedi Clinic. Handing Ontibile a food parcel, to my consternation she proceeded to tell her in no uncertain terms that she was not permitted to visit me at the flat again: ‘Ontibile, Mieke lives in a private flat, you can’t go there in the morning anymore, you shouldn’t go there at all. It’s a private flat, you understand?’ But my hesitant attempts to intervene merely fell on deaf ears as Toko
continued, ‘You need to go back to Botswana, neh? You’ll stay until December because they have to monitor you at the hospital, but then you need to go home because your support system is there. Okay?’

In the months that followed I saw Ontibile fairly regularly, though there were weeks when we did not meet, whether due to my own schedule or her ‘temporary disappearance’ from outreach circles. At times she visited me at the flat or I took her to Kalafong for her monthly check-up—or, alarmingly, we would hear from one acquaintance or another about her having collapsed ‘again’ at the shelter or on the street (Ontibile was taken to hospital by ambulance four times between November 2006 and May 2007). Whenever Toko and I visited her in the hospital following such incidents, Toko would urge her to go home. ‘What if the day comes when we’re not here to take care of you?’

Through the grapevine we also heard other stories. ‘Eish, Ontibile, that one, she’s hanging around with bad people at the shelter!’ ‘She’s having many boyfriends!’ Although it was exceedingly difficult to disentangle fact from fiction regarding such rumours, Ontibile’s call to tell me that her friend had given her a cell phone for Valentine’s Day led me to cautiously bring up the issue when she next visited me. ‘Aowa Mieke!’ she giggled, ‘it’s not true, he’s just a friend! My pills, my ARVs are my boyfriends.’ Some weeks later she confided that another man at the shelter had asked her to marry him, but that she had declined his offer. ‘I told him, why should I marry you, I don’t know you!’

I never officially interviewed Ontibile in the sense that I used a recorder, a device of which many of my friends and acquaintances in the inner city were more than a little sceptical. Our relationship, I felt, was fragile, elusive, as if it could suddenly end. She rarely volunteered details of her life in Botswana other than those concerning her rural origins, the fact that she had

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13 A reference to multiple partnering, which tends to be economically motivated in powerful ways. I discuss this matter in some detail in Chapter 5.
a daughter, and that she belonged (or had once belonged) to the Zion Christian Church (ZCC),
and appeared equally reluctant to talk about the four years that had passed since crossing the
border. The little I knew was that she had come to South Africa to study at an ‘upholstery
school,’ that her link to the country had been the father of a friend in Botswana who was a South
African, and that she had been living with friends in Atteridgeville before being diagnosed, first
with TB and then with AIDS. Once, when I asked her about her friends in the township, she
enigmatically replied ‘They think I am a ghost.’ It was the only comment she ever made about
them.

What I was left with—or what she left me with—were written words: poems that spoke
compellingly of ‘being HIV’ and ‘having a vision’ in spite of it, of Ramatla as ‘the mother I
have now,’ of dreams of being a ‘married woman.’ Above all, Ontibile’s poetic renditions bear
witness to what, trapped in extreme conditions of poverty and illness and living amongst ‘flying
gossips’ and ‘ever right people,’ she was so frequently prevented from expressing in ordinary
conversation. Consider, for instance, the poem ‘My Confidence,’ which she wrote shortly after
her expulsion from Ramatla:

I’m feeling vulnerable
I’m different to myself
My passion has declined
I’m filled with anger

Happiness please fight my anger
Confidence may you boost my self-esteem
My confidence is my hero
While my worries are my enemies
Come and live in my blood veins
I mean you my confidence

The flying gossip won’t help
The ever right people won’t do much better
But the level of my trust
And the ego to go on
Shall be my strength
My confidence is my success

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Clearly Ontibile’s words here still evoke her Ramatla days, the language she learned to write and perform during her time at this hospice: ‘Come and live in my blood veins, I mean you my confidence.’ One of the last poems I received from her, ‘It’s Autumn,’ reveals a distancing from this kind of outreach-influenced writing, and simultaneously constitutes a poignant expression of the fears and desires that lay at the heart of her performance of the self:

The parents finished their task
They brought these seeds up
All of them were well taken care of
We the daughters must wake up
If not, autumn will frustrate us

Me daughter of Mthimkulu
I’m still single in autumn
What am I waiting for
The princes are well groomed
My heart is a stubborn rock
This autumn is my last chance

I have everything except courage
I have everything but lack charity
Oh my forefathers help
When will I overcome this wall
But finally I’ll be in love
I need love

Ontibile continued to stay on in Pretoria after the completion of my fieldwork. In June 2008 a violent incident occurred near Visagie Shelter, during which she was stabbed by a male resident who accused her of sleeping with him without having disclosed her seropositive status. Following this event Ontibile relocated to a women’s shelter in the inner city.

**Conclusion**

The labour of HIV/AIDS outreach, this chapter has suggested, can be helpfully conceived via Turner’s theorization of the four stages of the moral (social) drama. If the nation- and indeed worldwide breach phase of this drama first became apparent a good twenty-five or thirty years
ago, the crisis it has produced lives on and continues to produce myriad redressive and adjustive measures. In Pretoria’s inner city, HIV/AIDS care mirrors the moral drama in its initially tacit, then gradually more explicit emphasis on the ‘need’ for individual patients to acknowledge the predicament of the illness in their bodies and lives and take proper action to adjust to and counter it, in order to finally be reintegrated in the kin networks and support systems of their origin. Should this ideal process appear improbable due to the disease’s progression and death’s nearness, redressive action comes to include an often fretful search for a dying person’s kin in order to ensure the appositeness of his or her ‘forthcoming’ burial and prevent the occasion of another pauper interment.

By tracing the outreach navigations of Abram and Ontibile, I have sought to portray some of the challenges this morally-imbued project encounters in its attempts to address the HIV/AIDS crisis and substantiate redressive action. In this respect, when ill persons enter the project the first ‘fact’ to be established is to what extent they remain enabled or in control of their own agency. Even in cases where, as we might put it, death has already so far advanced that the strength to enact agency has significantly faded, outreach workers will attempt to counter this process on behalf of dying persons by initiating the legal procedures through which access to medication becomes possible. Yet commonly—as with Abram—death remains hovering, ready to strike at any time; hence it becomes equally important to contact patients’ relatives. Note that in this vein, the death of a client at Thapelong or elsewhere does not necessarily denote the ‘death’ of the moral drama of outreach, for if kin members are successfully traced and prove willing to collect a relative’s body for burial it is considered a form of appropriate reintegration. On such occasions outreach employees deem their duty—the temporary assuming of agency for a dying or deceased person—to be fulfilled as best as possible in the circumstances. By contrast, when kin members fail to be located or refuse to take
responsibility for a kinsman’s body the moral drama does experience a kind of death, since neither in the life nor death of the deceased has (a form of) reintegration materialized.

In the circumstances of clients like Ontibile, the realization of the project’s redressive intentions appears more likely and indeed often proves effective. Initial adjustment takes the form of (the acceptance of) treatment; in turn, improved wellbeing tends to engender a moral transformation and a kind of novel moral consciousness in relation to self and other. The performance of the self, as Ontibile’s exuberant clowning during the clown festival and the public recitation of ‘Dear Virus’ indicate, also changes accordingly, becoming reflective of the ‘inner revolution’ the AIDS sufferer has experienced.

Beyond such positive developments, however, the irony of HIV/AIDS in contemporary South Africa also clearly becomes apparent; in this respect we need to recognize, for starters, that the illness does not merely confuse but indeed stalwartly denies the liberation the end of apartheid was supposed to have ushered in. In a sense, it is this jarring illogicality redressive projects like the one here described seek to counter through a dual emphasis on the ‘certainty’ of biomedical intervention and the ‘freedom’ of individual agency. Yet as the account of Ontibile demonstrates, irony is not so easily put off. It returns, as it were, in full measure at exactly the moment circumstances appear most ‘promising’: when redressive achievement is to engender a client’s departure to and reintegration in his or her kin network. Notably irony surfaces more complexly at the end of a client’s sojourn in the project than it does at the beginning, when its presence is chiefly apparent in victims’ devastated bodies. By contrast, at the conclusion of the redressive phase—to outreach workers at least—irony appears in the ostensible refusal of patients to ‘go home to their relatives.’ Yet from a different perspective this assessment of clients’ ‘nonsensical action’ can in itself be read—as it sometimes is—through the lens of irony when it is conceded that the charge of ‘going home’ entails an assumption of familial loyalty
and support and an underestimation of clients’ fears (via which the efforts of the outreach project and its employees rather than the practices of one or another client emerge incongruous).

Finally, if Ontibile’s disquiet at the prospect of returning home, as so poignantly expressed in ‘It’s Autumn,’ powerfully ironizes the project’s labour, let us not forget either that her alleged sexual partnerships render the assertion ‘My ARVs are my boyfriends’ more than a little paradoxical as well.
PART II

Performances of the Gendered Self
CHAPTER THREE

Hard Laughter

Prologue

‘Come Mieke, sit here! Sit beside Palesa so you can share her umbrella.’ Gesturing toward a rickety chair in the corner of Thapelong’s small courtyard, Toko makes sure I’m alright before finding a place for herself. It’s a Thursday morning in late November, and Toko and I find ourselves once again at Thapelong for the weekly Support Group meeting with the residents and staff of this inner city AIDS hospice. Seating myself beside Palesa, I glance around, greet people, count heads as the sun is beginning to burn. Today’s turnout is substantial: more than 20 people are crowding the courtyard. Patients able to walk find spots in thin patches of shadow, nurses stand in the doorway, fieldworkers and careworkers fiddle with their cell phones. Toko asks for silence, then clears her throat to begin.

‘First of all, I want to thank you all for coming. For today I am going to read from the Book of Proverbs, the Book of Proverbs Chapter 16. I will read verse nine. It says, “In his heart a man plans his course, but the Lord determines his steps.” In this verse we read, we can make our plans but God is the last one to know about your life, your plans. He is the last one neh? Whenever you ask something, ask God to help you with your decision. God wants the best for us. Ask Modimo, he is the fulfiller of our lives. Every time we must trust in God.’

Amidst the murmur of distant traffic, soft ee’s [yeses] echo back to Toko from different corners of the courtyard. Toko prays as quickly as her brief meditation, then turns to a more practical matter.

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1 Employees of the outreach network’s HIV/AIDS project, the main duty of the fieldworkers was to traverse the inner city in search of AIDS sufferers; that of the careworkers to follow up on those patients who had been discharged from Ramatla Care Centre or Thapelong Hospice. In order to become a fieldworker or careworker, applicants were required to follow a one-week training course on HIV/AIDS the project intermittently offered.
‘The purpose of us coming together is to address the needs of the patients in this Support Group. What are the needs? One need is about massaging. The heels and ankles, and also the shoulder blades. People have lost weight and there is no muscle left, so we must massage where the bones are sticking out.’

Sister Maria, an elderly lady and fulltime nurse at the hospice, explains that we are going to use Vaseline. ‘It’s to encourage blood circulation, and so the skin doesn’t hang either. We have plastic gloves here, we will use them to massage the patients.’ She stresses that we are to rub with the palm of the hand, not use our fingers.

I accompany Toko and Palesa, herself visibly ill with AIDS but still well enough to be employed as a fieldworker, to Sarah’s room. We don’t know much about Sarah—only that she is from Brits, was born in 1980 and was brought in by her mother earlier in the week. When she arrived at the hospice, she was unable to walk and barely conscious. The nurses put her in Ntombi’s room, whose baby son is fast asleep in his crib when we enter. The walls are bare, except for a lone round mirror adorning one. Light blue curtains dotted with small yellow flowers shield out the sun. White rumpled bed sheets and off-white blankets cover the two beds.

Sarah is awake and looking at us. She returns our greetings with a barely perceivable nod. ‘How are you?’ ‘I’m fine…’ Toko attempts to continue the conversation, but Sarah does not engage. She merely watches us, dark eyes sunk deeply back into her face. We ask if she would like to be massaged, and she agrees. With another faint nod and a few words she indicates that especially her legs and feet are sore: that’s where she wants to be massaged.

We spread royal amounts of Vaseline on Sarah’s legs, ankles and feet, and rub it gently into her skin so that her legs and feet look very oily. Toko reminds me to rub with the palm of my hand. Sarah lies still but she does not smile, nor does she close her eyes; she continues to watch us closely. Her legs are thin, mere bone, and I can tell from her skin too that she is in an
advanced stage of the illness. The colour varies from light to dark brown in different places, like a patchwork. We massage mostly in silence for five minutes, ten minutes; once in a while
Palesa, Toko and I exchange a few words. When we finish, we ask Sarah if it felt good and she nods quietly from the head of the bed. As we are about to leave she asks us to help her get into the wheelchair that is standing by the window. ‘I need to urinate.’

I push the wheelchair nearer to the bed as Toko and Palesa carefully try to help Sarah into a sitting position. She is wearing a white gown with the term KALAFONG HOSPITAL printed all over it in large green letters. Sarah can’t get into the wheelchair by herself, so we lift her gown a little, move her legs one by one; we place our hands under her armpits and lift her up. Everything about her is fragile, withering. We concentrate, move slowly, try to work gently.

Suddenly Sarah’s face contorts in pain and she lets out a dry, agonizing cry; taken aback, we half-put-half-drop her back onto the bed. Sarah tugs at her gown as she opens her legs. Large tears appear and roll down her cheeks. It all happens in seconds. Toko and Palesa figure it out before I do: Sarah accidentally peed! Palesa hurries out to get one of the nurses while Toko and I remain as if frozen, unsure how to help Sarah, who is in obvious pain. Sarah continues to pull at her gown. She keeps her legs as far apart as possible and then we see: she is not wearing underwear, not even a diaper. The skin around her vagina is eaten away, pink, raw. The hot urine must be burning her flesh. A wave of nausea passes through me. I turn away—for my own sake as much as for Sarah’s.

Palesa and Sister Maria rush into the room, the latter carrying a bedpan. As Sister Maria attends to Sarah, Toko beckons me and begins to giggle. She looks at herself in the mirror, purses her lips, makes kissy sounds and then dons the ‘Pussy Cat,’ a bodily stance and facial expression meant to convey an erotic, sexually very tempting woman. She laughs loudly.

‘Mieke I’m so beautiful!’
I grin in response but remain silent. Sister Maria is still busy with Sarah as we leave the room. We wander around a bit longer, chat with patients, admire the budding vegetable garden in the backyard. Patient Doris is clearly doing better; she is on ARVs now. The garden was her incentive. Then it is time to leave.

Introduction

Although I attempted to hide it, my initial reaction to Toko’s enactment of the Pussy Cat during the above course of events was one of puzzled frustration. It was not the first time I had been privy to this kind of comedic performance and, under the circumstances, it annoyed me more than anything else. Did it not occur to Toko that the misery of Sarah’s condition made the Pussy Cat entirely inappropriate at that moment? Was it not downright disrespectful to this young AIDS sufferer, who may well have observed it? Although Toko engaged me in her action and it required a response, I deliberately reacted as indistinctly as I could; just then I had no desire to participate in her carousing. It was only later that day, while writing up fieldnotes, that I once more found myself mulling over her performance and considering it—potentially at least—a telling rejoinder on her part to witnessing the extremeness of Sarah’s vulnerability.

Humour and laughter, more often than not of the mocking sort, pervaded JPP and the outreach network, and formed an important component in many of the relationships I observed and partook in. Thus, when Andrea ‘again’ received a ‘bothersome’ phone call from a group of researchers based at a local university asking if they could ‘interview some AIDS patients,’ she handed the matter over to Toko with the cynical yet laughter-provoking comment, ‘Just tell them some horror stories, okay?’ On another occasion I attended a meeting during which the situation of a large family was discussed, whose children, it had recently been found, had lice. ‘They sleep four to a bed and the rest sleeps on the floor!’ the social worker who had made the discovery exclaimed. ‘Any volunteers for fumigating the place?’ And then there was the running
joke at JPP’s meetings about the one item always on the agenda: that of resignations. The question ‘Anyone resigning today?’ frequently led to several hands being raised in jest, evoking bouts of laughter.

Yet the many different types and meanings of humour that permeated the world of outreach made it one of the most challenging subjects I encountered over the course of my fieldwork. As much emotionally constituted as it is culturally woven, laughter is far from straightforward; its significations rather tend to be obscure, hard to pin down, elusive (Goldstein 2003). One helpful starting point for its study has been developed by Michael Herzfeld, who some years ago argued for the centrality of ‘cultural intimacy.’ In Herzfeld’s conception, cultural intimacy is

the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment ensure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation (Herzfeld 1997: 3).

Embarrassment and rueful self-recognition, Herzfeld goes on to say, are the key markers of cultural intimacy; these “are not solely personal feelings, but describe the collective representation of intimacy” (1997: 6). As his definition suggests, ‘creative irreverence’ is integral to cultural intimacy; it is only when we come to an understanding of a collectivity’s witticisms and mockery—when we get its jokes—that its points of insecurity and vulnerability, as well as those of possible resistance, become apparent. The anthropologist’s endeavour is one of attempting to enter such an intimate circle; to become a member of what Herzfeld calls a “fellowship of the flawed” (1997: 28).

It should come as no surprise that in the diverse outreach environment, several forms of cultural intimacy were represented and became apparent over time. For example, Afrikaner outreach employees—many of whom held high(er) positions than did their black colleagues and
continued to be affiliated with one or another Afrikaans-speaking church—generally shared a cultural intimacy that illuminated how their ‘culture’ (as they called it) and ways of life had undergone a process of delegitimization in the post-apartheid era. Although this issue was deeply sensitive and rarely overtly voiced, at times things expressed in jest (when only Afrikaners were present) spoke volumes. In this respect there was the occasional mocking and rather bitter reference to ‘Affirmative Shopping’—a play on the Affirmative Action campaign lamenting the (purported) increase in armed robberies in recent years. There was furthermore the joke told by a DRC pastor, who started the service he was leading by asking ‘Who were the greatest reformers? Calvin and Hitler!’ As I was to learn later, he was not the only Afrikaner to draw connections between Calvinist Christianity and Nazism. JPP ran a volunteer program for overseas visitors, and on two occasions Maya, Nyeleti and I shared our flat for a time with a young German woman. Both had to endure Afrikaners teasing them about Nazi Germany, though each was born in the 1980s. Such instances might be read as Afrikaners’ attempts to extend a sense of cultural intimacy, but predictably, in the cases of these German youth this venture utterly backfired.

My aim in this chapter is however not to provide a detailed examination of the many different types of humour and laughter that were, often ambivalently, present at JPP and beyond. Instead I hone in on one ‘culturally intimate’ group—the female black outreach staff I lived and principally worked with—paying close attention to the people and occasions that tended to produce comic enactments and hilarity amongst them. In doing so the dissertation’s course shifts from the earlier concern with the performance of outreach as an ideologically imbued moral drama, one never definitively concluded, to one that seeks to (further) grasp this state of affairs by attending to the gendered performances of JPP’s female lay workers. In this third chapter the Turnerian perspective employed earlier makes way for Erving Goffman’s approach, particularly
his analysis of how individual performances can form “an integral part of a projection that is fostered and sustained by the intimate co-operation of more than one participant” (1959: 77-78).

Otherwise put, I examine women’s laughter through the lens of Goffman’s concept of the ‘performance team’ (or ‘team’)—“any set of individuals who co-operate in staging a single routine” (1959: 79)—to highlight how this practice is at once relational and exclusive, or socially binding to some whilst being closed off to others, within the fragmented context of the JPP moral drama (see also Carty and Musharbash 2008: 214).

As sharply discerning as they could be subtly or overtly derisive, the comically-intended anecdotes, jokes and enactments women constantly engaged in produced a kind of laughter I refer to as ‘hard.’ Hard laughter (and associated humour) is a particular type of laughter. It bears important similarities to what Donna Goldstein refers to as ‘laughter out of place’ in her study of the lives of impoverished women and children living in a favela (urban shantytown) in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. In the sharp words and enactments of her interlocutors, Goldstein argues, “a particular kind of communication and meaning-making takes place” (2003: 5):

This humour was a kind of running commentary about the political and economic structures that made up the context within which the people of Rio’s shantytowns made their lives—an indirect dialogue, sometimes critical, often ambivalent, always (at least partially) hidden, about the contradictions of poverty in the midst of late capitalism (Goldstein 2003: 2).

As Herzfeld also recognized, humour and laughter are intimately connected to the sensibilities of particular collectivities as they are situated within particular racialized, classed and gendered structures; in this regard the hard laughter I encountered bore a fundamental relation to the entangled conditions of racism, poverty, gender and sexual violence to which women had been variously subjected since their apartheid childhoods. In contemporary South Africa, the ongoing presence of these conditions emerges deeply ironic in view of the social and individual ‘freedoms’ the democratic transition of 1994 signified; a reality which is also starkly present at
JPP in the NGO’s assertion of ‘equality for all’ even as the past’s institutional forms and practices live on in its structures and programs. Hence in analyzing women’s hard laughter—itself an ironic register (see Fernandez and Huber 2001: 23-26)—I bring to the fore its relation to irony, arguing that hard laughter constitutes a discursive and enacted space within which women are able to communicate about and navigate the incongruencies apparent both at their worksite and in the broader South African social sphere.

The chapter is organized into three sections, each illuminative of a different target of women’s hard laughter: Afrikaners or ‘whiteys,’ street persons or ‘hobos,’ and men and sexuality, respectively. The first and second of these women daily encountered through their employment at JPP, whilst the third (and second) formed direct parts of their personal lives as they ambiguously lived these ‘between’ inner city and townships. In and through the veiled practice of hard laughter, it is further important to add, the often harsh experiences and conditions of women’s existence and the ways these could and could not be spoken about also first became apparent to me in subtle, yet deeply startling ways. Indeed commonly, vulnerabilities past and present remained unexpressed in any ‘serious’ manner, and only a few women were to increasingly grant me more solemn glimpses into their pasts as my research unfolded.² Finally then, these observations lead me to suggest preliminarily that there is something about the disguising performances of hard laughter involve that speaks to the matter of self-respect, specifically the weight of its maintenance in the face of its incessant refutation—an issue I return to in the chapter’s conclusion.

Of ‘Stupid White Men’ and ‘Scared White Women’: Laughing at the Maburu (Boers)

On the first of many evenings my flatmates and I were to spend together watching soapies on our old television, Nyeleti and Maya were intimately leaning against one another on one couch

² Broadly following the trajectory of my research, the accounts thus gathered form the subjects of the latter chapters, particularly Chapters 4 and 5.
while Emma, a young volunteer from Germany, and myself were seated on the other. We had been quiet for some time when, seemingly out of the blue, Nyeleti turned towards me and said ‘You know Paul, he told me God told him he would meet a Canadian girl, and that’s the girl he will marry.’ Not knowing what to make of this statement, I remained silent, as did everyone else. After some moments Nyeleti continued: ‘Serious, he told me himself. A Canadian girl is coming for him, God told him in a dream. I’m not saying it’s you Mieke, just what he told me!’

Be it hesitantly, Emma was the first to laugh, and soon the rest of us followed her example. For me our collective laughter spelled relief: the unease I had felt moments ago, not knowing whether Nyeleti was serious or not, had passed; our joint amusement reassured me that she was merely teasing.

And yet, despite the quiet that once more settled in around us, Nyeleti’s curious assertion kept running through my mind. I sensed her words denoted more than just a little banter; that they, in one way or another, signified an attempt to find out more about me; to discover who I was and importantly, what it was that I wanted. Although I was a new face at JPP, having arrived in South Africa just a few weeks earlier, I was quickly learning that one of the NGO’s features was its variability, its unsettledness. People were constantly coming and going, joining this urban outreach entity or leaving it, excitedly participating in it or letting it go. Clearly people’s choices or prospects of leaving varied, and two of the more transient groups consisted of volunteers from overseas on the one hand, and outreach clients on the other. Admittedly, the emphasis I placed (especially initially) on being a researcher implied not just the influence of a faraway ethics board on my pursuits; it also highlighted my desire to differentiate myself from overseas volunteers in particular.

Nyeleti, it appeared, had sharply picked up on this effort of mine. It was as if she was asking me the same question Barbara Myerhoff encountered as she initiated her fieldwork with
elderly Jews in California: “So what do you want with us here?” (1978: 14). What differed was the manner in which the question was posed; yet in thinking her comment over, I increasingly came to appreciate it for its astuteness. All Nyeleti knew about me at that point was that I was a researcher from Canada who had come to ‘study religion’ in the inner city, and that I had already attended several worship services and Bible studies to that end. Paul, an Afrikaner in his late twenties, was an outreach employee I had recently met who had been described to me as a ‘true man of God.’ A deeply committed Christian, he was widely acknowledged to be living very close to God—so close that, in the estimation of my flatmates, others’ Christian faith (including their own) did not nearly approximate his. While Nyeleti drew a combined link between Paul’s whiteness and religious practice and my whiteness and interest in investigating religion, her joking was also a way of questioning me; of trying to figure out who I was and where I stood. To what extent was I like Paul, and in a broader sense like her Afrikaner managers who had, after all, arranged this living space for me?

Nyeleti, it turned out, was not finished with me yet that evening. She next wanted to know what I thought of racially mixed couples. Again I did not know how to react—this time not least because she had, earlier that day, let me in on a major flat secret: that Emma, the overseas volunteer sitting next to me, had been dating a Shangaan man named Joel for nearly two months unbeknownst to Afrikaner outreach staff. While I thought I understood Nyeleti’s argument that ‘their cultures are too different,’ I had nonetheless been struck by how vehemently she had opposed their relationship. Uncertain of what would constitute the most tactful response, I vaguely mumbled ‘It’s not a problem for me…’ Perhaps Emma’s presence is what led Nyeleti to promptly reply that it was not a problem for her either. Yet her doubtfulness regarding the situation was subtly revealed some minutes later, when she went on to describe a street near her mother’s house in Mamelodi where, she asserted, she knew of five people who
were or had been involved with whites. ‘I don’t know what happened to that street!’ she concluded, whereupon she and Maya, followed by Emma and myself, burst out laughing.

In ways I only came to appreciate more fully later on, this evening constituted something of an initiation for me; an induction into a particularly racialized, classed, and gendered world of hard laughter. This world, intimately known to and shared by JPP’s female black workers, was one wherein the pervasiveness of paradoxical experience was itself subjected to ironic observation and commentary. In the introduction to their edited volume *Irony in Action* (2001), James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber point out how anthropologists have increasingly come to employ irony “as the goal of ethnography has shifted to capturing ambiguities and contradictions in the modernizing and even postmodernizing world.” Yet if this development reveals the discipline’s contemporary analytical inclination towards irony, more important—and more ‘true’ to the field—has been the growing interest in interlocutors’ “own experience of a world at odds with the authority of received or imposed tradition” and the question of “why [this] is so often captured indirectly by ironic tropes” (2001: 2). In the latter, not the anthropologist but the subject of study is the ironizer; if irony suggests a “questioning of established categories of inclusion and exclusion,” the ironizer reveals herself quite capable of “contest[ing] through irony the adequacy of such categories” (2001: 9).

As several scholars have suggested, ‘true irony’ dwells in the realm of the uncertain, the indeterminate and ambiguous (Fernandez and Huber 2001; Lambek 2003). Fernandez and Huber distinguish this ironic mode from other expressions of discrepancy by noting the “absence of militancy and malice” in the first. Satire, parody and sarcasm, they note, can be considered militant ironic forms that are “positioned confidently as to what is right and wrong in the world.” Militant or malicious ironists “use parody or satire of the other to express their self-confidence and mock the others’ lack of knowledge, and/or values and accomplishments.” In
contrast to true ironists, the militantly-minded profess to know how the world works and what the causes and solutions are (2001: 21-22).

Arguably, true and militant irony ought to be recognized more as ideal types than as two separate strategies people employ to express their knowledge of the nonsensical—for certainly in the ironic register of hard laughter, often the two could not be so easily distinguished. As John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash note, “[laughing] ‘with’ some people usually entails laughing ‘at’ others” (2008: 214), and women’s amusement could be as sarcastic (of specific persons or groups) as it was wont to be ambivalent. In the second part of the conversation related above, Nyeleti subtly targeted the matter of Emma’s dating Joel, of which she disapproved. ‘Unable’ to express this displeasure straightforwardly in Emma’s presence, she evoked a comparable situation (or situations) she purportedly ‘knew’ of in Mamelodi, ending her narrative with the declaration ‘I don’t know what happened to that street!’ What makes this statement ironic is the discrepancy between what Nyeleti says and what she really means; yet despite her feigning uncertainty and ignorance, behind her words her censure of the situation remains detectable.

At this stage Nyeleti’s assessment of Emma’s choice to date Joel—be it tacitly critiqued through irony—remained quite careful (I return to this matter later in the chapter). More overtly critical, at times deeply mocking, were the words and anecdotes she and others expressed in commenting on the folly of ongoing racial differentiation at JPP; on the absurdity of racism as it continued to permeate their worksite in both its hard and soft structural forms. At times ‘Afrikaners’ or ‘whiteys’ at the organization and/or beyond it would constitute the target of their amusement; at other times particular white persons formed its subject (cf. Basso 1979). For example, JPP’s head offices were sardonically referred to as ‘the Parliament’; the managers who had their workspaces there as ‘Ministers.’ These characterizations connotative of the political
past formed a running joke at our flat, from whose windows (which also looked out over JPP’s parking lot and Lesedi AIDS Clinic) the head offices’ comings and goings could be closely observed.

Often also, women’s jokes constituted immediate reactions to witnessing a white person engaging in a specific activity. Such jokes—at times solely articulated through a nod of the head, followed by giddy laughter—illuminated how local conceptions of race, class and gender entwined in the ongoing process of social differentiation. Thus when Marsel, the Afrikaner CEO or ‘President’ of JPP, purchased an expensive motorcycle and accompanying leather suit and rode it to work, whereupon he spent considerable time in the parking lot showing it off to some male co-workers, it brought several of my acquaintances to tears as they repeated to each other ‘Eish, Marsel’s got a new baby! Check!’ ‘Check the coat, check the coat!’ ‘Aowa the pants, the pants!’ ‘Who want to ride his baby?’ (The word ‘check’ formed a sort of codeword for any state of affairs or occurrence considered even remotely funny. In the mornings, all it took was Maya’s, Nyeleti’s or a visitor’s ‘check’ with a meaningful glance toward the window to generate laughter concerning, for example, someone covering their shiny vehicle with a car jacket to prevent the birds from pooping directly upon it.)

Lastly, women tended to have a store of memories concerning white people upon which they sometimes drew to induce a time of merriment. Not infrequently such recollections evoked moments when one or a few whites found themselves outnumbered by blacks, or in culturally or geographically unfamiliar territory. Correspondingly, Nyeleti loved to tell the story of how some years ago, during the one visit her manager Sandy had made to her mother’s house in Mamelodi, Sandy had avoided the toilet the entire time. ‘She never went! [loud laughter] She had to go but she was too scared to use the toilet! She held it for five hours!’ Comparably, when Martie once brought her three-month-old son to the inner city, her ambivalent refusal to let any black person
hold the baby became a source of considerable mockery. ‘She thinks we will drop him!’ Lily giggled that evening. ‘BAM! Break his head on the floor!’ And then, with a tinge of bitterness, ‘What does she think, we never held a baby before?’ What women, often accurately, perceived during such instances was white people’s fear of them—an attribute of whiteness they were familiar enough with to know that it formed the rule rather than the exception. Relatedly, women also found it extremely funny when I or another white person broke locally salient boundaries constituted by such fear. ‘Are you not scared to shop here Mieke?’ a friend might ask just before entering a grocery store frequented by black persons, whereupon she would break out in voluble laughter; or ‘Mieke, are you not afraid to sleep in the same room as us?’

Yet scared white women and ‘stupid white men,’ to evoke an expression Toko once used, were not the only subjects of women’s hard laughter. Certainly humour that spoke to the incongruity of racial differentiation at an organization that liked to present itself as ‘free’ of it constituted a significant and telling component of their amusement, perhaps even its most palpable feature (in the inner city at least). Yet at the same time there were also other, decidedly more ambiguous targets, including an impoverished category of persons women referred to as ‘hobos,’ a term meaning ‘street’ or ‘homeless persons.’ It is to women’s humour and laughter regarding the figure of the hobo and its significations—examined chiefly via the experience of one considerably mocked person I came to know in the inner city—that I turn in the ensuing section.

**Kinlessness as Disgrace: Laughing at ‘Hobos’ (Street Persons)**

‘Mieke, guess what! I ran into Sello last week.’
‘Oh! How’s he doing?’
‘Ah, he’s *fiine*, he asked about you, he wanted to know about the wedding.’
‘Did you tell him when the party will be, in South Africa?’
‘Ee, I told him, I told him, he says… [giggling] He says he’s gonna buy the suit for your wedding.’ [starts to laugh]
‘Oh, he said that?’
‘Ee! [between bouts of laughter] He says he’s gonna buy the black suit… the black shoes… the tie… He’s gonna buy the white blouse… Eish!
‘Okay…’ [grinning]
‘He says… [hiccupping from laughing so hard] He says he’s gonna shine like a star in the sky for the wedding!’

When, during a July 2008 telephone conversation, Toko informed me of Sello’s aforesaid plans, I could not help but be reminded of the tragicomic figure of Toloki, the central character in South African writer Zakes Mda’s magic realist novel *Ways of Dying* (1995). One day Toloki, a self-ascribed but impoverished professional mourner who has left the rural village of his youth in favour of a life of wandering and mourning at strangers’ funerals in a South African city, discovers a costume in a shop window which, he knows, will be perfect for his vocation. The outfit, “all in black comprising a tall shiny top hat, lustrous tight-fitting pants… and a knee-length velvety black cape buckled with a hand-sized gold-coloured brooch with tassels of yellow, red and green,” is one Toloki falls in love with and decides he simply must have. Upon entering the shop, Toloki learns from the owner that it serves the theatre world. “Most of his outfits were period costumes that actors and producers came to rent for plays that were about worlds that did not exist anymore. But other costumes did not belong to any world that ever existed. These were strange and fantastic costumes that people rented for fancy dress balls, or for New Year carnivals, or to make people laugh” (1995: 26).

When Toloki inquires about the price of his desired outfit—a strange request, since people don’t normally purchase these costumes—he is told that it is very expensive due to the materials of which it is made: silk, and velvet. Knowing he will not be able to afford it, he has little option but to leave the shop, his heart greatly pained. Nonetheless he refuses to let go of his wish without putting up a fight:

He went back to the shop every day, and sat outside that window looking longingly at the costume. Leaking from his open mouth were izincwe, the gob of desire. The owner of the two [nearby] restaurants began to complain. ‘He is frightening our customers away,’ they said. ‘Who would want to eat our food while looking at the slimy saliva
hanging out of his mouth?’ But Toloki refused to move away. It was a public place, wasn’t it? Didn’t he have a right to be where he wanted to be? At least if he couldn’t afford to buy the costume, he had all the right in the world to sit there for the rest of his life and admire it. ‘What can we do?’ the restaurant owners said resignedly. ‘Ever since these people began to know something about rights they have got out of hand. I tell you, politics has destroyed this country.’ So, day after day Toloki came to admire his costume, until one day the restaurant owners decided to buy it for him. ‘Promise us that if we buy you this costume you will never come back here again,’ they begged. He promised, and left happily with the nicely wrapped costume under his arm. He was never seen there again (1995: 27).

It was, however, not merely Toko’s sardonic rendering of Sello’s notion that he would wear a fancy suit to my wedding that conjured up the character of Toloki in my mind. I had first read Ways of Dying in the field, and already then Sello had appeared to me as a kind of real life Toloki, the professional mourner par excellence of outreach circles, if any such person could ever be said to have existed. The first time I met him was in July 2006, when he was still employed as a fieldworker with the HIV/AIDS outreach project; what struck me from the outset was the extraordinary personal style he tended to adopt when in the company of others.

Admittedly Sello, a Sotho youth of small stature, had been mostly quiet the first couple of times we encountered one another—a stance likely influenced by his colleagues, four young black women also employed as fieldworkers with whom he daily traversed the inner city in search of AIDS sufferers. During those months Toko and I accompanied the group several times, either on their walks through the city or to Thapelong, the AIDS hospice. The women’s constant chattering and laughing ensured that Sello could barely get a word in; yet the manner of his dress and whatever he happened to be carrying with him typically spoke volumes. Along with a pair of bright blue coveralls sporting the slogan SOWETO 1976, his preferred attire consisted of a set of dress pants (always meticulously ironed), a well-worn tuxedo, shiny black dress shoes, and a toque he wore in the locally popular pantsuli style. Fake gold and silver earrings and necklaces, one with a hashish leaf dangling from its end, completed the image. Not infrequently Sello could be spotted carrying his guitar on his back, and once he showed me a
book he was reading, *Die, the Beloved Country*; ³ the new South African flag burning to ashes on its front cover.

Sello’s ‘home’ in the inner city was Visagie Shelter, the same provincially run homeless facility Ontibile came to live at following her expulsion from Ramatla (Chapter 2). How he had ended up there at the youthful age of twenty-three remained a mystery to me until I was well into my fieldwork; initially the only facts I managed to glean were that his monthly salary (like that of the other fieldworkers) was R1,000 ($125 CAD) and that he was, by others’ accounts, a heavy dagga smoker. One August day, not long before the Feast of the Clowns, Toko took it upon herself to question Sello regarding his dagga habit—a matter that, until then, I had heard many whisper about but never overtly address. ‘Sello, why do you smoke it, the dagga?’ Sello grinned in response, then went on to explain that it inspires him to do his art. ‘Aah… I am an artist! I write the poems, I have the guitar lessons…’ ‘Aowa Sello, if they find out at Lesedi you will get fired!’ But Sello merely grinned some more, asking us if we would be attending the clown festival. ‘I’m going to perform, you’ll see me on the stage!’

And perform he did, in an overdramatic manner that, regardless of my earlier observations, quite astounded me. Sello’s preferred act, I learned, was that of poetry recital. To this end he carried onto the stage a notebook filled with lengthy, handwritten poems, each of which, he later asserted, he had authored himself, as implied by the personal signatures concluding each composition. ⁴ Yet it was not just the spectacle of words constituting each poem that struck me; it was equally Sello’s sensational, histrionic rendering of them on stage; the flamboyant, almost gaudy manner in which he related them to his audience. Consider the following excerpt, from a piece entitled ‘Rebel’:

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³ Authored by libertarian Jim Peron, the book examines the ANC’s first term in office, arguing that the 1994 political transition signified the rise to power of a small black elite (Peron 1999).

⁴ Sello wrote and recited each of his poems in English. He preferred English over his native Southern Sotho, he later told me, as English ‘is the global language, the language of the world.’
[...]  
People are turned to hearts of wailing!
Saxophones of sorrow! Oh! Oh! Saxophones of sorrow!
Pianos of pain! Pianos of pain!
Clarinet of distress!
Drums of misery! Drums of misery!
The unfettered vampire feeds on human blood!
Fathers have untimely and ignominiously fallen!
Homes are barbaric! Oh! Homes are barbaric!
Orphans and abandoned children abound!
We are in a deep freezer!
People are sitting on a volcano!
Children are playing with fire!
Adults are playing with dynamite!

Dangerous like sharks in the sea!
And silent like a poisonous serpent!
The banal beast ferociously unleashes!
Blatant, unbridled brutality on all!
Mothers, sisters and children all dead and buried!
Yes still and unabatedly!
People are sitting on a volcano!
Children are playing with fire!
Adults are playing with dynamite!

Reject with disdain and rebel against!
This Dracula’s dreadful dictatorship!
Listen to the loud and clear reveille!
Now more than ever it’s time for rebellion!
Rebel against sex before marriage!
Rebel against unsafe sex!
Rebel against unprotected sex!
Be wise and condomise!
Denounce and destroy this Dracula!
[...]  

Or alternatively, take the following passage, from the poem ‘Let Us Be A Man’:

For God’s sake! Let us be a man!
Not monkeys minding machines
Or sitting with our tails curled!
For God’s sake! Let us be a man!
While [still] machines amuse us!
The radio or film and gramophone!
But not monkeys with bland grins on our faces!
For God’s sake! Let us be a man!
Not robots or robocops, which are controlled by remotes!
Not cyborgs with machines
Incorporating wailing and warning, mourning and startling, Sello’s narrations formed a rather eccentric yet remarkable collection of renditions evoking a host of past and present social conditions, including South Africa’s turbulent political history, poverty, the collapse of ‘proper’ kin and gender relations, and HIV/AIDS; even what he called society’s increasing ‘cyborgization.’ As Sello and I became more closely acquainted, I gradually learnt how much he cherished and staked upon his, what he alternately called performer, artist, poet or actor role. It was partly in and through this conviction that his performance resembled that of the fictional Toloki: Sello also envisioned himself as a self-taught, professional mourner of sorts, the only difference being that he bemoaned the burdens of life and living rather than those of death and dying.

Nyeleti, Maya, Toko and Lily, in whose presence I observed several of Sello’s theatrical recitations during the clown feast, initially eyed his enactments with puzzled suspicion. Before long they began giggling and throwing each other meaningful looks, and upon Maya’s ‘Here is the real clown of the feast!’ all finally burst out in howling laughter. The amusement lasted but a few moments; yet I was to witness its articulation repeatedly in the weeks and months that followed. Even though my friends took care not to mock him publicly, from that day on Sello was no longer just Sello but Sello-the-clown—someone who, it seemed, it was easier to ridicule and laugh at than to take seriously.

