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Decoding dispossession: Eviction and urban regeneration in Johannesburg's dark buildings

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In January 2012 the residents of an inner-city tenement building in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, were evicted on a court order. The building was situated in a post-industrial neighbourhood in which thousands of South Africans and foreign nationals, many blind or disabled, live in unlawfully occupied buildings without access to water, basic sanitation, electricity and waste management services. Such buildings are known in policy discourse as 'bad buildings', and informally as 'dark buildings', invoking both a sense of developmental failure and spiritual insecurity. In this paper I analyse how urban renewal policies created social divisions and alliances not only among the residents of Chambers, which were channelled along nationalist lines, but also between the able-bodied and disabled, and produced new social alliances. In particular, I document how a group of blind Zimbabweans experienced threats of violence and accusations of betrayal, as they were offered alternate accommodation by the evicting company because of their disability. I argue here that the pressures of private-sector housing developments intersected with the insecurities and divisions of inner-city social spaces and also fostered new alliances. Following the work of Deleuze and Guattari, I invoke the concept of 'decoding dispossession', proposing that ongoing evictions and dispossessions are characterized by simultaneous movements of 'decoding and deterritorialization' and 'overcoding-reterritorialization'.

Keywords: urban regeneration, dispossession, Johannesburg, stigma, migration, blindness

Prologue

In September 2011 I sat on the roof of a tenement, informally known as Chambers, in the southeast of Johannesburg. A woman, her arm hanging in bandage, struggled to hang her laundry. Her blanket—with curling art nouveau leaves and pink petals—swung in the breeze against the backdrop of a modernist factory, still home to a textile production line, one of the few remaining amid the deindustrialization of the area. At the corner of the roof, a group of Rastas sat washing their clothes and braiding hair. Many of them were from Zimbabwe and made a living by making crafts and furniture to be sold in markets, while some struggled to make it as musicians in the city. A South African gospel musician showed me his CD and said he was looking for a studio. A sex worker wearing a Springbok rugby tee shirt sat chatting to a stylishly dressed woman with pink-dyed hair. I spoke to them about the previous weekend's soccer match, the Soweto derby between Kaizer Chiefs and Orlando Pirates. They told me that the woman with the bandage injured her arm when she fell through a hole in the floor in the darkness of the building below. This scene struck me as redolent of the lives of many in the city: the struggle with broken structures and broken bones to create spaces of cleanliness, creativity, decoration and intimacy amid the forces of urban change.

I was led to the roof through the precarious fire escape route by a man I will call Lwazi. He was gaunt, his eyes intense, his body hit by recurrent bouts of tuberculosis. He had been a member of the African National Congress (ANC) during the apartheid

years, but now he had no formal employment and felt abandoned by ANC, left out of the post-apartheid promise. Looking over the city, he told me, 'This is not the land of the government, it's a private land (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2011).' From the roof, the signs of rapid urban change were visible. In the neighbouring building, a group of men were dismantling the tin roof for recycling cash. One could see the city's railway lines running to Soweto and beyond. In the near distance was the Ellis Park Stadium Precinct, which the city of Johannesburg spent ZAR 170 million (approximately USD 12 million)[1] (Garner, 2011) renovating in the build-up to the 2010 World Cup, vastly more than the amount spent on transitional housing for the evicted. Across the road was a polka-dot apartment block advertising 'trendy modern apartments', where one of the men on the roof had lived, prior to being evicted. A few blocks away was the development of a new arts precinct with studio and loft apartments, called Maboneng or 'Place of Light' (Nevin, 2014); the name was in stark contrast to the several 'dark buildings' in the neighbourhood like Chambers. These dark buildings of inner-city Johannesburg, as they are often called by their residents, are vertical informal settlements in states of extreme dereliction, appropriated by those left out of the city's urban regeneration schemes.