Fast forward some months to an afternoon in late October, when Sello unexpectedly SMS’d me to say he was waiting for me at the entrance to our flat. ‘Aah, Mieke, I have a problem… Staying in the shelter, I’m tired of it, I have no room there, no privacy, no place to work on my art!’ It emerged that Johan was organizing a room for him at
the social housing complex bordering the one I stayed in and similarly owned and managed by JPP; the problem was that he had not yet been paid that month, but he needed money to rent the room. He and Johan had come to an agreement: rent would only be R300 ($37.50), but Sello would have to take out JPP’s garbage at six o’clock each morning. I sought to get some clarification regarding this turn of events—Why could he no longer stay at the shelter? Did he sign some sort of contract with Johan?—but largely failed to gather any further insights. I lent him R350 for his first month’s rent and a couple of meals, which he promised to return upon receiving his salary.

A few days later Toko and I found ourselves on JPP’s parking lot awaiting the start of a meeting when we ran into the fieldworkers near Lesedi, the AIDS clinic. Still visibly shocked, they informed us of some bad news they had just received. Their jobs, they had been told, were ‘finished’; the Department of Social Development had cut the funding through which their salaries had previously been paid. Sello was the first to smile (or to hide behind his smile): ‘Aah, it will be fine… Where God closes a door he opens another.’ Moments later, out of earshot of the others, he apologetically informed me that he did not yet have the money to pay me back. He needed food, and furthermore had ‘some debts’ to pay off. Since I was on my way to a meeting, he promised he would drop in soon for a visit.

For Sello, leaving the shelter and losing his job meant that he now faced a major challenge: how to pay for rent and provisions without any income? In his case the loss of his paid position in the HIV/AIDS project only increased his dependence on the outreach network: other than potentially returning to his relatives, there was nowhere he could go. His experience during those few October days illuminated how permeable the boundary between being an employee or a client of outreach could be.

Sello, it turned out, had no desire to return to the location in the rural Eastern Cape from
whence he had come, nor to the place of his mother’s kin in Sebokeng (a township south of Johannesburg) where he had also lived for a time. This is what he told me when he came to visit the next day. Our exchange, which lasted a good two hours, constituted the beginning of what would develop into something of a ‘long conversation,’ one that persisted throughout the period of my fieldwork and beyond. Sello became a regular visitor at the flat in much the same manner as did Ontibile (although Sello visited more often)—a manner I incessantly fretted over, for our relationship came to be based (aside from some form of mutual trust, or so I would like to believe) on his partial dependence on me for food and money. Sello would share bits and pieces about his life in the location and in Sebokeng—the two homes he had known before coming to Pretoria in 2005—and I in turn would share a meal, or my wallet. It was in this way that I learnt of his youth in the location (‘I was bad then, I steal the money from my mother, me and my friends we buy the drugs, we eat the money’), of his daughter (‘She stays with her mother, she is four now’), of the time he was arrested and the months he spent in prison (‘Eish, the police, the judge, they ask the questions, so many questions! So I decide I only answer with yes. Why did you steal? Yes. Where do you live? Yes. How old are you? Yes.’).

My flatmates, along with other black women staff at JPP, diffidently observed my unfolding ‘friendship’ with Sello. Their reserve to openly criticize me in this regard was likely due to my ‘otherness,’ my white and foreign status, which seemed to grant me a considerable amount of leeway. They of course knew that I occasionally gave him money and provided for some of his subsistence needs; I in turn was well aware of their disapproval, if not contempt of my actions. Through my relationship with Sello I was in fact repeatedly breaking the one ‘rule’ a number of women had firmly laid down during the early stages of my research: they did not want my money, my charity. To offer them money in times of need—in other words, regularly—would have been tantamount to the worst of insults, since women knew they would
struggle to pay me back. As Marcel Mauss astutely argued years ago, an unreciprocated gift “makes the person who has accepted it inferior” (1990 [1950]: 65)—a veracity that also powerfully speaks to the process via which mutual respect (and hence self-respect) is established and maintained.

Fast forward again, this time to a February evening during which Sello appeared at our gate just as Nyeleti, Maya, a friend of Maya’s and I were getting comfortable in anticipation of the locally popular soapie *Generations*. Seating himself on the living room floor, he announced that he did not just want to talk to me but had something important to say to all of us. ‘Yes… I’m looking for the sponsors; it is for my music, my art.’

Again I noticed the suspicious, guarded look appear on my roommates’ faces. ‘Ee?’

‘I’m looking for the sponsors because, my guitar is out of tune and I need the guitar tuner. I was at school, I tune it with the piano, when I come home it is out of tune again. I walk everywhere to find the cheap one, it’s fifty bucks (Rand; $6.25), so now I’m looking for the sponsors… Tshepo, she give me twenty bucks already.’

A moment of incredulousness ensued, soon broken by Maya’s cynical ‘Eish, you’re pulling our leg!’ and Nyeleti’s loud laughter. In what registered with me as anger, Maya rose from the couch and removed herself from the situation by withdrawing to her room, her friend in tow. Nyeleti, as usual slower than Maya, took her time to let the laughter pass before sighingly raising herself up as well. The subsequent transition from amusement to animosity shocked me in its swiftness and harshness as she derisively said, ‘*Go home* Sello, *go home!*’ before turning in for the night.

It was a laughing matter, it was a raging matter. Sello’s seeking out and acceptance of charity—mine and that of other ‘strangers’—denoted an absence of kin relations upon which he, in the view of my flatmates, ought to have been drawing instead of engaging in the disreputable
act of relying on non-kin for survival. In addition, what made women’s laughter particularly ambiguous were the parallels between their own uncertain situations and his: they also were thoroughly familiar with conditions of poverty, which they knew could ‘turn extreme’ at any moment; they also depended on JPP for survival. In a sense, by laughing at Sello they were also laughing at themselves; at their own maddening experience of race- and class-based disrespect. Yet their way of combating marginalization and disrespect differed radically from his: in contrast to his ‘choice’ of staying homeless and kinless in the inner city, they spent virtually all of their free time with extensive kin networks, mostly in the townships surrounding Pretoria, and it was equally these structures of relatedness they fell back on in times of hardship.\(^5\)

Sello’s disgrace was not poverty, but kinlessness, which women tended to view as a by and large self-imposed condition of ‘abandonment’ (cf. Biehl 2005). Furthermore, in this he was not unique. There were many others—certainly among outreach clients—who found themselves in similar circumstances. Thus when Siphiwe, the HIV-positive Zulu man who faithfully guarded Lesedi’s entrance each day, lost his job in March 2007, he became an object of women’s mocking laughter in much the same manner as had Sello. Siphiwe took the loss hard, yet refused to follow people’s advice and travel home to KwaZulu-Natal; angry and disillusioned, he stopped taking ARVs and began to consume alcohol at an alarming rate. Before long he was kicked out of the shelter where he had been staying. For the next few weeks he slept beneath a bougainvillea bush on JPP’s parking lot, and in the early mornings could be observed washing his face at the outside water tap. ‘Check, Siphiwe’s bathing!’ my flat mates would giggle, and with a naughty nod toward the other’s privates, ‘I think he missed a spot!’

In addition to illuminating the ways locally salient conceptions of race continue to figure

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\(^5\) Among the inner city’s new black population subtle disparities thus exist between those who come from the townships surrounding Pretoria and those whose places of origin are located at a greater distance from the city centre—in the ‘rural areas.’ For the latter, due to distance (in conjunction with financial constraints), it is often more challenging to maintain familial relationships.
in everyday life at JPP and beyond, women’s black humour thus also sheds light on the complex structuration of class; on how shifting class locations and relations play themselves out and are played out by those who inhabit and embody them. Generally speaking, women did not consider poverty shameful in and of itself; instead what made or could make this condition disgraceful—and thus subject to women’s ridicule—was its entanglement with kinlessness, as in the lives of assumedly homeless persons. The capacity of poverty to ‘uproariously disrespect’ is generated in and through the absence of relatives or a home, regardless of how destitute they or it may be. In the last section of this chapter I turn to a third ubiquitous subject of women’s humour and laughter: that of gender subjectivity, as connotated in jokes and satirical enactments regarding men and sexuality.

**Of Men, Sex and Pussy Cats: Gendering Hard Laughter**

I’m telling you, even Mandela, when he got married to Graça Machel he said in an interview that he is still fine, he is still strong! He will get some medicine, some *muti*, that way his penis will be up the whole night and Graça will be very satisfied, no problem! If you look at her, she looks healthy and strong, you can see that they are doing it! He is a tiger, Mandela!

With this humorous, if cheeky assertion Nyeleti soon had everyone present in our small living room—Emma, her boyfriend Joel, Maya, Maya’s sisters Nomsa and Sesi, and myself—doubling up with laughter. It was still early in the morning, and the seven of us had just gathered in front of the television for our usual breakfast, a slice of buttered white bread and a cup of instant, well sugared coffee. Interestingly, just preceding her depiction of the sexual prowess of South Africa’s former (and well aged) State President thanks to the miraculous power of muti, Nyeleti had been painting a picture of dutiful wifely behaviour in marriage. Upon marrying, she had

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6 Adam Ashforth defines muti, also referred to in common parlance as ‘medicine’ or ‘traditional medicine,’ as “substances that serve as the medium of engagement between [a] witch and his or her victim” (2005: 9). While a witch’s employment of muti signifies an intention to harm, ordinary persons may use it to ward off a perceived threat. In the words related here a third ostensible usage of muti is distinguished, if in jest: as a means to ensure the wellbeing of one’s physical condition.
declared, a woman must move to her new husband’s place and raise her children there; she must join his church; she must cook pap and *morogge* (a type of spinach) for him; and she must do all the washing. Then, moving seamlessly into a joking mode, she had begun to describe the husband’s side of the bargain: keeping his wife sexually satisfied, if need be with the help of some ‘traditional medicine.’ Her reference to Mandela was followed by an equally amusing portrayal of an old man she had allegedly ‘been with’ some years ago.

In my interpretation, Nyeleti’s charade constituted an immediate, darkly funny rebuff to Emma and Joel’s sleepy-eyed appearance in the living room that morning. In recent weeks Joel had been making a habit of staying overnight at the flat, a development I knew Nyeleti to be critical of, yet by and large powerless to do anything about. Her articulation of gender roles in marriage had started out on a serious note as she had addressed our German flatmate primarily: ‘Emma, when you and Joel get married…’ Noticing Emma’s apprehensive frowns (which made their appearance about halfway down the list of wifely tasks) Nyeleti’s tone had turned quasi-serious; by the time she got to describing the husband’s responsibility her performance had transformed into one of feisty, aggressive laughter. It was also at this point that Nyeleti’s claims seemed to have become too much for Joel, who until then had been awkwardly grinning along. Smiling sheepishly, he excused himself and made for a hasty escape to Emma’s bedroom.

Yet clearly Nyeleti’s performance was not just revelatory on the point of Emma and Joel’s relationship. In fact, it was episodes like these that increasingly came to captivate me whilst in the field: how through brief moments of hard, carnivalesque-like laughter, at times barely a minute in length, women time and again seemed to allude to the ever-shifting yet staunchly rooted complex of socioeconomic structures, hegemonies and experiences that had produced their subjectivities. Especially at first my observations in this regard generated more questions than answers. Taking Nyeleti’s black humour as a case in point, concurrent with her
commentary on Emma and Joel’s mixed-race liaison, what sorts of other messages was she also sending? Where, in this performance and others like it, were her own memories and emotive experiences of marriage to be located? What were the implications of her assertions regarding Mandela—a figure I knew her to otherwise admire and respect—and the potent, yet also derisory role of muti? And what of the old man she had ostensibly ‘been with’ at an earlier stage in her life?

In attempting to unravel the crucial role played by gender subjectivity in women’s hard laughter, allow me to begin not with these questions but with a departure: that of Joel, around what perhaps constituted the climax of Nyeleti’s boisterous act. It was, after all, only when Nyeleti arrived at the subject of the husband’s role that she herself started laughing, signifying to the rest of us that from then on things promised to get ‘truly funny’—at least for the women gathered in the living room. Alternatively, with Joel Nyeleti’s words likely registered as a not-so-subtle criticism; a quite explicit warning that his behaviour with Emma was now seriously getting out of hand. Having discussed the matter with Nyeleti on separate occasions, I knew that she had previously confronted Joel in Shangaan—her and Joel’s mother tongue, which neither Emma nor myself could follow—and that her primary concern was that Emma would ‘safely’ return to Germany (that is, neither pregnant nor HIV-positive) where she could ‘find a nice German boy.’ What confounded me in the roughly two and a half months during which these events transpired was Nyeleti’s and other women’s almost fanatical insistence that Emma must at all costs be prevented from finding out about Joel’s ‘girlfriends’ in the township, with one of whom he had a seven-year-old daughter. When I learned of these concerns—and at that early stage in my research women would have preferred it if I had not—they made me swear that I would not tell Emma, nor any other white person at JPP. Although I was tempted to do so at times, I never did; instead I found myself looking in on the tragicomic world of laughter, a
world imbued with an astuteness I had rarely thus witnessed before.

Joel’s departure from the living room denoted his knowledge that Nyeleti’s comments constituted a critical assessment of his relationship with Emma, for which she held him principally responsible and which she felt he ought to end. That this was unlikely to happen was something of which she was equally well aware; hence her rowdy amusement at the image of Joel and Emma as man and wife. The notion is darkly funny precisely because it is absurd: Joel would, Nyeleti ‘knew,’ prove unable (or unwilling) to keep Emma pleased in the marriage bed, to say nothing of providing for her or assisting her with daily household chores. In reacting to Joel’s unwanted presence Nyeleti tellingly blended condemnation with hilarity; her laughter, in which she was instantly joined by the other women, was intensely frank and chillingly feigned at the same time.

Drawing on the work of Bakhtin (1984 [1968]), Goldstein points out that in Felicidade Eterna she became a member of “a chorus of ‘laughing people’…—in this case, a chorus of women and children sharing stories and making each other laugh” (2003: 5). Similarly, in a paper addressing ‘dirty joking’ among Shiite Muslim women in a Bahraini village, Anke Reichenbach and Fatema Hashem also emphasize the gendered context in which suggestive jokes are told. “Only in the protected sphere of all-female gatherings,” they write, “women are allowed to laugh out loud and to express their sense of nonsense” (2005: 73). To these ethnographic instances the gendered team performances of my female friends in Pretoria’s inner city may be added. The black humour I observed in this urban South African domain also chiefly emerged in women’s relations with their ‘sisters’—other black women, including both biological and fictive kin; not surprisingly, this was most poignantly the case with laughter and mockery pertaining to men and sexuality. Certainly the flat formed a markedly gendered space, not least due to the ease with which my housemates and their female visitors engaged in sex
jokes within the privacy of its walls. Beyond this intimate sphere, whenever they were in each other’s company, a suggestive joke might be told or a brief show of the Pussy Cat enacted, sending them into howls of laughter.

Arguably the vignette presented at the outset of this section formed something of an exception in comparison to the ways women more commonly engaged in suggestive humour. More precisely, Nyeleti’s performance at the flat that morning was probably less ambiguously condemning, more overtly critical than the majority of the comments, jokes and enactments I observed—a quality attributable to Joel’s presence and the concern over his involvement in an ‘impossible’ mixed-race relationship. Here, I would suggest, one could quite straightforwardly argue that Nyeleti’s and the other women’s hard laughter was of a markedly resistant or resisting sort, the explicit object of their resistance being Joel. Generally however, humour regarding men and sex tended to be considerably more ambivalent in meaning; particular occurrences of gendered hard laughter decidedly more difficult to interpret.

Although—as with Emma—suggestive banter also constituted a key means through which women interacted with me (e.g. by commenting on my body or clothing, suggesting who I should ‘become friends’ or ‘spend some time with’ in addition to my boyfriend, offering me condoms), clearly the practice illuminated gendered positions and processes pertinent to their lives and relations rather than mine. Evoking a wide range of phenomena and individual experiences, such joking formed a kind of running commentary on any perceived departure of ‘normative’ heterosexual relationships. Accordingly, one topic that could suddenly produce an abundance of mirth concerned the strategies a woman might employ in the event of a boyfriend’s or husband’s infidelity. ‘A woman’s best weapon is being sexy!’ Lily once asserted to several of us as we were having dinner. She continued, between mouthfuls of rice:

What you have to do is go see him! Ee! You tell him you have to see him once more. And then, you visit the shops. As I said you have to use your weapons! You buy the new
bra, you buy the G-string. You buy the shirt that is maybe a little bit see-through. The clothes must be tight. Then you bathe, you put on the clothes, you visit him at his house. You seduce him on the bed!

The hilarity such words generated was an indicator of the common, yet often vaguely concealed practice of having or keeping multiple partners, conceived of as a serious threat to relationships. As women sometimes warily pointed out about one or another man they knew (e.g. Joel), ‘Aowa that one, he keeps three girlfriends!’

Another gendered theme addressed through humour and hard laughter was the alleged sexual potency or skilfulness of old, well-off men, as briefly alluded to earlier. Here women might satirically recall or make up an experience they had ‘enjoyed’ in the past, beginning with the laughter-inducing statement ‘Yo! He wanted me!’ Such declarations tended to be followed by detailed descriptions of the man’s wealth as it had been displayed in his house and bedroom—the quality of the Jacuzzi, the size of the bed, the number of pillows—and be concluded with a more or less graphic portrayal of the owner’s sexual appetite, as in the assertion ‘He could ride the whole night!’ Beyond the amusement such exposés generated they ambiguously spoke to the appeal potential ‘sugar daddies’ held, specifically for women who were desperately poor and kinless (see Hunter 2002; Chapter 5), or who had been disappointed in one or more previous relationships.

Lastly, concurrent with sex jokes women also frequently enacted the Pussy Cat, a brief but aggressive gendered performance bordering on the pornographic via which they rendered themselves excessively erotic and sexually tempting. As with suggestive banter, the Pussy Cat was chiefly performed within the intimate bond of sisterhood and could be donned in seconds—in response, for instance, to the statement ‘You look nice today!’ The basic stance of the Pussy Cat saw women straightening their backs, pushing out their breasts, turning their faces slightly sideways, and pursing their lips, all the while gazing around with alluring yet laughter-filled
eyes. More elaborate versions involved a confident gait evocative of models marching down a runway, and could be triggered by a memory of sex in the past, its expectation in the near future, or a dirty joke.

As I came to understand it, the graphicness of the Pussy Cat was situated at the heart of women’s humour; it constituted the most explicit performative mode women engaged in in the everyday negotiation of gender. Yet it satirically embodied not just women’s knowledge and experience of gender subjectivity, for at times it simultaneously evoked the myriad ways their lives had been shot through with experiences of racial and class-based marginalization and disrespect. Thus Maya’s sexually charged clowning at the flat around the time of the Feast of the Clowns (see Prologue to Chapter 1) constituted a mocking, subversive commentary on her white managers’ insistence that she ‘become a clown’ (nonsensically raceless, classless, genderless). In another example—that of Toko’s enactment at Thapelong with which I began this chapter—the Pussy Cat emerges as a sudden, intuitive line of defence in the face of terrible, and terribly classed and gendered, human suffering. Be it in different ways, both situations threatened women’s sense of self-respect, the first in its assumption that a temporary erasure or reversal of status would be possible and purposeful; the second through the radical negation of the one value—strength—Toko and others often proudly associated with ‘black womanhood,’ which Sarah’s vulnerable condition so desperately undermined.

**Conclusion**

If outreach workers like Nyeleti, Maya, Toko, Lily and others may be said to share a sense of cultural intimacy due to their joint knowledge of township life in apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa, in the JPP environment this is evidenced through team performances of critical commentary and hard laughter regarding a multiplicity of paradoxical realities. Goffman notes that a team is a grouping, but “not in relation to a social structure or social organization but
rather in relation to an interaction or series of interactions in which the relevant definition of the situation is maintained“ (1959: 104). In this regard the current chapter has assessed a number of interactions I observed amongst a segment of JPP’s employees that were evocatively characterized by hard laughter. Although the practice clearly speaks to the structural conditions of women’s past and present lives and the knowledge, amongst women, of a locally salient form of cultural intimacy, Goffman’s approach is particularly helpful in view of JPP’s diversity, where a team of women lay workers emerges distinct, different from other teams also present in the same environment (such as Afrikaner staff members). In the NGO milieu this team of women forms a “kind of secret society whose members may be known by non-members to constitute a society, even an exclusive one, but the society these individuals are known to constitute is not the one they constitute by virtue of acting as a team” (1959: 105). Societies contain teams; their cultural intimacies become apparent through team performances; what the notion of the team allows us to do is demonstrate how socially or culturally intimate knowledge is expressed in particular social settings and circumstances.

The social realities women encounter through their labour in the inner city are familiar to them; indeed a number are effects of the same broad township-to-inner-city movement they themselves also participate in. In the first category of persons discussed, Afrikaners and other ‘whiteys’ at JPP were the target of women’s hard laughter, precisely because these outreach leaders and co-workers continue to assert race-based dominance despite their claims to the opposite—and that in an urban context that has momentously transformed into a ‘black’ domain. In the second, that of ‘hobos’ or street persons, women’s black humour moves closer to home in the sense that in the figure of the hobo, women recognize what might happen to the self should they similarly ‘disavow’ the bonds of kin and community. Finally in the third category, that pertaining to men and sexuality, the incongruities of disloyalty, infidelity and gender violence in
women’s personal lives come to the fore, forming the most intimate subject of women’s laughter. In the latter subjects the ‘safe’ distance between Other (the target of women’s commentary) and self (commentator) collapses as women laugh at and mock not only men, but equally their own subjective positions in relation to men and possible compliance with men’s behaviour. This collapse is most affectively realized in the enactment of the Pussy Cat, a performance that in its silence (be it surrounded by laughter and talk) powerfully reveals the frequent ‘failure’ of words to capture gendered experience.

In sum, borrowing from Goldstein, I have analyzed hard laughter as a practice via which it becomes possible for women to speak about the everyday inconsistencies and ironies that permeate their work and personal lives. Yet beyond (or perhaps within) this, I would further suggest, hard laughter also performs another kind of labour. Moving away from the thought that it resists (as it may, in particular situations), we should also take stock of the manner in which occurrences of hard laughter serve to shield and protect participants’ self-respect. As elaborated in the dissertation’s Introduction, of essence here is that the quality of self-respect (as something a person ‘possesses’) can only be established through the exercise of mutual respect between different persons or parties. Given that overwhelmingly, women’s lives are witness to individual and social relations characterized by disregard, disrespect and even contempt, we may read the evocation of black humour and hard laughter as a responsive performance via which self-respect is safeguarded, just as the question of its lack is protectively veiled through the avoidance of laying bare subjective experience.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘My people stay that side’: Exploring City-Township Relations

Introduction: Via Van Der Walt

Cutting through Pretoria’s inner city in a north-south direction is Van Der Walt Street, one of its busiest thoroughfares. Each weekday from dawn to dusk, from those moments the sun’s first rays touch down on the city until darkness once again begins to hover over its corners, Van Der Walt witnesses an immense amount of activity. The commotion is particularly focused along a stretch of road comprising a few blocks, bordered by Boom Street to the north and Pretorius to the south. Within these perimeters, street vendors crowd the sidewalks with their wares. Hawkers take advantage of the plugged up traffic to wash windows or sell various goods. Members of Tshwane’s Traffic Police, presumably charged with the duty to keep some kind of order, keep watch on the corner with Vermeulen. Day in and day out a lone street preacher, whose foreboding message of doom appears to go largely unnoticed among passers-by, lingers around the crowds near the Shoprite entrance.

Such are Van Der Walt’s constancies, immediately recognizable amidst the at times overwhelming scurry of movement this street manages to incorporate. Van Der Walt’s main import, however, derives from its role as the most centrally located taxi rank in the inner city. The principal mode of transportation for township dwellers, taxis (slightly more costly than buses) are the fastest and therefore the preferred means via which commuters seek to get to the city or township. Van Der Walt is thus first and foremost a space signifying transit; it is a section of town the majority of people pass through rather than spend time in.

Of undeniable import, and equally well known for its aggressiveness and notorious driving habits (Dugard 2001; Hansen 2006), the taxi culture Van Der Walt daily exhibited was one my friends at JPP were intimately acquainted with. For some travelling by taxi formed an
everyday routine; for others it was one they participated in at least twice a week. Each Friday or Saturday after work, for instance, Nyeleti and Maya would pack together a few belongings and head for Van Der Walt, where they would catch a taxi to Mamelodi, the large township located on Pretoria’s eastern edge. On Sunday afternoons or early Monday mornings they would travel the same route in the opposite direction to once again take up their tasks at JPP.

As I grew more familiar with the inner city and my friends’ lives, Van Der Walt increasingly came to symbolize, for me, the incessant, restless movement between the various localities that collectively comprise and structure urban Pretorian life. To reiterate, following apartheid’s end Pretoria’s binnestad (Afrikaans, inner city) rapidly transformed into a predominantly black area (Bakker 2002);¹ hence during the period of my research none of its black inhabitants (with the possible exception of the very young) were from the inner city in the sense that they had been born or had extensive kin networks there. By the mid-2000s several parts of town had become known as ‘foreign neighbourhoods,’ as places ‘where the makwerekwere [Pedi, foreigners] stay,’ as some interlocutors would say (cf. Landau 2006 on Johannesburg); or, perhaps comparably, as ‘little Rhodesia,’ in the case of an elderly Afrikaner tannie (Afrikaans, aunty, denoting respect) who lamented the transformation of the streets around her church in particular. Others of the inner city’s new population had arrived from the ‘rural areas,’ specified either in terms of the names of former homelands such as Bophuthatswana or the Transkei, or referred to using the new provincial designations: Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga. Yet others called the townships surrounding Pretoria home: Atteridgeville, Mamelodi, Soshanguve, to name the nearest ones.

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¹ Studies of post-apartheid urban change have focused principally on Johannesburg (Beall, Crankshaw and Parnell 2002; Landau 2006; Mbembe and Nuttall 2004; Morris 1999; Murray 2008; Tomlinson, Beauregard, Bremner and Mangcu 2003) and to a lesser extent on Cape Town (Besteman 2008; Ross 2010) and Durban (Freund and Padayachee 2002); in this literature Pretoria remains underrepresented.
If for my black interlocutors Van Der Walt represented a point of arrival, for me it became a point of departure, the street from which I left the inner city to visit a friend’s family or attend one or another function in the townships. Initially I travelled such routes but sporadically; towards the end of my fieldwork almost weekly. In line with people’s work schedules, the majority of these trips took place over weekends, when they had ‘free time’ at home; it was also on Saturdays and Sundays that marriage celebrations and funerals tended to take place. Unless they lived permanently in the townships, weekday trips were limited to emergencies, such as a relative’s urgent need for cash or provisions, or the death of a family member or friend. Especially for those whose expenses included paying rent in the inner city, travelling by taxi was costly and could not be afforded each day.

Taking as its point of departure the constant movement I observed and participated in between the different urban settings in the Tshwane area, this chapter examines the relation between inner city and township against the backdrop of JPP’s religious imagination of the contemporary inner city. In the earlier consideration of the Feast of the Clowns (Chapter 1), we received an impression of how JPP and other outreach leaders conceptualize the need for the inner city’s transformation—both its past and present—via association with the Medieval Feast of Fools on the one hand and Christ as ‘holy Fool’ on the other. Preliminary in that chapter, we also gained insight into the incongruity of this week-long performance in the broader outreach context, comprised as it is of black outreach workers (and clients) whose subject positions and knowledge belie the possibility of achieving ‘real’ communitas. The current chapter picks up on this incongruity, but does so with significant differences: the ‘stage’ I engage with is the ordinary stage of outreach labour and life, whilst the main focus shifts from Afrikaner outreach leaders, in the first section, to black lay workers at JPP. What the chapter seeks to clarify is how
‘the city’ is multiply imagined and read, and how these different conceptions bear important consequences in relation to the moral drama JPP stages in the inner city.

The analysis developed in the ensuing pages draws on two sets of data. The first consists chiefly of a document penned by Johan, one of JPP’s Afrikaner managers, entitled Die Stad: ‘n Inleiding in die Teologie van die Stad (Afrikaans, The City: An Introduction to the Theology of the City). Johan initiated the writing of this document in 2007; at the time I had the opportunity to watch him present segments of it at JPP on two occasions (he completed the twenty-five page paper in 2008). The second set of data comprises fieldwork and interviews conducted with three interlocutors: Jonas, a young Tsonga man employed in the Children’s Ministry of JPP; Toko, the Pedi social worker at JPP’s Therapy Centre; and Nyeleti, my Shangaan flatmate whose post was in the NGO’s Teen Ministry. Intertwining insights from these sources, I show how JPP’s imagination of the contemporary inner city—with its specific religious ‘flavour’—emerges contrastive to those of its lay employees, whose imaginations of the (inner) city are markedly premised on their experiences and knowledge of township life. While, rather generically, in and beyond the document JPP draws links between the ‘decline’ of Pretoria’s city centre and inner cities the world over (especially those in the ‘Third World’), the individual accounts and enactments of black employees like Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti reveal the complexity of local urban processes and the ways regional history impacts upon the ‘fate’ of an inner city like Pretoria’s.

As Achille Mbembe argued some years ago in respect of Johannesburg, for many black South Africans the city represents a distinct urban form that ‘asks’ to be inhabited in the post-apartheid moment; that stages a certain allure that needs to be ‘conquered’; that denotes

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2 All citations from this Afrikaans document in the current chapter have been translated by me.
3 Johan told me that his main purpose for writing the document was to ‘get our staff to think more critically about what is happening in the city,’ which is also why he planned to translate it into English or to have it translated (his presentations of the material had been in English). He further added that ‘we’re thinking of making it required reading for new employees,’ although this had not yet been implemented in 2008.
opportunities of work and education (2004). For my interlocutors furthermore, in contrast to the city’s ‘modernity,’ the urban form of the township implied ‘tradition’ and ‘culture,’ alongside widespread poverty and joblessness. In part resonating with Mbembe’s theoretical musings, such were the ways in which people who came from the townships tended to evoke the differences. Yet notwithstanding such powerful (and compelling, for many) dualisms, I also found that if often ambivalently, the most deeply influential value attributed to the townships revolved around kin relations and responsibilities (cf. Mbembe, Dlamini and Khunou 2004: 505-6, who more generally mention the role of ‘friends’). It was this value, embedded in local understandings of what constituted ‘proper’ or ‘moral’ behaviour and exchange, that had people regularly taking taxis; that repeatedly brought them back to the townships to pay visits, contribute foodstuffs, or participate in family or community events. Consequently the lives of JPP’s black staff were markedly characterized by a sense of the interstitial; by an in-between-ness that had them decisively situated neither in the inner city nor in one or another township, but rather hazily, vacillatingly in both. If this reality may be proposed as one reason why the out-migration of the white population has not entailed a kind of instant ‘replacement’ in the form of an (idealized) black or even ‘mixed-race’ community in the inner city, the lack of engagement therewith in The City and amongst white outreach personnel more generally illuminates the incompatibility of the latter’s urban imagination with those expressed by (former) township dwellers.

Following a summation of JPP’s religious imagination of the post-apartheid inner city as outlined in The City, the chapter turns to the accounts of Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti. In attending to their narratives and enactments, Erving Goffman’s insights on the ‘presentation of the self’ (1959) again provide helpful directives. In some contrast to the previous chapter, wherein I evoked the notion of team performances, here I will be chiefly concerned with how interlocutors
presented the self to me (in interviews and other one-on-one conversations wherein I was the sole audience) and in various companies of which I was a member. In this regard I assume with Goffman that “when an individual appears before others he will have many motives for trying to control the impression they receive of the situation” (1959: 15)—an observation that holds particularly true in situations where people are introduced to one another or do not know each other well, or where intimacy is lacking. Should familiarity develop between persons, one may invite the other to join his or her team (when possible); simultaneously as well, one learns to ‘read’ the other’s performances and vice versa as these unfold in different settings (1959: 17-30). In sum then, through the stories of Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti I consider how they presented the self in the company of me and others, over the course of time, in relation to the township lives of their youths and their later movements between township and inner city.

A Theology of the City

Partially inspired by Robert Linthicum’s *City of God, City of Satan: A Biblical Theology of the Urban City* (1991), Johan’s delineation of a ‘theology of the city’ begins by noting that despite the ‘godlessness’ that characterizes many cities, in God’s eyes the city is far from nothing. In fact, “God even uses the city as the symbol upon which He will build His final kingdom.” In today’s cities we should not be merely touched by inhabitants’ suffering; indeed, he writes, cities place “a responsibility on our shoulders.” In brief, Johan summarizes the matter thus: “The world is seeping into our cities and we need to be there to meet them in the Name of Christ!”

But the challenge, the document continues, is not just one of mobilizing Christians to come to the inner city, for as important is our “thinking about the city and involvement therein.” This thinking and involvement urges a ‘second conversion’:

Our own conversion and path toward holiness was worked out for us by God—we ourselves have… worked through this over the years. Now however we enter the city, and we are not just dealing with one story, but with millions; not just with our own
personal sins, but with enormous communal sin; not just with a nicely worked out life, but with the lives of many who have only known life’s bad side. When we realize this, we enter a second conversion. God writes you into the story of the inner city and just as with your own conversion… it is not easy. Instead it is the opposite. View therefore your involvement in the city as the beginning of your pilgrimage to the city and allow yourself to be formed and changed. Remember: theology is much more a verb than it is a noun!

The Bible, Johan insists, was written “in the context of the city for people of the city, and especially also for people who want to serve the city.” Here he refers to Linthicum’s assertion that “The city is the locus of a great and continuing battle between the God of Israel and/or church and the god of the world” (1991: 23). In the Bible this urban battle is symbolized through the cities of Jerusalem and Babel, where Jerusalem is the “City of God, His beloved city and also the name of His future city,” the New Jerusalem. By contrast, Babel is the city that stands against Jerusalem, the latter’s opposite.

In today’s cities as in those of Biblical times, the document further proposes, both Jerusalem (God) and Babel (the god of the world, or Satan) are present. The tension between the two is “everywhere apparent”:

On the street, where a homeless person shares his bread with a friend, but where we also cross paths with abandoned children; in a church’s worship, yet where that same church refuses to take care of widows and orphans; in a City Council member’s fight for better sanitation in an apartment block, but where banks refuse to grant loans to prospective homeowners; in a prostitute’s selling her body to feed her children, even as she cannot but sell her body to feed her children.

Despite God’s “great love” for the city, ‘Babel-ness’ is everywhere apparent—yet the sin of the city denotes more than the sum total of inhabitants’ personal sins, amounting also to what Johan calls “communal sin.” Communal sin surfaces in the “power structures of the city,” alternately its “systems,” of which there are three: spiritual, political and economic. For many years now these have been “twisted by Satan,” whereby a spirituality of communion with God has been replaced by “ritualism,” a politics of justice by one of “stratification and oppression,” and an economics of stewardship by one of “profit and exploitation.” God’s answer or project for
contemporary cities includes a constant looking forward to the New Jerusalem, a working toward the transformation of cities’ distorted structures, and a critical evaluation of the work of the church in the city, including its commitment to the poor.

Having remained focused thus far on what the Bible has to say about cities, the document then switches gears to discuss the origin of the inner city and its poor. The ensuing sections are more explicitly concerned with Pretoria’s inner city, a site Johan connects to other urban domains in the ‘Third World’ and elsewhere. Cities, he asserts, are constituted by “pull and push factors.” On the one hand the city draws people in due to the work opportunities it provides, its entertainment, cheap housing, the availability of basic needs, educational opportunities, and institutions like hospitals, clinics and so on. The city may also be attractive to those seeking anonymity or a place to hide. These pull factors are however accompanied by a host of push factors, including “noise, violence, crime, overcrowding, meaninglessness or insignificance, contamination, and being overworked or jobless.” It is the tension between the two that, as the urbanizing process continues, eventually leads to suburban development:

The possibility of work draws people, but the overcrowding may well push them away. When people become mobile, i.e. when they make enough money to be able to take the bus each day or afford a vehicle, they often give in to the negative push factors without giving up on the positive pull factors. Hence they move away from the city centre whilst continuing to work there [until moving on to work in the suburbs]. Sadly factories, businesses and institutions such as schools, hospitals and so on are not immune to this process. They also abandon the inner city in favour of safer, more personal, quiet areas around the inner city… This is how suburbs with their own housing, industrial and commercial centres are established.

Those who remain behind in the inner city are the poor, who lack the necessary funds to access the suburbs and its comforts and pleasures. “Housing may be cheap, but is no longer properly managed. Educational [and work] opportunities are scarce, due to so much expertise having left the inner city. Churches also follow the exit route taken by money, goods and people.” The result is the “economic, social and spiritual decay of the inner city’s people.”
The document is concluded by noting that the inner city’s suffering is “indirectly caused by the wellbeing of the suburbs”; that the latter’s economic welfare is “dependent on the poverty (cheap labour) of the inner city and townships.” Though the geographic distance between inner city and suburban dwellers is minor, economically, socially and spiritually the distance is vast and ever increasing. This is not unique to Pretoria or South African cities, but amounts to a “global trend.” Johan ends up on a religious note by querying whether “poor rich persons” and “rich poor persons” exist, answering in the positive. “A poor rich person is someone who has lots of money, but who perhaps due to greed has lost his friends or family, or has fallen prey to one or another addiction, or has lost his relationship with God.” Such a person is “socially and spiritually poor.” By contrast, a rich poor person may be “economically poor, but is rich in God and socially healthy.”

Johan’s rendition of a theology of the city, particularly the notion of the need for a second conversion, is reminiscent of the themes encountered in the Feast of the Clowns, when (once-)dominant churches and formations of social and individual suffering are critically assessed by outreach leaders who call for their transformation. In *The City* these concerns are repeated in the assertion that churches often also “follow the exit route taken by money, goods and people” and that the current ‘decline’ of the inner city—following a quite straightforward Marxist or class analysis—is due to its abandonment by the economic and related powers that be. In an elementary sense, we will do well to acknowledge, Johan’s consideration of the urban form of the city and inner cities within and beyond South Africa is not inaccurate; yet in view of the pertinent context (including JPP and the transition from apartheid to post-apartheid) the absence of any reference to apartheid or the recent past appears stark. In the document, amidst the discussion of cities and suburbs, the urban form of the township is mentioned but once, in relation to the suburbs’ dependency upon it and the inner city for cheap labour. Although the
fact that townships are not suburbs—despite their location on cities’ outskirts—is thus tacitly acknowledged, the lack of engagement with this reality, arguably even its erasure, emerges deeply ironic, particularly at JPP where the majority of staff members bear township roots.

This incongruity can best be demonstrated by addressing in some depth the narratives and enactments of some of JPP’s lay workers, whose lives are distinctly characterized by unremitting movement between township and inner city. As will become clear, this movement tends to be profoundly ambivalent, marked by a dichotomous sense of the township as a traditional, cultural, impoverished domain versus the inner city as the site of modernity, opportunity, and (potential) wealth and freedom, even as (former) township dwellers continue to value their places of origin by recognizing and engaging in reciprocal kin and community obligations.

**Words at Work: In Conversation with Jonas**

‘Khumo le lehumo, di lala mmogo, neh? Khumo, it’s wealth. Lehumo, it’s poverty. Di lala mmogo, it means they sleep under the same blanket. That means, you can be having a lot of money today. But you don’t know what tomorrow holds for you. You might lose it and tomorrow have nothing. So, to have a lot of money, that doesn’t mean that you have wealth; and then, that doesn’t say you must undermine the other people. Neh?’

When Jonas evoked these Tswana words during an interview in March 2007, he drew on them to answer a rather sensitive question I had just asked regarding the socioeconomic differences so readily apparent among JPP’s black and white staff. After a brief moment of hesitation he opted to answer my query ‘with two answers,’ and it was through the first of these that the above aphorism emerged.

‘Let me start with myself, neh? For me it’s not a problem. Because some people make up a world, with finances. But I don’t make a world with finances. That is the reason that it’s not
my problem. I don’t care how much money some people have, how many expensive cars. But what is important to me is what they do with their money. That is something that catches my attention.

‘As long as the person who has money doesn’t undermine some other people. And the other thing is, some they were born into rich families with lots of money, and with lots of worth. But some people they worked for it. And the challenging people are the people who worked for it.

‘They are examples to me. Because I believe the person who worked for something will know how to use the thing correctly and profitably. More than the person who inherited it. Because some they inherit it and misuse it, or they undermine some other people. And they forget—there’s this other word that says—it’s a Tswana word that says, Khumo le lehumo, di lala mmogo…’

Jonas’s answer, up to this point, differed considerably from most of the observations and reactions I had been gathering from other black outreach workers. His words were distinctly thoughtful, cautious, measured; they refused to impart immediate blame on the generally much better-off Afrikaners who were his colleagues and managers at JPP. Indeed Jonas carefully steered clear of the thorny subject of race—until he came to the second part of his answer.

‘Now, on the other hand. I had a problem and this is still my problem, neh? With all the JPP camps, I’ve been in lots of campsites. And, all the domestic workers are black people. That is my problem. Because, then I realized that a lot of black people are not financially empowered.

‘You know things like this, neh? But my problem is, it’s not about white people, I don’t want to say it that way. The reason I’m saying this is because everyone can do anything and everything they want to. But some people they don’t see opportunities. Some of them they misuse opportunities. Some of them they’re waiting for someone to give them a job, so that they
can get money. And the thing is, they don’t use their heads to think! Someone is thinking for them. And it will always be like this, if someone is thinking for you, you must depend on them. And this is the price that they pay.’

Here Jonas alludes to how race and class continue to be powerfully enfolded in each other in contemporary South Africa; yet his description and interpretation of this reality remain tentative. To make his position more tenable he could, for example, have referred to Lerato, the domestic worker who could be daily observed dusting the desks and mopping the floors of JPP’s offices, including the one Jonas worked in. He might have mentioned, as his black co-workers often did, the strain of trying to make ends meet with salaries ranging from a mere R1000 ($125 CAD) to perhaps R4300 ($537.50) per month. Or he could have remarked on those from his family or community who once or still were employed as ‘maids’ or ‘servants.’

The fact that he did not—that in some way he seemed to want to refuse drawing certain conclusions about racial differentiation, or to illuminate possible interpretations thereof with specific cases or patterns discernible at JPP—is telling, alongside the critical conviction that ‘people they don’t see opportunities,’ ‘they don’t use their heads to think.’ These words, together with the Tswana expression highlighting the ultimate uncertainty of one’s economic circumstances, cannot be sufficiently grasped in terms of JPP as an NGO, but need to be elucidated in the broader context of Jonas’s memories and narratives regarding his life, including the movements between township and city that have come to characterize it.

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Jonas himself efficiently divided his young life into three distinct periods: his childhood in the township of Mabopane and the nearby rural area (as he called it) of Kgabalatsane; his teenage years, the turbulent time when he converted to Christianity; and his young adulthood in

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4 During apartheid Mabopane was a location in the Tswana homeland of Bophuthatswana; following the regime’s demise it was incorporated into North West Province. Situated on the border between North West and Gauteng provinces, its proximity to Pretoria is relatively close.
Pretoria’s inner city.

‘I was born twenty-four years back, so in 1983; I was born in Mabopane, which is in the far north of Pretoria. I grew up for some few years, and then we moved from Mabopane to Kgabalatsane. It’s about six kilometres from Mabopane, so it’s not far, it’s a neighbouring village, a rural area. That side that we moved, there was no electricity by then. So we used candles, paraffin, we used wood sometimes to cook.

‘I grew up in a… not so much financially empowered family. We struggled a little bit, with quite a few things. Yeah and when we moved that side, I was about five years, and I started my schooling in that place. I started with the preschool…’

Here Jonas broke off, falling into voluble laughter. I failed to understand what was so humorous until he explained that his mother had tried to get him enrolled in the first grade instead of in preschool in order to save money. Jonas went on to recount the different grades he had followed, and at which schools.

‘Before I go further, I’m the ninth child in our family. We are a family of ten children, and the other one passed away somewhere in ’93, in a car accident. So now we are left, nine children.

‘My parents, they are still there. But my father is very old, he was turning eighty-six somewhere… I think the fourth or third of February. And now my mother is turning seventy-one or seventy-two, somewhere in April.⁵

‘After Grade 12 I didn’t have money to go to the university, because of the financial problems. So I stayed for two years, doing nothing. I got a little job that was paying me… some peanuts. [grins] I worked for two or three months, and the job was over. I thought maybe I will like it, to gather some money, to further my studies.

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⁵ Jonas was born into a polygynous family; his birthmother was his father’s second wife.
‘So I stayed for two years at home, until I came to JPP in 2004. It’s three years now. I came to JPP through my sister, Ruth.’

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‘I’m Tsonga. You know the background of the Tsonga people, they stayed with the Nguni, it’s Zulu, Swati, Xhosa and Ndebele. They were from the neighbouring areas, as we take it from the history. And they were friends. And they believed more, in gods.6

‘I grew up in a sangoma [Zulu, ‘traditional healer’] family. My mother was a sangoma, I think she’s still a sangoma. And my aunt was also a sangoma, my father’s sister. So our background was more of a sangoma. And that, we took it as life, by then.7

‘But it came to pass, as I was in Grade 7, that I got saved into this Christian religion. At first I didn’t believe that much into it, because of my background. You know, things that you were taught at a young age… it’s not easy to get rid of it. It’s very strong, more than something that you get somewhere along the way. That, you can lose it anytime, anywhere.

‘So it was not easy, losing this my sangoma belief. I got to know this Christian belief in ’96; and then, I didn’t believe that much into it. I just heard about it, a little and a little more. But I lost it, somewhere in ’97, ’98. And I got it again in ’99. That’s when my understanding

6 Ancestors.
7 In his discussion of traditional healing in Soweto, Adam Ashforth writes: “Most discussions of traditional healers generalize the Zulu usage of sangoma and inyanga to cover all traditional healers serving Africans in the region, regardless of ethnicity. Other commonly encountered local terms include the Sotho ngaka (dingaka) and Xhosa igqirha (amagqirha). Common usage in Soweto also favours the Zulu terms, and in everyday parlance inyanga and sangoma are often used interchangeably” (2005: 52). In Pretoria’s inner city and surrounding townships people evoked the terms sangoma and ngaka to refer to traditional healers; inyanga was used but rarely. Ngaka could also denote a ‘modern’ or ‘Western’ medical doctor.

Drawing on the work of Harriet Ngubane (1981), Ashforth goes on to show that the “literature on traditional healing in South Africa conventionally distinguishes between two types of traditional healers: ‘diviners’ and ‘herbalists’… Since sangoma rituals centre on communication with ancestors and other spiritual beings, many writers believe it is more appropriate to consider sangomas as religious practitioners rather than simply functionaries in a putative ‘traditional health system.’ The inyanga, thus, can be treated as a medical practitioner, whereas the sangoma belongs primarily in the field of religious activity” (2005: 52-53). Ngubane furthermore clarifies that inyangas are males whereas sangomas are usually females (1981: 361). As will become clear, the analyses of Ngubane and Ashforth resonate with Jonas’s account on several fronts: it was the women in his kin network who held sangoma positions; it was also partly the ‘sangoma belief system’ that he eventually forewent in favour of Christianity. See also John Janzen’s work on ngoma (1992).
was a bit matured.

‘So then I changed my belief into Christianity. I was attending this other church, they have a uniform of white and blue.\(^8\) And then, they also believed in gods. So that is the reason that I changed from that church to this other church. Because I really don’t believe in gods! So, now I’m in the Jehovah Jireh Ministries. It’s like Rhema in Joburg, but it’s not as big, it’s still a developing church.\(^9\) It’s in Hebron, next to Mabopane, so I travel there every weekend. That’s where I feel comfortable, I feel home.’

I asked Jonas whether his conversion had created conflict in his family.

‘Sho! A very big conflict! And it was me and my sister, Ruth. We were only two, neh? And it took us away from our parents, for a while. You know, we were dependent on them in everything, we didn’t have income, we expected them to take care of us. But unfortunately they left us… quiet for a little while… not doing anything, not taking responsibility for us. Because of this thing. It was like we were disrespectful; and it sounded so, that we disrespected them, and disrespected the rules, and the father figure, the parenthood in the family.

‘It’s especially the old people. They find it very difficult, to understand this thing. They feel like—and I understand this. They feel that it’s a modern something. And then, it’s taking them away from the real thing. They feel like this new South Africa, it’s bringing new beliefs, and it’s taking away from their parents’ teachings and their parents’ beliefs. For them it looks like they are disrespecting their parents, even though their parents are not here.

‘Our grandparents and great-grandparents, they thought this way. But things didn’t change. At the end of the day they died with these kinds of diseases, they died with poverty…

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\(^8\) Likely a splinter group from the St. John’s Apostolic Church of Prophecy, founded by Christinah Nku in 1939 (see Landman 2006).

\(^9\) Jehovah Jireh Ministries in South Africa seems to be an offshoot of the Wilmore, Kentucky-based Jehovah Jireh Ministries International. Johannesburg’s massive Rhema Bible Church similarly has American roots: it was established by Pastor Ray McCauley in 1979 following his return from the U.S. where he studied at the Rhema Bible Training Center in Broken Arrow, Oklahoma. The Rhema label is part of Kenneth Hagin Ministries.
But, why can’t we change this? Because for me this is more of earning a way for the coming generation. Our parents have been doing this kind of tradition, neh? And their believing, it has been the same rules. We know that, if they do this, this is what’s going to happen thereafter. And thereafter. And later on, ‘This is good.’ And they’re going to die in poverty. They’re going to die in this kind of life.

‘So, it’s my poverty. If I live in poverty, my children, they’re also going to inherit that poverty. We’ve inherited the poverty from our grandparents, our great-grandparents. And then, we still want to hold on to that, live with that. For me it doesn’t make sense.’

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By the time I interviewed him Jonas had been living in the inner city and working at JPP for three years—a move, he emphasized, that had initially been motivated by a dire need for employment. It was through his older sister Ruth, his only sibling to also have converted, that he managed to get a job at JPP’s Development Centre (Ruth, who occupied a secretarial post at JPP, had joined the organization a year earlier).

Jonas described the various positions he had held and challenges he had faced between his old work at the Development Centre and his current post in the Children’s Ministry. In late 2005 he was diagnosed with TB, a condition that kept him away from work for over four months. Upon his return to JPP in 2006 he was offered a job in the Children’s Ministry, a position he accepted despite the salary being lower than the one he had previously received (and could continue to receive) at the Development Centre.

‘I didn’t come to the Children’s Ministry for the money. I came here because I thought, maybe I will get more challenged, and indeed I got more challenged, I’ve got more responsibilities here. I’m coordinating the Tjommies [Afrikaans, little boys] project. The financing part of the Tjommies project is my responsibility. The planning is my responsibility.
The day to day running of the project is my responsibility. So, it’s a big challenge. And I felt that this was something that I wanted to do.

‘As time was going, it came to an extent that I started to seek who I am. So, I want to understand now—because I had quite a few things that I needed by then—but, what do I want in reality? So, I don’t know exactly what happened! [grins] But it came to an extent of, I started to realize that I have interests in the business. And then, on the other hand I have interests in the charities.

‘I realized that I actually want to be in the businesses all my life. So that’s what I’m working on now. I want to equip myself for the corporate world. Not forsaking the charities, because my dream is to establish financial background in the businesses, and after that, go fulltime into charities. In the charities it’s more of giving, so I want to give something that I have, because it’s impossible to give something that you don’t have.

‘That’s what I call my life. If I speak of charity, and speak of businesses, that’s who I am, that’s everything. It came to pass that I realized that I don’t need anything more than this. As soon as I’ve established my financial background in the businesses then I’m going straight into the charities and I will die in the charities!

‘I didn’t have interest in markets or in the charities—never thought of the charities before in my life! Until I come to JPP and realize the need of the community in the inner city. And not only the inner city; in the townships and rural areas, because while I’m working in the inner city I think of where I come from, the village that I grew up in. And there they have more needs than in the inner city.’

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Well before our interview I had learned that Jonas took a taxi ‘to Mabopane’ each weekend to attend church and spend time with his family, and in the context of his narrative these weekly
trips had me all the more intrigued. What was Jonas’s relationship with his kin and home community in light of his alternative thinking about ‘traditions,’ religiosity and economics? Did he, with his monthly JPP salary, support his relatives with cash or basic provisions, as other outreach workers did?

‘I don’t know what to say about it, neh? I don’t know if I can say… I’m *mild* about this. I’m not so much supporting my family. What I can tell is, at home we’re still a tin house, and I’m working towards helping my parents build a brick house. Neh? I *don’t* want to do it by myself. I want to give a challenge to my parents as well.

‘I want them to have responsibility. I know my mother is struggling a lot, trying to do that, and I’m trying to help her. But I don’t want it to be my responsibility.

‘Because I have brothers and sisters, a lot of them. But if I look at the kind of lifestyle that they’re living… I really don’t have that much hope as pertaining to this. You know? Their kind of life… I tend to say, they were not as wise as they were supposed to be. Neh?

‘I’m not undermining them, first of all. I respect them a lot. And I realized they respect me as well. But the decisions that they made were not so clever, to the extent that the decisions created a better future for them. So, that is a problem. For this reason I’m saying that it’s not my responsibility, but I’m taking part in getting a better environment for my parents. And so my sister Ruth is doing.’

Through his narrative Jonas effectively steered me away from thinking chiefly in terms of his labour in outreach. Although he was well aware of the tensions JPP faced in seeking to ‘build a loving community in the inner city’—tensions pertaining to racial, class, and gender differentiation between outreach workers and clients and between outreach workers themselves—he instead chose to accentuate the notion of responsibility, specifically that relating to finances. This issue, he repeatedly indicated, bore implications that travelled far beyond the
inner city’s outreach context: to Mabopane, to Kgabalatsane. In this sense his use of the proverb ‘Wealth and poverty, they sleep under the same blanket’ turned out to be as revealing, if not more so, about his family and home community as it was about JPP and the broader outreach network.

‘You know that side that I come from, it’s a community that has this… I don’t know if it’s a concept, or what. If you get money, you use it, neh? And as time goes by, as their needs are growing, then the income it’s not enough to cover all their needs. So they borrow money to try to cover all their needs, and when their income comes they have to take part of that and cover their debts. And at the end of the day they don’t have enough money to cover their needs. So, it becomes a problem. They’re always living in debt, because after they paid for some debts there’s only a little amount left for the month. They have to borrow again, another money from someone else.

‘The people they don’t put a lot of their monies in the bank. What they do, it’s stokvel. They bring along their monies, as friends; they collect their monies and give it to someone, to use it. And maybe the following month, some they will collect it again and give it to another one. And just like that they’re trying to empower themselves. Ever since I was born this thing was there. But, it’s never made improvements in the lives of the community.

‘Then I realized that there’s something wrong with this thing. So, since last year, we’re trying to change this thing, it’s me and my friend. We started this community bank. It’s the same system that they used, of stokvel, but we’re trying to improve it. See if the new system will not empower the community in a certain period of time.

‘Instead of going to the commercial banks, or instead of gathering all their monies and dividing among themselves, they bring the money to this bank, and then if they need a loan, it gives them a loan at lower interests than the commercial banks. On the other hand it’s
developing the financial skills of the community. It’s equipping them for how to manage their monies, how to save their monies.\textsuperscript{10}

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Since I never accompanied Jonas on one of his trips to Mabopane, I never saw the corrugated iron shack where he had spent most of his life, nor did I meet his parents or witness the workings of his community bank. Yet the sincerity of his deliberations seemed to me to be reflected in the care he took of his older brother Philemon, ill with AIDS, who spent time in Ramatla Care Centre between 2006 and 2007; of his sister Ruth, whose boyfriend left her shortly after she became pregnant in 2006; and of his girlfriend Maddie, whom he married some months after she fell pregnant in mid-2008.

Still, in interpreting the living conditions and choices of his relatives and the broader black community, were his words at times not overly critical, if not downright harsh? What of apartheid and its myriad legacies, which—although I sought to ascertain his thoughts in this regard—he barely touched upon? To what extent was his analysis of township and rural life shared by others?

These questions serve to problematize and interrogate the ways negative value—poverty, stasis, ‘traditions’ (i.e. ngoma, gods, stokvel)—is attributed to the townships by those who grew up and continue to spend significant time there. For in this Jonas was not alone: other friends and acquaintances could be equally severe in their observations, or (in the case of women

\textsuperscript{10} Be it in a rather bare sense, Jonas’s description of the proceedings of stokvel in black communities is nonetheless accurate. Stokvel associations essentially serve as rotating credit unions or informal saving schemes, where members regularly contribute a fixed sum of money to a central fund. Each month a different member receives the money in the fund to use for his or her own needs or interests. While not as predominant in the inner city as in the townships and other areas where black roots lie deeper, at JPP I also came across several stokvel arrangements, though I only observed women participating in them.

In line with the broader thrust of his account, however, Jonas does not much elaborate on the social aspects of stokvel as a locally salient system of reciprocal exchange. In stokvels hard cash might be the predominant object that is being exchanged; yet, women told me, stokvel should only be engaged in ‘if you can also eat together.’ Belonging to a stokvel fundamentally implies participants’ continuous indebtedness towards one another, and in this sense it constitutes as much a moral practice as an economic one (cf. Piot 1999).
especially) could display a great deal of unease—sometimes hidden behind hard laughter (Chapter 3)—concerning their relations with people ‘back home.’ Against this backdrop the city emerges as a realm that opens up the possibility of (personal) transformation, which may—if one ‘uses one’s head to think,’ to paraphrase Jonas—bear positively on one’s life and the lives of one’s township relations. The next section, focused on Toko, describes and investigates these ideas further.

**Traces of a Soshanguve Childhood**

Some forty-five kilometres north of the inner city, beyond the arms of the Magaliesberg range, lies Soshanguve township. Like other townships an unequivocal product of the previous era and its ‘apartheid city’ designs, Soshanguve was established in 1974 on ‘trust land’—land scheduled for incorporation into a homeland—bordering on Mabopane in what was then Bophuthatswana, to house Sotho, Shangaan, Nguni and Venda people (hence the acronym, So-sha-ngu-ve).

In essence the founding of this township formed yet one more forced relocation project in a long row of comparable endeavours; in this case the objective was to freeze the further development of Mamelodi and Atteridgeville (the two townships nearest to Pretoria), in accordance with government policy that sought to limit the number of Africans living permanently in the cities. The new residents of Soshanguve consisted of persons and families who were considered to have been ‘homeless’ in Mamelodi or Atteridgeville, according to the definitions of the apartheid state (Mashabela 1988: 138).

I first traversed this sizable township in 2005, while on a two-month preliminary research trip in the country. At the time an acquaintance, a volunteer who assisted in the

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11 As a ‘trust town’ Soshanguve was to be merged into the neighbouring homeland of Bophuthatswana. Plans to this effect changed in March of 1988, when the government introduced legislation in terms of which Soshanguve was no longer a trust town, and hence no longer scheduled for such incorporation. According to the then-Minister of Development Aid, Dr. Gerrit Viljoen, the ‘inter-ethnic composition’ of Soshanguve’s population precluded the incorporation (Mashabela 1988: 138).
managing and day-to-day running of an AIDS hospice, invited me to join her each week as she delivered food parcels to impoverished AIDS sufferers and transported the ailing and dying to the hospice using the backseat of her car as a makeshift ambulance. In this way I became acquainted with one deeply distressing feature of township life—a feature I was to witness again a year later, this time in the inner city.

As noted in Chapter 2, Toko, a social worker employed at JPP’s Therapy Centre, was closely involved in the outreach network’s HIV/AIDS project. When I learned of this on the day we met in June 2006, I proceeded to tell her of my visits to Soshanguve a year earlier, which I imagined were perhaps comparable to her own work in the inner city. Despite her seemingly enthusiastic response—‘That’s where I’m from!’—and the familiarity that was to grow between us over the next couple of months, Toko, I soon learned, did not prefer to travel to or extensively speak about the township of her youth. ‘With my salary I am supporting my mother, my son and my brothers’ children,’ she once told me curtly during those early weeks of fieldwork; ‘I go home to Soshanguve to see my mom, those are the only times.’

Almost from the first moments of our acquaintance, Toko became the person alongside whom I carried out much of my work with particular outreach efforts in the inner city. The meetings she attended I also frequently joined, and in a sense her clients became my clients as we discussed their situations and sought to attend to them together. In this manner our collaboration soon began to spill over into other realms as well: one of us would need to get groceries; she would have to drop by her husband Lebo’s office to pick up the house key; her son Timothy, twelve years old, would quickly meet us on one or another corner to get money for a taxi, a mid-afternoon snack, or some airtime.

Toko tended to travel to Soshanguve on Thursdays after work or on Saturdays, two or three times a month. Initially she did not invite me to join her on these trips, declaring that ‘It’s
boring, eish!’ or that she stays ‘only a little while, to bring the pap and the meat.’ Hence I was pleasantly surprised when, after four months of fieldwork, she proposed a visit to her childhood home ‘so you can meet my mom.’ It would be short, she said, and she would not tell her mother that we were coming ‘or she will want to cook for us’; we would combine the trip with a visit she needed to make in Mabopane, a granny and her grandchildren, clients of hers whom she had promised to bring a food parcel and some second-hand clothes.

Located in Soshanguve’s Block K, a short distance from the main road running through the township, Toko’s mother’s ‘matchbox’ house appeared deserted upon our mid-afternoon arrival the next day. Curious neighbours watched from their doorways as we pushed open the rusted front gate, walking past a large avocado tree toward the back of the property. Between rapid Pedi words exchanged with a female neighbour and apologetic whispers to me regarding the dilapidated state of her mother’s house and the strewn-about garbage, Toko gave a few quick raps on the backdoor. ‘Mama, it’s me!’ And again, more loudly. ‘Mama, it’s me!’ Several moments passed before we detected some shuffling inside, followed by the turn of a key in the lock and the squeaky opening of the wooden door. Toko kissed her mother, a stout woman wearing a pair of glasses held in place by just one arm, on the mouth in greeting.

Ma Dora, sweating heavily, appeared exhausted. In a mix of Tswana and Afrikaans she informed us that she had been lying stretched out on the cement floor in the hallway, trying to sleep. It was so hot that she had trouble breathing; the cement floor was the coolest place in the house. Could we take her to the ngaka (Pedi, doctor) after our visit? We promised that we would do so.

‘Come Mieke, come sit in the living room!’ Toko called, and I duly followed her and Dora through the kitchen toward the front section of the house. The inside of Dora’s dwelling was in as derelict a state as the outside: the yellow plastic kitchen cupboards revealed many a
crack, pale pink paint was peeling off the walls, and the door to the bathroom was missing. In addition, in contrast to other township homes I had visited, Dora’s living room did not display either an elaborate ‘entertainment system’ or sizable dining room set. Its furnishings rather consisted of two well-worn loveseats decorated with springbok skins, a sturdy cardboard box that served as a coffee table, and three televisions, one of which worked ‘some of the days’ with the help of an antenna. Along with a baby blue poster depicting two grey kittens, framed photographs of Bishop Lekganyane, the founder of the Zion Christian Church (ZCC), and his son adorned the walls.

Toko introduced me to her mother, explaining that I was her new co-worker who had come from Canada ‘to study the inner city.’ Although Dora was clearly unwell she nonetheless sought to welcome me, firstly by berating Toko for not letting her know that we were coming and secondly by offering me coke to drink. ‘Come Mieke, we are going to the shop,’ Toko promptly responded, since there was no coke in the house. Or would I be fine with a glass of water?

During that first visit Dora told me she had worked for many years as a domestic in an Afrikaner household in town. She had retired two years ago, upon her sixty-fifth birthday, and now spent her days taking care of her grandchildren—‘then that one, then that one,’ in Toko’s words. ‘Ek sukkel baie…’ (Afrikaans, ‘I struggle a lot’) Dora sighed, indicating how each month she had to make do with a government pension grant (R920 at the time of my fieldwork, or $115) and with whatever her daughter could provide. Toko later estimated that she contributed about R500 ($62.50) to her mother’s household every two weeks. To this end she would purchase staple foods such as pap, rice, meat and vegetables in the inner city ‘where it’s cheaper’; thus laden with provisions she would travel to Soshanguve by taxi, carrying the heavy bags to her mother’s house for the last leg of the journey.
In the previous section I drew on the words of Jonas to introduce one way in which city-township relations are conceptualized among those traversing the inner city. Although I also interviewed Toko in early 2007, with her it was through participant observation that various strands of her life story emerged over time, in ways much more intricate than the interview alone managed to capture. In my depiction of Toko’s life I draw on both sets of data.

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‘I was ve-e-ery sick when I was growing up. Ve-e-ery sick, I was in and out of hospital until 1999.

‘Mostly it was the headaches, and the vomiting. They wanted to check where there was something wrong, but they didn’t find anything. Like when I was in school, I used to collapse. So they wanted to know what was the problem, what was wrong. But then they judged it to be a migraine. And then they told me how to live, how to avoid triggering the migraine.’

It was in this illuminating manner that Toko began to tell me about her life, when I asked her to do so during our interview. The theme of sickness was not altogether unfamiliar to me, for even during fieldwork she was fairly regularly unwell. Every now and then I would go to meet her in one of JPP’s offices, only to find her lying on a couch in one of the counselling rooms, a damp cloth on her forehead. Or she would send me a quick SMS: ‘I have the nausea. Going home early.’

‘I used to go to Kalafong [Hospital]. I used to stay there two months, three months. I was not permitted in Ga-Rankuwa [Hospital] because it was only for Tswana people. My mother is Tswana but my father, he was Pedi, so I am Pedi.

‘I grew up without a father because my father passed away when I was six months, so I don’t know him, I only know him on photos. And then, my mother was my mother and my father, she did everything for me. And I have two older brothers, because I’m the last-born.
They are both married, staying with their wives.’

Toko’s birth and the death of her father due to diabetes six months later coincided with the establishment of Soshanguve in 1974; thus the small house where Dora still lived was the only home Toko had known in her youth. During one of our Soshanguve visits, Dora told me that she had grown up near Warmbaths (now renamed Bela-Bela) while her husband was from Sekhukhuneland. Their marriage had taken place in 1960, whereupon they had moved into a shack in Atteridgeville; it was also in this township that the couple’s first two children had been born.

Toko’s brothers were notably older than her—the first was born in 1961, the second in 1966—and by the mid-2000s she had only sporadic contact with them. Both lived in Soshanguve and were in their second marriages; the three grandchildren Dora often took care of were Toko’s brothers’ children from their first marriages. After I met Thabo, the second brother, one afternoon at Dora’s house, Toko took it upon herself to teach me something about ‘South African men,’ using her brother as an example.

‘Thabo, neh? The one you met today. He is so-so-so naughty, I’m never sure whether I can believe him or not! [laughs] One time I gave him R200 to pass on to my mother. He gave her R150, telling her that’s all I gave him. Mieke, to this day my mother hasn’t seen that R50! He is a fool and a liar!

‘It’s South African men, they’re like that, you don’t know! They fool and fool and fool people!’

Although Toko rarely voluntarily reminisced about the years she had spent in Soshanguve, the one memory she did often articulate, and that with great ardour, was the experience of having grown up in poverty.

‘Yoh, we were poor! We were living in poverty because we used to eat pap and
cabbage… every day, pap and cabbage pap and cabbage because my mom could not afford otherwise. And my brothers at that time were still going to school. And then they were doing like, all the piece jobs. They didn’t have permanent jobs.

‘I still remember, I couldn’t wear a jean. Because my mother couldn’t afford to buy me a jean. So, it was really hard for her. I know that to raise children as a single parent, it’s difficult, I saw it with my mom.’

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As the photographs of the Bishops Lekganyane in the living room and the green and silver star always faithfully pinned to Dora’s blouse attested to, Toko had grown up in a household that adhered to the teachings of the ZCC, though she no longer belonged to this church in 2006/07. By the time I met her she had, in fact, done some significant moving around when it came to churches—a process that had first begun during her early teenage years.

‘When I was growing up I went to Zion Christian Church. But I didn’t like it, neh? Because, I was not fulfilled when I was coming from church.

‘I didn’t know what we were sharing about. It was like we were worshiping one human being. So, I was not growing, my spiritual level was… just the same. There was nothing that I could make it about, like maybe the work, they don’t emphasize on the work, they emphasize on the person, that he’s the leader of that church.

‘So, it didn’t do anything for me. And then, at the age of thirteen—I still remember that day. I think it was in 1987 or ’88. I was in church and I started to be sick, neh? But there was nobody who can help me. So I went out of the church and I went home; and then… ’cause I had a migraine. So I entered home and I started to vomit, all those things. When my mother came home, I told her that day that I’m no longer going to that church—until today I never went back to that church.
‘I didn’t find another church right away. I just stayed, without going to any church. Until 1999. Then I went to a church in Mabopane, it’s called Celebration Christian Church. I went there with my husband, we went to visit a friend, he invited us and that’s when we got born again.

‘First when I was born again I didn’t know whether I was making the right decision, or what. I felt as if… eish! I’m tying myself to a certain religion, I’m not sure if I can handle… But then as time went on I realized that no, this is something that is with me. Until today, it’s like that.’

For a time, between their conversion at Celebration and their current participation in Hatfield Christian Church in Pretoria, Toko and Lebo belonged to what she called ‘the church on the mountain,’ a group of believers who gathered each Sunday for worship on the Magaliesberg, next to the highway that runs between Pretoria and Soshanguve. In contrast to her husband, who enjoyed worshiping at Celebration, Toko preferred Hatfield, which was racially mixed. ‘It’s private, that’s why I like it,’ she once explained. ‘In the township everyone knows everyone, and the people gossip, eish! I don’t like it.’

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Toko fell pregnant in the winter of 1993, just after her nineteenth birthday, and early the next year she gave birth to a son.

‘When Timothy was born I was very young, neh? I was nineteen. By that time I was doing Grade 10. I was only in Grade 10 because of the migraines.

‘When I learned that I was pregnant… sho, I nearly killed myself! It was very hard, because my mother was raising us alone and she was trying to do everything that she can, just to

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12 Hatfield Christian Church, whose roots go as far back as the early 1900s, was officially established as Hatfield Baptist Church in 1932. In the mid-1960s the congregation underwent a significant shift when, according to the church’s website, “the Holy Spirit began filling the members one by one.” For a brief overview of this and proceeding developments regarding this church, which now counts more than 5000 members, see www.hatfield.co.za/history.php.
have a normal home. But then I fell pregnant and then… What would she do, with me and this baby, and the father of the baby was not working, he was still in Technikon [now renamed Tshwane University of Technology (TUT)] himself, you see?

‘And then I still remember, it was in 1993, September. I tried to poison myself. But that day, my husband came. By that time he was my boyfriend, we were not married yet… So he came and then he asked me, “What are you doing,” then I said to him, “I feel as if I have overburdened people with what I did, I believe that if I go away everybody will be relieved.”’ So I wanted to kill myself and then he said, “No don’t do that, everything is going to be ok. It doesn’t mean if you are pregnant, that it’s the end of the life. Everything is going to change.”

‘And then you know what, neh? That pregnancy helped me to realize that… everything must be planned, you must be ready for whatever you’re doing. You must be able to take responsibility. So I just told myself, you know what, through this pregnancy I’ll be matured. And I will raise the child, with love.

From time to time Toko would mention how blessed she felt to have married and still be with the father of her child, in contrast to the circumstances of many others, including several of her JPP colleagues. The event of her marriage to Lebo, however, did not take place until 2000 (lobola, bridewealth) and 2001 (the white or Western wedding), and for the first six years of Timothy’s life she remained living with Dora in Soshanguve. ‘My mother used to carry Timothy, not me,’ she once disclosed. ‘He was too heavy for me, eish! That time, I was not strong…’

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Whenever Toko and I travelled to Soshanguve, I would be struck by the fierce manner in which she articulated—expressly for my benefit, it seemed—her disapproval of the township. ‘You see Mieke, it’s poor, poor!’ she would lament; ‘It’s bad, the people they don’t work, they just sit
around all day!’ Or ‘The people, they are so negative! You see how they look at us, they judge us because we are a white and a black together!’ This intense mode through which she evoked the township also emerged during the interview, specifically when I asked her whether she had kept in touch at all with her old Soshanguve friends since moving away in 2000.

‘No-no-no-no! No, I don’t know… What happened is, I took my witness, neh? I took my disadvantage, to turn it into advantage. What I told myself after I got pregnant is that I’m going to finish my studies. And then my friends by that time, they dropped out of school, they said they are old now, they can’t go back to school. And then I told myself that if I get the opportunity to go to university, I will use it. So, I did it.

‘So now if I go back to Soshanguve, when they see me they hide, because the standard that I’m in is totally different from the standard that they are in at the moment. They feel a little bit embarrassed, they feel small because now I’m educated and then they are not educated, you know things like that.

‘The other thing is, the language that I’m speaking now is different from the language that we used to speak when we were in high school. After high school, neh? You meet different people, you meet challenges, you learn new things, you get wisdom. So your mental ability is different from those ones because you were exposed to different things, and then they… it’s like their life has ended there. They have not done anything to improve their life. So there is a lot of jealousy, neh? A lot of jealousy! Like when you achieve some things… and then they gossip about you.’

Toko, I knew, was immensely proud of her education, to the extent that this accomplishment sometimes rubbed the wrong way with other black women in the inner city as well. Following Timothy’s birth she re-entered high school, gaining her Matric in 1998. She registered at UNISA in 2000—‘Only two modules because I didn’t have enough money’—and
graduated with a Social Work degree in 2005. At JPP, where she fulfilled the practical requirement of her degree in 2005 and began working fulltime in 2006, her educational achievements were reflected in her salary, which was considerably higher (R7200/month, or $900) than that of most of her black (and some white) co-workers. It was also in 2000 that the first significant event of Toko and Lebo’s marriage took place (lobola), whereupon they settled in the small house in Danville where they continued to live in 2006/07.

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Clearly Toko’s account corresponds to that of Jonas in key ways. As with Jonas, Toko also tells a story revolving around childhood poverty, and equally alludes to how this reality is in the process of being escaped, overcome. This progression is constituted by a distancing from the township and what are perceived to be its significations. Although the two accounts differ in some of their details (Jonas placed greater emphasis on ‘traditions,’ Toko on the ZCC; Jonas made much of ‘economic culture,’ Toko highlighted the prevalence of jealousy), the general picture that emerges is illuminative of how a series of negative values are being ascribed to the urban form that is the township. Lastly, both Jonas and Toko accentuated the concepts of ‘responsibility’ (imagined as an action) and ‘empowerment’ (imagined as a state of being, achieved through the action of being responsible), which they indicated to have played key roles in their decisions.

In the elucidation of Toko’s words and actions, however, we gain a better sense of how the presentation of the township as a negative site, one infused with poverty, stasis and tradition, is counterbalanced by one cognizant of the value of kin and community relations. To utterly deny this value by refusing to visit and lend support or cutting off one’s ties definitively would amount to deeply disrespecting and disrespectful conduct (cf. van der Geest 2004b)—one that, interlocutors realized, might (and in some respects already had) come to haunt them as well. In
the last account I relate, that of Nyeleti, the connection to the township comes most clearly to
the fore, as the busy household of Nyeleti’s mother Miriam was the one I came to frequent most
often.

‘Home but not home’: Mamelodi Musings

Hugging the Magaliesberg and neighbouring the Coloured township of Eersterust, Mamelodi is
the black township situated nearest to Pretoria. At a distance of some thirty kilometres from the
inner city, it is separated from Pretoria’s north-eastern suburbs by an industrial buffer zone and
the N1 Highway that heads south towards Johannesburg and north towards Polokwane (formerly
Pietersburg). Taking Stormvoel Road from the N1 and passing first the factories and businesses
and then Eersterust, eventually one comes across an ironic sign on the left hand side of the road:
Welcome to Mamelodi, City of Progress and Prosperity.

Mamelodi was established in 1953, when the first sixteen houses were built in what was
then known as the Vlakfontein area. A product of the Group Areas Act of 1950, it was
established specifically to accommodate African people who were being removed from
Riverside, Eersterus, Eastwood and Lady Selborne—areas that had been designated for other
‘racial groups.’ Its growth stopped in 1968 when the government halted development of
additional housing for Africans in urban areas (hence the establishment of Soshanguve; see
above), a policy which was reversed in 1978 (Mashabela 1988: 104).

Although I had passed through Mamelodi before, my first significant encounter with this
township occurred on an ordinary Sunday in September 2006, when I joined Nyeleti and her
family at their Swiss Mission\footnote{Officially renamed Evangelical Presbyterian Church in South Africa (EPCSA), Nyeleti and her relatives
nonetheless continued to refer to their church as Swiss Mission. The denomination to which they belonged was
founded in 1875 through the labours of the Reformed-minded Swiss Mission in South Africa. In the past it has also
been known as the Tsonga Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian Church—Swiss Mission in South Africa, and the
Bantu Swiss Mission.} congregation in the morning and, following the church service,
for an elaborate afternoon lunch. That morning, Nyeleti and her sisters-in-law Abby and Phindile had risen early to prepare chicken, pap, rice, and a multitude of salads and vegetables. Noting my surprise at what constituted nothing less than an elaborate buffet set out on the large wooden dining table—a table that filled most of the room—Nyeleti laughed heartily. ‘We only cook like this on Sundays,’ she responded; ‘We eat from it the whole week, until it’s all gone.’ As it turned out, my impression of a buffet-style meal was not all that far-fetched: some twenty plates were filled to their edges and consumed within an hour or two. To my regret, as a visitor I was not permitted to help clean up after family members and guests finished eating. Instead the hefty television in the same living room that proudly displayed the wooden dining table was turned on for my benefit, the remote control placed at my side.

Later, after all the dishes had been washed up with the help of a red plastic tub and several kettle-loads of boiling water—in lieu of a sink—Nyeleti proposed a walk through B3, the section of Mamelodi West where her mother’s residence was located. Our first stop was ‘the mountain,’ a block and a half away from the house. Walking a short distance up, Nyeleti’s voice softened to a whisper as she explained that she did not like the mountain ‘because of the snakes… and those ones there…’ She was referring to a group of eight men seated at the foot of the mountain, where the tarred road ended, who seemed to have been consuming beer for some hours already judging by the amount of empty bottles strewn about. Yet she insisted on taking me here to show me the view: the extensive graveyard towards the right, the long dilapidated hostels reaching back to the main road, the field where her son Amazi played soccer for the Youth Mamelodi Sundowns, her mother’s house, her children’s schools, her church.

Our next destination, Nyeleti informed me, would be her grandmother’s house; hence I was a little surprised when she took me to a shebeen located directly opposite the hostels.

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14 Township pub.
Following brief introductions Nyeleti’s cousin Roy, who ran the establishment, quickly returned to the boisterous gambling that was going on around the pool table. ‘It was my grandmother’s place,’ Nyeleti explained. ‘After she died Roy got it, he is the one who opened the shebeen. You see all the people, he is making the bucks! But what I don’t like is that those ones from the hostels, they are coming here every every day. Eish…!’

‘Who is staying in the hostels?’

‘Those guys, I don’t know… they don’t have houses so they sleep there, they do everything there. But they are always fighting with the guys from our side.’

Of the township households I spent time in, it was the one belonging to Nyeleti’s mother Miriam that I became most intimately acquainted with. Although the number of residents in Miriam’s house was constantly fluctuating, ten of Nyeleti’s relatives lived there more or less permanently between 2006 and 2007. In addition to Miriam, there were Nyeleti’s three children Robert, Amazi and Princess; her nephew Lucas, the eldest son of her older sister Pauline; her niece Tsakani, daughter of her younger sister Rhulani; and the family of her brother (cousin) Gabriel, including his wife Phindile and their two small children, Akani and Ntsako. The family also hosted two boarders, a brother and sister from Giyani, Limpopo, who were students at the TUT. The house itself, in typical ‘matchbox’ style, was of a layout similar to that of Dora’s residence in Soshanguve: one bedroom and a living room at the front, a second bedroom and a kitchen area at the back. In the late 1990s, Nyeleti’s older brother Jeremy, a medical doctor, had financed a sizable expansion at the back of the property. Three cement structures—a garage plus two other rooms—had been erected, each of which was being used as a bedroom in the mid-2000s.

Unlike Toko, Nyeleti did not possess a university degree, and neither did she characterize herself as ‘upwardly mobile.’ Yet in spite of some notable distinctions between
these two women, what they shared was the intricate manner in which they gradually, ever
guardedly, taught me about their lives. In terms of their relations with their home communities it
was important that I travel there with them, for memories were compellingly tied to and
expressed in specific places: this was my school when I was small, that’s the church where I got
converted, the snake was in that tree, this is the fence where James was shot. In my portrayal of
Nyeleti’s life I employ an approach similar to the one I utilized in presenting aspects of Toko’s
story, one in which I draw on both participant observation and interview data.

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Born in 1972, during our interview Nyeleti began by telling me that she grew up in a family of
five siblings. ‘My mother’s kids, we are four, and the other one he is my brother also, as I told
you his mom passed away, his mom and my mom were sisters.’

Nyeleti and her family had lived in the house in Mamelodi for a long time—since the
fifth of May 1963, to be exact. Together with other important documents, Miriam still had the
bill of sale somewhere at the bottom of an old shoebox. Her husband had purchased the house
following their marriage earlier that year; at that time Miriam, the daughter of a large family
from Bushbuckridge, had just turned seventeen. The couple’s first child, daughter Pauline, was
born in 1964, followed by son Jeremy in 1967. Next came Nyeleti, and lastly a third daughter,
Tlangelani, in 1979. Gabriel, Miriam’s sister’s child, permanently joined the household in 1978,
when he was three years old. His mother, I was told, had ‘died of stress.’

Nyeleti asserted that her life had initially been ‘wonderful,’ because ‘you know my mom
and my dad were both working, they used to spoil us, and everything was good. Until when they
divorced, I was ten to twelve years old.

‘The difficult part was at school, because that time they were not giving us a lunch box
or money for break, so my dad used to bring it at school. So that was difficult for me because…
eleven o’clock and my dad will quickly come from town to school, to bring us food, everyday, and then it started to change. Then my mom tried that but she was working, so my grandmother, she was doing it.

‘So it was different, because we used to have a father in the house. But on the other hand my mom fought for us. She made sure that she healed the wounds, by taking good care of us.’