The scene on the roof, in the spring sun, was also very different from the floors below. The interior of Chambers was shrouded in darkness even in the day, and the air smelled of paraffin. Cell phones and cooking fires illuminated the dark. Graffiti covered the walls, toilets overflowed, and large rats scurried over the mounds of waste in the basement. There was only a single tap for a few hundred people. In this darkness I was often guided by the blind, who led me down the passages illuminated by the light of a Nokia cellphone into carefully ordered rooms in which families sat eating, talking and mending clothes. Many of the blind had come from Zimbabwe during the time of economic collapse, where even the well educated could no longer survive. South Africa offered a chance to live off begging even while other opportunities were few. The building was home to multiple forms of engagement and sociality, which were centred around listening to music, attending the nearby prophetic churches, which many of the women went to together, watching football and chatting about the shared conditions and adversities of life in Johannesburg.

Chambers was targeted for eviction and redevelopment by a company called the Affordable Housing Company (Afhco), whose signs and buildings spread throughout the area offering thousands of decent accommodation units at low cost, which were still unaffordable to those unemployed or working in the informal sector, as were most residents of Chambers. In the preceding year tensions in Chambers had increased. In the face of eviction, divisions in the building between a group of South African men led by Lwazi and a group of blind Zimbabweans had emerged, ironically, through the very legal process meant to protect against eviction. Furthermore the divisions did not run cleanly along ethnic, racial or nationalist lines but revolved around bodies, cutting between the blind and the able-bodied (although the latter included pregnant mothers and the ill).

Four months later in January 2012, the residents of Chambers were forcefully put out on the street. Only the group of blind Zimbabweans was provided with alternative accommodation. By early 2015, this world was erased. In its place was a new building called Platinum Place, its exterior adorned with red and white lines, its access gate controlled by fingerprint technology and guards who conducted identification checks, its rooms installed with satellite TV, and its roof now a playground installed with CCTV. Its new inhabitants were not the wealthy middle class of the city, but rather an aspirant class of formally employed workers and entry-level managers, among others, households

earning at least around ZAR 4000 (approximately USD 280) a month seeking safe and affordable rental housing. But for the hundreds who were to be evicted onto the streets, access to the building was denied. Those who stayed there needed bank statements, deposits, identity papers and permanent employment, which were beyond the reach of those working informally. In spite of constitutional protection against eviction and homelessness, many residents of Chambers found themselves caught once more in cycles of itinerancy and dispossession.

Introduction

This paper outlines the history of this eviction, based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted at Chambers between September 2011 and January 2012 and interviews with residents of Chambers as part of a long-term study of unlawfully appropriated buildings and urban regeneration in the inner city. My use of the term 'decoding dispossession' describes both the analytic task at hand and primarily a concept of dispossession, which is characterized by simultaneous movements of 'decoding and deterritorialization' and 'overcoding-reterritorialization' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 243). 'Decoding dispossession' refers to the ways in which real estate investment operates through the spatial displacement of precarious populations and through the coding and decoding of bodies and spaces. This process becomes enfolded in and disrupted by the coproduction of spaces, alliances and divisions of the inner city. Economic and legal processes leading to and resisting urban dispossession are mediated through interpersonal relationships and discourses, spiritual insecurities and racial, ethnic and corporeal distinctions formed at the margins of formal markets and municipal governance (cf. Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Das, 2004; Ashforth, 2005b; Quayson, 2014). Conversely the residents who unlawfully occupy buildings also order and control space along lines of ethnicity, kinship and nationality as well as through evolving and unpredictable alliances, and in turn code, decode and disorder the workings of real estate capital and state and legal processes.