Fifty-nine years old when I met her in 2006, Miriam appeared to be in a constant battle with her body: her knees, her feet, her back, not to mention the diabetes for which she had to inject herself each day. ‘Aowa, my body is tired, my mind is tired!’ she used to say emphatically, counting again on her fingers how many children she had raised and was still raising. Miriam had, as a matter of fact, a long history of illness, and according to Nyeleti this issue had played a major role in her parents’ estrangement.

‘My mother she was very ill, she was always ill. In and out, from the hospital. She had lots of operations. So, by the time she was admitted to the hospital, I think my dad was doing… all these sorts of things, and then this other lady ended up being pregnant with my father.’

Nyeleti’s father lived in Soshanguve, but Nyeleti never went to see him, and neither did I ever cross paths with him at Miriam’s house. Nyeleti’s older siblings, Pauline and Jeremy, appeared to have some contact with him.

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Rather than having her children attend high school in Mamelodi, Miriam sent them to a boarding school in Bushbuckridge, the place she had come from where many of her relatives still lived.

‘The other year my sister, she was going to high school. My mother took her to the boarding school so that life can be better, she can be able to look after us you know?’

‘It was expensive, she was working very hard. She wanted to show us that even if my
father is not there, life still goes on. And then it went on and on, until my brother passed his Grade 7, and he went to the boarding school. And it went on and on until I passed my Grade 7, and then I went to the boarding school. So we ended up not living with my mother, but only Gabriel, and Rhulani because she was still young.

‘The boarding school was like a hostel. It was a daily routine… at five o’clock you wake up, clean your room, quickly go to the shower, cold water… After that go to the dining hall, eat, seven o’clock go to school, ten-thirty again to the dining hall, come back at eleven… Four o’clock it’s after school, six o’clock dining hall, seven o’clock study until ten o’clock. Every day the same thing. But by that time neh, if you were in boarding school, it wasn’t like anybody’s going there…’

Attending boarding school was, as Nyeleti implies, a privilege. For five years she lived in Bushbuckridge, spending the weekends at her mother’s brother’s house. Trips to Mamelodi were limited to school holidays, and were complicated by the government-declared State of Emergency that hung over South Africa in the mid- to late 1980s. Miriam told me that her main reason for sending her three eldest children to a faraway boarding school was because of the unrest and violence that increasingly gripped Mamelodi in the late 1970s and 1980s. ‘I was scared,’ she admitted; ‘I was very scared! It was not safe here! The young people, they were angry, some they did not go to school anymore. So I wanted them to go to school, I wanted them to be in a safe place.’

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During the interview Nyeleti continued with her story in the following manner.

‘So life wasn’t that bad, for five years we didn’t stay with my mother but we were visiting during the holidays. So my brother passed, he went to university, to MEDUNSA, to study for the doctor. Yeah and I… I didn’t make it, my last year. I fell pregnant.
'I went back home, but I didn’t go immediately. I think I was eight months, two weeks. I went home I stayed for two weeks, and then the baby was born and I got quickly married, I was seventeen. I stayed at home for two weeks again, and then I went back to school to write my exams. The baby was with my mother. I passed, and then I stayed with Patrick, for the whole year I was with him. The following year again I got pregnant, because I was married. Until I have all my kids, and then we separated.’

Nyeleti gave birth to her first son, Robert, in 1990, and to a second son, Amazi, in 1991. Although she and Patrick lived near Patrick’s family in Tembisa, for Amazi’s birth she returned to Mamelodi once again: ‘I chose for my mom to be part of it when my babies were born.’

Then, on the ninth of August of the same year Amazi was born, she had a stroke in her upper right leg. It happened at her mother’s house in Mamelodi; she had not yet returned to Tembisa. Nyeleti first decided to share some of her memories regarding this major event in December 2006, while we were on our way to Durban for JPP’s annual Sea Camp.

‘I call it a stroke but to this day I don’t know what it is, no one knew, not even the doctors, nobody! I tried to get up in the morning but I couldn’t walk, I couldn’t even leave the bed!

‘It happened on nine August, ten August I stayed home, eleven August I went to the hospital. I stayed for two weeks, but then they said they couldn’t help me. So I had to go home. Three and a half years I didn’t walk.

‘It even affected my breast milk! It was yellow. We were afraid for Amazi so we took him to the hospital to get checked. Luckily he was fine, but I didn’t breastfeed him after that. Some people said it was the witch…’

15 Amazi’s full English name was Amazement, reflecting the shock and incredulity felt at Nyeleti’s second pregnancy, so soon following the first. In South Africa’s black communities it is common practice to name a child after the particular circumstances surrounding his or her birth (see Guma 2001).
‘Who was saying that?’

‘My aunts, my uncles… I can go crazy because of this, because I don’t know what it is, no one knew, the doctors didn’t know! If I get into an accident and I die, or if I get shot, I die not from that but from this!’ At this Nyeleti slapped her thigh, whereupon a pensive silence settled upon us.

During the interview Nyeleti again briefly evoked this troubling period in her life.

‘Everything was dark to me. For three and a half years, there was just… a parcel there. I was helpless.

‘I was just sleeping, at home. Went in and out of the hospitals, went to different churches, you know mos. Nothing helped, I was just… a person lying there. My mother hired people, just to come and look after me and the kids… I had some problems with Patrick, because today he will say hi to the kids, tomorrow come and get them, stuff like that. And I didn’t have the power to fight, because I was helpless, sitting there.

‘They were making food for me, they were cleaning me… I was just… wake up and try to walk, but you know I was in pain. I spent three and a half years of my life in pain. Sometimes I was even thinking of killing myself, but I didn’t have that power to kill myself because… even if maybe I wanted something to kill myself I couldn’t reach that something.

‘You know Patrick, for him I was nothing by that time because, maybe he thought I’ll die or what.

‘But after some few years God just helped me, and then I got better, it just happened I don’t know how. I started to walk, you know, slo-o-owly… And then as time goes on and on and on I started to walk there and there, the distance.’

Eventually Nyeleti regained most of her strength, although the whole ordeal left her with a conspicuous limp. In 1997 she and Patrick decided to give their marriage another try, and
Nyeleti and her sons returned to Tembisa. The couple’s third child, daughter Princess, was born in 1998. Less than a year later they separated for good, and Nyeleti and her children once more settled in with Miriam in Mamelodi.

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Nyeleti enjoyed a close relationship with her brother Jeremy. Following her return to Mamelodi, it was he who suggested that she return to school, offering to finance her studies.

‘My dream was to become a social worker; it was something that I wanted. So but those chances were gone because I fell pregnant, and then I wanted to go to the university, but then I was having kids… And at home they were not happy about it, for me to go far away, because you know I got sick, what if it starts again, stuff like that. So I went to the Teacher’s College [in Mamelodi].

‘After that I searched for a job and then I got different kinds of jobs, until I ended up at JPP. So, my life started from there.’

Nyeleti, who was one of the first black persons hired to work in one of JPP’s ministries, joined the organization in 2001 through her sister Pauline, who was then employed in one of JPP’s social housing complexes. Later that same year she moved to the inner city, where she continued to spend most of her time in 2006 and 2007. Having started out with a salary of a mere R250 per month, by the time of my arrival she was making R2000 ($250), virtually all of which she contributed to Miriam’s household.¹⁶ ‘I have to take care of my kids.’

Nyeleti travelled to Mamelodi most Fridays, returning again to the inner city on Sunday evenings or early Monday mornings. Miriam would do the laundry during the week; Nyeleti the ironing on Friday evenings. Saturdays were devoting to cleaning and shopping, and Sundays the extended family typically gathered together to attend church and share a meal. Of Nyeleti’s

¹⁶ In 2006/07 Nyeleti’s actual income was R2400 per month, but R400 of this she never saw since her employer, JPP, deducted it from her salary as payment for rent.
three children who were living with Miriam, only Princess called Nyeleti ‘Mama.’ Her older brothers Robert and Amazi, well into their teens, rather called their birthmother by her first name. ‘Ma’ was reserved for Miriam. ‘You know mos,’ Nyeleti once noted; ‘She raised them more than me.’

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In apparent contrast to Toko, who regularly expressed the desire to leave Soshanguve behind ‘forever’ and who acted upon this desire to the extent that this was possible, through Miriam’s household Nyeleti’s engagement with Mamelodi remained much more active. This, however, must not be misinterpreted to mean that Nyeleti’s relationship with the township differed radically from Toko’s. In a manner comparable to Toko’s frustrated expressions regarding township culture and life whenever we found ourselves in Soshanguve, Nyeleti could equally severely (and sometimes fearfully) nod toward a house across the street or a group of women sitting on a stoop somewhere, murmuring a sharp comment. ‘That house, they all have AIDS, the brother and sisters, all four of them, eish! And then they keep having the boyfriends!’ ‘That one, she used to be my friend. She’s in the sangoma school now, neh? She wants to become a sangoma. We still greet each other but I won’t let her come into the house again, never!’ Her neighbours, she asserted, were jealous of her, and in fact of the whole family, particularly because of Jeremy’s success. ‘Mamelodi is home but it is not home, I have no friends here.’

Like Jonas and Toko, Nyeleti also eventually left the township, ending up at JPP. The difference between the situations of the first two and Nyeleti was that the latter’s children were living with Miriam in Mamelodi, a strong circumstantial cord that pulled her back to the township each weekend. ‘All I want is to see my children grow up and be successful, not to repeat the mistakes I made,’ she sometimes reiterated tiredly. ‘Then I can go to my grave in peace.’
Conclusion

If the words and enactments of Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti provide us with valuable glimpses of township life past and present, they clearly do so from the perspective of persons who have (partially) let go of that urban form. In their accounts, the relatively short geographical distances between the townships of their youth and the inner city lengthen metaphorically through the extended encounter with the latter. In the movement from township to inner city, the urban form of the city centre transforms from one once principally imagined to one that is realized; a process that gains particular speed when persons find a job in the inner city or enrol at one or another postsecondary institution, which may result in (semi-)permanent relocation. The distancing process ushered in by the move from township to city typically engenders a standing back; a critical assessment of the sites and circumstances that shaped a person’s youth and early adult life. The criticisms vary in their specificities: from ‘belief in gods’ to poverty, from ‘everyone knows everyone else’ to ‘tradition,’ from gossip to jealousy; yet the evocation of each points toward the ways those who have left imbue the township with negative value.

Yet amidst such censorious ascriptions and the contrasting presentation of the self as ‘modern’ and (more or less) ‘freed’ from the township’s constraints, the continual movement from the inner city (back) to various townships reveals the interstitial quality colouring urban migrants’ lives. In effect, the dichotomous representations of the inner city as ‘modern,’ the site of opportunities and possibilities, versus that of the township as ‘traditional,’ stagnant and rather hopeless emerges deeply ambivalent. In contrast to the inner city, where people are essentially strangers to one another, it is in (and beyond) the townships that people’s support networks remain principally located in the form of kin and communal life. For Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti moreover, the awareness of this reality is enhanced through variously enacted acknowledgments of the self as persons who, being in the process of ‘making it’ beyond the township (i.e. having
gained employment and/or an education), bear important financial and other responsibilities in relation to their kin—specifically parents and children—who remain there.

In view of these insights, JPP’s conceptualization of the contemporary inner city as described in *The City* and enacted during the Feast of the Clowns appears more than a little incompatible, and hence ironic. Indeed, in the portrayal of the inner city as a site abandoned by the wealthy, one wherein for ‘the poor’ nothing remains but ‘economic, social and spiritual decay,’ we foremostly gain a picture of the perceptions of Afrikaner and other white persons who witnessed the demographic transition firsthand. Entangled in this picture is JPP’s religious imagination of and approach to this ‘decaying’ urban domain, which envisions Christian involvement as a pilgrimage and, at the start of it, a ‘second conversion.’ As the analyses of the experiences of Johan, Toko and Nyeleti demonstrate, however, for them the inner city is not—or certainly not only—a site witness to the various forms of ‘decay’ Johan evokes. In comparison to the township, the urban form of the inner city denotes economic, social and at times spiritual opportunities in the form of jobs, education, and a variety of churches. Finally most patently, the incongruity of the NGO’s religious conceptions surfaces in the absence of engagement with the recent past and the ‘apartheid city’ model that moulded South Africa’s urban development in the latter half of the previous century—for along with it, the lives of the majority of JPP’s staff members were clearly also shaped.
CHAPTER FIVE

Performing the Gendered Self: From Parody to Subjectivity

Introduction: Imagining Marriage on the KwaZulu-Natal Coast

In December 2006, at the initiation of school children’s summer vacations and with the holiday season just around the corner, JPP held its annual ten-day Sea Camp on the KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) coast. This elaborate event, funded by JPP and a host of private and corporate benefactors and coordinated principally by the NGO’s Teen Ministry, witnessed the temporary relocation of some eighty inner city teens and twenty staff members to an idyllic beachside setting. As the lengthiest and one of the most demanding affairs staged by JPP each year, the camp’s theme, encompassing the figurative wedding between Christ and ‘the Church,’ had been selected well in advance of the event. Upon arrival at the camp each participant received a ‘marriage preparation booklet’ outlining the ‘marriage course’ to be followed over the next ten days, as well as a bright pink t-shirt depicting two hands, one slipping a wedding band on the other’s finger, captioned by the sizable words ‘I do!’ The topic, its various socio-religious components (Biblical symbolism in the Old and New Testaments, identification of the bride and groom, the role of sin, contemporary applicability) and associated activities had been prepared by Irma and Sandy (the Teen Ministry’s two Afrikaner managers) in consultation with other ministry personnel, and had been approved by JPP’s governing body. The theme was an important and necessary one, the managers felt, because it would allow them to address such ‘widespread social problems’ as premarital sex, cheating, violence against women and HIV/AIDS, each of which ‘our teens face every day of their lives.’

In essence the camp’s main objective, in line with the broader goals of JPP and the outreach network, can be conceptualized as a kind of moral labour: the work of recognizing,

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17 Seventy-nine of the eighty teens the camp hosted were black and of various ethnic backgrounds; one, a male, was Afrikaans. Eight of the twenty staff members were Afrikaans while eleven were black, again of different ethnicities. Simultaneously with the teen Sea Camp, JPP’s Children’s Ministry also organized one for children, of similar size.
evaluating, and transforming-for-the-better the values according to which persons conceive of, organize and enact the self in relation to others (including, of course, God). To this end, the 2006 Sea Camp asked its participants—emphatically, teens and staff—to imagine their upcoming marriage to Jesus and to envision this spiritual event as a path or process, preparations for which must be made in the here and now; in the midst, that is, of the ‘brokenness’ of earthly life. What, the marriage preparation booklet asked, does it mean to say ‘I do’ to Jesus? In the wedding between God and ourselves, does lobola (Zulu, bridewealth)\textsuperscript{18} constitute part of the proceedings? Is there a marriage contract, and if so, what does it say? What of the wedding vows? The aim of such questions was to get participants to think about and assess the purported normalization, in contemporary South Africa, of certain gender-related values and practices in light of their (potential) consequences in this life and the anticipated marriage to Jesus.

Foregoing the possibility of a comprehensive analysis of the Sea Camp, in this chapter I extract two performances, or interactive presentations, from the hectic flow of events during this camp in an attempt to bring them into play as points of departure for an examination of gender performance and subjectivity among JPP’s female lay workers. My aim is to elicit certain discursive aspects emergent from the Sea Camp’s ideological repertoire, including the ways these both actively and passively appeared to be ‘accepted’ by women, and to situate the insights thus garnered in the context of their lives and memories. The first Sea Camp event with which I will be concerned emerged in the form of a play, straightforwardly entitled Hosea Drama, which related the Biblical narrative of the ‘extraordinary’ relationship of the prophet Hosea and his adulterous wife Gomer; this event I employ as a starting point for a discussion of women’s knowledge regarding transactional sexual practices. The second event occurred a few nights later and amounted to a collective Sea Camp debate, mediated by the Teen Ministry’s

\textsuperscript{18} The Zulu term lobola was that which black interlocutors also used most commonly, and hence is the one I employ. At times the practice of bridewealth transferral is also referred to as lobolo or bohali (Sotho).
managers, regarding the practice of lobola; in the latter part of the chapter I draw on this moment to explore contemporary formulations of marriage in light of women’s memories and experiences thereof.

Following the analyses of women’s team performances of hard laughter in and beyond the JPP environment (Chapter 3) and the accounts of Jonas, Toko and Nyeleti regarding their township histories (Chapter 4), in the current chapter I thus turn more explicitly to the subject of gender performance. At stake again is an incongruity, here one that emerges at the margins between the JPP conceptualization of ‘proper’ gender relations, which women are required to bear witness to and enact in the context of their outreach labour, and women’s gendered subjectivities. I argue that the dissonance between the two becomes perceptible when we read women’s apparent complicity in the *Hosea Drama* and lobola discussion through the lens of their gendered knowledge and histories, via which their participation in the former emerges parodic—an ironic imitation of the moral values intended to be conveyed—whilst their notable silence in the latter signals their subject positions (see next paragraph). Through these enactments women manage to maintain the ‘face’ their labour requires of them and their own senses of self-respect by keeping their gendered vulnerabilities out of sight, even as it allows them to tacitly comment upon the illogicality of the values in question or to evade dealing with their presentation altogether by remaining silent.

Alongside this key argument regarding women’s engagements with specific gendered values in the JPP context, the chapter further addresses the topic of gender performance through a consideration of women’s experiences and memories of marriage. Evoking the state’s entanglement in African marriage practices and experiences, I show how during apartheid the absence of state regulation (and recognition) of customary marriages\(^{19}\) existed simultaneously

\(^{19}\) The apartheid state’s stance on customary marriage essentially derived from that which had been developing over the course of the earlier colonial period. In general the “British and Afrikaner settlers regarded black African
with the state’s historical ‘presence’ in such marriages in and through the violent behaviour of husbands. Constitutive of women’s gendered subjectivities, although the lack of bureaucratic regulation has received significant attention post-1994 via the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act (Act No. 120 of 1998) (Bah and Rama 1999; Chambers 2000), the failure to address the pervasiveness of gender violence has ensured its concrete extension into the present (Hassim 2009). At the same time the practice of sealing marriages ‘traditionally’ (to evoke interlocutors’ term)—that is, through lobola or bridewealth prestations—has become entwined with the desire to have a ‘Western’ or ‘white wedding,’ implying a civil rather than a customary marriage. Indeed today, even as marriage solemnizations via lobola prestations continue on the ground, couples often choose to register their marriage as a civil rather than a customary one. In addition to the desire to be ‘modern,’ I suggest that this shift also crucially signals a wish to avoid what are seen as the complexities and possible conflicts entailed in customary marriages, wherein the ideal of the union of two families (as opposed to two individual partners) is often belied by conflicts between spouses or between a spouse and his or her affines.

These developments—and interlocutors’ diverse situatedness within them—will finally return us to women’s discretionary silence during the Sea Camp’s lobola discussion. Moving us to a type of performance beyond hard laughter or parody, in the enactment of silence—resonant marital practices as barbaric… but in the end colonial and settler governments generally tolerated the practices because, in a context in which blacks greatly outnumbered whites, tolerance was consistent with efficient administration” (Chambers 2000: 106). During the years of white rule, “the only sort of coupling relationship denominated as ‘marriage’ by law was the form of Christian or civil marriage that white people practiced” (2000: 102-3; Ogbu 1978: 242). Black persons could marry under civil law if they wished to; yet even as some (chiefly Christians) did so, the majority “[married] solely within the customary group” or between groups (Chambers 2000: 103).

This Act became operational on November 15, 2000. Accordingly, two types of marriage have come to be recognized at the Department of Home Affairs (DHA): civil marriage and customary marriage. The first is performed at the offices of the DHA by Marriage Officers or at churches by pastors who are licensed Marriage Officers. At the second—sealed through lobola prestations—no Marriage Officer presides, but the parties concerned are responsible to go to the DHA to register the marriage as a customary one. In the Recognition of Customary Marriages Act a distinction is also made between customary marriages entered into before the implementation of the Act and those entered into after implementation. Thus persons who were customarily married pre-2000 have the possibility of registering their union after the fact; however, I encountered no couples who had actually done so.
of women’s hesitant revelations regarding their marriages to me—we gain a sense of how women live with the knowledge of the reality of gender violence in the everyday (Das 2007, 2008) and how it has shaped and continues to mould the performance of the gendered self.

Beyond the ‘facts’ of specific women’s accounts or narratives, this sense helps us to determine and acknowledge the particularities of local moral practice; a matter I return to in the chapter’s conclusion.

Why God Told Hosea to ‘Marry a Slut’: A Bible Story Enacted

As part of the Sea Camp’s well-prepared stock of activities that at once served to keep the teens occupied and drive home the message of the obligatory act of committing oneself to Jesus, on our third evening in KZN the Teen Ministry’s employees, aided by other staff, presented the teens with a brief dramatic performance. Based on the Biblical account of the ‘extraordinary’ relationship of the prophet Hosea and his wife Gomer, the play, my flatmates Maya and Nyeleti informed me, had been penned ‘mostly’ by Irma and Sandy, though ‘they did ask us what we thought about it.’ In essence it sought to relate the story of Hosea and Gomer in a kind of trendy fashion that, it was imagined, would resonate well with the urban youth culture of the teens; to this latter end as well, it was deemed necessary that the two main verbal roles the drama required would be performed by black people. In contrast, the by and large silent roles—of which there were some fifteen—were enacted by both black and white individuals. With the

21 The Introduction to the Book of Hosea (New International Version [NIV] Study Bible 2002: 1342-43) notes that Hosea prophesied around the mid-eighth century BC and that his prophesy was primarily directed at Israel’s northern kingdom. He lived in the twilight years of that kingdom, a time which would ultimately end when Samaria (Israel’s capital city) fell to Assyria and its people were exiled in 722-721 BC. The first part of the book (Chapters 1-3) tells of Hosea’s marriage as a symbol to convey the prophet’s message from God for his people. God’s order to Hosea to marry an adulterous wife, Gomer, “graphically represents the Lord’s relation to the Israelites… who had been disloyal to him by worshiping Canaanite deities.” Israel had to undergo a period of exile as punishment for their “spiritual adultery,” but “the Lord still loved his covenant people and longed to take them back, just as Hosea took back Gomer.” The second part of the book (Chapters 4-14), comprising Hosea’s call to repentance, provides details regarding Israel’s participation in Canaanite religion. There has been considerable debate among Bible scholars concerning the nature of the story told in the first three chapters. While some have argued that the story of Hosea and Gomer’s marriage is allegorical of the relation between God and Israel, others have interpreted it literally, as the Teen Ministry’s managers also did through their emphasis on Hosea and Gomer’s relationship rather than on that between God and the Israelite nation.
key narrator roles allocated to Rose and Lily, the play proceeded as follows.

Rose [busy braiding Lily’s hair]: Hey girlfriend, have you heard about this guy Hosea and his wife Gomer?
Lily: No honey, what are you waiting for, tell me!
Rose: Hosea was a preacher, mos. And he was so into this Gomer chick that he married her. Apparently God told him to marry her.
Lily: No, you lie, wena [Pedi, you]!
Rose: Serious!
Lily: Serious?
Rose: Se-ri-ous! But let me tell you everything…

*Hosea is busy preaching to an audience, while Gomer is passing by with her entourage. While passing by, God, through a dove, tells Hosea to marry Gomer.*

Lily: So what’s the big deal? He married the girl!
Rose: Like they say! But wait, there’s more…

*All the guests arrive at the ceremony. The preacher comes in and gets ready for the ceremony. The wedding music begins to play, and Hosea and Gomer walk down the aisle. Hosea is looking very pleased while Gomer is winking and flirting with the men she passes. The preacher announces them husband and wife. Hosea shyly points his lips, and Gomer gives him one look, then grabs him by the arm. The guests sing ‘For they’re a jolly good couple…’ and throw confetti on them.*

Lily: Great! So they lived happily ever after? How romantic!
Rose: As if! That woman… [laughs] She’s a wacky one… That woman, she’s a slut!
Lily: Ach, sies [Afrikaans, gross] man!
Rose: Really! She’s cursing, being dishonest, unfaithful to her husband, practicing her profession while she’s married… if you know what I mean…
Lily: Oh really!
Rose: Yes honey, I’ve got info. She did it not just once, she did it a lot of times.
Lily: What did Hosea do? Surely he cannot be happy with this?
Rose: You will not believe this girlfriend…

*Gomer: I’m so sorry Hosea! I will not do it again. They are flirting with me, and when I’m lying in bed with them I realize, you know… I don’t want them to feel bad about themselves. Hosea: [gentle voice] You have rejected me, Gomer, but my anger is gone. I will love you without any limits. I will take care of you, you can rest in my arms.*

Rose: This happened every time. He will forgive her, take her back, and a few days pass by and Gomer will be gomering the neighbourhood again.
Lily: But why don’t he divorce her and get it over and done with?
Rose: Remember, Hosea is a preacher and God told him to do this.
Lily: Why would God tell Hosea to marry a slut when she will only make him miserable?
Rose: God has a purpose with those two, you know. God is like Hosea, and Gomer is like people on a Sea Camp, being dishonest, cursing and swearing at each other, even gossiping! But just like Hosea, God wants to tell the Sea Camp guys that He too will take them back. No matter
what they’ve done, He too wants them to rest in His arms.
Lily: Serious?
Rose: Serious!
Lily: Serious serious?
Rose: Se-ri-ous!

The show, for one, had the teens giddy with laughter—a reaction principally due to Rose and
Lily’s witty performances, as well as that of Irma, who had humorously enacted the
promiscuous Gomer. Beyond this, the play conveyed a series of messages that, it was hoped,
audience and actors would take to heart: one ought to be faithful to one’s spouse, but if one is
not, it remains possible to imagine and get to know a ‘spouse’ who is ultimately forgiving.
Condemnation and absolution, censure and salvation: both fundamental tenets of Christian
doctrine were present in the performance. In the minds of the camp’s chief organizers, it was the
twin values of faithfulness and mercy the drama was meant to illuminate.

Aside from these rather obvious religious meanings, the play was allusive in other ways
as well—in ways that rendered it (or that carried the risk of rendering it) deeply contradictory in
the ‘interracial-but-largely-black’ context in which it was enacted. In this respect the
conversational style Rose and Lily’s characters engage in—abetted by their activity during the
exchange, the ‘typical’ pastime of one black woman braiding another’s hair—is clearly not that
of innocent chitchat, but of malicious gossip: ‘Hey girlfriend, have you heard…?’ ‘No honey,
what are you waiting for, tell me!’ ‘You lie, wena!’ ‘Serious!’ ‘You will not believe this
girlfriend!’ One may note that this peculiarly jars with what the narrative itself proclaims (‘God
is like Hosea, and Gomer is like people on a Sea Camp, being dishonest, cursing and swearing at
each other, even gossiping!’); yet more importantly, it also ambiguously draws certain linkages
between blackness, gender identity, and an ostensible propensity to gossip. In this sense the play
edges perilously close to that domain, informed at once by discourse and praxis, where race-
based inferences become glaringly, gracelessly apparent.
A second suggestive element, related to the first, further requires elucidation: here I refer to the recurrent allusion that Gomer’s ‘profession’ is that of being a prostitute. Notably the terms ‘prostitution’ and ‘prostitute’ are absent in the script itself; still a rigid, contemptuous reading of the practice is manifest: ‘That woman, she’s a slut!’ ‘She’s cursing, being dishonest, practicing her profession while she’s married…’ ‘She did it not just once, she did it a lot of times.’ ‘Gomer will be gomering the neighbourhood.’ In this construal, prostitution—a term long burdened with allegations of sexual and other forms of depravity, which have come to be deployed with new intensity in South Africa in the time of AIDS, as Didier Fassin (2007) has shown—is entirely devoid of the diverse individual contexts within which it occurs, and of the historical and socioeconomic conditions that facilitate its engagement as an economic resource.

Although each of the Teen Ministry’s black employees (amongst them Maya, Nyeleti, Lily and Rose) and some of the camp’s other black staff (Toko, for one) participated in the play’s staging, none of these women commented upon it in seriousness or pointed out its problematic significations. Far from it, comparable to the teens it also engendered boisterous, hard laughter amongst them. This laughter, following the lines of my earlier argument (Chapter 3), can be considered a kind of subtle commentary, here on the idealism implicit in the drama’s morally-imbued themes and the ‘impossibility’ of its realization. To further conceptualize how women’s staging of the *Hosea Drama* and the laughter it produced caricatured the play’s (and hence the managers, Irma and Sandy’s) intentions, I evoke the dilemma Rose came to face in and beyond JPP following the Sea Camp and how other women came to address it. For unbeknownst to anyone as of yet, the news of Rose’s pregnancy was to burst onto the JPP scene soon after.
Rumours of Rose

At the time of the Sea Camp, Rose, a young Coloured\textsuperscript{22} woman from Nellmapius (a township extension on Mamelodi’s eastern fringe), was still a relatively new presence at JPP. I had first met her the September previous, when one afternoon she had come calling for Nyeleti at the entrance to our flat. Nyeleti was expecting her, she had informed the two of us who happened to be home; she had in fact made the trip from township to city to discuss the Teen Ministry’s weekend camp which would be happening soon, and which she planned to join as a volunteer counselor. In this manner, she had added, she hoped to convince Nyeleti’s managers that she was a hard worker, deserving of the position that, it was rumoured, would open up in the Teen Ministry in the new year. ‘Eish, it’s hard, to get the job!’ she had exclaimed; ‘But I need it, because I have two children.’

At this revelation our visitor had fallen silent, though only for a moment. Maya and I were still preparing coffee in the kitchen when Rose’s voice had again reached our ears from the living room: ‘What if you don’t like sex anymore with your boyfriend?’ Taken aback, neither of us managed to furnish a response—which perhaps was not expected either, for Rose’s attention had rather quickly turned elsewhere once more. On the television a local reporter was interviewing children about their future ambitions. Watching the broadcast with some interest, Rose had commented, ‘I’m not sure what I want to be when I grow up. Maybe a famous actress… or a pastor! What do you think?’ And as if to reassure us: ‘I \textit{can} be an actress or a pastor, I can do both!’

Twenty-five year old Rose, the daughter of a Coloured woman from Eersterust\textsuperscript{23} and a Swazi man she had seen nor heard from for many years, had first met Nyeleti at the latter’s Swiss Mission church (attended predominantly by Shangaan people) in Mamelodi West. She

\textsuperscript{22} Although Rose’s father was Swazi, this was the identification Rose herself preferred, testament of the anger she felt towards a man who had abandoned his family and whom she no longer knew.

\textsuperscript{23} The ‘Coloured’ township located next to Mamelodi.
had joined this Christian community some years ago, she told me, because it was the church of her then-boyfriend, a Shangaan man who was the younger brother of Joel (see Chapter 3). Though now split up, the couple had had a son in 2000. Rose’s first child, a daughter, had been born in 1997; this baby’s father had been tragically killed in a motor accident a mere two months following his daughter’s birth. While Rose’s children were staying with their grandmother in Eersterust, Rose resided in Nellmapius (Mamelodi East) ‘with some friends,’ and since her relationship with her mother was fraught with tension (‘She is a woman who doesn’t love her children,’ as Rose once accusingly put it), she visited her nine-year-old daughter and six-year-old son but sporadically.

It was Nyeleti who had informed Rose of the news, then going around in outreach circles, that a significant overhaul of JPP’s Teen Ministry was in the making, and that in the process one or maybe even two fulltime positions would become available. As spring turned to summer and the specifics of the proposed changes to the organizational structure of this ministry began to take shape, Rose eagerly, and successfully, applied for a post. Her official appointment was to commence in the first week of January, though Irma and Sandy also requested that she join the December Sea Camp, a condition to which she agreed. Upon arrival at the camp Rose’s own overly boisterous revelation—‘I don’t mind working for free, at least I don’t have to think about kos [Afrikaans, food] for ten days!’—reinforced my earlier impression that her economic circumstances were significantly dire.

Despite Rose’s success in having secured a job, among black outreach workers (principally women) and some teens who regularly attended the Teen Ministry’s programs, certain rumours about the new employee soon began to surface. It was asserted that she had ‘many boyfriends’—the alleged number ranged from two to four—and that at the place she shared with her girlfriends in the township ‘all of them, they are doing that.’ This manner of
speaking, lacking a reference to prostitution, was common amongst black interlocutors more generally, and resonates with Mark Hunter’s analysis of the sexual practices of youths in KZN, wherein he differentiates between prostitution on the one hand, and ‘sex linked to subsistence’ or ‘sex linked to consumption’ (the boundary between which is relatively permeable) on the other (2002; see also Motsemme 2007). Here an ambiguous, locally salient knowledge concept makes its appearance, one that neither outrightly condemns nor straightforwardly condones the practice of engaging with or keeping multiple sexual partners, but in which the possibility of censure (as the rumors allude to) and that of recognition (signified by the absence of the critical term ‘prostitution’) simultaneously exist.

In addition, to momentarily return to the Sea Camp’s *Hosea Drama* (which can of course only be brought to life through performance), it now begins to become apparent how women’s performance thereof is ambivalently double. Rose and the others primarily enact the play’s characters since they are required to do so by their managers; less certain, and much more difficult to establish, is their conviction of the lessons the drama seeks to teach and the values it hopes to imbue. One suggestion it is possible to make, based on the conceptual distinction women commonly draw between ‘having boyfriends’ and ‘prostitution,’ is that their life-world encompasses socioeconomic and gendered realities that are altogether absent in the play. In light of the rumours that were already then circulating about Rose, the fact that no one objected to the drama’s problematic allusions (the figure of the black woman as a gossip, perhaps a prostitute) is what makes women’s performance a double one: behind the distinct roles enacted during the show we sense the existence of other characters, other dispositions.

Arguably then, the challenge becomes to identify these other performative roles; these other impressions through which the self emerges in alternative ways. Note however that the enactments thus far considered—the Hosea play, women’s talk of Rose’s ‘many boyfriends’—
can be considered safe as long as the performers stick to their roles; as long as they do not forget their lines, whether by accident or design. To recall Erving Goffman, the members of performance teams are linked to one another by bonds of ‘reciprocal dependence’ and ‘reciprocal familiarity’; each teammate “is forced to rely on the good conduct and behaviour of [her] fellows, and they, in turn, are forced to rely on [her]” (1959: 82). The codes of conduct according to which teams operate form safety mechanisms in that they protect against the eruption of conflict, which would give the show away. In the events under discussion, this holds true both in relation to the whisperings of Rose’s alleged sexual partnerships and the staging of the *Hosea Drama*, for both situations contain the seeds that might cause such an eruption to occur: in the former between Rose and those who gossiped about her; in the latter between the play’s black performers and its Afrikaner authors. Whether Rose suspected her coworkers of gossiping about her, or whether Irma and Sandy sensed that ‘prostitution’ really ought to be problematized to a greater degree, is not of immediate relevance here (save to say that both parties well might have). The point, rather, is to recognize that the rules or codes of conduct to which performers are ideally bound serve as control mechanisms which concurrently might take on a protective, possibly moral function. To provide an example, Nyeleti, who introduced Rose to JPP and informed her of the available position, remained, deliberately it seemed, vague about Rose’s circumstances and living conditions ‘that side’ from the moment the latter entered outreach circles until the news of her pregnancy became public knowledge. Although not overtly denying the rumours, she refused to participate in spreading them, instead opting to support Rose by sharing food and bed whenever Rose could not afford the R18 ($2.25 CAD) taxi ride home.

Observing and participating in a variety of events and situations opens up the chance of witnessing different performative roles in action, and hence of considering how and why certain
circumstances seem to require one character whilst others generate alternative ones. At JPP one such situation began to unfold in late January 2007, when the rumours of Rose suddenly intensified and expanded to include the likelihood that she was pregnant. Rose, so the story went, had been complaining at work that her skirts and pants no longer fit comfortably, and that the extra weight she seemed to be carrying around could only be due to ‘all those sweets from the Sea Camp.’ That this attempt at humouring the situation largely misfired became clear when I observed the grave looks on Nyeleti and Maya’s faces as they related Rose’s words to me. As for Rose, it took her a few weeks longer to admit that she might indeed be pregnant, and when she reached that point (or could no longer avoid it) the uncertainty and anxiety she felt appeared to me to colour every aspect of the strident, humorous performance she sought to stage.

The moment unfolded at our flat one evening in February, just after I had returned home at approximately the same time as my flatmates, who were accompanied by Rose. Amidst the boiling of some eggs for a quick dinner and people awaiting their turn to use the bathroom, Rose began to explain to Tinyiko, Nyeleti’s twelve-year-old niece, and me that the Teen Ministry’s employees had just had dance lessons with Irma.

Rose: Eish, the exercises were tiring, the dancing was tiring!
Nyeleti: Aowa Mieke, my body-
Rose: I’m not tired from the dancing, the baby is tired from the dancing! …I’m not tired but I think the dancing made the baby tired! [laughs loudly]
Mieke: Hmm?
Rose: I have to go to the doctor, I don’t know if I’m pregnant but I think so. I never feel my babies and I don’t get the morning sickness.
Mieke: You didn’t feel it with your other babies?
Rose: I don’t feel anything so I don’t know! I have to go to the doctor to do the pregnancy test.

Rose left soon afterward for Nellmapius, still ostensibly humoured by her own joke, but more awkwardly than before since no one had responded to her words with laughter. Not much else was said between us about the situation the rest of that evening, other than Nyeleti’s laconic ‘Now the cat is out of the bag!’ and, a few moments later, ‘It’s not good… The teenagers…’
A time of waiting then ensued: a waiting, essentially, for Sandy, Irma, and JPP’s other managers to find out about Rose’s situation and render a decision about it. Among the NGO’s black staff, it was a time laced with questions. Who was the baby’s father, and where was he from? When had she fallen pregnant? With ‘so many boyfriends,’ could she even know who the baby’s father was? And what would ‘they’ do with her at the Teen Ministry? Rose, in the meantime, remained tightlipped, but when she was involved in a serious taxi accident in March, one that proved fatal for two of the passengers, she could not keep the news of her pregnancy from her managers much longer. Badly shaken, I encountered her the morning of the crash on JPP’s parking lot, waiting for a friend to take her to the hospital. ‘I have the cramps,’ she stated flatly; ‘what if maybe something happened to the baby, so I told them I have to go to H.F.’

And then, not without some irony: ‘I’m one of the lucky ones.’

While the sonar showed that Rose’s baby was fine, it was the teens who shortly thereafter finally informed Irma and Sandy of Rose’s condition. Two weeks later, she was fired from her job at the Teen Ministry.

**Gomering the Neighbourhood? Rose’s Dilemma in Context**

Rose’s unexpected pregnancy essentially broke the code of conduct that more or less tacitly defined and ordered everyday relations at JPP. Based on accounts gathered from Maya, Nyeleti and Lily, Irma and Sandy had reacted to the news with a mix of disappointment and anger. Rose’s condition, the managers were reported to have said, flew in the face of ‘everything’ the Teen Ministry stood for, not least those Christian values they had sought to discuss and instill at the recent Sea Camp. Considered from the vantage point of the ministry’s mission of value

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24 H.F. refers to what is now Steve Biko Hospital, which until recently was named Pretoria Academic Hospital and before 1994 Hendrik F. Verwoerd Hospital—hence the abbreviation H.F. Located near the inner city, this hospital, run by the Gauteng Provincial Government and the main teaching hospital of the University of Pretoria (and also the medical institution Thapelong’s and Ramatla’s patients frequented; see Chapter 2), continued to be referred to as H.F. by many—an indication of the powerful persistence of the city’s Afrikaner image in the minds of both black and white Pretorians.
labour, Rose’s pregnancy and the actions that were presumed to have led to it amounted to a bad example for the teens; as such there was deemed to be no other option than to fire the new employee. At stake was the overall moral performance the ministry sought to stage; what Rose’s situation revealed was how this performance was embedded in a productive, continuous process of evaluating the quality of individual characters’ performances.

Rose’s twin dilemma of being pregnant and then dismissed provoked multiple, shifting reactions among black outreach workers. During one conversation, for instance, Toko angrily expressed her thoughts as follows: ‘In the white culture maybe it’s a shock, but in our culture we’re used to it, many girls get pregnant, it’s fine!’ Sharply edged and defensive of Rose as these words were, I knew they nonetheless diverged from opinions she had voiced at other moments. One such moment had occurred a few weeks earlier, as we were slowly wending our way back toward JPP’s offices after a morning of visiting clients in Sunnyside. Over the course of that morning, one woman had irked Toko by loudly proclaiming, following the news that she was pregnant ‘again,’ that she would sell the toddler sitting on her lap ‘for five thousand Rand.’ ‘Why doesn’t she use contraceptives!’ Toko had lamented afterwards. ‘These babies, she can’t take care of them, it’s irresponsible what she is doing! She must stop having babies!’

In effect Rose’s pregnancy engendered something of a crisis not just among JPP’s managers, but among female black outreach workers as well. There was, as it were, an unspoken question hanging in the air; one that in practical terms queried women about how they would reorder or reorganize their relationships with Rose in light of the new circumstances, and that, on the level of the ideological, urged them to open up the issue to moral scrutiny. Certainly this two-pronged question derived importantly from the immediate surroundings wherein I observed Rose’s dilemma develop; yet it would be a mistake to argue that the outreach environment was its only incentive. That the question at hand could be constituted as much by developments in
As noted, at JPP Nyeleti’s initial demeanour with respect to Rose had been one of protectiveness, signified by her carefully observed silence regarding the latter’s circumstances and alleged activities in Nellmapius. This began to change to some extent at the end of January, around the same time that Rose began to hint to her coworkers that she was expecting. On the Monday morning of the succeeding week Nyeleti shared with me the following news:

Yoh Rose, she’s a terrible one, that one! Last week I told you mos, we were working in the office, she was saying those things about her clothes, then she told us about this guy whose wife stole five thousand [Rand] from him, she was saying those things... This guy is her friend, he told her, he got so mad at his wife he moved all the furniture out of the house! Then I realized neh, she is talking about my cousin! You know at first I thought it’s fine, she can come to JPP, I wanted to help her! After I come home on Friday I call my cousin, she says it’s true, she stole the five thousand because the money was going all the time, she didn’t know where so she took the money for her children. She needs to save it for her children!