Chari and Gillespie (2014:145) argue that a critical urban study requires thinking the 'dialectics of space and of emergent expressive traditions in ways that do not simply confirm the power of repetition, [and do] not lose sight of the potentiality of new forms and ideas . . . [and] new spatial formations and forms of life'. This proposition should account for, as Deleuze (1994: 81) puts it, 'the perpetual divergence and decentring of difference corresponded to a displacement and a disguising within repetition'. I argue here that a case study of the eviction of occupants from a single building reveals not only a diachronic (in relation to the history of Johannesburg) and synchronic (in terms of global processes) repetition, but also an immanent decentring and divergence, spreading into rhizomatic and non-linear forms (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004). As the editors of this special section (Koster & Nuijten, 2016) note, this non-linearity crosses both formal and informal economies. The theoretical stakes of this non-linearity are as follows. First, structural divisions of class, race and ethnic or nationalist divides—although powerful, persistent and limiting—do not predetermine the differentiations, alliances and patterns of dispossession created by urban regeneration polices and resistance to them. Second, accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004; 2006; 2008) not only operates through commodifying an urban commons, but also *decodes*, disrupts and creates forms of spatial coproduction, control and corporeal distinction operating within unlawfully appropriated urban spaces. Accumulation by dispossession is both violent and generative.

Repetition and difference in Doornfontein

The city of Johannesburg was born in 1886 in the area of Doornfontein, the area in which Chambers was situated, as a mining settlement. The first mass evictions in Johannesburg were in 1904 (Beavon, 2004) and involved burning down of the houses of an Indian community in the city, justified by the threat of bubonic plague. The 1923 Natives (Urban Areas) Act aimed to regulate black migration and residency in Johannesburg and laid the basis for apartheid-era urban segregation. The Act was followed throughout the 1920 and 1930s with mass evictions of black residents from the inner city to the urban peripheries. Doornfontein itself in the 1930s was a mixed-race working-class area and became a target for racially motivated slum clearances: black populations were evicted to the urban peripheral area that became Orlando, later part of Soweto. After 1948, apartheid-era legislation was to solidify the racial divide of South Africa and its cities, and black workers had to live in townships like Soweto on the urban peripheries (Tomlison *et al.*, 2003). The 1950s saw the mass removals of black communities in Sophiatown in the northwest of the city, and again in the 1970s there were municipal attempts at slum clearances in Doornfontein, as the area began to deracialize against state agendas (Marx & Rubin, 2008).

In the later years of apartheid, while the government tried to prevent racial mixing and evict inner-city black populations, civil society activism in Johannesburg managed to prevent some evictions (Winkler, 2013). During the 1990s and 2000s an intensive capital flight and departure of white residents from inner-city Johannesburg followed the end of apartheid, which was characterized by the closure of luxury hotels, deindustrialization and the relocation of office space to the northern suburbs and other urban peripheries (Chipkin, 2008). The result was a proliferation of unlawfully appropriated buildings: abandoned industrial spaces and the degradation of rental spaces also known to municipal policy makers as the 'bad buildings' (Zack *et al.*, 2010) or 'hijacked buildings', and informally as 'dark buildings'. As discussed, many of these were appropriated by poor South Africans and foreign nationals without access to formal accommodation, who were living in conditions below international standards for refugee camps (Médecins Sans Frontières, 2011).

This process was accompanied by shifts in migration dynamics in the city. As black South Africans increasingly moved into the inner city, it became the primary entry port and place of residency for diverse migrant populations (see, inter alia, Morris, 1999; Beall *et al.*, 2002; Simone, 2008; Winkler, 2013). In addition, the political and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe in 2005 led to intense migration into South Africa, with many migrants working in menial jobs or in the informal economy with wages well below those needed to access decent social or private housing (Crush *et al.*, 2012). In 2008, anti-immigrant violence spread through Johannesburg and the country and led to over 60 deaths and the displacement of 100 000 people (Landau, 2011). The reshaping of the city through patterns of migration, both within South Africa and from across its borders, has led to multiple lines of collaboration, affiliation and alliance, and strategies of inhabitation and evasion from state and police actors (Mbembe & Nuttall, 2008; Simone, 2008; Landau, 2009; Landau & Freemantle, 2010; Vearey, 2010; Hornberger, 2011; Wanjiku-Kihato, 2014).

Responses to this private-sector driven 'regeneration' of the inner city have been divided. Some have argued that the city's policies have transformed the city from a derelict place of crime and grime to a regenerated and more accessible and representative space (Garner, 2011). Others have emphasized the ways in which the post-apartheid city

management has reproduced apartheid-era inequalities with the city separating into gated communities and ethnic enclaves (Jürgens *et al.*, 2003; Murray, 2008; 2011). The metropolitan municipality in the post-apartheid era has focused its urban regeneration policies on market-driven policies, aiming to 'raise and sustain private investment in the inner city, leading to a rise in property values' (City of Johannesburg, 2014). This emphasis has, in the view of some critics, 'worked against inner-city residents . . . precipitated the view that "community" in the inner city is dead' (Beall *et al.*, 2002: 109) and often bypassed opportunities to work with economically stressed communities through focusing on 'linear-free market rationalities alone' (Winkler, 2013: 3). However, the metropolitan municipality has attempted to create social housing through public-private partnerships like Johannesburg Social Housing Company. Furthermore, developments like those of Afhco's are not classic cases of 'gentrification' entailing the displacement of working-class families from urban centres to make way for middle-class residents (Smith, 2002), primarily because Afhco's housing developments provide rental accommodation for those within the state social housing bracket.[2] However, these housing units are largely inaccessible to those working informally (Tissington, 2013). Furthermore, a number of legal cases have protected inner-city occupants from eviction or provided them with alternative accommodation (Clark, 2013), though in cases like Chambers a loss of legal representation has exposed residents to evictions, as shown below. As I argue here, the shaping of Johannesburg through real estate capital and its attendant dispossessions has been highly uneven and non-linear and involves the enfolding of real estate investment in complex legal codes and the social dynamism of the inner city.

Decoding dispossession

Contemporary studies of urban dispossession have been informed significantly by David Harvey's reading of Marx's notion of primitive or primary accumulation. Harvey (2004; 2006; 2008) argues that this process is a continual feature of contemporary capitalism, which he characterizes as 'accumulation through dispossession' involving a wide array of processes. One such process is 'the commodification and privatization of land' that allows 'conversion of various forms of property rights—common, collective, state, etc.— into exclusive private property rights' (Harvey, 2004: 74). Harvey (2006) also explicitly sees large-scale urban evictions as a form of accumulation by dispossession and frames the resistance to these processes of accumulation and dispossession in terms of 'class struggle' and the Lefebvrian notion of the 'right to the city'. Harvey is, however, also sensitive to the fact that the circulation of capital is always mediated by local conditions and the 'web of life' (2006: 81) that give rise to uneven processes of development and dispossession, and that neoliberal development may foment diverse struggles.

Recent work in urban geography and anthropology, particularly in relation to cities of the Global South, including those in Brazil, South Africa, India and China, has examined how ongoing processes of eviction and forced relocation are significantly differentiated and stratified, involving entanglements in local regimes of law; class, ethnic and racial divides; local histories, memories and forms of resistance; and embodied and gendered social divisions (Appadurai, 2000; Hart, 2002; 2006; Holston, 2008; Weinstein & Ren, 2009; Roy, 2010; Doshi, 2013). Furthermore, processes of urban marginalization and eviction are shaped by the stigmatization of spaces and communities (Wacquant, 1999; Olds *et al.*, 2002). These studies highlight how the diverse and uneven lines of dispossession are created by urban regeneration policies and how these policies and resistance to them are shaped by divergent legal regimes and social affiliations, divisions and stigmas.

I propose here to acknowledge that ongoing evictions and dispossessions are a recurrent feature of global urban development and to use the work of Deleuze and Guattari as a line of theory to account for the divergences, ruptures and contingencies of urban dispossession without abandoning an analysis of capital. I argue that this analysis deepens our understanding of the following: first, the contingent, uneven and unpredictable character of urban dispossession; second, the ways in which real estate capital becomes enfolded in the urban forms of life, corporeal distinction and legislative codes; and finally the manner in which urban dispossession entails not only territorial displacement, or deterritorialization, but also a reorientation and marking of bodies and spaces. Deleuze and Guattari's readings of the historical transition from feudalism to capitalism and of Marxian primitive accumulation are critical here. They argue that the formation of bourgeois capitalism is characterized by two simultaneous movements—decoding-deterritorialization and overcoding-reterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 24). I argue here that these processes characterize the ongoing evictions and dispossessions in Johannesburg.