Nyeleti’s words came tumbling out with such speed and at such a level of intensity that initially, I barely grasped what she was saying. Clarifying her account, it became clear that she was putting two stories together, an exercise that led her to some distressing conclusions. The first story, of which she had been in the know for some time, concerned the troubled marriage of her cousin Ntsumi and her husband Karabo, who with their three children stayed in the house of Ntsumi’s aunt in Mamelodi. The marriage had been strained, Nyeleti asserted, ‘for the last half year,’ ever since Karabo had been staying out late in the evenings instead of returning home after work. Judging by the sums of money that had all too regularly begun to disappear from their joint bank account, Ntsumi and her relatives suspected Karabo of spending the couple’s savings on ‘more than only the beer,’ although they had no way to prove it. Ntsumi felt she had no other option than to withdraw what was left of the money and hide it from her husband. Karabo’s discovery of this action triggered a fit of rage, during which he damaged much of the furniture, then ‘stole’ whatever intact pieces remained. These events had transpired two weeks
earlier, but what had set the alarm bells ringing for Nyeleti was Rose’s inadvertent disclosure—the second story—that she knew about their occurrence from her ‘friend.’ Although Rose had not mentioned the friend’s name, Nyeleti had pulled her own conclusions—for who could it be other than Karabo?

As Nyeleti continued to speak, the angry tone that had characterized the first part of her speech suddenly lessened and was momentarily replaced with one that was notably calmer, as in a more or less conscious switch from vexation to elucidation:

I don’t know how she can do this but what it [the friendship between Karabo and Rose] means is he’s giving her food and money. It’s not only Rose, those ones she’s staying with, they are doing that too. It’s how poor girls survive, they make friends with older men who have more money than they have. And then they get food from them, and maybe the clothes.

Upon my asking, Nyeleti emphatically added that such friendships were ‘not like prostitution’: ‘What I know is that prostitutes go out on the street and sell their bodies. That’s not what Rose is doing, you can’t know if they have the sex, maybe, maybe not, but no one says that so you can’t know.’ Then, irately once more, ‘I’ll find out! Because she is hurting the people around her, it hurts my cousin, then me, then Maya, you see? And I am the one who brought her to JPP!’

Later, around the time that the news of Rose’s pregnancy reached the managers, Nyeleti again brought up the subject, this time in the presence of Maya as well. Rose, she sighed, had again asked her if she could sleep over at the flat—a once-frequent extension of generosity on Nyeleti’s part that she had, as of late, increasingly sought to avoid. ‘Aowa I don’t want her here!’ Nyeleti harshly declared; ‘I don’t want her in my bed, it will be like I’m a prostitute!’—a statement that ignited the following exchange:

Maya: [critically] Aowa Nyeleti!
Nyeleti: [shaking her head] Eish…!
Maya: You don’t know! We don’t know!
Nyeleti: She complains that she has no money! If you don’t have money how can you take care
of a baby? She can’t even take care of the kids she already has!
Maya: Éé [Pedi, yes], that’s why she needs people to take care of her!
Nyeleti: You know, it can be you or me, it doesn’t matter, you don’t know! You might be
getting to know the person but you don’t know everything about them. So with me and James,
from the beginning we used a condom. I am telling you guys, you don’t know the person, you
don’t know everything about them! No condom, no sex! Because you don’t know! It’s not just
skinny people, it’s everyone, you can’t see on people that they have the AIDS. I know people
want to please each other but we have to protect ourselves. I may be poor but I can protect my
body, I can protect myself! You know last year Rose had a miscarriage and when I asked her
how come [how she got pregnant], she said the condom broke. But she’s lying, she’s careless
that one!

Maya, characteristically reticent, did not respond to Nyeleti’s tirade. Shortly after Rose was
dismissed from her job, she and Nyeleti went to see Johan at ‘the Parliament,’ located across the
parking lot from our flat, where four members of the organization’s all-Afrikaner board had
their offices. That evening, Maya stretched out on the couch beside her, Nyeleti told me about
the meeting.

The lions are chasing after us, that’s how we live, Mieke. Then we come here, to the
church [JPP], and if the church shuts the door and leaves us out on the street the lions
come after us again. Rose, she made foolish mistakes, but it’s not for us to judge! So we
talked to Johan, we told him, maybe Rose got pregnant because she was looking for
security from the guy. She has no money, no job, she’s not living with her mom but with
her friends. We told him! It’s not right to just get rid of her. If the church shuts us out
then we go back to our old ways, that’s how it is. He said it’s right what we said to him.
He said he will ask her if she wants to volunteer at the Community Centre. It’s not for
money but at least she can get the food parcels, she can get the support.

Johan stayed true to his promise. Rose worked at the Community Centre until August, just
before she was due; during those months it was not uncommon to see women patting her
steadily growing belly whilst exclaiming how beautiful she looked, or what a blessing it was to
be with child. She gave birth to a second daughter at the end of August in Mamelodi Hospital.
When I next saw her at JPP in September, she was seated amidst a small group of baby admirers
while Khethang, the new UNISA student carrying out the practical component of his Social
Work degree at JPP, was walking around with the baby. ‘People ask me who the baby’s father
is,’ she said, addressing no one in particular. ‘I tell them, everybody is the baby’s father!’
In one sense the case of Rose can be told as a story of gender violence: Rose, a woman of Coloured/Swazi background at once born into the apartheid system and a household fraught with marital and generational conflict, a teenage mother twice over, resorts to transactional sex in the face of extreme destitution. In doing so, her survival hangs multiply in the balance. She seeks to cover her basic needs through her liaisons—at once commercial and romantic—but at what cost? There is the possibility of being infected, of falling pregnant, of abandonment.

During my fieldwork, the latter two happened. She bore a child whose father is ‘everybody’—who was, we might say, indeed fathered by ‘everybody.’ Rose’s claim is not an excuse; not a kind of pretext through which she seeks to place responsibility for her child’s existence and well-being on the shoulders of others. Quite otherwise, it constitutes a deliberate situating of her single motherhood in its socio-material context, and simultaneously an appeal to those around her that they see that context, acknowledge it for what it is.

This is the story I have sought to tell here; yet in relating it this has not been my sole objective. A second, as important goal has been to show how the occurrence of transactional sex is located and made sense of within a system of knowledge that is daily enacted; that is incessantly performed, but variously so depending on site and situation. Through women’s accounts and enactments the local knowledge concept of transactional sexuality that emerged incorporated both disapproval and recognition. This concept first came into view but dimly, hazily, through the circulation of rumours; at this time—before the news of Rose’s pregnancy made the rounds—its performance was also bound to a relatively small team of black women. Importantly at this stage, developments remained rule-bound; the code of conduct still in place, the Hosea Drama could be safely subjected to women’s (including Rose’s) hard laughter, parodying the play’s illogical, unrealistic messages. In its failure to acknowledge the deep ambivalence surrounding transactional sexual practice, the drama quickly became a target of
women’s ridicule.

Subsequently for Nyeleti, Maya and others, Rose’s pregnancy broke the rules that typically guaranteed the ‘success’ of their team performances at JPP. It breached the tacit agreement that as much as possible, their lives as workers for ‘whiteys’ in the inner city and as members of marginalized township communities ought to remain separated. In this process JPP’s Teen Ministry managers unwittingly became persons ‘in the know’; having been let in on a ‘team secret,’ their reactions of disappointment and shock (underscoring the veracity of women’s satirizing the Hosea play) engendered the rash decision to fire Rose. It is telling that at this point Nyeleti and Maya decided to speak to Johan, thereby (temporarily) urging him to join their performance in relation to Rose—but in a particular way. In pleading with Johan to acknowledge the direness of Rose’s circumstances, they stressed not the disapproval segment of their knowledge of transactional sex but that of recognition (‘The lions are chasing after us, that’s how we live’) and beyond that, of mercy (‘Rose, she made foolish mistakes, but it’s not for us to judge!’). In the latter we have an implicit return to the message of the Hosea Drama; an unequivocal exhortation that JPP ought to practice what it preaches. The absence of parody is notable in this interaction, and can here be attributed to the redressive nature of the request.

Alongside women’s insights into multiple partnering and transactional sexual practices, a second realm of gendered knowledge also emerged over time, regarding their experiences and memories of marriage. During the Sea Camp this subject, beyond the reiterated emphasis on ‘our spiritual marriage to Jesus,’ was addressed by the managers through an emphasis on lobola or bridewealth: those payments that pass from a man and/or his kin to the kin of his partner, effectively sealing African marriages.25 Turning now to this topic, I begin with a portrayal of

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25 I employ this rather generalized definition in view of the highly diverse urban environment I worked in, where it formed the commonly accepted one in relation to customary marriage. The literature on southern and sub-Saharan Africa bears witness to anthropologists’ struggle to define and describe ‘African bridewealth practices’—
how the practice of lobola was construed at the Sea Camp, after which I contextualize this presentation in relation to the ways women evoked their memories and experiences of marriage.

‘J.C.26 has paid your lobola!’: Christianizing Bridewealth at the Sea Camp

With all the participants seated in small groups, those made up of teens led by their counselors, on the fourth-last evening of the Sea Camp we were asked to turn to a specific page in the pink marriage preparation booklet that had been given out at the commencement of the camp. Headlined by a depiction of two bags stamped with green dollar signs and the questioned term Lobola?, the page contained three questions which, Irma and Sandy directed, were first to be considered in the small groups—an activity that would be followed by a collective discussion.

The first and second questions, correspondingly What is lobola? and How does it work?, generated a set of answers from the teens that in some ways was comparable to the accounts I had been gathering from black interlocutors in the inner city (see below). Initially hesitant, the teens’ responses to the first query included such rather formulaic statements as ‘You have to pay the parents of the bride so you can take her to your house,’ ‘It’s an offer of thanks to the bride’s parents,’ and ‘It’s like money and things that are given to the parents of the girl to say thank you for their daughter and the work she’s going to do, and after that the guy can take the girl.’

Amidst an increasingly animated atmosphere, the second question produced more detailed answers, including a list of material prestations and several contextual aspects that were generally known to affect lobola costs, or in the teens’ words, ‘the woman’s price’:

Money
Pots
Blankets
Beeste (Afrikaans, cattle) in the townships
A stick or a knife for the bride’s father
A jacket for the bride’s father

26 Acronym for Jesus Christ.
Facecloths
Handkerchiefs
Something to sit on
Soap

And furthermore:

‘In my culture the bride can’t see the groom for two months before the wedding. I think maybe in other cultures it’s different.’
‘She can’t be in the room when lobola is being paid. She has to stay under the blanket.’
‘After it’s paid the bride’s family makes a meal and gives food to the groom’s family.’
‘First they negotiate the price, they ask if the girl is a virgin. If she’s not a virgin the price goes down.’
‘Yeah but if she’s pregnant from the guy the price goes up. Or if she already has a kid from him. Then he has to pay the damages. Like in Zulu if the girl gets pregnant before lobola is paid the guy has to pay money for the damages.’
‘What if it’s not his kid?’ (This question was asked by a male teen.)
‘Depends on the father of the kid. If he doesn’t want it anymore and the new guy is willing to adopt, he has to pay more.’
‘The more qualities she has, the more you pay. If she’s intelligent you pay more. If she went to college you pay more.27 If she has a kid you pay more. It’s like that.’

Yet when it came to the third question, the teens (along with their counselors) grew noticeably silent: If we are planning a wedding between us and God, do you think that lobola was paid? If yes, how much was it? Aside from a few stifled giggles, the room in which we found ourselves remained awkwardly quiet, such that Sandy, who had asked the question, felt pressed to repeat it. ‘Come on guys, what do you think? Is lobola paid when we marry Jesus, when we give ourselves to God? What did you come up with in the small groups?’ It took a tentative ‘No…’ from one youthful camper for Sandy to provide the ‘correct’ answer:

‘No,’ thank you Mpho, that’s right! Or at least it’s partly right, you’re on the right track! The lobola of nowadays neh, it belongs to this world, it’s not of the perfect world that is to come, when we will be married to Jesus. That kind of lobola doesn’t have to be paid when we commit ourselves to J.C. But there’s another kind that does have to paid, neh? But the good news is, none of you have to pay for it! It’s already been paid, neh? Jesus paid your lobola by dying on the cross for your sins! J.C. is the ultimate lobola!

Sandy’s explanation signaled the end of the study session and was immediately followed by

27 A reference to the common practice of determining lobola costs according to a woman’s educational achievements, whereby her prospective husband “is expected to compensate the parents for most of the educational expenses they have incurred” (Mwamwenda and Monyooe 1997: 86; Burman and van der Werff 1993: 119). In Gloria’s account (below) we encounter a critical assessment of this development.
some thirty minutes of worship, leaving no time for comments or further questions. To my mind, one aspect left wanting in her elucidation was a consideration of the practical implications of the argument she had put forth. If Jesus’ sacrifice could be likened to and identified with lobola, what might this mean in terms of ‘this-worldly’ marriages? Was paying bridewealth still necessary, or warranted? And what of the mixing of the two sets of signs, the one broadly associated with African culture and marriage practices, the other with Christian belief and culture, bearing in mind that elements of the latter had been incorporated into the former and indigenized long ago in South Africa’s socio-cultural environment?

Comparably to the *Hosea Drama*, these questions, which Sandy’s words alluded to but did not explicitly pose, went unanswered. Sandy, Irma, and other Afrikaner leaders did not address the topic of lobola again other than briefly on the camp’s final evening, during the symbolic celebration of the ‘marriage feast,’ and then only to reiterate the message of Jesus’ payment. Neither, to my knowledge, did the teens, their counselors, or other black personnel attempt to problematize the managers’ reasoning; instead they remained quiet. Clearly each camp participant knew about bridewealth in one way or another, whether intimately through personal experience, by observation, or via hearsay. Yet on the part of female black staff, foregoing even the familiar rejoinder of hard laughter, the only engagement I observed in respect of the lobola discussion amounted to utter silence.

It is against this backdrop of discretionary silence that I explore women’s memories, experiences and knowledge of lobola and marriage, beginning with the account of Gloria, a 54-year-old Pedi woman from Atteridgeville who weekly attended JPP’s sewing and cooking

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28 Situated some fifteen kilometres west of the inner city, the township of Atteridgeville (including the adjoining area of Saulsville) was established in 1939. By 1962 about ten thousand houses had been built in the township to accommodate people removed from Marabastad, Newclare, Bantule, Lady Selborne and Hove’s Ground. The development of Atteridgeville was frozen between 1968-78 in accordance with government policy that housing for Africans be limited to the Bantustans, or homelands. Atteridgeville was granted municipal status in 1984, the same
classes. Rather differently than the younger women at the Sea Camp (two of whose stories follow Gloria’s), Gloria could be characterized as a woman who, when it came to her experiences of marriage and gender relations in the townships, tended to throw caution to the wind; who frequently and candidly expressed her frustration with men, all the while regularly attending lobola ceremonies and expressing her support for this ‘cultural tradition.’ Gloria’s narrations are illuminative not merely because they provide insight into how bridewealth practices and views thereof have transformed over the years, but also because they allow us to compare her experience of gender subjectivity—including her expression of and ways of addressing it—to those of Nyeleti and Toko a generation later.

**Gloria: ‘If you suffer, you will be clever’**

It was this sentence, binding ingenuity straightforwardly to the experience of suffering, that Gloria increasingly began to repeat to me toward the end of my fieldwork. She used it, for one, to tell me about the business she had started in 2005 and had registered officially as a Close Corporation (CC) in 2006; a business she had named *Basadi Matladi* (Pedi), in translation *Clever Women*. Through *Basadi Matladi* she sought to make each of her income-related activities, of which there were a good number and which had previously fallen into the ‘informal economic’ sector, legal by state law and eligible for certain tax and other benefits. Buying second-hand clothes from JPP and selling them for profit, making shoes out of rubber soles and brightly coloured string purchased cheaply from ‘the Indians’ in Marabastad, sewing

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29 A Close Corporation or CC is a form of business ownership available to South Africans geared toward small or medium-sized enterprises. The managerial and administrative requirements of a CC are less formal than those pertaining to companies. See the following website, linked to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI): [www.cipro.gov.za/products_services/close_corps.asp](http://www.cipro.gov.za/products_services/close_corps.asp).

30 Situated on the north-western edge of the inner city, Marabastad was named after the Pedi chief Maraba, who after establishing his *kraal* (homestead) on the western bank of the Steenhoven Spruit (Afrikaans, stream or brook) in 1870 subsequently founded a village there. Black people employed as servants for Voortrekker and other settlers in the nearby town of Pretoria were accommodated there, and over time a sizable settlement developed (including
traditional wedding dresses, preparing and serving meals for large gatherings, hairdressing at her Atteridgeville home—whatever the opportunity or occasion, Gloria’s resourcefulness seemed to know no bounds.

At the same time Gloria also used the sentence disparagingly, to berate those women who, in her view, failed to live up to its truth. One frequent target of hers in this regard was Connie, the 56-year-old Tsonga woman from Mmakaunyana with whom she weekly attended JPP’s sewing class. Gloria and Connie, ‘sisters’ by virtue of having been married to men who were brothers, had remained close over the years despite Connie’s husband having passed away in 1997 and Gloria’s ‘divorce’ in 1993. While Connie headed a household of (more or less) thirteen, comprising six daughters and six grandchildren in addition to herself, Gloria shared the house she had inherited from her mother with her brother and twenty-eight year old son, an epilepsy sufferer. Each household faced its own set of difficulties. Connie, whose income from domestic labour amounted to R600 per month ($75), struggled to feed her family and deal with various crises (the husband of one daughter had committed suicide in May 2006, whilst another daughter was stabbed and seriously injured by her boyfriend in September of the same year); Gloria’s brother and son spent much of their days ‘drinking the money away.’ Although on one level Gloria was protective of Connie, who was unable to read or write, she equally often rebuked her sister for her weariness. ‘Aowa, she is too down! She’s lazy, that one!’

In contrast to the rather fluctuating attendance of other women, Gloria and Connie

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on the eastern bank of the Spruit, which had been set aside for black people in 1867 and had been named Schoolplaas) which became known as Marabastad. The stormy history of this complexly ‘mixed’ area is one of persistent in-migration and forced removals of black, Indian and Coloured people. See Strydom 2007 for a brief outline.

31 Formerly part of the Bophuthatswana Bantustan, the town of Mmakaunyana was incorporated into North West Province following apartheid’s end. It is located at a considerable distance from Pretoria’s inner city, beyond Soshangue and Mabopane townships.

32 See Introduction. Although Gloria generally used the term ‘divorced’ to describe her marital status (as others in comparable situations also did), her 1973 customary marriage had never been registered with the state. In effect, neither could her 1993 separation be officially recognized or finalized through state law. I comment further on this matter below.
faithfully came to the sewing class each week, skipping only in cases of a family crisis or death. At times our Tuesday afternoons were spent in a silence interspersed only by the hum of sewing machines and the quiet comments of the teacher, an Afrikaans woman named Esther; on other occasions, lively discussions ensued regarding topics as varied as Jacob Zuma, the alleged differences between white and black men, one or another recent taxi strike, or the ‘impossible’ cost of funerals. In the conversation below the principal narrators were Gloria, Connie, Beatrice and Felicity, the latter a 28-year-old Kongo mother of three from Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of the Congo) whose Angolan husband—also of Kongo ethnicity—worked as a pastor and missionary for a local congregation of the Assemblies of God. The dialogue started when Gloria began to talk about the lobola ceremony she planned to attend in Ga-Rankuwa the next weekend.

Gloria: The lobola, they will pay it on Saturday. On the third of December is the Western wedding. You’re not allowed to wear the white dress until the lobola is paid. Ee, we are going to cook, cook the pap [Afrikaans, stamped corn], cook the vleis [Afrikaans, meat]… it’s going to be nice!

Esther: Why do you pay it, the lobola?
Gloria: It’s for respect between the families, to bring the families together. Mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, after the wedding it’s mother and daughter, they are not in-laws anymore. [Felicity throws me a skeptical look.] And they stay close also if there is the divorce. You see me I’m still close to my mother-in-law, she is my mother!
Felicity: … I’m against lobola, it’s stupid!
Mieke: Did they pay lobola for you?
Felicity: They paid for me and now they are planning it for my daughters! It’s like they’re not my children, my mother-in-law says I have no word on my children because they paid! So!
Gloria: In your culture maybe you stop, but not in our culture! It’s like that, the children are not ours, they belong to the fathers and the in-laws! My husband and my husband’s brother took my son, the sick one yes! It is not my child! It’s theirs!
Felicity: Lobola, can you believe it! I carry the baby in my stomach and everything! What for! That’s why I’m not gonna have any more! They’re not even mine!
Beatrice: It’s culture!
Felicity: My mother-in-law, she says she come to see my children, not me! [People laugh, but Felicity’s anger is apparent.] ‘No, you didn’t come to see me, I don’t come to see you!’

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33 Ga-Rankuwa township is located north-west of Pretoria on the border separating Gauteng and North West provinces. It was founded on communal land in the 1960s as part of the forced removals of ‘homeless’ black persons and families from the two Pretoria townships, Mamelodi and Atteridgeville. The establishment of this settlement and that of several others formed part of the formation of the ‘Border Industrial Area’ of the Bophuthatswana Bantustan.
Gloria: Aowa Felicity, it’s shameful what you are saying.
Felicity: She comments on food! She says there’s food for two, three more children!
Connie: Things are more expensive these days!
Beatrice: ...When I got married in 1986 my lobola was six thousand Rand, two beeste and the
doek [Afrikaans, cloth or blanket]. It was twenty years back.
Esther: You were expensive!
Connie: Eish! Mine was a hundred and forty [Rand]. It happened in 1970, it was a hundred and
forty, two blankets, the coat, the axe, the broom...
Gloria: I got married in 1973, it was one hundred sixty [Rand], one blanket, one long jacket.
[Glaria gets up to imitate her father’s prancing around in his new coat, leading everyone to
laugh.] That time, before 1970 lobola was maybe a hundred Rand, but now it’s more. Money
talks, we want money! [laughs]
Mieke: What if there’s a divorce?
Gloria: If you have children you don’t have to take the lobola back because you’ve done your
job. [Felicity rolls her eyes.] You work hard for the one-sixty [Rand], you cook and clean, raise
the children... Eish, men, they can’t do anything!
Beatrice: They just watch the TV!
Gloria: Aowa aowa, I don’t want men! No men for me, men are useless! [...] If the woman gets
pregnant first [before the marriage] the man must first pay the damage. They separate it, that is
now. Because otherwise the men they don’t stay.
Esther: What if a Zulu marries a Xhosa?
Beatrice: Zulu is very expensive, and Ndebeles. They don’t want money. Maybe they want
twelve beeste, or twenty. And you must buy for the whole family blankets, you must buy for the
ancestors too. And they like to marry each other. Zulu-Zulu, Ndebele-Ndebele, one culture.
Gloria: We work hard for the money, for the husband! When he comes home late you open the
door, he goes to sleep. You have to clean, sweep the floor, carry the water...
Felicity: Me I don’t believe in culture! I ask my husband—no man! Maybe someone is in danger
and you’re just sitting there! I just follow what the Bible say, if the Bible don’t say it I don’t do
it!

Argumentative as much as it was descriptive, the conversation clearly had Gloria and
Felicity, the main protagonists, at loggerheads. Although a variety of factors were at play in how
the debate developed (age difference, religious conviction, possibly ethnic identity), perhaps the
most significant element influencing the two women’s divergent positions pertained to their
different experiences and expectations of the relation between a woman and her husband’s
mother. Some two months before the dialogue took place, Felicity’s mother-in-law had traveled
from the small northern Angolan town where she lived to South Africa in order to spend ‘some
time,’ ostensibly an indefinite period, with her son’s family. For Felicity they were trying
months, sharing the small Sunnyside flat in which she lived with her three children and mother-
in-law while her husband was repeatedly away ‘for the missions.’ ‘The only reason she come is to tell me to have more children, to tell my husband! She don’t do anything, she can’t even make tea!’ And, pointing toward the apartment building where I was dropping her off when she made these comments, ‘She say she can’t open the door, the gate! Imagine!’

If Felicity’s frustration was due to her husband’s mother, Gloria’s had once stemmed from her husband, a discontent that had grown into an intense distrust of black men more generally. Born in 1952, she had been daring and inventive from childhood, always taking chances and exploring whatever opportunities came her way within apartheid’s structural limits, as became eloquently clear when we recorded parts of her story in January 2007. The members of her natal household—seven persons, including her parents, her granny, an uncle, an older sister and older brother—had been subject to forced removals twice, first from Lady Selborne (now Suiderberg) to Mooiplaas (now Laudium), then from Mooiplaas to Atteridgeville. Their life had been one of poverty. Unable to afford the local school’s black and white uniform, Gloria had attended her classes wearing a dress made from old mealie meal sacks which, filled with corn, the family purchased to make pap, the staple diet. ‘Yoh! We didn’t have food. When I come home during lunch there was no food nothing nothing. I just open the stove. I find the pap crumbs. Just eat it and drink water and go back to school. That time we didn’t complain because we used to see it was like that, the life was that. I went to school up to, it’s Grade 9 now.’

As Gloria’s parents could no longer afford their children’s school fees, Gloria quit her education and looked for work. ‘I see now my mother and my father haven’t got money. I just say, “No here! Let me look for work for myself.”’ I went to Laudium.34 I was still small that time. And then, that Indian people put the washing there; I wash it wash it; I’m about to finish it they bring another one. I wash wash wash for the Indian people so that I must get something to

34 Proclaimed an Indian township in 1961, Laudium was rezoned (from being a white settlement) during the early years of apartheid to accommodate South African Indians who were being relocated from Marabastad and other neighbourhoods in Pretoria’s city centre.
eat! Because I could see my mother was struggling, my mother was crying, they haven’t got money anymore.

‘Oh! That Indian people, that other one, I get cross! I just leave it like that; put it in the water again; I just say “No, I won’t!” When I was sleeping there this other lady say, “They want somebody to come and work in the shop here,” in the old Chinese shop there in Proes Street. Because I knew how to talk English. So eh! I used to work for that old Chinese shop for a hundred and ten [Rand] per month. But that time it was, you can pay for some things.’

A few years later Gloria found new employment as a shampooer in a hairdressing shop in the inner city, a place that catered to white customers only. It was during this time—in 1972—that she met Sipho in Mabopane. Sipho paid lobola a year later, in 1973; in 1974 the couple settled in a small house in Soshanguve.

‘You know my sister was staying in Mabopane, so I went to visit my sister, I met him there. I thought maybe this is somebody, so I ask my sister, “This guy hasn’t got a wife?” My sister say “No he hasn’t got one.” Because I say, “I don’t want to stay with somebody who’s having another somebody or maybe, who’s having a wife.” He was right all along. But now, when you finish get married, it changed, everything! It changed changed changed.’ Gloria and Sipho had a son in 1974, a daughter in 1975, and a second son in 1978. But at home, things were ‘impossible.’ ‘He was shouting there, shouting shouting! My children, they didn’t even get a chance to learn! I took my children to the boarding school so that they must learn there because at home there’s no peace. It was shouting every time.’

Sipho’s verbal abuse was not limited to the home, following Gloria around from that intimate space to the two places in the inner city where she was employed in the 1970s and 1980s, first the hairdressing shop, then Pretoria Central Prison.35

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35 The notorious Pretoria Central Prison, where numerous anti-apartheid activists were incarcerated either temporarily or for longer periods (a number were sent on to Robben Island, including Nelson Mandela) whilst
‘Now my husband, he want nothing nice, nothing! I used to work, and then, he used to come to town. Because he was having the car. And he just stand at the door. “No I want my wife back. No my wife doesn’t work. No I want her now, it’s my wife!” I say, “No! Come and fetch me!” “No I want my wife, I want my wife! No I don’t want her to work, I’m coming to take my wife, we are going!” Now my boss say, “No but she’s working.” He say “No, this is my wife! If I say this, I say this!” Ah! Then after one o’clock we go home, but when I am at home he doesn’t say anything. In the morning when I wake up, he’s wake up already, he say “Where are you going,” I say “I’m going to work,” he say “No, who said you are working, you are not going to work.” But now I get clever. Because we are having the car. At night I take my clothes; put in the car; wash myself; then in the morning I just wet-wet and then, take the clothes and go! When I come back he doesn’t say anything to me anymore.

‘Then I leave the job there. After some time I find the job in prison, we used to look after the prisoners, the ladies, the female prisoners. […] I work there, that time they were paying four hundred [Rand]. Now my husband, he come again. He say “You! Who said you must come and work!” When I come from work, I say “Here is my wages,” he say, “I don’t want to see your wages. I don’t want to see it because I don’t know if you are at work or what, I don’t know.” I say “But now I must work, because the children are in school, or what if someone get ill, and then we’re going to suffer! At least when I’m used to work it’s going to be better!” Ooh! He doesn’t even want to hear that! He come again there. He say “You people, I want my wife back. I want her!”

others were hanged or died at the hands of the Security Police there (Steve Biko being perhaps the most well-known of them). During one sewing class it emerged that both Gloria and Esther, the teacher, had been employed at this top-security facility in the late 1970s and early 1980s, although they had not known each other. Gloria’s job included cleaning and providing black female prisoners with their meals; Esther’s, as social worker, counselling white male prisoners. The dialogue turned tense when Gloria began to explain how “it was bad that time,” how the prison’s wards and entrances had been divided along the racial lines of blankes (Afrikaans, whites) and nie-blankes (non-whites)—the reason, she argued, that she and Esther had never encountered one another. Esther’s response to what she perceived as an attack was instant, and partially aimed at me: ‘There’s two sides to this story! Have you ever heard of poor whites, Mieke?’
‘When I go to work, we start at six o’clock. And [the prison] it’s there, in Potgieter [Street] and I stay in Soshanguve. We have the car in the yard but he doesn’t want to take me. I catch the taxi at four o’clock. In the taxi I just see four guys at the back, I thought maybe it’s passengers. Just after we leave the driver say “No I’m not going to town anymore, you can catch another one.” When I start to go out of the taxi—because, those boys were thugs. They grab my handbag, everything, they run away with it. Then the other ones they take the knife like this. The other one say “No don’t stab her because, she’s staying there!” They knew me! They— “She’s staying there!” But I was fighting with them! They saw that I was strong! They ran away with my handbag and everything. It was the purse like this, with the wire like this. I was running and trying to fight with them, then the other one scratches me here, and then, the other one here [with the wire]. When I go back home I am bleeding, my husband say “I wish they killed you because I say you mustn’t go and work and then you go and work.”

‘I phone them at work and then, I go back to the work. He went there again, he say “No, I don’t want her to work.” So, my boss come and call me, he say “You know Gloria, this is not your boyfriend. If it is your boyfriend we will say no, you are not going away. But now, he’s your husband. So, if he say he don’t want you to work, there’s nothing we can do. You better stay at home.” Ooh, I get so worried because I am used to work, I like to work! But he say “It’s your husband, if we keep you here he can sue us, because you are the wife.” I stay at home again.

‘Oh I get worried, I get worried, I say “But why, why,” because I don’t like to wake up and sit like this. I say “Let me try the businesses.” I start cooking food, selling… I start doing the hairdressing at home now. He start again. I was cutting another man, neh? Before I was finished—the rolls are on the hair, I was shampooing to remove [them]. He just grab that man, say “You, go away here! What will people think if my wife will touch your hair!” He say to me
“No, you can’t!” I say “But I’m working, I must work at home for the perming,” or what—what for the hair. He say “No I don’t want anything here, nothing nothing!”

‘I sit down now, I phone my mother-in-law I say “Yoh, I don’t know what to do now because, I like to work but now my husband doesn’t want me to work.” My mother-in-law say “Come here.” I go to my mother-in-law, we go buy things and then we go sell them. When I come back, he say “Oh, you’re going to my mother, my mother’s going to look for another man for you.” But it’s his mother! No! She say I must come and stay with her because he doesn’t want me to work and what—what, she say no, come let’s buy things and go sell so that you can have money. When we finish he say to his mother “No! You’re my mother! You want to teach my wife to get another man!” He didn’t know what he want—he just say no. And every time when we’re sitting he is shouting, shouting, for nothing. If I say “Tell me what you want, and what you don’t want.” He doesn’t want to tell me. When he finish get drunk he’s… shouting shouting shouting. He’s watching TV he switch off he say “No it’s my TV, my TV.” Oh! One day I get cross, I say I’ll never fight with him. I say “You know what, now I’m going to my mother’s house. I’m leavin’ now because I can’t live this type of… life.” I just grab my handbag like this and then go home, until today.’

Some fifteen years of anger, hostility, bitterness condensed into one extended narrative, told predominantly in the present tense, as if the events Gloria was describing had just happened, as if they had taken place but yesterday. And albeit differently than in the account of Rose, again one that reveals how gender relations in the townships have long been shot through with violence, as if imbued with a kind of fated vehemence that all too frequently pits partners to a marriage or other romantic/sexual arrangements against one another. Yet of equal interest is Gloria’s portrayal of her relationship with her husband’s mother; a relationship that aided her through one of the most difficult periods of her marriage, when it seemed that every option of
being able to work had been denied her, and one that ultimately proved stronger and longer-lasting than the one she had with Sipho, since Gloria and her mother-in-law continued to work together until the latter’s death in 2002.\footnote{Note that during the sewing class Gloria evoked her mother-in-law’s ongoing presence (‘You see me I’m still close to my mother-in-law, she is my mother!’), denotative of the ongoing relationship between the living and the earthly deceased through the latter’s ancestral status.} In the context of the reality of gender violence, we might suggest, lobola takes on—or can take on—a novel dimension. In Gloria’s words, evoking a locally salient principle, ‘The two families must go together’; in practice, following her narrative and enactments, it is especially the women of various families who become part of a shared kin network through lobola transactions. Sipho’s mma (Pedi, mother) remains Gloria’s mother, and Connie her sister, long after the dissipation of the marriage.

Gloria’s support of lobola nonetheless existed and was enacted in light of the knowledge that the practice was undergoing a period of transition, and had been for some time. Already alluded to during the sewing class dialogue (‘That time, before 1970 lobola was maybe a hundred Rand, but now it’s more. Money talks, we want money!’), she commented on this development more elaborately during our interview.

‘But now! Some of them they don’t take lobola anymore because, as they say everything’s improving. Like another child there in Venda,\footnote{Some of Gloria’s relatives lived near Thohoyandou in the former Bantustan of Venda, now part of Limpopo Province.} he’s just having the little children with the girlfriend. Now they just go to Home Affairs and then, go to sign, so that they are married [see Note 4]. But they must take out the lobola. They must take it! […]

‘People now they make business. Because if maybe you are a nurse, or a teacher. And I’m the son’s mother. I say [to your relatives], “We want to pay the lobola for your daughter. How much is it?” Let’s say they want twenty thousand [Rand]. Or maybe fifteen thousand because you are educated. But what about me, my son also is educated! So they make like that but others they say “Okay, maybe we can take two thousand off or four thousand, so that this
children when they have their house, they can get money to buy things for the house.” But now when they say twenty thousand, or maybe fifteen, how are [the children] going to live? Who is going to give money to who to buy those things? So now the expensive lobola, I don’t support it. Because if you say your child is learned, mine is learned also! Now how are we going to work it? Can we go half-half? So they mustn’t ask for so much. And maybe sometimes you are working, and my son also is working. So they must think of those things.

‘But if times go on. Then the lobola won’t work anymore because this children they don’t like it also. They don’t like it, [they] finish going to Home Affairs… They’re living the whites’ life. Because the whites don’t pay lobola, they just go to church and buy the rings. Now they’re adopting the white culture. You tell them “Maybe it’s not like this”—“No don’t tell us about the old thing, that thing is your old thing, now here we are the new generations now!”

Gloria’s knowledge and memories of bridewealth and marriage are those of an older woman, one who was raised and lived a substantive part of her adult life under apartheid’s yoke; a reality that persistently and forcibly circumscribed her life-world and that of those around her: her natal family, her husband, his kin. In addition to the forced relocations and economic deprivation, this reality is borne out in the memories pertaining to her marriage, which well illuminate Linda Richter’s argument of how apartheid, migrancy and unemployment jointly resulted in “men’s loss of power.” These processes

   disempowered men and disabled their capacity to live with and support their families. In response to this, social adaptations… emerged amongst men which [have] further alienate[d] men from children [and their wives], such as machismo related to the conquest of women” (Richter 2004: 20).

With the foci of scholarship during the 1970s and 80s on documenting the impacts of migrant labour and forced removals and the bleakness of urban life, the effects of these processes on gendered and sexual identities have only begun to be considered recently—in the post-apartheid moment. In a 2009 article Shireen Hassim considers how “sexual violence was the dark shadow
of political conflict in South Africa,” whereby the latter operated in concert with the upheavals in African family and community life, engendering ‘violent masculinities’ in which “rituals and expressions of violence were intricately tied to the formation and performance of male identities” (2009: 64-65). More generally, recent research on gender-based violence has shown how “sex and love are inextricably bound with violence in South Africa,” and how “violence has become a naturalized part of heterosexual relations” (2009: 66, 67).

Yet, as Veena Das has recently reiterated, research on gender and violence “is not only about how worlds are unmade by violence but also how they are remade” (2008: 293)—a veracity Gloria’s words and actions equally allude to. In this regard, alongside the myriad indications of Sipho’s aggression and desire to control we learn of Gloria’s unceasing attempts to work and provide for her family—aspirations that also eventually led her to leave her husband in 1993 (and that culminated in her registering her company, Basadi Matladi, in 2006). More subtly, her (and other women’s) usage of the term ‘divorced’ to describe her marital status in the wake of leaving Sipho is also at once demonstrative of violence’s reach and its address, particularly since customary unions and dissolutions thereof were never acknowledged by the apartheid state. In this respect the usage of the label ‘divorced’ in everyday parlance can be considered a kind of reclamation; a tacit rewriting of state rule in the face of the latter’s negation both of African marriages and the occurrence of gender-based violence and subjectivity within them.

For women born in the 1970s, experiences of getting and being married can on the one hand be shown to be comparable to those of the older generation; on the other to be significantly different. Regarding the latter, Gloria refers to two discrete yet intertwined processes, both pertaining less to the experience of being married than to the course to be followed for a marriage to be sealed in an appropriate, publicly (culturally) sanctioned manner. The first,
summed up as ‘People now they make business,’ constituted a common refrain (and in the cases of some young men, a complaint) amongst interlocutors, and referred to the increasing monetization or capitalization of lobola. Clearly the lengthy process of prestation negotiations and the subsequent transfer of wealth during the sealing of a marriage is not what has changed, but rather its material form, the objects through which wealth is symbolized and, in their transaction, status is conferred. Certainly in the urban setting in which I worked the preferred form of lobola payments was in hard cash, and that in considerable to vast amounts, ranging from a couple of thousand Rand in the cases of some to twenty-five or thirty thousand in those of others.\footnote{Sandra Burman and Nicolette van der Werff suggest that the monetization of lobola bears particular consequences in cases of divorce. “Theoretically,” they write, “should [a] marriage be dissolved as a result of misbehaviour on the wife’s part, then the bridewealth could be reclaimed from her family, though usually… with suitable deductions for the children she had borne, who would be claimed by the husband’s family. However, in practice… there has been a steep decrease in claims for the refund of bridewealth when marriages break up… Where claims for the return of bridewealth are made… it is seldom actually repaid, although much acrimony results. This is probably largely due to the fact that bridewealth is now mainly paid in money, not cattle, particularly in urban areas. Unlike cattle, which had calves and so enabled the bridewealth to remain available, money tends to be spent” (1993: 112). These comments resonate to some degree with the account I gathered from Gloria, whose lobola had never been returned following her and Sipho’s divorce. Leaving aside the question of whose ‘misbehaviour’ it was that had led to the divorce, perhaps it was partially for this reason that Gloria emphasized her children’s belonging to Sipho and his kin rather than to herself and her relatives.}

For some such costs are so far beyond their means that the process of bridewealth transferral remains incomplete for years, if not decades,\footnote{In the past as well it was not uncommon, in some societies, for lobola to be paid over protracted periods.} whilst others (younger couples especially) prefer to take the Home Affairs route, as Gloria also indicates.

Concurrently, in the last few decades lobola has also come to be linked to and entwined with a second symbolic process, one commonly referred to as the Western or white wedding—a rather novel development on a popular scale which Gloria alludes to when she argues that ‘This children, now they’re adopting the white culture’ (the term ‘white’ in white wedding also refers to the bride’s white dress). As other interlocutors likewise explained, this part of the process of getting married can only occur after lobola has been paid. At times it follows lobola prestations by mere days or weeks; at other times a month, a year or even several years might pass before
the Western wedding—a second set of expenses, typically including another costly meal—becomes an affordable possibility. Western weddings often begin with a church ceremony, after which the wedding party and guests are invited to celebrate the Christian ritual at the home of the bride’s parents or other of her relatives.