Frederic Jameson (1997) and Jason Read (2003) highlight the originality of Deleuze and Guattari's account of this transformation with their emphasis on the 'code'. As Jameson (1997: 399) explains, codes have a textual function in that 'they are inscribed —at the outer limit inscribed on the body (tattoos, scars, face painting)—when not on the body of the world'. However, in Deleuze and Guattari's ontology, codes operate not simply as a semiotic label or corporeal marking, but as an immanent trait of flows matter and life; the cosmos in their view is 'an immanent plane of signification or "semiosis"' (Colebrook, 2001: 107). Deleuze (1971) notes that every code has three fundamental terms: 'something must pass through, i.e.: flow . . . something must not go through . . . and . . . something must effect the passing through or, on the contrary, the blocking'.

Deleuze and Guattari read precapitalist society as structured around notions of 'filiation' (which is 'administrative and hierarchical') and 'alliance' (which is 'political and economic')—these structures revolve around bodily marking, debt and exchange, and territorialized production (Deleuze & Guattari, 2003:146–48). However, departing from a structuralist analysis of kinship, Deleuze & Guattari (2004: 263) view alliance as generative and concerning 'becoming' and creating new assemblages. While the assemblage approach towards urbanism has been criticized for not providing a way of analysing structural processes of urban inequality and dispossession (Brenner *et al.*, 2011), I will argue that that the work of Deleuze and Guattari can be used to grasp contemporary processes of urban dispossession and resistances to these. Deleuze (1971; see also Deleuze & Guattari, 2003; 2004) argues that the formation of capitalism arises from the contingent encounter of the 'flow of decoded money and the flow of deterritorialized labour'. This insight has critical implications for understanding contemporary processes of urban dispossession in that capitalism operates around the conjunctions of deterritorialized (or spatially displaced) populations along with decoded money (in the form of capital). In this, Deleuze and Guattari's analysis has an uncommented-upon affinity with Harvey's notion of accumulation by dispossession as a continual process, but provides a more nuanced account of its social operations than simply positing the commodification of an urban commons.

Two further dynamics are critical to the analysis here. First, as Jameson (1997: 400) notes, various forms of coding 'survive in capitalism in forms that resemble their traditional counterparts, but that have in reality completely different functions'. Capitalist axiomatics, or rules of operation, continually adjust to incorporate other forms of social

organization. In particular, forms of bodily marking and distinction remain central to contemporary markets. Foucault (2003), in a related sense, has also noted that the emergence of disciplinary and biopolitics from the seventeenth century onward relied on the marking, classification and regulation of bodies and populations. Second 'decoding' is not only an operation of closure or control, but also a generation of new flows, divergence and forms of being. As Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 495) explain:

> Let us recall that 'decoding' does not signify the state of a flow whose code is understood . . . (deciphered, translatable, assimiliable), but, in a more radical sense, the state of a flow that is no longer contained in . . . its own code, that escapes its own code.

Capitalism in their view operates by continually expanding its own axioms and rules of operation and continually adapting to flows of matter and populations that exceed it and which it cannot control. Deleuze and Guattari (2004: 517, also cited in Jameson 1997:401) characterize four flows that disrupt capitalist axiomatics: 'the flow of matter-energy, the flow of population, the flow of food, and the urban flow'. For Deleuze and Guattari, minorities who are uncodeable or outside market operations continually disrupt the operation of capitalist axiomatics, which seek to adjust and incorporate decoded flows into its operations, hence the schizophrenic and delirious operation of capital (Jameson, 1997).

I believe that this analysis, although I take it in a divergent direction, provides a path for rethinking the operations of contemporary urban dispossession, as I will explore below. First evictions and dispossessions caused by real estate investment operate not only through spatial dispossessions or the deterritorialization of minority populations, but also through attempts to overcode bodies and spaces. The process requires a violence that is not total: the operations of capital become enfolded within, though do not fully erase, forms of sociality, alliance and control that are illegible to it, along with legal codes that work against its operations. This encounter hence generates not only immanent divergences and flows, which real estate capital attempts to incorporate within, but also a multiplicity of codings of bodies and spaces (based on legal codes, corporeal and spiritual distinction and so on). The second key point, linked to the introduction to this special section (Koster & Nuijten, 2016), is that the operations of real estate capital do not simply impose order on disorder, but can be fundamentally disordering and disrupt alternative forms of ordering space outside formal markets. Third, marginalized populations also attempt to code and decode the workings of real estate capital and negotiate their own control and appropriation of urban spaces through shifting alliances. In my analysis corporeal marking and distinction remain immanent and central to the process of accumulation and resistance to it. Finally the mobilization of legal codes serves neither the property owners nor necessarily those who risk eviction, but rather opens up a space of contestation and production.

Decoding the dark: a history of chambers

The precise history of how Chambers fell into dereliction is somewhat opaque. The building had once been a furniture factory and likely a warehouse for a moving company called Stuttaford Vanlines, as a mural painted on the building in 2011 attested to. By the 2000s it was being rented out as residential accommodation. Afhco had bought the building at auction in 2005, when the owner's company went into liquidation, but the caretakers of the building continued to collect rent and employed their own armed security. Renney Plitt, the CEO of Afhco, explained to me that after Afhco had purchased the building, unlawful rental collection continued: 'We couldn't walk into the building,

because there was a guy with a firearm standing in the reception permanently, and people certainly were paying rent to someone (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2013).'

South Africans who had been living in the building for around a decade confirmed that they were paying rent to a 'caretaker', who represented the owner (according to them, an Indian man came in a Mercedes to collect rent but later died or disappeared). It is notable that both Plitt and the residents of Chambers identified the previous owner as 'Indian'—racial codings and markings remained key to interpretations of property dynamics. The continued role of caretakers was a recurrent pattern of so-called building hijackings: rather than armed gangs taking over rent, existing caretakers often took control of the buildings.

However, the existing residents of Chamber actually viewed Afhco and particularly their area manager, whom I will call Willem, as the hijackers. Identified by the residents as a white Afrikaans man, Willem had been working in Doornfontein for over a decade. Rumours spread about Willem that he drove around Doornfontein looking for buildings to hijack. The discourse of 'hijacking' became a shared language through which both residents and property owners articulated conflicting legal rights: the former a right to housing, the latter a right to property. As noted in the introduction to this special section (Koster & Nuijten, 2016), questions of legality and illegality and order and disorder are socially situated and not given: from the perspective of the residents of Chambers, the property company represented disorder and an illegitimate use of power; from the viewpoint of the company, the residents were associated with criminality and chaos. What is significant here is that the longest-staying residents of Chambers, at the time of the eviction, had started their residency as legitimate tenants and not as unlawful occupiers.

In the period after the auction in 2005 when the building fell into disrepair and was unlawfully managed, utility services were cut off and the building became one of the dark buildings of the inner city. *Umnyama* or darkness in isiZulu and isiNdebele languages refers to the lack of light and the existence of metaphysical threat, witchcraft and misfortune (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015; Zulu & Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015). The darkness even for residents was something uncodifiable, a place of threat and haunting in which they demarcated their own rooms and places of intimacy. During the period of unlawful management, many Zimbabwean migrants including the blind moved into the building. In spite of the lack of electricity, they found the place relatively safe and secure until the xenophobic violence of May 2008. During this time, according to a number of interviews, several non-nationals were killed inside the building by violent groups. However, these groups had come from the hostels in the southeast peripheries of the city, primarily though not exclusively occupied by South Africans. Foreign nationals who were attacked in Chambers were sent to a nearby police station. The blind were, however, not attacked, because the assailants feared ancestral or spiritual vengeance for harming the blind. One blind man, Solomon, who had lived in Chambers since 2007 explained common attitudes towards the blind in the inner city:

> Most are afraid to threaten the blind or disabled, because they say the ancestors will fix you. So, I think that was the reason why I think the blind people in Chambers were not even beaten. They fear the ancestral spirits will do bad to you . . . I heard that during the time of xenophobia, most of the blind people were told to go out before they started to beat people (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2012).