In the remainder of the chapter I present two further accounts of marriage: those of Nyeleti and Toko—both born in the 1970s—respectively. While Nyeleti’s account will reveal important continuities in relation to that of Gloria and the broader experience of gender subjectivity, Toko’s will illuminate how such experiences have concurrently been subject to transformation. Nonetheless, beyond the divergences characterizing the stories of these two interlocutors, what they bore in common was the mode in which they were presented to me and others within and beyond the JPP environment: hesitantly, guardedly, ever warily. Engaging in some depth with this observation will ultimately bring us back to the Sea Camp’s lobola discussion and women’s notable discretionary silence in its wake.

**Nyeleti: ‘We are crying every day of our lives’**

With these brief yet evocative words, accompanied by a barely perceptible nod in the direction of Maya’s room, Nyeleti indicated how she felt about the unexpected visit of Given, Maya’s boyfriend, who together with Maya had just disappeared into the latter’s bedroom. Given, we knew, had inexplicably ‘vanished’ more than a month ago, and for the past couple of weeks Maya had grown increasingly disconcerted as her SMSes and calls had gone unanswered, yielding nothing but an automated voice messaging system. Nyeleti, well aware of how the young Ndebele man’s curious disappearance had worn on her friend, was both angry and disappointed with Given, whose greeting she had returned in a deliberately cold manner. And yet—what could be done? Above all else, the words she had uttered evoked both the ordinariness of what had happened and a certain powerlessness, as if no act or decision would
ever be able to change the course of such things.

Nyeleti, Maya’s senior by some fifteen years, was herself intimately familiar with her friend’s dilemma, not least through her on-again-off-again relationship with James, the 42-year-old Shangaan man employed by a local unit of the Scorpions40 who lived in one of the new extensions that had sprung up beyond Mamelodi’s eastern border in recent years. At the initiation of my fieldwork she had known James, a divorced father of two, for nine years. He was her ‘third boyfriend’ since her divorce (separation)41 from Patrick, the father of her own three children who lived with her mother Miriam in Mamelodi West (see Chapter 4). Their relationship, she asserted, had been ‘good at first,’ when she still lived with Miriam and the children in the township; during those years James had come to visit often, bought her nice things, taken her out on dates and spoiled Robert, Amazi and Princess with gifts of clothes and toys. ‘He wanted to marry me,’ she once disclosed, ‘but I didn’t want to, aowa! I won’t marry again, never!’ According to Nyeleti, it was only when she moved to the inner city in 2001 that their relationship had begun to sour, a problem that remained unresolved in 2006/07. Over the course of my fieldwork Nyeleti and Maya’s respective liaisons with James and Given were at best ‘okay’; the majority of the time they appeared decidedly vague and uncertain. At first they also conspicuously sought to hide their boyfriends’ visits from me (and sometimes from each other)—an initial act suggestive of the wariness young women commonly effected concerning their romantic and sexual involvements.

Comparably to Toko (below), roughly during my first half year in the inner city Nyeleti

40 A unit of the National Prosecuting Authority of South Africa (NPA; created during the drafting of the 1996 Constitution), the Scorpions, otherwise known as the Directorate of Special Operations (DSO), came into operation under ex-President Thabo Mbeki in January 2001, charged with the task of investigating serious organized crime and unlawful conduct, such as human and drug trafficking and governmental (including police) and business sector fraud and corruption. Over the next years, the Scorpions because especially well known for their raids of houses of high-ranking ANC politicians, including—in view of alleged corruption in the South African Arms Deal of 1999—that of Jacob Zuma, then Deputy President. The ANC’s decision to merge the Scorpions with the South African Police Service (SAPS) in June 2008, thereby greatly reducing their power, was widely criticized as a deliberate move to protect corrupt ANC officials. The unit was officially abolished in October 2008.

41 See Note 16. Nyeleti’s employment of this term is directly comparable to Gloria’s usage.
never spoke of her former marriage to Patrick of her own accord. That she was in touch with him I knew due to the sharp telephone conversations I witnessed her partaking in from time to time; conversations that, she might subsequently mention, concerned the children or the support money that ‘he refuses to send any more.’ At one point she noted that at their final separation she insisted that the children stay with her because ‘that time they were still young’—an arrangement Patrick had agreed to on the condition that when they reached the age of sixteen, they move in with him. With the sixteenth birthday of Nyeleti’s eldest son Robert in 2006, that time had now arrived; Robert, however, had expressed little desire to leave home and friends in order to settle for an indeterminate period with Patrick and his family in Edenvale (near Johannesburg). ‘He doesn’t want to go!’ Nyeleti exclaimed. ‘He won’t go without Amazi, he doesn’t want to go at all! So now Patrick says he won’t waste his money any more!’

The ambiguous relationship with James, the fervent refusal to remarry, the agitated exchanges with Patrick, not to mention the stroke she suffered in her leg in the 1990s, her dragging limp, the more or less mysterious ‘pains’ she regularly endured—the combination of these articulated and enacted signs spoke of something, bore witness to something, though what precisely that ‘something’ amounted to remained long hidden in obscurity. Meanwhile the busy rhythm of Nyeleti’s inner city/township life went on as usual. Rumours of James having proposed to another woman, some months later of having fathered the newborn of yet another, produced vehement fusions of anger and conflict that led to something akin to breakups, yet that always turned out to be temporary. When her brother (cousin) Gabriel paid lobola for Phindile in November 2006, James was there; when Roy, the cousin who ran the shebeen in the house that had once been their grandmother’s, paid lobola for his girlfriend Blessings in March 2007, James once again showed up. After the second of these events I hesitantly inquired after

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42 See Note 22. As with Gloria, neither had Nyeleti’s family returned the lobola Patrick and his kin had paid to seal the marriage. Here however, clearly adding to the considerable tension between the former couple was the matter of the children’s living with their maternal rather than paternal kin.
Nyeleti’s own lobola. ‘Eish, it was boring!’ was the extent of her response.

In the South African spring of 2007 a series of dramatic events, including the shocking murder of James in August and the death of Maya’s mother in September, led to considerable conflict between several of the women with whom I had been working. Coincident with my return to the field in September, two results of these developments were noticeably higher levels of anxiety and vulnerability amongst women on the one hand, and a tacit feeling of suspicion towards me on the other, which I sensed would either strengthen or disappear depending on which side I would ‘choose’ to support. Although I do not address these matters here (see Chapter 6), it is worthwhile to mention that in this time of unease it was Nyeleti who staked the greatest claim on my presence. One of the ways in which she did so was by sharing with me, ever gradually, an increasing number of details regarding the major events and experiences that had shaped her life, beginning with various interpretations of James’s recent passing and eventually touching on the years of her marriage to Patrick as well—the subject with which I am here especially concerned.

Accordingly, one afternoon in mid-October 2007, still in the midst of the distancing-process that the upheavals of the past couple of months necessitated, the two of us found ourselves in the flat sharing a late lunch from Zozobites, JPP’s cafeteria, when Nyeleti informed me that Patrick had called her the night before, asking if he could have the children over the weekend for the family’s mphahlo (Shangaan, ancestral ceremonial rites). ‘It’s ancestor stuff,’ she explained; ‘I told him I don’t know… I have to talk to my mom, I don’t think she will let them. She’s a Christian mos, she doesn’t like those things.’ Then she continued, bridging back to the time of her ‘quick’ marriage at the age of seventeen, just after she had given birth to Robert.

‘Those ones that side, they like the traditions! Even when we got married [in 1990] it
was only lobola, we didn’t have a white wedding. And because I was pregnant we [Nyeleti’s family] had to go to his family to ask for the negotiations, but we didn’t, they came to Mamelodi, imagine! They were the ones who said we had to get married!’

‘Why were they so insistent?’

‘Because I was pregnant with Patrick’s baby, they threatened they would take the baby if we didn’t get married. My mom didn’t want [the marriage], she thought we were too young but she couldn’t do anything, her hands were tied.’

‘And what about you, did you want to get married?’

‘Yes, I wanted to! Because I was there when [my sister] Pauline got married, I was small then but the lobola was nice, and she had the white wedding too, it was nice, so I wanted that too. But then we didn’t have a white wedding, Patrick’s people they are not Christians, they didn’t want that.’

Nyeleti went on to explain that her lobola had been five thousand Rand, ‘and then one hundred for that, two hundred for that, one hundred for that… until seven point eight [R7800], like that.’ When Patrick and his relatives arrived for the ceremony they further brought an ‘expensive axe… this long coat… and some blankets.’ Following Shangaan tradition, she sat under the blanket ‘for long, eish! In the other room Patrick’s family, they put some money on the floor, maybe fifty, then my family they said it’s not enough. Then they put one hundred, one hundred and fifty, and so on until it was enough, maybe up to two hundred. Then his family opened the blanket. Eish, it was heavy and hot, it was boring!’ The cow that was slaughtered for the lobola came from Bushbuckridge, because ‘my mom’s family they have cattle there… But with Princess neh, I don’t want so much, maybe three thousand to help pay for the cow. I don’t want to sell my daughter.’

Darkness fell as the heat of the day rapidly transformed into a heavy thunderstorm. Ever
fearful of lightning (‘Those ones, they sell it in Marabastad, *aowa* I don’t like it!’), Nyeleti hastened to shut the windows and pin the curtains together with clothespins from top to bottom. While I prepared coffee, the red blanket she liked to wrap around herself in the evenings was exchanged for one of a safer hue. Once more comfortably seated in the living room Nyeleti turned to another topic, one she did not explicitly relate to her marriage but which, I sensed, had everything to do with it, at least in its initial manifestation.

‘These nowadays I have the pain again in my leg, I told [my brother] Jeremy, he gave me the pills but they are the cheap ones, I know!’

‘They’re not really helping? When did it start again?’

‘Maybe two weeks back… eish! I’ll get sick again, I won’t be able to walk! It’s the same as that time… We tried *e-ve-ry-thing*! That stroke, I don’t even know if it was a stroke, the doctors didn’t know! We even went to the ZCC, those people that side they said they could heal me but—nothing!’

‘You went to the ZCC to get healed?’

‘Yeah it was that other side of Mamelodi, but it didn’t work, they prayed and prayed and prayed, yoh! …Then this lady she told my mom about this *sangoma*, this lady she was old. So my mom agreed that I could go. We went at night because it was dark. That place it’s close to our house. This sangoma, he was a man. So I went into the room with him, he threw the bones. [giggles] But you know what he said? He said I had… what’s it called, these diseases… STDs, he said I had the STDs! He did not know what he was saying! He didn’t know I was married and had two children, he just saw me and thought “This one is young, she must be sleeping around.” That’s why he said I had STDs!’

‘…What did you do?’

‘I didn’t say anything, I went home but that lady was with me mos. That guy he gave me
a jar of *muti*, he said I had to put it on my body and we had to sprinkle it around the house, like that. But my mom, she was not happy! That lady, she told my mother, then my mom came to my room and told me not to believe the sangoma, he lied and cheated us out of money that one! My mom she paid him three hundred [Rand] already, we owed another seven hundred but she refused to pay it. But he thought my mom had money, you see?’

The noisy arrival of Maya, her sister Sesi and friend Mandla put an end to Nyeleti’s ruminations, but only temporarily, for a few days later she once more picked up the thread of the narrative she had begun to weave about her marriage. This time her entrance point formed the interview Robert, now aged seventeen and in Matric, had had that morning with the South African Navy.

‘Probably he will go to TUT (Tshwane University of Technology) next year, but I told him he should go for the interview, I signed him up for it. So that if I can’t afford the college fees he’ll at least have the job. So he went for the first interview, he passed. The second one he passed, this one was the third one. Now maybe he can work there, it’s good neh? He will have a salary. …But he doesn’t want to work for the Navy, he told me *every* time! Because he doesn’t like guns. You see how we raise our kids, we teach them guns are bad. …But, I don’t know why… maybe it’s because Patrick threatened with a gun all the time!’

‘He threatened you with his gun?’

‘Sho, a *lot!* You know he was a cop mos, he had a gun, but even before he became a cop he had a gun. He threatened me the most. …‘Shut up or I’ll *shoot* you!’ Those other times he threatened the kids if they made him angry. And those other times he locked us in the house. There was a lock on the door and he locked it and took the key. And also he locked the gate. …I have suffered a lot in my life, *aowa*!

‘It was not easy, I was young mos. After we got married his mother and sisters were at
the house all the time. They were always telling me what to do, how to wash, how to cook… They accused me because they said I didn’t know how to stir the pap.

‘That time Patrick he was working for the Coca-cola company, he was not yet a cop. He would bring home the cool drinks and I would sell them from the house, maybe thirty in one day, or fifty. A lot! So we made some extra money but then he started to threaten us and it stopped. He forbade me to sell any more, I had to stay in the house.

‘Then he became a cop, at first he worked for the Traffic Police. That time it was good to work there, people they still obeyed the law. But then he didn’t go on with that, he was fighting with some people there. Then he joined the police, the investigations.’

Going further back in time, Nyeleti evoked her later schooldays in Bushbuckridge, the time she had fallen pregnant.

‘When I fell pregnant I didn’t know it for four months. Maybe I felt something but I didn’t know, I thought maybe I ate too much! Then those ladies at the school, the teachers they said “Why are you glowing?” You know mos many ladies when they fall pregnant they get ugly, but I didn’t get ugly, I became more beautiful! That’s why they said I was glowing. Then the headmistress took me to the clinic. They told me I was pregnant.

‘I phoned my mom. My mom: “What! You’re pregnant!”’ And then she hung up the phone. Patrick’s mom she was shocked also but she didn’t hang up the phone, she told us we had to come the next weekend.

‘Patrick he’s just small that one. [laughs] He was in love with me, yoh! I wouldn’t go out with him at first, then one time he hid my schoolbooks. I looked everywhere for them and then he said he wouldn’t give them back until I went out with him. That time I was the head girl and he was the head boy, so we were doing the same thing. He loved me very much that time, he wanted me, yoh! And that time I was beautiful!’
As the day of my departure grew nearer it was as if Nyeleti wanted to ‘finish’ her account, ‘complete’ it in a way that would, at least for the moment, satisfy her and that at once lay claim to and sought to nurture the mutual reliance that had grown between us—a strong reminder of my reciprocal obligations towards her. In line with her earlier tacking back-and-forth between the experience of marriage and that of illness, during one of our last afternoons together she further elaborated on the latter by weaving the ambiguous presence and role of one member of her extended kin network into her narrative.

‘I told you mos, my aunt Dikela in Waverley, she’s a ngaka [Pedi, doctor]. She always used to be sick that one, she was always pale neh? Then this other lady told her about a school in Limpopo, there was a ngaka there, he was the one who healed her. So that one he trained her to be a ngaka. A ngaka is above the sangomas, like that neh?

‘So when I had the stroke nothing helped. So my aunt, she took me to that ngaka. Eish…! I went, and Robert and Amazi they came with me. I went to that school and that guy he said I needed the treatment, it would be some weeks or maybe some months, they said they didn’t know how long. Sho, I was scared! I had to sniff some things, like… they burned the roots, like that. Every every day. I was so uncomfortable, I wanted to go home!

‘Then one day I overheard them, neh? That ngaka and my aunt, they were talking about me! They said something about making money from me, I was so scared, I didn’t have a phone so I couldn’t call anybody! After some time I managed to smuggle my brother’s number to this guy in town, he phoned Jeremy for me, he told him to come get me that day. That guy who phoned my brother, he saved my life! Because, they made me do all those things… they even kept my boys from me, imagine! So my brother came, he took us home, but they were angry, eish! They fought with my brother because they said the treatment is not finished!’

Nyeleti’s account highlights how for women born in the 1970s, experiences of getting
and being married have remained comparable to those of the previous generation. Like Gloria and Sipho’s marriage, Nyeleti and Patrick’s was also solemnized in the customary way of lobola prestations, passing from Patrick’s family to Nyeleti’s without state recognition. Yet concurrently, the destructive effects of colonial and apartheid rule nevertheless worked their way into the marriage through Patrick’s violent behaviour. In Nyeleti’s account Patrick’s violence becomes most apparent through her revelation of his gun ownership (‘even before he became a cop he had a gun’) — at once a tool and symbol of aggression, which he used to threaten both her and their children. Such expressions of violence, closely entwined with the performance of male identities especially in the latter years of apartheid, once more illuminate Hassim and others’ analyses of the development of violent masculinities and women’s gendered subjectivities as key effects of state violence (Hassim 2009; Richter 2004). The final account I relate will prove significantly different in its details, indicating how apartheid’s end has simultaneously engendered momentous transitions in the realm of African marriage practices and expectations.

**Toko: ‘I didn’t stay in his house like a ngwetsi [Pedi, daughter-in-law]’**

Compared to Toko’s pride at the university degree she had received in 2005 (see Chapter 4), she and husband Lebo’s purchase of their own house in the suburb of Danville (Pretoria West) in 2001 came a close second. It was, in fact, one of the first personal details she shared soon after we met; part of a short yet significant list of such details which included the revelation that she had fallen pregnant at nineteen, that her son Timothy was now twelve, that she had married the father of her child ‘when Timothy was six, seven, eight, something like that,’ and that at the time she had told Lebo that she would not live with his kin in Hammanskraal but wanted to have her own house. To her mind the significance of this decision was constantly reiterated not

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43 A township located some forty kilometres north of Pretoria.
only in view of the lives of those former friends of hers in Soshanguve whom she had by and large bid farewell by leaving the township, but also through her labour and connections at JPP and in the broader outreach network. Thus when twenty-five year old Atile, a fieldworker at Lesedi AIDS Clinic who herself was positive and whose baby daughter had died the year previous from the illness, anxiously told us of a meeting she was to have with her estranged husband and his lawyer, Toko utilized the moment to once again emphasize the value of a couple’s establishing their own independent household. ‘Families, eish Mieke! When you marry the husband or the wife should come first, not family! That’s the problem! Atile’s husband, his family, they won’t give her the divorce, they want her to come back to Limpopo and stay there, and her husband agrees with them! That’s why I insisted on moving into my own house, not live with Lebo’s family. Women need to be independent these days!’

Despite intermittent attempts on my part to gain some insight into how the process of Toko’s own marriage had unfolded, during the first months of our acquaintance she never voluntarily raised the subject, and the sole details I managed to ascertain were that Lebo had paid lobola in 2000 and that the Western wedding had been held a year later, in 2001. When she agreed to an interview in January 2007 and I broached the issue again, she once more honed in on the matter of living separately from one’s in-laws rather than on the process of getting married. Following a brief description of lobola (‘It’s part of our culture. It’s not like paying for the daughter, it’s like, “Thank you for the daughter you gave me”’) Toko continued by saying ‘And then, we bought a house. So I didn’t stay in his house like a ngwetsi… I didn’t stay in his house.’ That she had emphatically rejected this option I already knew; yet she chose to explain it once more in some detail—notably this time recognizing and incorporating her husband’s role in the decision as well.

‘The thing is, we grew up in different cultures, neh? I’m Pedi, he’s Tswana. And the way
we do things, it’s different. And then, we wanted to avoid quarreling between me and the sisters, because his sisters are the same age as me. So, we perceive things differently. Like most of the time the problem is that people will fight. For instance the way you are taught to cook is different from mine. Those differences make people to have conflict, so we avoided that kind of conflict and decided that no, it’s better for us that we go to our own house. And then that is what is being encouraged in our church also, that when you get married to a lady, to maintain that [marriage] relationship you must maintain that boundary between you and her family, her and your sisters, you must take her to your own house—if you don’t have a house at least somewhere where you are not going to stay with the whole family because if you’re staying with the whole family, there are many conflicts that occur. And, due to small things!"

In February 2007—on Valentine’s Day, to be precise—Toko and I found ourselves at JPP’s Therapy offices busily working on an outreach presentation in the company of Promise, a 33-year-old UNISA student from Soshanguve who had recently joined the organization to do her practicals. In telling us a little about herself Promise shared that she had three children, a seventeen-year-old daughter and two sons, aged eleven and nine, that she had been married ‘twelve years now,’ and—with a nod towards me—that she ‘only had the traditional wedding, it was in Hammanskraal.’ After a momentary silence she added, ‘I want my daughter to have opportunities. I didn’t have opportunities when I was her age. My father thought girls don’t need education. Now I am catching up!’

It is possible that both Promise’s words and the interview Toko and I had recently recorded played a role in what Toko next revealed, as if her response more or less consciously sought to serve two purposes: ‘My wedding pictures are in Hammanskraal, at Lebo’s house.’ When I queried why they were there instead of at her own house, she angrily replied, ‘I don’t want to see them, they don’t bring back good memories, eish! I don’t want to think about it!’ An
awkward quietness instantly settled upon us, one that only broke some minutes later when Toko continued to share some of her recollections. ‘I wasn’t ready for the Western wedding, neh? But his family said we should marry, even Lebo said we should get married then, eish! Because we had a child already and his family thought it should happen. But the Western wedding, the white wedding, it costs a lot of money, I wasn’t ready for it! We didn’t have enough money to have that wedding!’

As during the interview, here Toko’s words again appear indicative of tense relations between Lebo’s relatives and herself—and simultaneously, of the distance she nurtures between the township and its significations and herself as a woman who has let go of or ‘risen above’ that urban form. The anger and frustration evident in her account and the purported disinterest in her own wedding photos denote that the issue does not merely concern a one-time event, an incident of the past, but speaks to a broader struggle of resistance and transformation that is continuant; that remains essentially unfinished.

One week following the above exchange, when Toko and I traveled to Soshanguve to pay a visit to her mother, she chose to elaborate on another factor that had affected her experience; this time a startling combination of hard laughter and overt anger coloured her performance. Directing me away from town instead of towards it after we left Dora’s house, a complex maze of paved and unpaved roads led us into Mabopane, where in due course she asked me to pull over to the side of a quiet dead-end street. Across from where we were standing a massive yellow and white striped tent, its sides flapping restively in the breeze, stood erected on a grassy field surrounded by a ramshackle fence.

‘This is Celebration Christian Church, it’s where Lebo and I were born again. Lebo loves

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44 For Toko’s birthday in 2007 I gave her a photo album. When I next visited her in Danville she showed me how she had organized it: from present to past rather than the other way around, starting with some photos of the 2006 Sea Camp and ending with the one picture she had of her father. And indeed—no images of either the Western wedding or lobola ceremony.
it! They jive here and speak in tongues.’

‘And what about you, do you like it?’

‘It’s good because I was converted here but I don’t like to go anymore. It’s not private, everyone knows everyone else. It’s also the church I got married in, neh? ... And you know what the pastor said, neh? He said “You’ve been sleeping together for seven years! For seven years you were living in sin!” [laughs loudly] Then he told us because we converted we are cleansed! [still laughing]

‘Lebo likes this church better than Hatfield, he thinks Hatfield is too whitey. We don’t go here now but maybe when we get a car we can visit. Lebo would like that… but me not, not every Sunday, I won’t! When we got married I wasn’t happy because we weren’t financially ready, but Lebo’s family pressured us and that pastor also. And then they wanted us to live with them and his sisters, they wanted that I work for them! In Hammanskraal! Aowa Mieke, I refused! I refused! It’s rural areas that side!

‘Eish Mieke, it was bad, the fighting. The whole time they threatened to take Timothy, the whole time! But until we bought our house in Danville I stayed with my mother. We can drive now.’

The exhortation to be married on Christian terms, in Toko’s reference to have the Western wedding, came from two sources: the pastor and wider Pentecostal environment at Celebration on the one hand; Lebo’s relatives on the other. In the case of the latter Toko further revealed that it was particularly Lebo’s mother, a ‘preacher and prophetess in her church,’ who had urged for the Christian ceremony to take place. Although Lebo also paid lobola, Toko’s revelations suggest that the real conflict pertained not to the negotiation or transfer of

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45 Since the pastor of Celebration Church was not an authorized Marriage Officer Toko and Lebo went to the DHA on the Tuesday following the Western wedding, where they had a civil marriage ceremony: ‘We signed the papers there.’ Hence in contrast to the marriages of Gloria, Nyeleti and Promise, Toko’s was registered with the state. Of further note regarding Toko and Lebo’s union is how they opted to have their marriage recognized as a civil rather than a customary one, even as the latter had also taken place.
bride wealth but to the when and how of the fulfillment of Christian marriage obligations. Not that Toko did not deem herself a Christian; what is rather notable is that she, along with so many others of her generation, refer to what often constitutes a Christian ceremony as the Western or white wedding—an appellation implying more than (or something that reaches beyond) Christianity. As she repeatedly stressed, the problem, in her view, was that she and Lebo ‘weren’t financially ready’ to have the Western wedding. In this instance the rupturing potency of the notion or trope of ‘being Western’ comes clearly to the fore.

Yet despite what might be read as her minimizing or downplaying them, that ‘cultural expectations’ continued to play a substantial role in Toko’s life became equally clear over time, not least through the anxiety she periodically expressed regarding the matter of having another child. Every once in a while this issue popped up again during one or another conversation: ‘In our culture it’s not enough to have only one child!’ ‘I’m using contraceptives but my mom and Lebo’s mom, they don’t know. But when they see me they just shake their heads.’ ‘Lebo said to me yesterday, “Listen woman when will you have my baby!”’ [laughs] But he was only joking, he understands. He wants to have a girl but because of Timothy it’s okay, he says he can wait.’

Following my return to the field after a two-month absence in mid-2007, the subject of the cultural significance of motherhood surfaced again, though for the first time in the context of the lobola that Lebo had paid in 2000. Toko began by sketching the events of that day in a few rough strokes: ‘The lobola, it was six thousand Rand. Lebo, he brought two blankets, he brought them to my mother’s house. I wore the one over my shoulders, the other one was for my mother. You wear the blanket over your shoulders or over your head, the mother also neh? Then he brought the money also, the winter jacket and the axe. After this we danced, and we ate a lot! It was my mother and me, my brothers, my uncles, Lebo, Lebo’s father, his uncles, our other relatives and our friends.’ When asked about the meaning of the various objects and acts, she
noted that wearing the blanket or sitting beneath it ‘has to do with respect, that the woman has to have respect,’ but when it came to the jacket and the axe she hesitated: ‘Eish, I don’t know my own culture! But what I know is that after the lobola the man’s family and culture have authority over the woman’s family and culture. And the children belong to the man’s family and culture also, so Timothy he is Tswana like Lebo, not Pedi like me. And Lebo’s family, they want more Tswana babies, eish! I don’t know…’

Although not without conflict or evidence of gender subjectivity, Toko’s account well demonstrates how African marriage practices have been transforming in recent decades; a change significantly related to the breaking of apartheid’s hold and the move toward democracy. If for Gloria and Nyeleti, customarily married in 1973 and 1990 respectively, the state was absent in their marriages in its lack of recognition thereof (yet crudely present in their husbands’ violence), the process of the sealing of Toko’s marriage—including lobola, a Western wedding and a civil marriage ceremony at the DHA—speaks to the conversion of the apartheid reality. Yet as Toko’s account equally indicates, more often than not this process does not come easily; here Lebo’s role in the marriage relationship deserves especial recognition. In this regard it is not only the lack of violence on Lebo’s part that differentiates Toko’s marriage from those of Gloria and Nyeleti, but also his agreement to stay in Danville with wife and son instead of residing—with Toko and Timothy—with his own extended kin network in Hammanskraal following the marriage.

Taken collectively, the accounts of Gloria, Nyeleti and Toko illuminate the continually shifting social arena of African marriage practices in relation to the violence of the past and the promises and contradictions of the present. At stake in both has been the entanglement of customary practices with state power. Ironically during apartheid, the absence of governmental regulation existed concurrently with the state’s presence in the violent conduct of husbands and
fathers; a gendered reality transformative of the lobola ideal of kin unification into one wherein
the women of two separate families may foster a special bond (as with Gloria) or wherein
women may find themselves returning to their natal homes (as with Gloria and Nyeleti).
Contemporarily, the attempt to regulate customary unions has unfolded without due cognizance
of women’s gendered subjectivities—and even as the practice of solemnizing marriages via
lobola prestations continues on the ground, it is notable that couples often choose to register
their marriage as a civil rather than a customary one, as both Gloria and Toko allude to.
Plausibly, this development can at least partially be attributed to a desire to avoid what are
perceived as the potential conflicts customary marriages entail in the unification not of two
partners, but two families. To once more evoke Toko, ‘When you marry the husband or the wife
should come first, not family!’

Lastly, in presenting the accounts of Gloria, Nyeleti and Toko I have also sought to
attend to the manner in which they presented their memories and experiences to me and in the
everyday—in and beyond JPP—more widely. In contrast to Gloria’s frank revelations (which
can in one sense be attributed to her age), Toko and Nyeleti appeared markedly wary in evoking
or talking about their marriages. In my conclusion I reflect on this distinct performance of the
gendered self, and attempt to relate it back to women’s silence following the Sea Camp’s lobola
discussion.

Conclusion
Corresponding to JPP’s broader aims in Pretoria’s inner city, the NGO’s Sea Camp on the KZN
coast in December 2006 can be read as an exercise in moral labour; one in which staff were
urged to partake and ‘learn’ as much as the teen participants. In my analysis of this moral labour
and the ways it was received by female black counselors, I elicited two performances, using
them as starting points for discussions of women’s knowledge of transactional sexual practices
and marriage. At issue in women’s enactments during and after the *Hosea Drama* and the lobola discussion was the dissonance between the JPP conceptualization of ‘proper’ gender relations and women’s gendered subjectivities, which continue to bear witness to the violence of the recent (apartheid) and more distant (colonial) pasts. During the Sea Camp, the ‘absurdity’ of the moral lessons the *Hosea Drama* and lobola discussion sought to instill was alluded to by women’s parodic participation in the former and their silence regarding the latter; interpretations that are best supported through in-depth engagements with women’s own knowledge of the Sea Camp presentations’ themes. Hence via the events surrounding Rose’s pregnancy I honed in on women’s conception of transactional sexuality, which they strongly dissociated from ‘prostitution,’ whilst their experiences and memories of marriage illuminated at once their subject positions and the illogicality of the notion that ‘J.C. has paid your lobola.’

Women’s parodying of the *Hosea Drama* formed a team performance in Goffman’s sense; one closely related to the gendered team performances of hard laughter examined earlier (Chapter 3). By contrast, the silence subsequent to the lobola discussion was noticeably different, amounting to an alternative type of gendered performance that I encountered among women at and beyond JPP more widely, but that lacked any sort of distinct team constitution. This silence was one I also met in my attempts to gain a sense of different women’s past and present relationships—their marriages and/or other romantic or sexual involvements—and the ties of kinship or other loyalty they implied. In writing of the violence of the Partition of India in 1947 and the ways families, especially women, were marked by it, Das comments on the nature of the silence she encountered, noting that the “violence of the Partition seemed to have disappeared into a distant past.” It was not that, if asked, “people could not tell you a story, but simply that the words had [a] frozen slide quality to them, which showed their burned and numbed relation to life” (2007: 11). During my fieldwork, it was as if the transposition of state
violence onto the spousal (and other romantic or sexual) relationships women had been or still were involved in had engendered a comparable silence; one that was not entirely devoid of words or stories, but whose stories lacked “the performative aspects or the struggles over the control of the story,” which are “a mark of storytelling in everyday life” (2007: 80). What is the relation between narratives and enactments that speak of gendered violence and suffering and the shielding silence that concurrently surrounds them in the everyday?

As proposed in Chapter 3, beyond allowing women to comment on the absurdity of racial, classed and gendered disparities at and beyond JPP, the ironic register of hard laughter also constitutes a kind of responsive performance through which women work to safeguard their self-respect in interactions and contexts permeated by disrespect. As the previous and current chapters attest to, however, women are of course not laughing all the time, just as ironic suggestions are always offset by evocations of seriousness and sincerity. In the discretionary silence following the Sea Camp’s lobola discussion, the enactment of which also shrouds women’s memories and experiences of marriage, I posit that we cross paths with a locally salient form of moral practice or phronesis. To recap, alternative to the ambiguity and/or mockery implied by hard laughter, phronesis is the situated exercise of moral judgment; the “cultivated predisposition to do the right thing in the circumstances” (Lambek 2002: 16). In this respect women’s silence can be conceived as carrying out certain ‘tasks’ different situations and interactions call forth. Accordingly, despite its exasperating illogicality, women’s overt expression of disagreement with or disdain regarding the lobola discussion would have disrespected the managers, Irma and Sandy; instead the enactment of silence worked to preserve the definition of the situation the managers sought to stage. More complexly (but comparably to the ways hard laughter resonates with societal ironies beyond JPP), silence also operates importantly in women’s negotiation and recollection of spousal (and other romantic or sexual)
relations, whereby overly dramatized reference to violence suffered or hardships experienced risks destabilizing either the relationship at hand or the self’s wellbeing in relation to a painful past. In turn, women’s roles and responsibilities as wives, mothers, daughters, sisters and/or aunts could also be considerably or severely compromised.
CHAPTER SIX

Arcane Knowledge: Death, Malevolence, and the Everyday

Fieldnotes Excerpt 1: December 2006

Both Toko and Nyeleti called me this evening to share some bad news: it concerned the young girl Precious who had just been with us on the Sea Camp. Her stepfather murdered her mother yesterday. Toko said it was by shooting while Nyeleti said, by choking; the latter appears to have been the case. It happened in the family’s flat in Sunnyside, right in front of Precious and her two younger siblings. Terribly sad… The stepfather is in jail and the children are staying with their grandmother in Hammanskraal for the time being. The funeral will be held there not this but next Sunday (because they’re ZCC). Nyeleti said she planned to go. The main worry now is to find a place to live for the children. The little ones can maybe stay with their grandmother, but Precious is attending high school in the inner city.

Fieldnotes Excerpt 2: February 2007

Today Toko and I went to Thapelong. We heard from Nombeko that Vusi was still around so we tried to find him. The first room we entered had two men in it, obviously in very ill stages… It was extremely tough, the smell was putrid. The one on the left was an older man with a beard, and his body was covered up; he was lying in bed having spasms, mouth agape, yellow pus on his pillow… The man on the right was extremely thin and wearing a light blue diaper. His knees were up in the air, feet down, like that. Like a skeleton covered by the thinnest layer of skin. It smelled so badly in the room that we could hardly bear it and we left again soon, realizing also that these men could not understand and maybe not even see us. […]

After talking to Makalo Toko and I walked back to the office, and we asked the nurses about Vusi. Sister Matla pointed to one of the rooms and said, ‘Vusi is in there, but he’s very sick, he went to the hospital and then he was back here again, then he went to the hospital again
and now he’s back here. Until his body just went down like this.’ We were surprised: we had been in that room, the one with the two men, but we hadn’t seen Vusi. So we entered the room again. The man on the left was still lying there in obvious misery, the curtains beside him drawn tight to keep out the day’s brightness. We turned to the bed on the right and there was Vusi—so badly emaciated that we hadn’t recognized him! […] We stood there beside the bed, and Toko said several times, fairly loudly, ‘Vusi! …Vusi!’ He would turn his head toward us but it was as if his eyes were lolling in his head and he couldn’t focus, couldn’t see or understand us. We stood there for a while, trying to get Vusi’s attention. Eventually we left, shocked at how his condition had deteriorated. Less than a month ago he still appeared strong: he was able to walk and talk, read the Bible, go to the bathroom, feed himself… and now, just like that, he lay there dying. (Vusi passed away three days later.)

*Fieldnotes Excerpt 3: October 2007*

A sad story this morning. I was having coffee with Andrea at the Therapy Centre when Khethang walked into the office and greeted us. As he passed us Andrea asked, ‘Did you find out anything about the baby?’ Khethang said he didn’t find out much. I wondered… ‘Oh no, did they find another baby?’ Andrea then told me that she’d just heard about it that morning. Yesterday when the municipal workers came to collect the garbage from Schubart Park, someone noticed a baby in one of the bins. As one load of garbage was being scooped up, someone spotted two little legs dangling from the heap. Everything was stopped. It was a newborn, a little girl, and what made things even worse was that the heart, little lungs, and the liver had been cut out of the body. Khethang was sent there to talk to the security guards. But it seems they had not seen anyone suspicious and could not tell him anything—or they didn’t want to; Khethang said they were very afraid. Later Willem came. He said the baby had been thrown down Block D’s garbage shaft, the same building the Community Centre is in. He also alleged
that there was a pregnant woman in Block D but now she is not pregnant anymore. ‘She probably sold her baby to a sangoma.’ Khethang: ‘They probably took the body parts for muti.’ Andrea: ‘But don’t they usually take the genitals?’ Khethang: ‘Yes, the genitals, and also the face—the eyes especially. But maybe also other body parts, you don’t know…’

**Introduction**

These three passages, in their specificities unrelated to each other, illuminate what many consider to have been a key feature of South African social life for some time: the presence of death—and not just any death, but particularly ‘bad death’ (Bloch and Parry 1982; van der Geest 2004c).46 Overwhelmingly in contemporary South Africa, a bad death indicates that the cause of death was either AIDS or one or another form of violence or criminal activity.47 Death, of course, denotes interruption; the great agitator of life, its intrusion typically engenders a set of discourses and practices that—however varied cross-culturally—are marked by the liminal labour they intend to carry out: ensuring that the process of a human subject’s ‘becoming dead’ proceeds in the proper cultural or religious manner. This course of action is as crucial for those left behind as it is for the deceased. As Bilinda Straight has noted, “At the fragile, permeable borders between life and death, the ontological status of persons—the living as well as the

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46 For Maurice Bloch and Jonathan Parry, a ‘bad death’ “represents the loss of regenerative potential” while a ‘good death’ “promises a rebirth for the individual” and a “renewal of the world of the living” (1982: 16). As death signals the loss of life, productivity and fertility, the central concern of mortuary rites is the retrieval or salvaging of this loss for the community (for a critique, see Seremetakis 1991: 12-15). Less focused on the question of regeneration, Sjaak van der Geest construes a good death as ‘peaceful,’ whereby the dying person has “finished all business and made peace with others” and is “at peace with his/her own death.” Furthermore, a good death refers to the manner of dying: not by violence, accident, disease or pain. A peaceful death “comes ‘naturally’ after a long and well-spent life” and “preferably takes place at home,” amidst one’s relatives. The converse of these significations denotes a bad death (2004c: 899). When I evoke the term ‘bad death’ in reference to present-day South Africa, I imply, in a broad sense, the opposite of van der Geest’s definition of peaceful or good death. Note however that this is not contrastive to Bloch and Parry’s theorization, which can be read as consequential to van der Geest’s elaborations.

47 To a lesser extent, accidental deaths and deaths due to witchcraft also figure in the popular conceptualization of bad death. Of the four (clearly not mutually exclusive) typifications, three have received considerable to extensive attention as such, both in the political and popular spheres and the academic literature. For discussions on HIV/AIDS see Fassin 2007, Niehaus 2007, Posel 2005 and Robins 2006; on crime see Buur 2006, Ran-Rubin 2008 and Wardrop 2009; on witchcraft see Ashforth 2005, Comaroff and Comaroff 1999 and Niehaus 2001.
recently deceased—is typically, even necessarily, in flux” (2006: 102). Death’s eruption into life demands the reimagining of social relations, but this process is a perilous one, which may assist the mourners in going on; which may recreate the agency of the deceased in positive ways; or which may lead to personal chaos, loss of health, additional deaths, and the accidental or deliberate annihilation of the ‘soulful agency’ in the deceased (Straight 2006: 102-3).

Death’s occurrence implies that “the relationships between deceased persons and those who loved them” are about to undergo a series of painful, possibly hazardous transformations, a reality ensuring the continuous reiteration of mourning and burial rites in everyday life (2006: 103).

In the often harried context of JPP and the broader outreach network, the tragic deaths portrayed above and others like them held a particular, and peculiar, quality: they signified the deaths of ‘strangers.’ Each an instance of bad death in the inner city, they interrupted, if not so much the ebb and flow of outreach labour, certainly the lives of those who had worked with the deceased or his or her relatives, or who were intimately acquainted with the physical surroundings wherein a death had occurred. Aside from the senses of shock, sadness and anxiety these deaths generated, they posed a problem in terms of how the vulnerable process of a deceased person’s ‘becoming dead’ ought to be engaged in. Perhaps more than anything else, the event of a (bad) death revealed the essentially limited role of the outreach worker: they could never stand in for the kin or close friends of the deceased (in Straight’s words, ‘those who loved them’); could never guarantee that a dead person’s transition from the realm of earthly life to that of the hereafter would ensue in the manner appropriate to his or her cultural or religious background or circumstances. For the latter to happen, the active presence of ‘real’ relatives was requisite.

As noted, following the death of Precious’s mother kin members instantly began to make arrangements for her funeral: it would be on a Sunday, a week and a half after her death, and
would occur in Hammanskraal, the township where the murdered woman had been raised and where her parents and other relatives still lived. Although this death still had an impact on outreach workers, specifically on those who had known the woman through their work with Precious at JPP’s Teen Ministry, the matter of her interment was taken care of ‘as it should’: by her kin. Contrastively, the same did not occur in the cases of Vusi and the nameless (but not genderless) infant thrown down one of Schubart Park’s garbage shafts. In this sense, though all three deaths were bad, the latter two signified the epitome of badness: in their cases no relatives showed up or were identified, with the result that there was nothing left to be done but hand over their ‘soulful bodies’ to the state for burial. For all the things JPP carried out in the inner city, for all the roles its staff enacted on a daily basis, the action of laying to rest the soulful bodies of the deceased was beyond their capacity. Consequently, the deaths of Vusi and the unnamed baby girl unsettled the already rough waters JPP normally found itself in even more, but only temporarily so: they were horrific deaths, deaths outreach workers spoke about for a time, but just as their interruption had been ‘sudden’ and ‘unexpected’ (though less so with AIDS sufferers), so, it appeared, they could be ‘suddenly forgotten.’