In the aftermath of the violence, Solomon and several others in the building reported hearing footsteps of the dead victims of the violence dancing on the roof, while others reported hearing the ghosts of those killed by fire and of those who had died of HIV/AIDS. Although this paper is not the place to discuss in more depth the forms of spiritual

insecurity characterizing life in the dark buildings, which I have addressed elsewhere (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015; Zulu & Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015), what is important to note here is that these spaces are characterized by high levels of spiritual threat related to experiences of migration, exposure to illness, violence and untimely death, and fears of unseen and malevolent forces (cf. De Boeck & Plissart, 2004; Ashforth, 2005b; Nunez & Wheeler, 2012). These experiences of spiritual insecurity shape intersubjective relations and ways of coding bodies and spaces. In particular haunting can be viewed as a form of social memory in which the history as a space and its occupants' experiences of violence and trauma have a continued affective and discursive presence (Jameson, 1998; Gordillo, 2014). Furthermore, spiritual insecurity maps onto particular juridical codings of bodies, as revealed in the case of the blind in Chambers discussed below.

The World Cup

In late 2009, as the push for regeneration in the area gained momentum in preparation for the FIFA World Cup in 2010, the residents of Chambers were evicted. However, they were allowed to return to the building after an urgent application by the Legal Resources Centre (LRC), a pro bono non-governmental organization (NGO) that specializes in legal matters. After the residents returned to the building, they elected a committee that cut across ethnic and nationalist lines to represent the various constituencies in the building. A blind man Jethro Gonese[3] was elected as head of the committee and became the liaison to the lawyers. Although longer-staying residents in the building resented the election of Gonese, the residents shared an interest in getting the eviction overturned.

Gonese was a trained schoolteacher from the Zimbabwean midlands who came to Johannesburg on an asylum seeker permit and was forced into begging to make a living in city. Gonese could no longer teach in a school for the blind in Zimbabwe, as it could not pay for the assistance he required. Many blind Zimbabweans came to South Africa during the crisis in their country and found accommodation through social networks formed in Zimbabwe, often through schools for the blind. However, many were stigmatized in Johannesburg. In Chambers various rumors circulated about the blind: that they were witches, or that their disfigurement was a punishment for the evil of their parents. People wondered why so many blind people came from Zimbabwe, and there were rumours that Robert Mugabe, the Zimbabwe president, had poisoned the soil, making them blind. As some had tertiary education, they were accorded respect, although they were also treated with suspicion. Their presence in Chambers was also central to the eviction order being overturned on the basis that the eviction order was not served properly and that vulnerable groups were not considered. As the lawyer for Afhco, Louis Du Toit, recalled:

> The reason for the rescission was we had a problem with our order . . . it became evident that the sheriff hadn't served [the eviction order] properly, and even more so, I think the judge on that night would've let them back in even if there had been proper service, simply because the blind people would not have known. We didn't know the blind people were in there (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2013).

The Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act (1998: preamble) states that 'special consideration should be given to the rights of the elderly, children, disabled persons and particularly households headed by women'. The Act focuses on vulnerability rather than universal rights (cf. Fassin, 2012); however a series of constitutional court judgments have provided broader protection. A judgment known as the 'Olivia Road' case of 2008 stated that the city was obliged to meaningfully engage

with communities prior to eviction on health and safety issues and to provide relief and alternative accommodation for those who would be rendered homeless by eviction (see Tissington, 2011: 45–47). The legal representatives for the evicted, however, made a case based on the general vulnerability of residents under the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from and Unlawful Occupation of Land Act, using the blind as an example, but this example was to shape subsequent legal action by the evicting company.