And yet—did such deaths really thus ‘disappear’? Could the once-presence of the dreadfully deceased be so easily erased, obliterated, annihilated? On the surface of things this certainly seemed to be the case: if ever remembered or reiterated, this usually unfolded through the discourses of the generic bad deaths of AIDS or violent crime for which South Africa has become so well known. In this manner the characteristics and uniqueness of persons who befell a bad death tended to be erased; they were rather quickly ‘deposited’ into the categories of death due to the pandemic or felony. Such deaths ‘happened’; their causes transparent, the obvious way of dealing with them was to make sense of them through the usual, widely accepted typifications.
In this chapter I do not directly seek to challenge the fact that bad deaths in present-day South Africa are often comprehended and indeed done away with or eradicated through the marking or tagging described above; indeed it is possible to argue that these techniques are crucial to the continuation of life (in the inner city, to the furtherance of outreach labour). Rather, I am interested in the broader question of how the widespread occurrence of bad death becomes salient; in how it affects the varied ways the performance of the gendered self unfolds in the region of the everyday. Clearly the latter does not preclude the former; dealing with death’s ubiquity by categorizing many a death as being due to AIDS or violent crime was common both at and beyond JPP. Such discursive particularizations we might think of as the predominant type of performance people engaged in as they sought to make sense of death’s pervasiveness. Yet with what other—perhaps more subtle—enactments were these prevailing performances entwined? How did these become apparent, and what can they tell us about how the ubiquity of bad death comes to be incorporated into the ordinary, mundane process of living?

In an attempt to address these questions, this chapter posits that in contemporary South Africa it is not only the event of death that interrupts life, but equally—and perhaps more so—its possibility. I argue that the knowledge that there are so many bad deaths and the agonizing question of why engenders a social order ‘defamiliarized by death’ (cf. Seremetakis 1991: 14), one in which death is no longer ‘containable’ through mortuary practices (though these continue to play an important role) but has come to permeate the realm of the living in arcane and potentially highly threatening ways (Straight 2006).\footnote{While elsewhere experiences and knowledge of bad death come to be (partially) grasped through ascriptions to a specific moment, such as a time of war or uncommonly intense violence, arguably a similar process has not (yet) unfolded in South Africa. Although on some levels it appears to be in the making through references to ‘the time of AIDS’ or ‘the upsurge in crime,’ the principal period that continues to require differentiation is that of apartheid; not of the years and events that have since unfolded.}

The first part of the chapter introduces this argument through an analysis of how a ‘good’ death—that of an aged person, the aunt of
Gloria—interrupts the ebb and flow of daily life, yet simultaneously comes to be inserted or blended into conceptualizations of bad death, whereby death’s effects are not merely temporary but come to be inscribed or etched upon the very process of living. Through the illuminating discussions regarding the cost of funerals and the required mourning periods for men and women preceding and following Keromang’s burial, we gain a sense of how, on a practical level, the high incidence of bad death impinges on women’s lives. This examination sets the stage for the chapter’s second part, which investigates how beyond specific occurrences of death its very possibility shapes (or might shape) the performance of the gendered self. In particular, I trace how in 2006 and 2007 Nyeleti was subjected to certain premonitions concerning the imminent death of her ‘friend’ James—premonitions that were to come true in August 2007, when he was fatally shot by the husband of the woman with whom he had been having an affair. Evoking the ways Nyeleti presented the self before and after James’s murder, I highlight how she construed this event in terms of the malevolent action (possibly witchcraft) of others, especially the ‘evil intentions’ of Lily, who had been her colleague at JPP since January 2006. Nyeleti’s words and enactments during this intensively lived period of her life ultimately take us beyond the level of the practical to that of the unfathomable, the arcane, where death becomes ominous through its refusal to recoil from the domain of the living—the region where life ought to be lived at a safe distance from death’s occasional disturbance.

In post-apartheid South Africa the pervasiveness of bad death constitutes a cruel irony; one that scathingly belies the 1994 political transition and the promise of freedom it signified, including freedom from (the threat of) violent death (see Introduction, Note 9). While in previous chapters I have been mostly concerned with ironies, paradoxes and incongruities as these are embedded in the JPP effort and surface amidst the ebb and flow of outreach labour, the current chapter will suggest how the broader societal irony of death’s omnipresence impacts (or
may impact) upon the NGO’s labour, not only via the deaths of outreach clients or their relatives but also in the manner of death’s affecting the lives of JPP’s employees. This will become especially apparent in the chapter’s second part, wherein I trace how James’s murder—an event that occurred in Mamelodi, unrelated to JPP’s outreach efforts—transposed itself from the township to the inner city NGO through the involvement of Nyeleti (and ostensibly, Lily). In this manner, and reiterating my earlier arguments regarding the incongruity of JPP’s conceptions of the post-apartheid inner city as a domain separable from the townships (Chapter 4) and the NGO’s ambivalent ‘erasure’ of women’s gendered subjectivities in and beyond those townships (Chapter 5), I bring the chapter’s subject to bear on the dissertation’s central theme of making, unmaking and remaking of the JPP ‘moral community.’

News of a(ther) Death

When, on a Tuesday in late February 2007, Gloria informed us (sewing class teacher and participants) that her father’s youngest brother’s wife Keromang had passed away the day before, I could not help but be struck by the reason she gave for her death: ‘She died,’ Gloria said, ‘of old age.’ Keromang, she went on to explain, had achieved the venerable age of sixty-three—a mere nine years beyond Gloria’s own age of fifty-four—and whatever people might go on to say about the life she had lived, that was certainly an age to be thankful for. In this respect Gloria’s words sounded familiar, for as many a black acquaintance had taught me by then, anyone who lived beyond the age of sixty was considered ‘fortunate.’ ‘Not many of our people get to live that long,’ people would say; or ‘If someone manages to keep living after sixty, it means the person is blessed.’ And although most would not specify to who the blessing of long life might be attributed, in the case of Keromang, Gloria candidly did: ‘The ancestors favoured her.’
My astonishment, I can say in retrospect, derived from the fact that I rarely heard about deaths that were caused by ‘old age’; over the course of my fieldwork only twice did people ascribe the death of someone they knew to the ‘natural’ process of aging (the other time was when Nyeleti’s mother Miriam’s sister passed away in Giyani, Limpopo Province, at the age of sixty-seven). To a certain extent at JPP but especially beyond it, in the townships, explanations that attributed one or another person’s death to such ‘vague’ sources as headaches, stress, or swollen feet were vastly more common. Such deaths usually meant that a (relatively) young person had passed away, one who ought to have been in the prime of his or her life; one who, in essence, ought not to have died. In my mind I typically sought to make sense of such deaths by linking them to HIV/AIDS or the at times extreme deprivation that structured people’s worlds. Indeed, until Keromang’s passing, four of the five deaths Gloria had previously told me about (in the seven months I had known her) formed cases in point. The first, in August 2006, was that of her cousin’s grandson, a ten-year-old boy who had died of ‘bad water.’ This heart-rending event was followed by the death of a cousin’s child in Venda (Limpopo) in September, whose passing she credited to ‘headaches’ (and later, to ‘trauma in her life’). The third, in October, was that of her brother’s wife, who died aged thirty-two because ‘she was having headaches.’ Perhaps the reason Gloria chose to expand on this death was due to the fact that she also lived in Atteridgeville, the same township where the young woman had passed away: ‘She had four children. The oldest two were twins; after that she had two more. She used to start screaming, screaming! Aowa! [Pedi, no] She would hold her head in her hands, like this! …I think also something popped in her ears… I think it was stress, she was having a lot of stress.’ Fourth, in December, her sister’s son died ‘in prison’ from ‘sadness’ (later Gloria would allude to this sister’s ongoing suffering ‘because of the police investigation,’ leading me to think that the young man might have been murdered), while fifth, in January, a Pedi cousin married to an
Ndebele man and living near KwaMhlanga (Mpumalanga Province) did not survive a taxi accident that occurred on the notorious Moloto Road—a calamitous event Gloria ambivalently associated with her having married ‘this [Ndebele] man’: ‘I say maybe she should not have married him! Those Ndebele they are too different!’

In each of these cases, none of Gloria’s explanations suggested that the cause of death was HIV/AIDS or violent crime. The issue was not that Gloria did not recognize such deaths, for she frequently alluded to the negative impact their prevalence was having on South African society, especially ‘our children’: ‘We are dying! They are dying from these things!’ Rather, there was something about Gloria’s connectedness to the deceased (in the above situations all through her extensive kin network) that led her to favour certain (orally expressed) modes of elucidation over others. 49 As I will also argue regarding Nyeleti, the features that characterize Gloria’s rationalizations play a key role in the process of making sense of occurrences of bad death and its stubborn refusal to withdraw from the domain of the living. Anomalous and jarring as such deaths are, they commonly imply the involvement of some being—whether human or otherworldly—whose intentions were and may well remain malevolent. This locally salient, abstruse knowledge is signified in a distinct manner: to express it orally, in ordinary conversation, is to evoke its mysterious, unknowable influence and potentially to gear it toward the self; in this respect the power of words cannot be underestimated. Hence while in present-day South Africa it has become possible to speak generically of the impacts of AIDS and crime, to do so in view of the unfortunate deaths of loved ones is quite another matter. Such cases reveal how in people’s everyday lives, dominant and socially sanctioned interpretations of bad death are significantly, and sometimes ominously, bound up with another type of knowledge,

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49 My emphasis on ‘favouring’ here is deliberate, for the matter could also be framed in terms of ‘rejecting’ certain ‘truer’ explanations, from which it is but a short step to the charge of denial.
one that refuses (or is unable) to ‘close’ the question of causality—and thus, we might say, that of the very matter of existence itself.

In contrast to the five tragic deaths that preceded it, perhaps it was because Keromang’s passing denoted a good or propitious death—that of a woman who during her lifetime had gained the blessing of the ancestors—that it was less troubling or hazardous for Gloria to speak about it. Indeed, perhaps it was this very reasoning that allowed her and others to comment about contemporary death’s menacing features more generally, be it through the lens of Keromang’s death. To my mind, both elements were present in the discussions that unfolded during and after the sewing class. That Tuesday, the day following Keromang’s death, Gloria was dressed beautifully, wearing a soft white dress decorated with tiny blue flowers, tinier green leaves, and a bright blue hat to match. (The hat, she proudly told me, was ‘Lady Di style’; she had purchased it in Marabastad for only R30.) Nonetheless, despite this striking image and the assertion that Keromang’s passing was ‘not hard’ because ‘she lived a long life,’ underneath the wide rim of the hat her face looked all but serene.

Gloria [sighing]: Eish! Life is hard, it’s hard! Every time I am attending the funerals, that one, that one, that one! …Eish!
Connie [Gloria’s sister and friend]: Ee! [Pedi, yes] Ons sukkel baie… [Afrikaans, We struggle a lot…]
Gloria: And it costs money, everything is about money!
Esther [sewing class teacher]: But Gloria, this lady [Keromang], she lived a long life, a good life. So you must be thankful.
Gloria: But I have to pay R200, 50 I don’t have it! They turned it off again the municipal what-what, the electricity, I don’t have money to pay them! At home I only have the tea, the sugar!
Mieke: Where will the funeral be held?
Gloria: In Kwaratsiepane, that side of Hammanskraal. It’s the house where she stayed. When she became old she stayed with her daughter, Hannah. That’s where she died, at Hannah’s house. Hannah is Connie’s neighbour also. But that side it’s close to Kwaratsiepane. Maybe five minutes to drive, or seven.
Connie: Ee, sy het langs ons gebly. Sy het net twee kinders gehad. Die seun hy’s nog in die tronk, hy sal nie help betaal nie. [Afrikaans, She stayed next to us. She only had two children. The son he is still in jail, he won’t help pay (for the funeral).]
Esther: With your [black] funerals, does the church help to pay for the food?

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50 As a relative of Keromang, Gloria was expected to contribute R200 ($25 CAD) to her burial expenses to help pay for the required head of cattle, casket and funeral home services.
Gloria: With the funerals, no.
Connie: *Dier kerk sal nie help nie. Almal breng die kos, pap, morogge...* [Afrikaans, The church won’t help. Everyone brings food, maize meal, spinach…]
Gloria: The church doesn’t pay, we don’t do it like that. Everyone, the family the neighbours they bring the food, the money. Then the Society⁵¹ they prepare the meal. After the funeral, we eat together. The funeral it’s sad but it’s expensive also! Aowa!
Esther: You know how we do it? Say I pass away, then at my funeral the church provides sandwiches, coffee, tea, fruit juice, and cocktail snacks.
Gloria: Pentecostal churches do that but in our church we don’t do that! We pay, the family pays! The family is the sponsor; they have to slaughter the cow!

As per our usual arrangement, after the sewing class I drove Gloria to the taxi rank from where she would catch a ride home to Atteridgeville. On the way she told me about the undertaker who would prepare Keromang’s body for burial and whose organization would also provide the tent, chairs and sound system during the two days the funeral would be held (from Friday to Saturday). Through emphasizing these elements, Gloria was reiterating her concern that she, as niece of the deceased, did not have money to make the expected contribution of R200. ‘Eish… I wake up sometimes in the night and I just want to die. We must all die! Why can’t I die? Why doesn’t God take me? I ask that, it’s terrible all the funerals!’ And, following a moment of silence: ‘It’s the custom to buy the food. And it’s not like a wedding, a wedding you can plan for financially, but it’s not like that with death, it’s sudden!’ As she stepped out of the car onto Van Der Walt’s curb, I dug for my wallet and quickly handed her R200. ‘Ooh thank you thank you thank you Mieke!’ And she was gone.

⁵¹ The burial society to which Keromang had belonged, and of which Connie was also a member. A type of voluntary association, burial societies are pervasive; most of the township households I frequented had at least one member who belonged to a burial society, intended to ensure financial and physical assistance when a death occurs (for an account of conflict within and beyond one burial society in the case of a death, see Bähre 2007). Although burial societies’ rules differ and variously define which persons in a family are covered, the women I worked with stressed that such associations were run strictly by women, as Caroline White also found in Soweto: “Given these domestic obligations [i.e. helping with the organization and catering for a funeral], it is perhaps not surprising that women were generally the prime movers in membership-based burial societies… Men, where they are members, do not attend meetings. Men benefit, of course, as the family members of the active women” (1996: 10).
‘We are happy because she was fortunate’: Burying Keromang

On the Saturday of Keromang’s burial we got on our way just past six in the morning, a company of seven crammed into a rusty Toyota, the vehicle borrowed from a friend of Gloria’s brother Paul. Gloria’s irritability with Paul, our driver, made the hour long ride to Kwaratsiepane more than a little awkward for all. It appeared he had been drinking the night before. ‘You! Now we’ll be late, we’ll be late! You are shame, you don’t even stop [drinking] for your aunt’s funeral! You shame her, you shame our family, aowa! The rest of us—Gloria’s son Johannes, her close friend and neighbour Sonto, her three-year-old granddaughter Nthati, Paul’s son Amohelang and myself—kept an uneasy silence as we watched the first rays of the sun stealthily creep over the horizon.

And late we were when, having passed Soshanguve, Mabopane, Ga-Mokone and Temba, we arrived at Keromang’s dwelling. Beneath the black tent pitched on the front lawn a number of people were fast asleep between the chairs, while in and behind the house the ladies of the Society to which Keromang had belonged—including Connie—were busy preparing the meal. Connie and the others told us that the funeral had just begun; everyone had left half an hour ago for the graveyard; if we hurried we would still be able to join. Since Paul had, perhaps not surprisingly, ‘disappeared’ soon after we got to the house, the task fell to me to drive to the graveyard, which was camouflaged by tall yellow grasses and thorned Acacia trees. We joined the group of approximately two hundred mourners as quietly as we could, men on the right side of the grave, women and children on the left. The early day had quickly grown blazing hot.

The Pedi speeches of the three pastors at the graveside (the black ‘Gereformeerde’ congregation Keromang had been part of was the same as Connie’s church, though not the same as Gloria’s, who attended Atteridgeville’s African Episcopalian Methodist church) were followed by several Christian hymns, during which older male members of Keromang’s family
and Khutsisa Funeral Home’s employees alternated in digging further at the grave—a symbolic practice Gloria would later explain by saying, ‘Nowadays those ones from the funeral home they dig the grave, we pay them to do it, but it’s not right, our customs say the family we must do it!’ The singing continued until Keromang’s casket was carefully lowered into the ground by male relatives, again with the assistance of the hired, after which each person present fell respectfully silent. An older woman, a sister-in-law of Keromang and Gloria’s father’s sister, stepped up to the grave and proceeded to recite a lengthy Pedi ‘poem’ (Gloria’s description). Addressing the deceased, the poem constituted a blessing to wish Keromang well on her journey of joining her forefathers. This performance was followed by women’s lively ululations and dancing around the grave, a prayer by one of the pastors, and Khutsisa’s men beginning to shovel the pile of earth amassed beside the grave back into the cavity from whence it had come. Silent once more, the gathered slowly made their way back to where the cars, taxis and bus were parked. Lining up along both sides of the path, we waited until the two old Datsuns carrying Keromang’s eldest kin and daughter Hannah—the only two cars permitted to drive up to the graveside—had passed.

Back at the house it soon grew busy. As we waited in line to ritually cleanse our faces and hands with cool water and aloe leaves, the massive sound system that had been rented for the occasion was turned to its maximum volume, booming out Kwaito for the entire neighbourhood to hear. ‘Now we are happy,’ Gloria said, by way of explanation; ‘We are happy because the funeral went well. We are happy because she was fortunate!’ During our absence the members of the Society had set up six tables; on these were spread out an array of pots and pans filled with pap and rice; pumpkin, beans, red beets, kale and cauliflower; pork, chicken and meat from the cow that had been slaughtered the previous day, as well as its stomach lining, a
delicacy; salads; and juice. Connie and the other women who belonged to the Society—some twenty of whom were present—had changed into their distinct attire: long black skirts with white-and-black striped blouses. Though exhausted—they had been up all night preparing the meal and singing and dancing with the others who had been mourning Keromang since Friday—they were responsible for filling the plates of the many family members and guests. Seated in the shade of the black tent, Gloria, Sonto, Nthati and I shared in the meal; when later we were joined by Connie and two of the latter’s daughters, the talk once again turned to financial matters.

Connie began by telling us that the cow, at the cost of a hefty R5000 ($625), had been purchased on credit, and while a down payment of R2000 had been made, where would the other R3000 come from? ‘Nou vra hulle vir ons, hulle sê ons moet R1500 betaal! Aowa!’ [Afrikaans, ‘Now they are asking us (the Society), they say we have to pay R1500! No!’] The tension between the Society and the men of Keromang’s family had begun yesterday, when the latter had demanded that, in addition to the various foodstuffs, vegetables, meats (chicken and pork) and other items the Society had already bought, they supply yet more cash to pay off the slaughtered animal. Gloria and Sonto, each members of a similar burial association in Atteridgeville, instantly agreed that this request was inappropriate. The problem was not merely that the purchase of a head of cattle for a burial was beyond the duties of the Society (customarily, this was the responsibility of kin); what was more, to evoke Sonto, ‘The funerals they are many! There is no money in the Societies!’ ‘Aowa!’ Gloria put in angrily; ‘They are

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52 The substantiveness of the meal at Keromang’s funeral was not unusual, though I also attended funerals where it was much less elaborate, indicating a family’s impoverished circumstances. As Lieketseng Mohlakoana-Motopi emphasized (Institute for Women’s and Gender Studies, University of Pretoria, March 12, 2010), community attendance at burials (and other events such as lobola ceremonies, Christian weddings or baptisms) tends to be extensive, in part because of the ‘free meal’ involved.

53 Along with the proliferation of bad death, South Africa’s funeral industry has also rapidly expanded; as part of this process ‘traditional’ burial societies have increasingly been targeted via ‘support plans’ and other ‘benefits’ offered by registered insurance companies. However, the burial society to which Keromang and Connie (had) belonged had not (yet) undergone such formalization (which would, among other things, involve the outlining of a constitution and operational rules).
crossing the boundary [the line]! They know our people are dying every day, the Societies they pay even for the ones who haven’t paid!’ Then she clarified that in the cases of those who died ‘without insurance’ (i.e. they or their wives or mothers were not part of a burial organization at the time of death), one or another Society is often still called upon to assist, whether through a more distant female relative or otherwise. Gloria referred to this as ‘a work of mercy,’ a kind of sympathetic labour that, she asserted, had grown increasingly common over the years. ‘It’s not right, they should have been members, we tell this to our children. But we have no choice, the people we have to bury them.’ In the time of bad death, both the intensity of the labour a Society requires as well as these organizations’ budgets are feeling the pressure. On a practical level, incidences of bad death impact on people’s—especially women’s—finances in two ways, firstly through the monies they are required to donate toward relatives’ burials and secondly through participation in burial societies, to which members contribute monthly.  

The events initiated the day before would continue well into the evening; not infrequently the latter parts of funerals are characterized by heavy drinking, especially on the part of men. Behind the house, where the majority of males had gathered, this was indeed in full swing. Before taking our leave we greeted and paid our respects to Keromang’s older female (and some male) relatives and daughter Hannah, who due to their nearness to the deceased were seated on blankets in the two front rooms of what had once been Keromang’s dwelling. As amongst the men, the women also appeared animated, boisterous; we sat and spoke with them awhile, accepting the small amounts of chewing tobacco they offered us. ‘You see Mieke, the

54 A recent analysis of survey data gathered by FinScope (based on research with formal and informal burial societies) notes that on average, between 2004 and 2007 one in five (21%) South Africans belonged to a burial society each year. Of this group, 74% were African and 60% women. In addition, the data indicates that burial societies are the third most commonly used financial product in South Africa, bypassed only by ATM cards and savings or transaction accounts. That burial societies impact heavily on people’s finances is shown by the more than 30% of members who ranked burial society contributions as their priority expense (Schneider 2008). It is, however, difficult to determine to what extent these numbers speak to my interlocutors’ experiences, for whom burial society membership involved not only financial contributions but also labour, and whose fluctuating incomes were further strained through the monies they were expected to donate upon the deaths of relatives (the two were also sometimes conflated).
people are happy now,’ Gloria reiterated; ‘they have just had the funeral and now it’s over, they are happy again after the sorrow.’ Just behind us, in the two back rooms of the house, the remains of the cow that had not been used for cooking (the massive head and legs, all skinned) lay on the ground or hung from large hooks from the corrugated iron ceiling.

It took a while for us to locate Paul; eventually Gloria spotted him seated in a small circle of men a short distance from the property, concealed by the height of the grass. They had gotten a hold of several bottles of Old Brown Sherry. As Gloria sought to control her ire, it was decided that I would drive the Toyota back to town, from where Amohelang (who did not have a driver’s license) would take everyone else back to Atteridgeville and return the borrowed vehicle to Paul’s friend. Paul would have to find his own way back.

It was whilst on our way home that Gloria and Sonto introduced another matter pertaining to death that further spoke to their and other women’s particular situatedness in a social environment profoundly marked by bad death. This time it was Sonto who commenced the conversation by asking me whether I knew about ‘our [mourning] superstitions’—a question she instantly followed up by providing an example:

There is this superstition that if your husband dies you can’t give things to another person [for one year]. So if you want to give a pen to someone but your husband he just died, you can’t give the pen directly, you have to put it on the floor. And then the person to whom you’re giving the pen, he picks it up from the floor.

Gloria’s response was immediate: ‘Aowa I wouldn’t do it, I won’t do it! It’s superstition! It happens in the rural areas like that but I won’t do it! What if I’m in a taxi and I want to pay, I have to put the money on the floor now?! It’s stupid!’ My two interlocutors went on to provide a few other examples by way of which widows are to express their liminal status and warn the unwary of potential pollution. During a woman’s one year period of grieving her husband, she is not to leave her home after nightfall (around 6 PM), though people may come and visit her after this time. In addition, the state of her mourning should be marked by her dress. She is to wear a
black *rok* (Afrikaans, dress), have a black piece of cloth tied around her arm, and a black shawl around her head (see Pauw 1990 on these and other prescriptions). Yet as the dialogue unfolded it appeared that, to a certain extent, the details of these customs mattered less than the amount of time women ‘ought to’ engage in them—one year—versus that which constituted the required time for men: ‘maybe three months, maybe six, it’s different [per culture].’ Gloria and Sonto expressed that this was ‘ridiculous’: ‘Why do we have to mourn so much longer? It should be equal!’ In the end, they succinctly tied the issue to the prevalence of bad death. Gloria: ‘Men are allowed to go on with life faster than we are! It’s not right!’ Sonto: ‘Ee it’s not right, it’s not possible! In these days everyone must go on! There are funerals every week! Everyone must be allowed to go on, the same! Or who will raise the children?’

Of note in this last discussion is how Gloria and Sonto have now wholly moved away from the immediate circumstances of Keromang’s death and burial. As women, they foreground women’s positionality in the context of death, arguing in what we might think of as a kind of locally salient feminist manner that the customary mourning periods for men and women should be ‘equal.’ It is especially Sonto who ties this to the current prevalence of bad death (Gloria did not voice any disagreement): ‘Everyone must be allowed to go on, the same! Or who will raise the children?’ By way of explanation, Sonto further shared that her daughter had been widowed at a youthful age due to her husband’s involvement in a violent brawl outside a shebeen (township pub). ‘She was innocent!’ Sonto exclaimed, ‘but she is the one who suffered! Her husband dead—no more house! No more money to raise the children!’ This man’s death had left her daughter homeless (because his brother had claimed the house in which they had lived two weeks following the funeral) *and* penniless (since the family had survived solely on his income). In the face of such wretched circumstances, Sonto maintained, no woman should have to suffer
through a whole year of grieving; instead she should be allowed to ‘go on’ by finding another
husband, one who would support her and her children.\textsuperscript{55}

Thus a third practical matter emerges through which bad death may impinge on
women’s life-worlds particularly. Here it is not kin-related funeral expenses or burial society
duties that are at stake but the subsequent period of mourning, which ‘superstitiously’ stipulates
that women ought to mourn longer than men, in ways that are more limiting in comparison to
the prescriptions for men (e.g. men are only required to fasten a black piece of cloth around their
arm to indicate their state of grieving, whereas women must be dressed in black entirely). In the
context of the pervasiveness of bad death, even this issue gets to be tied to the fraught matter of
money and its contestation in the everyday, where the urgency to ‘go on’—all the more so in
situations where the care of children forms a concern—is pressing.

Thus far, I have highlighted how the event of Keromang’s passing evoked discussions
and statements on the part of women that indicate how even in cases of ‘good death,’ it is almost
impossible to disentangle such situations from the broader societal context wherein they occur,
where the typical experience of death is markedly adverse. While the bad deaths of relatives,
friends, neighbours and other acquaintances tend to engender explicatory performances that
ascribe them to such innocuous sources as headaches or stress, good or ‘harmless’ deaths may
proffer the opportunity to meditate on death’s unnerving presence more widely, revealing some
of the practical constraints people—especially women—experience in an environment suffused
by death. Whether via expectations of individual or collective (funeral society) contributions to
funerals or through conflicts over customary mourning, which may well dictate when a person is

\textsuperscript{55} Sonto’s daughter had not completed the requisite year of mourning, although she had, I was told, kept it up for
‘some few months.’ When Sonto’s daughter had begun to date another man shortly after those few months, a
number of relatives had condemned her choice due to the obligatory mourning period not being finished. In Sonto’s
words: ‘Eish! We are still fighting!’
able to ‘move on’ from one or another bad death, each of the issues women discussed highlights how such situations are not just possible but indeed frequent in their appearance.

In the next part of the chapter I consider the events leading up to and consequences of a bad death: that of James, the Shangaan friend/boyfriend of Nyeleti, who was fatally shot in Mamelodi in August 2007. In the context of Nyeleti’s Mamelodi roots, James’s bad death formed but one more among many; yet beyond the silencing power such deaths commonly effected, in a sense our living together prevented this silence from taking over completely; from ‘successfully’ hiding how (the imminence of) James’s death impacted on her everyday life. In evoking and contextualizing this event, I illuminate how bad death’s pervasiveness in present-day South Africa has produced a social order wherein death is no longer an occasional interruption but rather an always possibly perilous presence—and one that, when death does strike, may simultaneously (and rarely positively) effect certain ‘performative tools’ by way of which persons seek to dissociate themselves from the malevolent intentions suspected to have motivated a certain death.

**Of Snakes and Lizards**

*Fieldnotes Excerpt 4: October 2006 (cited from several days’ notes)*

When Nyeleti came back from Mamelodi early this [Monday] morning, she told me about a major scare she had over the weekend. On Saturday she went into the garage at her mom’s place, and there right in her face was a mamba snake! She got extremely scared and went out into the street, calling for people to help and warning them. She expressed how strange it was: she lives close to the mountain but there are no snakes on the mountain where she lives—so why this snake in her garage? ‘Sho Mieke I was so scared!’ Her neighbours didn’t believe her at first and didn’t want to help, until one man came and killed it. The mamba is a deadly poisonous snake. Nyeleti said that after the man killed the snake, he and her boys burned it. ‘It took two
hours to burn, imagine! I was so scared!’ Nyeleti thought this was very unusual—it should have burnt quicker. In this way she seemed to imply that it had been a very powerful snake indeed.

[...]

When I came home earlier today [Wednesday], there in our little front porch area stood Nyeleti’s couch, desk, bedside table, mattress—all her bedroom furniture except the closet and the frame of her bed. What was all this doing here? When Nyeleti heard the gate being unlocked she came to the door and, upon seeing me, giggled embarrassedly. Then she told me what had happened. Already when she went to sleep the night before she wasn’t feeling good. Not that she was feeling ill, but that something wasn’t right… She slept badly and awoke at three. She was afraid, and then she saw it: there was a lizard in her room. ‘Sho, I was so scared!’ The lizard was crawling on the wall. It was about ten cm long (she indicated with her fingers). When she got up from the bed the lizard ‘fell somewhere’; she went to get the rat poison from the kitchen. This she put all over her room. But she ‘knows’ the lizard is not dead yet. So she was checking all her furniture… She was most afraid that it was in the couch so she said I should not touch the couch; Kenneth was coming to check it. ‘First the snake and now this lizard!’ ‘I don’t know!’ I asked her if she had told Maya; she said she had but Maya was just telling her to get over it (then she laughed uncertainly again). [...]

Nyeleti is sleeping in Maya’s room these days; she is convinced the lizard is still in her room; says she can ‘feel’ it. When she talks about it, her whole body tenses up. [...]

Just now Nyeleti came to say that she’d seen the lizard; could I help catch it? Maya went into the room armed with a broom; I with a glass and a broom. Nyeleti watched as Maya pointed out its location behind the closet. ‘There it is! You see it?’ Including the tail, it was about six or seven cm long. It was yellow with some greenish spots and tiny black eyes. We shifted the closet and the lizard ran around here and there, against the wall, into a corner, back again, but it
was just running little pieces of space. It ran behind a hat hanging there; we thought to crush it, but that didn’t work. Maya kept saying, ‘Hit it with the broom!’ […] Then it was back on the ground and I put the glass down sideways, and it ran straight into the glass—got it! I put my hand over the top and held it there.

Nyeleti was extremely frightened. ‘Aowa I don’t want to see it!’ Her body was shaking. Maya appeared less fearful but didn’t like it either. We had to kill it. […] We went outside; I killed and discarded it there by wrapping it in toilet paper, stepping on it, putting the remains in a plastic bag and throwing it in the municipal garbage. […]

I talked a bit more with Nyeleti, trying to ascertain what this all means, how she interprets it. She told me she’s been ‘very jumpy’—it started mostly with that mamba she saw some weeks ago. The lizard is just like the mamba, it’s evil and she is afraid of it. […] I hesitantly asked her if she thought it might be connected to witchcraft. She told me: ‘No, it’s not because of that.’ But, she said, there is lots of witchcraft in Mamelodi. And sometimes ‘people send snakes. And many people send lizards.’ She knows of a woman who walks around with them ‘all the time.’ ‘So sometimes I think someone sent them…’ Then, after a moment of silence: ‘My mom told me I’m losing my Christianity. She says, if only you would have more faith you wouldn’t be so scared of these things!’ And then, back to the evening she first sensed the lizard’s presence: ‘I told you neh, I woke up at three in the morning and tried to pray but there was something blocking the prayer, I couldn’t pray, every time I tried it was like it was blocked!’

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Although Nyeleti clearly drew a link between the two incidents here described, at the time she did not connect them to her ‘friendship’ with James, the Shangaan man in his early forties with whom she was engaged in a kind of on-again-off-again relationship. In fact, they happened at a
period when their liaison was temporarily over. As Nyeleti had asserted one day in late September, ‘I broke up with him. It’s finished, I’m tired of him! I never see him! Always he is gone and I don’t even know where!’ Yet I initiate my discussion with an illustration of these events because they constituted the first moments during which it started to become apparent that something ‘unusual’ or ‘mysterious’ was happening in Nyeleti’s life. At the time, what this ‘something’ involved remained indeterminate, and my uncertain attempt to classify it as witchcraft was instantly (though ambiguously) rejected. Two animals, each imbued with some kind of malevolent power, had been killed, but beyond that their meaning remained obscure. I refer to this kind of knowledge—knowledge Nyeleti initially began to exhibit over the course of the weeks the mamba and lizard intruded on her life—as arcane knowledge: knowledge that is signified by its essential unknowableness or unfathomability. Such knowledge is unknowable or unfathomable in two interrelated ways, firstly because the malevolence it implies cannot be known or identified until it happens, and secondly because to ‘know’ or ‘acknowledge’ it is, potentially at least, to gear the threat it denotes toward the self or those one loves.

Outside of Nyeleti’s bedroom grew a large Jacaranda, the leaves and branches of which extended over the stairs that led to our apartment’s gate and incessantly rustled against her second-floor windows (which she only opened briefly in the mornings to let in some fresh air, closing them again before heading off to work). In the aftermath of the lizard’s death Nyeleti sought out the aid of Kenneth, the floor manager of the building neighbouring ours (also owned by JPP), insisting that the tree be cut down; in her view, it formed the most likely route by way of which the animal had managed to enter. Before this could be done, Kenneth had to run the matter by JPP’s managers; following some argumentation back and forth, Nyeleti had to settle for second best. Kenneth received permission to prune the tree to some extent, freeing Nyeleti’s windows from any leafy touch, though it continued to shade our doorway. Subsequently, all talk
or actions pertaining to snakes, lizards or any other perceived danger receded into the background for the time being.

**On the Concept of the Unyatsi**

Although my first brief encounter with James occurred in August 2006, when Nyeleti introduced me to him as her ‘boyfriend,’ it took considerable time for me to come to an understanding of the nature of their relationship. Following his overnight stay at the flat, she informed me in one breath that they had been ‘together nine years’ but that she thought he was ‘boring and fat’; ‘I’m happy he’s gone!’ Their first break-up over the course of my fieldwork unfolded a good month later, in late September. Sometime in early November, I accidentally happened upon him again at the entrance to the flat—accidentally, because on that occasion it was clear that Nyeleti had sought to hide his presence from me as well as Maya. How long he had been in her room neither I nor Maya knew. Nyeleti’s sole comment to the two of us: ‘You know mos, we are friends!’ Whereupon she disappeared into her room.

The subject of Nyeleti’s relationship with James proved highly sensitive; certainly initially she rarely spoke about it. The next time she volunteered any details was on a Monday in late November, when upon her return from Mamelodi she told me with great hilarity that he had called her that weekend, wanting to see her. ‘I told my mom, “When he comes, tell him I’m not home!”’ But she had gone with him anyway to his newly-built, sizable house in Mamelodi East. ‘Eish, he’s so *boring*!’ I learned that in his house he kept a domestic—a woman whose labour he could afford through his monthly paycheque from South Africa’s well-known Scorpion unit—and that his two children from a previous marriage, a girl of eighteen (who, Nyeleti alleged, had had an abortion at fifteen) and a boy of fourteen who stayed with their mother, visited him regularly. Turning suddenly serious, she mentioned that she had met a ‘veeery nice guy’ three
years ago, but when James found out about it ‘he started threatening him.’ ‘Now I see him, he is there [in Mamelodi]! But we are not together because I don’t want anything to happen to him.’

Whilst different clues appeared over time regarding Nyeleti and James’s relationship, particularly at those moments when she sensed that his actions might well turn out to have dire consequences (see below), arguably the most explicit analytics she engaged in unfolded in March 2007, when during a lengthy conversation she drew a distinction between the concept of die regte (Afrikaans, ‘the true one’ or ‘one and only’) and that of the unyatsi, a Pedi term she translated as ‘secret affair’ or ‘secret lover.’ ‘A person,’ she said, ‘can have both.’ Die regte connotes one’s life partner, the person one enters into marriage with, and with whom one has children. By contrast, unyatsi implies an impermanent and by and large noncommittal partnership; these can last, she asserted, ‘from one night to very long, a lot of years… Until it is not a secret anymore!’ A close look at the English translation of the Pedi verb from which the term unyatsi is derived—unya—provides further insight: “to peep out and draw back again; to appear and disappear at intervals.” If an unyatsi is a ‘friend’ or lover who shows up once in a while, only to vanish again for weeks or months at a time, to my mind the relationships of both Nyeleti and Maya could be conceptualized as unyatsi liaisons. In this vein, when some months later we learned that Maya’s boyfriend Given had been married for three years, Nyeleti’s angry exclamation—‘She’s too young to be with a married man!’—spoke volumes.56

Tellingly, though Nyeleti went on to assert that ‘even girls say that’ (i.e. draw the distinction between die regte and unyatsi), she did not go so far as to claim that she was James’s

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56 Nyeleti’s elucidation of die regte corresponds to the definition put forth by Terry-Ann Selikow, Bheki Zulu and Eugene Cedras, based on their findings in Alexandra township. “A regte,” they write, “is the ‘right one’ or steady girlfriend, also known as ‘mosadi’ in Sesotho and ‘umfazi’ in isiZulu, or ‘mother’ or ‘wife to be’ in English” (2002: 25). Her explanation of the Pedi term unyatsi appears traceable to that of the Tswana nyatsi, which Isaac Schapera translated as ‘concubine’ (1933: 70-71), and which did not amount to a legally binding arrangement between a man and a woman (as opposed to that produced by the transfer of bogadi or bridewealth). In a recent publication Hoosen Coovadia and co-writers suggest that nyatsi refers to the “secret concurrent relationships of both men and women” (2009: 822), thus closely approaching Nyeleti’s description. Though to my knowledge it has not yet been done (but see Comaroff and Roberts 1977), a historical tracing of the changing meanings of the nyatsi/unyatsi concept would seem pertinent (cf. Hunter 2005 on the rise and fall of the isoka, the Zulu man with multiple sexual partners).
unyatsi or vice versa. As the discovery of Given’s marriage shows, women’s positions in such relationships as that of the unyatsi (as well as in that of die regte; see previous chapter) differ vastly from those of men. In Maya’s case, she considered Given her permanent boyfriend; even if she deemed herself too young to marry as of yet, certainly she thought of him more in terms of die regte (even if just potentially) than in those signified by the unyatsi. As a single mother of three, Nyeleti’s situation was different—as was James’s, who was himself divorced. James, Nyeleti once revealed, was her ‘third boyfriend’ since her separation from Patrick; during the initial years of their relationship ‘we were together every day’ and ‘he spoiled my kids that time, bringing them clothes, bringing them toys…’ By the time I met her in 2006 she insisted that she would never marry again, but this conviction may have been relatively recent; may in fact have been motivated by the uncertainty that had come to characterize her contact with James. In the following sections, which describe Nyeleti’s ambivalent enactments in relation to the events leading up to and following James’s murder, I suggest that this relational uncertainty lay at the heart of her performance of the self. Was she—or had she been—his regte or his unyatsi? And how, in the context of his bad death, would or did such different conceptualizations shape or affect her own position in relation to the arcaneness and possible malevolence his passing denoted?

**Rumours of James**

A Sunday afternoon in mid-January. Upon arriving at Miriam’s house around 1 PM, I come upon Nyeleti in an exceedingly upset and frustrated state. After sharing in the meal, she tells me about what happened earlier in the day. ‘Yoh Mieke, I’m so angry at James! This is it!’ Over a cup of well-sugared tea she describes how, while at church that morning, she found out that James had proposed to another woman; ‘a married woman even, imagine! She’s married to one of his friends!’ And then, as if this did not sound strange enough already: ‘He proposed to her in
her house, and the husband was even there!’ ‘Was he joking then?’ I asked, not a little confused. ‘No, it was serious! And now they’re fighting, James and his friend!’

Nyeleti went on to say that she had heard about it from one of his best friends, a man who attended the same Swiss Mission church she did. Upon coming home she had called James immediately. ‘He told me, “It’s none of your business!” Aowa!’ After a few moments during which she elaborated on the little she knew and further told me of the death of a friend of James the previous week, whose passing was due to swollen feet and who would be buried in Limpopo next Saturday, she appeared to have calmed down somewhat. But again she brought up their earlier telephone conversation. ‘I called James and he said, “It’s none of your business!” I’m not angry but I just wanted to say to him, “You must apologize to him [the husband]! You are hurting the people around you!” I wanted to warn him, he might die if he stays here, they will kill him!’ Her suggestion to James had been that he leave Mamelodi and go to Limpopo, where he would travel later in the week in any case to attend his friend’s funeral. ‘I told him, he should escape! He should leave, then when they are not angry anymore he can come back… Aowa he is hurting the people around him, I told him! It goes from here to here, to here!’

While parts of Nyeleti’s words made sense, others had me puzzled. In one sense, they highlighted the ambivalence she felt regarding her relationship with James. At first she claims to be so angry with him that it cannot but lead to the end of their liaison: ‘This is it!’ This enactment is however rather quickly replaced by another: ‘I’m not angry…’ If she and James are not in a committed partnership but are instead ‘friends’—a concept that might or might not incorporate unyatsi-related practices—she has no claim on the kinds of relationships he might (wish to) engage in. The latter part of her words implies such a friendship. She phoned him as a concerned friend, with the sole purpose of warning him: his actions spell danger; he should
apologize and get out of town as soon as he can. Yet still her explication denotes her own woundedness: amongst ‘the people around him’ he is hurting, is Nyeleti.

One of the more confusing aspects of her statements that Sunday afternoon was the assertion that James’s friend had died in Limpopo of swollen feet—for the previous day, before Nyeleti had learned of James’s unseemly proposal, one of her neighbours had been buried who had allegedly died of the same condition. Nyeleti had told me about the upcoming funeral on Friday, before leaving for Mamelodi. ‘She was young, only forty!’ she had exclaimed; and ‘I’ll be next.’ After a silence, she had added, ‘Eish, witchcraft is everywhere!’ ‘Are people saying it’s witchcraft?’ I had put in. ‘Ee, they are saying that! My mom says we’re protected but you know how I get scared!’ In the context of the rumours she had heard that morning—rumours which she took James to have confirmed through his ‘It’s none of your business!’—I wondered whether she was not somehow mixing up the occurrence of one event with the possibility of another. Whilst clarity on the matter remained elusive, perhaps the most significant element in the enactment at hand was Nyeleti’s foreboding sense that James’s actions might well lead to his death. Moreover, it is also in this sense that we might read her emphasis on the matter of his ‘hurting the people around him’; that hurt ‘goes from here to here, to here.’ In this conception injury or its potentiality travels; it does not limit itself to one or a few individuals. This knowledge is arcane because the routes by way of which hurt or injury moves around remain essentially indefinite, unspecified.

Already around the time of the snake and lizard incidents, I had begun to note the regularity with which Nyeleti referred to her own ‘upcoming’ death. All too often, in one or another exchange I witnessed her engage in or which I was party to myself, she would allude to that occasion, the moment of her passing. Though the time still unknown, again and again she would indicate that it would doubtlessly be ‘soon’: ‘I’ll be next,’ ‘All I want is to see my kids
pass Matric before I die,’ ‘They are already digging the hole.’ Atop the television in the wall cabinet in Miriam’s house, a piece of furniture she had once purchased on credit and was still paying off, stood an A4 size laminated photograph of a smiling Nyeleti, ‘the picture I’ll have on my grave when I die, because everyone can see it’s me.’ Maya, Miriam and I worried about these allusions, never quite knowing how to respond or how Nyeleti perhaps longed for us to respond. One evening in late January, when The Bold and the Beautiful’s broadcast was followed by a memorial statement announcing the death of Darlene Conley, who had played the flashy Sally Spectra on the show, Nyeleti asked Maya and me whether we thought it was possible to die peacefully. Tentatively, I told her I thought it was… ‘I want to die peacefully…’ she answered pensively. That same evening we watched Diary of a Mad Black Woman at Sterland, the ‘movie theatre for blacks’ situated a short drive from our flat. Based on a play written by Tyler Perry, the film focuses on a woman named Helen whose husband Charles, a successful attorney, abruptly ends their marriage on the eve of their eighteenth anniversary. Despite the pain he has caused, when Charles’s fortunes fade and he falls ill, Helen loyally comes to his aid, though she does not take him back. Exiting the theatre, Nyeleti compared Helen’s circumstances to her own: ‘We are the same! Watch, you’ll see me play the cards! [laughter] It doesn’t matter, James he can have anyone, even my neighbour!’ And then (like Charles): ‘I want him to go through pain, he deserves it!’

If James’s inappropriate proposal to his friend’s wife led to another break-up, it once again proved temporary. Toward the end of February and in March, James formed a more or less regular presence at the flat. As before, initially Nyeleti sought to hide his being there, but this could not be kept up for long; during this period he slept over several times and came to call on Nyeleti on other days—visits Nyeleti would explain in such ways as ‘His phone didn’t work so he came to use mine’ or ‘The fax machine in his office was broken, he had to use ours
[JPP’s].’ One evening during dinner, as Nyeleti came to the kitchen to fill his plate (he ate with Nyeleti in her bedroom; not in the living room with Maya and me), she commented, ‘I told you mos, me and jealousy we are not friends! I told him, “I don’t make enemies. As long as it’s not about relationships I will help you.”’ Yet a few days later, early in the morning, she rather unexpectedly pushed a ringing phone into my hand. ‘It’s James, tell him you don’t know where I am!’ After I awkwardly did so (sensing that he did not believe me), Nyeleti said she had refused to answer his calls since yesterday. ‘I will tell him I went to Mpumalanga with Toko,’ she told me, not without some embarrassment.

Wednesday 21 March, a state holiday (Human Rights Day), Nyeleti spent in Mamelodi; returning to the flat that evening, I once again encountered her in an exceedingly upset state. The following evening we got a chance to talk. Maya, who had taken on an evening job, was not home; Nyeleti was relieved that I would be: ‘I don’t like to be alone at night! I don’t like it, the darkness!’ As we sat down to eat, she began to tell me about what had unfolded over the course of her mid-week Mamelodi visit. In brief, she found out that James has a baby in Mandela Village.

It started when my aunt, she came to visit us yesterday. She was the one who told me. ‘I’ve seen that James of yours in Mandela Village, he was carrying a baby!’ So I called him, I said ‘I have to talk to you about something.’ He came with his son, the one who is fourteen. Aowa Mieke, the boy he was wearing the frayed jeans, I was so angry, I said it’s bad that his boy is dressed like that, I would never let my boys wear that! […] I took him into the garage, I locked the door. I confronted him! But he denied it! He said it wasn’t his baby, it’s the baby of his friend-what-what, he had the excuse ready! He’s lying that one! I told him, ‘How are you going to live in Mandela Village, it’s crime that side, kids there crawl through the muck, do you want your child crawling through the muck?!’ I told him!

Still angry, she had written him a letter. Quoting from it, she said ‘God gave you tools, little sperms, to go make babies with so go make babies!’ She had mailed the letter already; he should receive it soon; she was not sorry to have sent it.
Nyeleti went on to tell me about something that ‘Maya doesn’t even know.’ Four years ago, James was blacklisted from some stores. At the time he and Nyeleti were together ‘more than now,’ and Nyeleti had agreed to lend her name to open an account for him at a furniture shop. The debt on the account, Nyeleti said, was his; ‘he pays one point five [R1500] a month.’ ‘If I fight too much with him he will leave me with it! Next year March I can shut it down [if James makes all the payments]. No one knows but that’s why I can’t break up with him!’ There had also been another loan they had taken out together (already paid off), a small loan from Nedbank for which each had to get tested for HIV/AIDS. ‘Already that time he didn’t want to do it, he was so scared! But he had to do it, or we wouldn’t get the money. …Imagine, now with this baby! I told him, “How can you be so stupid! How could you not use a condom!”’

Whether triggered by the memory of the HIV/AIDS test, the negativity and possible malice the latest revelations (or assumptions) regarding James implied, or a combination of both, Nyeleti next elaborated on another grim memory. ‘In 1998,’ she declared, ‘my neighbours tried to kill me.’ The failed attempt to rob her of her life had occurred on a Sunday; ‘It was Mandisa, Thandi and Asti.’ These neighbours, who were sisters, I knew slightly; together with Thandi’s husband Lucky and their two children they lived in the house directly opposite Miriam’s. Much earlier, when I first began to visit Nyeleti and her family in the township, Nyeleti had told me that ‘they are sick with AIDS, all of them.’ As far as I had been able to observe, relations between the two families appeared unproblematic in the sense that each would greet the other, or have a brief chat whilst passing each other on the street. But this Nyeleti instantly dismissed: ‘We greet but it’s nothing… Mandisa and Asti, we greet each other but Thandi, with her I don’t talk, eish!’

I didn’t go to church [that Sunday], I cleaned and cooked at home. You know mos sometimes we don’t have the water, I had to go to the graveyard to fetch the water. My boys, they were with me. I come back, three pails. One here [tapping the crown of her head], two in my hands, like that. On the path they came towards me, those three. Aowa!
They attacked me, they had the knives and the umbrella, they hit me they tried to stab me! I was so scared!

Nyeleti had been forewarned of the attack by Debi, Lucky’s mother, who had come hurrying toward her on the path just before Mandisa, Thandi and Asti managed to get there. Around the same time Miriam and Tlangelani, Nyeleti’s younger sister, returned from church; hearing of the scuffle from other neighbours, they had come to Nyeleti’s aid. ‘It was me, my mom, my sister and Debi against those three, my kids they didn’t know what was going on, they were crying! They were little, they were so scared!’

Nyeleti had emerged from the confrontation mostly unscathed, but the question on my mind was why it had occurred in the first place. What were the circumstances that had led to the assault? Why had these women tried to kill her? Nyeleti asserted that it was ‘because of jealousy.’ She elaborated: ‘That time I was studying to be a teacher mos, I was doing my practicals in that primary school [in Mamelodi]. Those kids they were bad, I wanted them to listen! I wanted to make a good impression, I thought it was my test! But Thandi’s daughter, she was in my class.’ Nyeleti avowed that this was the reason why her neighbours had become angry with her. ‘Who does she think she is, she thinks she’s better than us!’ She ended her sub-narrative, or brought it back to the present moment, by reiterating how she had seen Asti, the youngest of the three sisters, the day before. ‘She was strong before but now I see she got skinny! After I saw her I went into my room, I went to sit on the bed, I was so scared! Aowa Mieke I was shaking, it was everywhere!’

It was also on this evening, our usual habit of watching The Bold, Isidingo, Scandal, Generations and Muvhango interspersed with Nyeleti’s intimate disclosures, that Nyeleti explained the concepts of die regte and unyatsi. Notably, she ‘arrived’ at drawing this distinction toward the end of the evening, as if to wrap up all the things she had been telling me about, including the very brief revelation that James had forced himself upon her ‘twice, he does that
when he is drunk.’ I was uncertain what to make of her distinct recollections, which yet blended into each other from one moment to the next, from one popular soapie to the other. It was clear that the rhythm of her everyday life had once again been shaken by the rumoured knowledge that James was sleeping with other women—was even having babies with them—and that this posed a problem in terms of her own liaison with him, which she could not terminate until he would finish paying off the debt that bore her name. But how did his particular actions—the ‘fact’ that he had had unprotected sex with a woman (and possibly more than one) beyond Nyeleti, the ‘truth’ of which was attested to by the birth of a baby in Mandela Village—spell danger for Nyeleti? Ought I to read the account of the attack by her AIDS-suffering neighbours as an oblique way of commenting upon how James’s unprotected sexual practices were at once placing her in harm’s way? Or was that stretching things too far?

This time around, however, James seemed determined to clear his name; to free himself (and arguably, Nyeleti) of the charges she had laid against him. Some three and a half weeks after Nyeleti learned of the infant James had allegedly fathered he paid her a visit at Miriam’s house, armed with considerable evidence. ‘He brought the woman and the baby to my house and he had the letter with him! He wanted to prove to me that he is not the father of the baby.’ The baby girl, it turned out, was the child of James’s cousin. I sought to determine how she now felt, in light of this new knowledge. ‘I still don’t want anything to do with him,’ she said; ‘I didn’t show my feelings.’ She further stressed that while she had spoken to James in her room, she had not allowed the woman to enter the house. ‘I acted cool towards them.’

A New Player on the Scene?

Thus far I have depicted how Nyeleti first began to reveal or express—to the extent that this was ‘possible’—her knowledge and fear of the arcane through the episodes of the mamba and the lizard; in these instances the known was densely overshadowed by and enveloped in the
unknown. What, if any, sort of hazard did they signify; what manner of menace? Was it aimed at her, her children or other kin members, or those she was otherwise closely connected to? Who lay behind the likely maliciousness, and why? For a few months no further insights emerged, until her life was once again thrown into disarray by the rumours concerning James. While during those months Nyeleti did not explicitly link the recent developments to the earlier malevolent appearances (she would ambivalently do so later), her sense that something bad might happen or be happening to James and possibly to her seemed to speak to the entwinement of the various events. Yet even then what was known remained scant, uncertain and vulnerable in its bareness.

In April, May and June, the final months of the initial period of my fieldwork, James once again put in regular appearances at the flat, which at times Nyeleti seemed to appreciate, at other times less so. One problem she was facing at this time was that her children’s school fees were outstanding. Former husband Patrick was responsible to pay these; that he did not do so by the required dates—would, as a matter of fact, fail to do so at all—led to significant telephone tension between the two parties; in this situation it was James who came to Nyeleti’s aid by providing some of the necessary funds. During the same period JPP’s Teen Ministry, the site of Nyeleti’s employment as well as that of Maya, Lily and several others, was entering a period that would come to be characterized by considerable difficulties. On one level these related to some of the ministry’s projects, which were deemed to be operating ‘less efficiently’ than they ought to—a concern that would in due course lead to a major overhaul of its organizational structure. At the time in question, the ins and outs of these matters began to circulate in the form of myriad rumours, which depending on who one spoke to differentially condemned the behaviour of some or imparted blame to others. It was by way of this second level, deeply
entwined with the first, that in the region of Nyeleti’s everyday life and concerns the potentiality of the malevolent intentions of a novel actor—Lily—first began to become apparent.

Matters appeared innocent enough at first, and unrelated to the frightful impenetrableness of Nyeleti’s encounters with the snake and lizard and the upsetting rumours about James. The issue, so it sounded, was solely work-related, and emerged in a manner I had grown accustomed to: over the course of an evening of gossip and other talk at the flat. That nightfall Nyeleti and I had prepared a substantial meal, to be shared with eight visitors in a jam-packed living room. Aside from Mandla—a friend who lived in the next building—and Maya’s sisters Nomsa and Sesi, Nomsa’s daughter Ntombi, and Nyeleti’s sister Pauline, Nyeleti’s friend Dyambu had also come to visit with her two children. Amidst animated talk regarding the current happenings at work, how to negotiate getting one’s driver’s license through bribery, and the joys and stresses of raising children, the always thorny subject of salaries arose. In the Teen Ministry employees’ incomes were structured according to position, that of ‘assistant’ generating approximately R2000 ($250) per month, that of ‘coordinator’ R4300 ($537.50), and that of the managers, it was claimed, anywhere from R7000 ($875) to R10 000 ($1,250). Being assistants, that my housemates’ small salaries formed a source of considerable bitterness I knew; predominantly thus far their indignation had been aimed at JPP’s management, not those who filled the coordinator positions. This more or less subtly began to change during this evening, when Nyeleti contended that it was unfair that Lily made ‘four point three’; ‘She doesn’t even have Matric!’ This statement was instantly submerged in its broader context by Maya, who put in that the other coordinators ‘make that too.’ Nonetheless, from April to June I noted that Nyeleti’s increasingly vehement assertions in this regard targeted Lily far more than the other three coordinators.
News of another Two Deaths

On the fifth of August 2007, while I was in Canada, Nyeleti sent the following text to my cell phone: ‘Mieke, James passed away. Somebody shot him. He died yesterday. I can’t believe that I’ve lost him for ever. It’s still unbelievable to me. I can’t stop phoning him even now.’ I managed to reach an agitated Nyeleti by phone some moments later. She informed me of the details she knew: ‘He found them together, the husband! They were in the bed! James and the woman they managed to escape from the house but the guy he followed them with the gun, he shot him!’ Her distress was palpable through the crackling, echoing line. James was forty-four when he died.

On my way back to South Africa in mid-September, I received a second message relating the occurrence of a death. ‘Hi, Mieke, glad you are coming. 2 moro we are going 2 the funeral. Maya’s mom passed away on Monday. Hoping 2 c u soon. Have a safe trip. Luv u. Send greetings at home.’ Less than two weeks earlier, Maya had written in an email that her mother Nndileni, who had been suffering from an ostensible combination of illnesses, was doing ‘much better.’ Nndileni had reached the age of forty-eight.

Upon my return to the inner city, Maya still away due to Nndileni’s recent passing and burial, Nyeleti and I took time to catch up in the shade of a large White Stinkwood tree on Church Square. There was much she wanted to tell me about: the restructuring of the Teen Ministry, by then in full swing; the death of Nndileni; the murder of James. The first of these subjects she mentioned briefly but irately: ‘I’m so frustrated [about the new job descriptions], I don’t even want to look at them!’ (For the moment skipping over this issue, she was to come back to it later.) It was rather via the occasion of Nndileni’s death that she launched into her narrative of what had unfolded in the months I had been away. ‘She was sick for a long time but it was not visible,’ she asserted; the fact that things had begun to go downhill ‘at the same time James died’ turned out to be ‘good,’ because ‘it helped me to keep my mind on something else.’
In Nyeleti’s elucidation, Nndileni, an asthma sufferer, had also had ‘problems with her heart and the kidneys.’ Notably, several members of Maya’s family suffered from asthma (a brother died in December 2009; having collapsed on the street, the ambulance did not get to him in time to give him oxygen), and I feared the condition was perpetually exacerbated by the destitute circumstances within which Maya, her mother and siblings lived in one of Mamelodi East’s shack settlements. From early August until the tenth of September, the day she died, Nndileni was hospitalized four times, twice at Mamelodi Hospital, twice at Pretoria Academic. ‘The doctors kept discharging her, they said they couldn’t do anything.’ During this period Given, Maya’s ex-boyfriend, came to Maya and Nyeleti’s aid by driving them back and forth between hospital and inner city: ‘They are still friends.’ Although Maya’s parents had been separated for long, her father Sifiye had been very upset at his wife’s death. Nndileni, originally from Venda, was buried in her husband’s kin’s graveyard in the former Bantustan of KwaNdebele, near the town of KwaMhlanga. ‘He was responsible for the funeral because he was still her husband.’

After informing me of other recent news (including how conflict had developed at the Teen Ministry since Nndileni’s funeral had coincided with one of the ministry’s weekend camps), Nyeleti began to remember James, the first of a number of occasions she would do so in the coming months. What would come to strike me most about this process was the manner in which, in contrast to the earlier ambivalent and at times overtly derisive enactments, she evoked him positively, as if he had constituted nothing less than the—or her—ideal partner. Making this particularly peculiar were the circumstances that had led to his untimely death: he had been caught in bed with another man’s wife, the same woman he had purportedly proposed to months earlier. Yet Nyeleti’s words, though first reiterating the discomfiting situation that had led to the shooting, ended on the following markedly optimistic note:

You know Mieke as I told you, on Saturday he was with the woman at her house, the husband he was working. They say he came home from work early, that’s why he found
them. He had the gun that one! They fled the house in his car, that black Golf, but he followed them! He tried to shoot them but his wife she survived, James he died there… *Aowa!* […] The wife, they brought her to the hospital, the husband they took him to the jail. But James, that one! I am telling you! Four August, he died. But from the Sunday [previous], neh? We were in touch *every* every day! He called me, I was at home, that day he drove me to JPP. *Every* every day he called, one day he came to visit, the other day we had the lunch, the other day I cooked for him. He was so good to me. He gave the money to my mom, she did not have money. He even picked up Robert from school and drove him to Mamelodi, imagine! It was so strange neh? The week he died we were so much together… ![Nyeleti counts on her fingers: Sunday this, Monday this, Tuesday this…] He was good to me. It was like he was saying goodbye, but we didn’t know it!

Did this retrospective account ‘accurately’ characterize the days preceding the murder, or were Nyeleti’s memories wistful, nostalgically idealistic? Was this her way of inscribing or re-inscribing herself as an important person in James’s life, and ought it thus to be conceptualized as an expression of the process of her mourning his passing? How would things be different if she interpreted his death as, for instance, ‘deserved’; as an event the destructive outcome of which was purely due to his own injurious behaviour? How did she fit into the unfolding picture?

Maya returned to work the following day. In the context of the conflicts at the Teen Ministry, then advanced to a far greater degree than in June, she kept up a decidedly controlled front; even at the flat she would not talk about her mother’s passing. Nyeleti worried about her: ‘She has no time to mourn… Here [at JPP] they don’t even allow us to mourn, imagine!’ Simultaneously speaking to anger and pain, Nyeleti’s statement needs to be framed in terms of the tense situation that had been developing at the Teen Ministry for months. In sum, my housemates’ work environment had become almost unbearable, not just for them but for others as well. One source of confrontation was the restructuring process for which the managers, Irma and Sandy, had received the green light from JPP’s managing body. A few days after my return, Maya and Nyeleti showed me an outline of the proposed new structure, which in its essence constituted an exact copy of the ministry’s composition as it had operated before, the sole
change being that ‘assistants’ were to be renamed ‘aides.’ More significantly, the new structure, which was to take effect in January 2008, permitted each current employee to apply for any position they wished (except that of manager). Yet what the managers perceived and branded as an ‘opportunity’ generated nothing but resentment, interspersed with mocking laughter, from Nyeleti and Maya. Initially I struggled to understand their bitterness and cynicism. Despite the myriad interpersonal and ‘company struggles,’ considering that neither of them had much choice, why not apply for a coordinator post, which would more than double their current incomes? But my perception was wrong. ‘I need pap and you [JPP] give me rice! I eat the rice but eventually I get stomach cramps!’ The issue of salaries and who would be given which post was entering a new stage, one through which it would become increasingly evident that at the heart of the conflicts was not merely money, but also—and indeed more so—important questions pertaining to the matter of respect, particularly the meaning of mutual respect and the consequences of its lack.

**Lily’s Muti**

Amidst this conflicted work situation Nyeleti continued to remember James, chiefly in the positive mode related above. I learned that she had not gone to his funeral, though several members of her family had, and that it had generally been widely attended. (The dramatic way of his dying had captured significant publicity via newspaper articles and news posters that had been plastered across the city.) She had, however, watched from a distance: ‘I can see the grave from my house.’ Over time she would give various reasons as to why she had stayed home: ‘He was my ex,’ ‘I didn’t want people to see me,’ ‘I was scared.’ She had been angry with her mother, her brother Jeremy and his wife Abby, because they had been away visiting kin in Limpopo on the day of the shooting, and had failed to come home upon hearing the news. Nyeleti had gone to see his grave after the burial, and at one point showed me the precise
location of the murder. It had happened near Mamelodi’s main shopping centre, in front of the Shoprite, on the main thoroughfare through which one enters and exits the township. The light had been red; the husband had jumped out of his vehicle and fired several shots before he had been tackled and held to the ground. But, she exclaimed, ‘he was innocent!’ And although she had heard from her brother Gabriel that people were angry with James ‘even at the funeral,’ and she herself would also acknowledge that ‘James he was stupid,’ during this conversation she suggested that James’s lover, a Xhosa woman, was to be blamed for how things had turned out: ‘Those Xhosas, they have strong muti! It was her, she used it on him! He was under her power!’

Whether due to its nearness or ‘incompleteness,’ during my first weeks back Nyeleti did not mention, let alone discuss the possibility of an alternative interpretation, one that ominously drew her into or inscribed her onto the event of James’s death; that indeed placed her at its very core. Only in the aftermath of a rough Teen Ministry meeting, it seemed, was she ‘able’ to express in the way of words an insight she had already known about for more than two months. Irma and Sandy had called the meeting, Nyeleti and Maya told me, to sort out ‘once and for all’ the ongoing tension between several of their staff—a statement they sensed to be aimed particularly at ‘us and Lily.’ The meeting recounted in detail, Nyeleti alleged that Lily had ‘looked hard’ at her; ‘Aowa I was so scared! That one she is evil, she is bad! She has bad muti!’ As Maya fell silent, a disconcerted Nyeleti went on to relate how Lily had come to the flat some time ago, before the deaths of James and Maya’s mother. Lily had sat down on the couch (Nyeleti pointed to the exact spot); that afternoon she had ‘said those things to me, aowa!’ In Nyeleti’s recollection, the threatening message had emerged as follows: ‘People who are not treating me right, bad things happen to them…’ Lily had gone on to mention two examples, both work-related in the sense that it had affected the lives of Teen Ministry staff members. The first was that of Dineo (a coordinator), whose mother had died in May; the second that of Agnes (like
Nyeleti and Maya, an assistant), whose AIDS-suffering brother had passed away in July. ‘You see?’ Nyeleti kept repeating ardently; ‘Aowa that one, she has bad muti!’ And: ‘It all started then, when she came to visit, that’s when it really started! And since then James was taken, and Nndileni.’

Maya, who might or might not have been in the know about these events, had been quietly listening as Nyeleti’s agitated words had come tumbling out. Usually the quiet one, this was not out of the ordinary; on the whole Maya was much more reserved in sharing the details of her life and knowledge. But because Nyeleti had indicated that Lily’s menacing words had targeted Maya as well, I was led to ask the younger of the two women what she thought about her sister’s explication: ‘Aowa I don’t want to think about it! It will make me go crazy!’

Nyeleti continued undeterred, determined, it seemed, to further elaborate on the matter. Lily’s visit had filled her with dread: ‘You know me mos, I needed to talk to someone!’ She had gone to see Debi, the same woman who had warned her in 1998 that her three neighbours were coming to kill her, and who had been employed at JPP since January 2007 as a housemother at one of the organization’s ‘homes of safety.’ Stressing that she did not blame Debi, she suggested that the latter had likely leaked (some of) the information regarding the enmity between Nyeleti and Lily, which had then somehow reached the ears of the Teen Ministry’s managers. ‘That’s why they called the meeting!’ Nyeleti concluded.

James’s death, Nyeleti finally asserted, had been ‘a triumph’ for Lily. This she knew because on the Monday following the event, she had watched from the flat’s living room windows as Lily had darted about JPP’s parking lot carrying the newspaper bearing the front-page report. ‘She was running with the newspaper and showing everyone!’ On this evening therefore, through the implication that it was Lily’s muti that had engendered the bad death of James (and that of Nndileni, and possibly two others), it became apparent how Nyeleti
considered herself—or her conflict with Lily—to lie at the heart of his passing; that in this manner she at once blamed herself and Lily for his death. In this interpretation James constitutes the innocent victim, while Nyeleti emerges concurrently as victim (of Lily’s evil intentions towards her, which were successful) and agent (since it was her troubled relationship with Lily that led to his death). To my mind, this goes some way to explain why Nyeleti portrayed her most recent memories of James as markedly positive, and why in the process of recollecting him she downplayed the more negative aspects that had featured in their relationship. By way of ‘positive remembering’ she was highlighting her role as victim, thereby distancing the arcane knowledge that it might well have been her troubles with Lily that had engendered his death.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has sought to demonstrate how in present-day South Africa, beyond the typical reiterations of bad death as being due to AIDS or violent crime, its omnipresence has come to permeate the realm of the living in arcane and potentially highly threatening ways. To recall van der Geest, a bad death can be signalled multiply: through the youthfulness of the deceased, violence, accident, illness, pain, or being away from one’s home or kin (2004c). Somewhat differently (but not unrelatedly), attending to the motives for and purposes of mortuary rituals, Bloch and Parry emphasize the “attempt to control the unpredictable nature of biological death,” whereby a good death is indicated by the proper carrying out of burial rites, through which the “victory of order over biology” is dramatized (1982: 15). In this way life is ‘regenerated,’ both in the rebirth of the deceased and the renewal of the world of the living, while the impossibility or failure of proper burial signals a bad death in the absence of control over biological fate and the lack of regeneration. Perhaps hypothetically, an untimely or bad death caused by violence, accident or illness can be turned into a good death through appropriate burial; yet as Bloch and Parry also point out, the outcome of this course can never be fully warranted: “Despite the most
fastidious endeavours, a mistake of ritual detail may have nullified the efficacy of the rites by which the rebirth of the deceased is guaranteed,” while the “mourners’ actual experience is likely to tell them that the death they mourn fell some way short of the perfect case represented in the ideology” (1982: 17).

In South Africa, the omnipresence of bad death is powerfully attested to by AIDS deaths and the pervasiveness of violent crime. This social reality is compounded by the deaths of those who pass away in sites and circumstances far from the support networks of kin—the only ones able to ensure that the mortuary rituals through which people ‘become dead’ and through which their deaths are (potentially) ‘made good’ unfold in the culturally or religiously appropriate manner (Straight 2006). I have argued that for those who remain behind—those who daily live with the knowledge of bad death’s pervasiveness—the social order has become ‘defamiliarized by death,’ whereby death no longer lingers at the edge of people’s life-worlds (only to occasionally interrupt), but has, potentially arcanely, come to penetrate it. Death’s unbounding from the social mores and control mechanisms intended to contain it imply that the standard opposition between life and death has become inverted, whereby the ordinary is broadly signified through life’s intimacy with death.

The possible arcaneness bad deaths entail is apparent in the discursive ways people announce, talk about, or recall such deaths. In the cases of strangers’ bad deaths, it has become commonplace to refer to such deaths as having been caused by HIV/AIDS or one or another form of criminal activity; when a bad death occurs closer to home, such particularizations fade and are replaced by ones that cautiously work to circumvent potential threat through reference to such innocuous sources as stress, headaches, or swollen feet. In view of this observation, I showed how the occasion of Keromang’s good death provided a window through which valuable insights emerged regarding bad death’s incursion into the everyday, in that—in
contrast to occasions of bad death—it permitted women to comment upon (bad) death’s
pervasiveness and the practical effects thereof in their lives. In the final analysis, Nyeleti’s
words and enactments in relation to the practices and eventual murder of her friend/boyfriend
James allowed me to reiterate the argument regarding death’s presence in the everyday, and
especially to demonstrate how the possible arcaneness bad deaths signify is agonizingly realized
in experience.
CONCLUSION

During my introductory tour of JPP in the winter of 2006, Johan showed me a tree in the courtyard of one of the organization’s nursery schools. ‘This tree,’ he said, ‘has got a story’:

This house used to be a manse, right? Around the time of the changes a Dutch Reformed pastor was living here with his wife. And this lady, she was frustrated… I mean she had a very difficult time with everything that was happening. Her mind was not good. One day she climbed up the tree and just started sawing off the branches. You can still see where she sawed them off. This couple came to visit us not long ago, and they went to look at their old house and—now look at the tree! It is growing again, you see?

Johan’s claim was, of course, a moral one. In his narration the tree is emblematic of JPP’s moral labour in the post-apartheid city. Notably, this moral labour does not (or not entirely) evade the recent past; instead it is premised upon and shaped by a particular experience of this past. In Johan’s telling of the story, this experience is conveyed in the portrayal of an unnamed, ‘mad’ Afrikaner woman; via the tree’s symbolic scars and newly growing branches, the narrative of brokenness and healing pertains principally to a perceived ‘Afrikaner community.’

As Michael Lambek (2002) and Saba Mahmood (2005) have emphasized, moral praxis is always locally situated, particular; its procedures, techniques and discourses are cultivated within distinct circumstances, settings and ‘communities.’ In this respect it is important to recognize that the outreach efforts Afrikaner leaders and other staff are engaged in are indeed morally imbued, as evidenced in the Feast of the Clowns’ call for an affective shift in conduct or comportment (Chapter 1) or the appeal for a ‘second conversion’ in response to the ‘suffering’ of the inner city (Chapter 4). In view of the inner city’s massive demographic shift, connoting, for Afrikaner and other white outreach workers, the abandonment of the city centre by (the wealthier segments of) ‘their’ community and churches, the presence of JPP implies an effort to cultivate a novel moral stance and practice; one that urges a defiance of the temptation to ‘selfishly’ desert the inner city in favour of greener pastures elsewhere.
The central aim of this dissertation has been to examine how this Afrikaner-initiated endeavour fares in the contemporary inner city, which contrastively to the early 1990s—when JPP was launched—has since transitioned into a largely black-inhabited and traversed domain. At the historic South African turn from apartheid’s oppressive rule to one of (ostensible) democracy, the opportunity arises to consider how novel moral ideologies and actions surface amidst the ebb and flow of daily life, and how such processes ‘make do’ in locations experiencing rapid societal change. One might also express this in terms of the relation between the ordinary and the extraordinary, whereby we understand the extraordinary to be folded into the ordinary rather than standing apart or existing separately from it, as if on its own plane. Indeed, it is the valorisation of the latter that engenders an overemphasis on transformation, transition, change; by contrast, the recognition of the ordinary allows us to acknowledge how the effects of momentous social change become real amidst the continuity of everyday life. As a locally driven NGO in the post-apartheid inner city, one resonant of the great diversity this urban realm has come to exhibit since the early 1990s, JPP forms one entity at and through which the meshing or entanglement of the extraordinary and the ordinary, the novel and the continuant, becomes apparent.

Accordingly, I have suggested that the instance that is JPP can be envisioned as a critical juncture; one within which the sincere intentions and practices of Afrikaner outreach leaders run up against the deep ironies characteristic of the present moment. On one level these ironies have come to pervade the whole of the South African social fabric, particularly in the recognition that the 1994 promise of freedom has by and large failed to realize for the majority of the population. The veracity of this insight surfaces, for one, in the ongoing violence of the HIV/AIDS crisis; beyond this, it emerges amidst public concern over state corruption and inaction, crime, sexism, xenophobia and so forth. On another level, that observable at JPP, such ironies meet and become
enmeshed in the constitution and day-to-day management of outreach labour, which, as we might put it, themselves have given birth to and bear witness to certain (larger) ironies.

Foremost amongst these are the NGO’s paradoxical claims of being ‘non-racial’ and ‘equal,’ which are, tacitly as well as explicitly, incessantly contradicted in practice. The unease the pervasiveness of incongruity and irony illuminate at and beyond JPP speaks to people’s knowledge (and ambiguous acknowledging) of the ongoing salience or continuation of societal structures and norms that were supposed to have faded out with apartheid’s demise. Otherwise put, in the suggestion of incongruity or irony we encounter one means by way of which the extraordinary folds itself into the ordinary, or how it becomes enfolded therein.

Yet, as Lambek (2003) has emphasized, the presence and mediation of irony are always juxtaposed by those of a (more) literal, serious or sincere nature. In this respect, if the high frequency of inconsistency, paradox and irony has figured crucial in my choice to employ the performance concept in this dissertation (opening the door via which both ironic and serious enactments can be accounted for in the analyzing process), the evocation of Aristotle’s phronesis can be said to have played a further balancing role. To recall, phronesis is the ethical dimension of practice. It is the nurtured, ongoing “exercise of moral judgment” that surpasses “individuated, selfish will and calculating, alienated reason” in its valuation of “cultivated dispositions toward doing good” (2002: 238). This concept is important because it allows us to pose the question of how and why, despite irony’s omnipresence, the labour of outreach manages to continue. Even more, rather than having collapsed, say, in response to the inner city’s demographic transition, JPP has not only kept going but has significantly grown in size and influence through the efforts of its Afrikaner leaders as well as those of its black staff.

The question, then, becomes one of tracing the relation between irony and moral practice; of deciphering what irony ‘does’ to the JPP project of enacting and promoting a
particular moral ideology and practice in the inner city. It is perhaps helpful here to recall James Fernandez and Mary Taylor Huber’s distinction between ‘true irony’ and that of the ‘militant’ or ‘malicious’ sort, whereby the former is understood to “dwell in uncertainty, with a kind of cosmic sense of the finitude and impermanence of all things human,” versus the latter’s expression of “self-confidence” and “[mockery of] the others’ lack of knowledge.” In Chapter 3 I proposed that this distinction does not exactly hold on the level of the practical, where the two can be said to be irremediably entangled. In this vein, even as mocking, sarcastic or parodic enactments regarding the Other (a person, idea or development) appear to be “positioned confidently as to what is right and wrong in the world,” they concurrently seem to me to speak to the ironizer’s own sense of ambivalence, uncertainty and insecurity in terms of his or her relation with or to that Other. Conversely, ironic evocations that look as if they illuminate the ironizer’s sense of ambiguity about the Other can at once, if but subtly, bear derisory qualities (cf. Fernandez and Huber 2001: 21-22).

Clearly the myriad ironic, paradoxical and incongruous ‘presences’ and performances observable at JPP—variously militant, always speaking to the ambivalence and reluctance imbuing social relations—impact upon the NGO’s efforts to cultivate a novel, locally salient moral practice in the post-apartheid city. I have sought to elucidate this matter by first presenting how Afrikaner leaders instil the labour of outreach with moral value, through urging—beyond themselves—other outreach staff to equally work to reverse the ‘fate’ of the inner city’s past and present. Explicitly called for during that week-long redressive event, the Feast of the Clowns (Chapter 1), the morally imbued message of the need to change one’s conduct—of ‘seeing’ the city and its people with different eyes—is meant to infuse ordinary outreach practice as it unfolds on different stages, such as that of the HIV/AIDS project (Chapter 2). Yet the communitas advocated in the former (pertaining principally to the
collectivity of outreach workers) and the reintegration aimed for in the latter (of AIDS sufferers into their kin and home networks) are recurrently contradicted. Clownhood may be subtly rejected, transforming outreach leaders’ objective into an ideal; the (also clearly idealistic) notion of ‘going home to one’s relatives’ may be refused, engendering schism rather than reintegration. Implied in both is a “reversion to crisis” (Turner 1980: 152).

Having set the stage in the first part of the dissertation, in the second I sought to attend in greater depth to the incongruities, paradoxes and ironies hinted at earlier, chiefly by honing in on the enactments, narratives and life stories of JPP’s female black workers. As already alluded to in the Prologue to Chapter 1, in many ways it was the recurrence of women’s engagement in performances of hard laughter and enactments of the sexually charged Pussy Cat that alerted me to the powerful role played by irony at JPP and beyond it (Chapter 3). Moreover, as noted earlier, even as broader societal paradoxes burden the labour of outreach and the moral intentions of Afrikaner leaders, so do the management of this labour and the ways leaders formulate and (fail to) practice certain proclaimed moral values bear their own ironic fruits. Regarding the latter, the presence of irony at JPP and the ambivalence this implies in terms of social relations can be (partially) explained by the dissonance between the NGO’s conceptualization of the post-apartheid inner city and those of its staff members, for whom this urban space is powerfully imagined through the urban form of the township (Chapter 4). Similarly, the gendered morals the organization elucidates emerge deeply incompatible in view of women’s gendered subjectivities as these are embedded in knowledge and experience of transactional sexual practices and/or of getting and being married (Chapter 5). In the final analysis presented—that regarding the pervasiveness of bad death, which disturbs the black segment (especially women) of the population particularly—it becomes apparent how a societal irony can come to bear upon the outreach effort through the arcanely experienced process of
making sense of such deaths, via which once-collegial relations between outreach workers may turn deeply resentful (Chapter 6).

As a—or perhaps the—thread that runs through the whole of the JPP effort in the contemporary inner city, irony bears an arresting quality via which the project’s moral ideologies and intentions are recurrently questioned, problematized, subjected to critical evaluation. Irony’s constant probing signifies that the human knowledge and experience that have engendered the JPP endeavour are subject to powerful constraints. Central amongst these is its ongoing rootedness in the ‘Afrikaner experience,’ as Johan’s story regarding the tree in the nursery school’s courtyard suggests; in effect the histories of the majority of the NGO’s personnel and clients are cast aside in the process of daily outreach labour. Yet crucially, I have argued that this does not denote the absence of the moral but instead situates it in the realm of the uncertain, the ambiguous and unresolved. Phronesis is not repudiated out of hand, but is indefinitely—and at times, it seems, knowingly—suspended until a future time. Simultaneously, this leads us away from a reading of JPP as a certain or sure ‘moral community’ in the post-apartheid city in favour of a construal highlighting the means by which it is incessantly enacted, reproduced, resisted and transformed by those who traverse its various stages.

Lastly, the dissertation has sought to engage in some depth with the question of the cultivation of phronesis—including the matter of its deferment—by evoking the concept of self-respect. Not unlike performance and phronesis, self-respect, I have argued, is a relational concept; even if we understand it to be a quality that specific social actors may be said to possess or lack, its establishment and maintenance are derivative of and can be traced in the extent to which circumstances and interactions imply the exercise of mutual respect. Indeed, it is precisely in self-respect’s relationality that its relevance to the nurturance of phronesis is to be located. Harnessing this thought to the JPP environment and the novel forms of moral practice
this organization seeks to foster in the post-apartheid city, we may observe that here, phronesis’s achievement often remains postponed due to a lack of reciprocal respect between different constituents. As I have sought to indicate by relating key moments and processes in the life stories of Nyeleti, Toko, Gloria and others, one legacy of apartheid can conceivably be formulated as the engenderment of particular strategies (i.e. hard laughter, silence) regarding how self-respect is to be safeguarded in the event of the lack of its joint exercise. Hence we can expect the suspension of phronesis to more or less persist as long as the ongoing salience of historical experience and knowledge, and especially people’s diverse situatedness therein, remains ‘unacknowledged’ in and through the ordinary action of respecting the Other.
REFERENCES