After the court order, the security of the building was taken over by guards employed by Afhco, who were meant to ensure that only those evicted could return to the building to collect their belongings, a task that proved futile. Significantly, residents including the blind and South Africans reported that security was much worse after Afhco installed their security. As Solomon, one of the blind men introduced above, explained:

> Darkness is a threat to any human being's life. During the February before the eviction it was not as dangerous as after the eviction when it was under Afhco security. During darkness people are drunk, they fight, they throw stones, they throw bottles. Again, during Afhco security there was a problem, because robbers were entering into Chambers. These robbers and thieves can do anything in darkness (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2012).

What is critical about this quote is that the intervention of private property developers and private security is viewed as the source of disorder rather than order and is associated with more insecurity.

Once residents returned to the building, tensions soon surfaced within the committee and also between the community and its lawyers. LRC told the community that eviction was very likely, but they could file a case for alternative accommodation. However, the residents of Chambers wished to remain in the building and did not want to be evicted, even if temporary emergency accommodation was provided. The committee sought alternative legal representation through another NGO, the Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI), and LRC withdrew its representation. However because of emergent divisions in the community, SERI too withdrew its representation.

For a while the building functioned with a unified committee. Money was collected for cleaning materials and for security. However the blind were accused of stealing money. A parallel committee emerged, led by a South African man Lwazi, who was mentioned in the prologue of this paper. He had been a member of the ANC during the apartheid years, involved in running battles in the townships against the apartheid government-sponsored Inkatha militia, a black Zulu-dominated opposition to the ANC, though he was Zulu himself. He lived in the city surviving on piecework construction and plumbing projects. He was known ironically as the 'president' in Chambers, the leader of the breakaway faction, because he tried but failed to extract rentals by controlling the building's tap, from the tenants who lived in the rooms he had built. Lwazi too had thwarted aspirations of being an R&B musician in the city. Lwazi's mother had a house in nearby Soweto, but he chose to live in the inner city for proximity to construction work; he was waiting, he told me, for construction work on a new shopping mall in the nearby Newtown precinct, work offered to him by a politically connected relative but never transpired. Lwazi's representation of South Africans and the Zimbabweans living in the building who were unhappy with the leadership of the blind committee illustrates the fluidity of social alliances in these spaces. He told me he liked the city, 'because there are many cultures, many different people, and you can learn a lot (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2011).' He was not opposed to foreign nationals living and working in the country, but he resented the legal privileges of the blind and their new power in the building.

While this was happening, Afhco relaunched legal action against the community. In its filed affidavits it made the claim that the community had failed to stop nonresidents from moving into the building, a condition of the court order. Afhco began to negotiate solely with the blind, ignoring the rest of the community. Afhco and its lawyers considered the South African committee elected by the residents as a criminal gang, which I found no evidence of; nor did any other members of the community, including the blind, alleged that they were. The committee also clearly did have some legitimacy among the residents but was not included in discussions for alternative accommodation. Du Toit explained the logic of only engaging the blind in the discussion, 'A blind person who makes . . . [his or her] living begging on street corners is very obviously vulnerable. An ordinary person may be equally vulnerable. A 25-year-old man, able-bodied, can make a plan. The prospect of them being homeless is minimal.' He argued that the blind 'were the only people that made themselves known to us. They were the only people that came forward' (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2013). What was at stake here was not simply the legal code, but who appeared within the juridical system, how the legal processes intersected with the social spaces of the urban poor, and which types of bodies and groups were viewed as legitimate and deserving of help.

During the juridical process the blind had clearly lost the goodwill of the community-at-large: they were viewed as traitors and witches. Members of the other faction in the building frequently referred to the blind community as witches, when negotiating with Du Toit (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2013) an extended date for the eviction. As one of the South African committee members told me, 'Some of the blind people are witches, they know how to kill people with *muthi*.[4] That's why they are blind. It's that wrongdoing they are doing (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2012).' The resentment towards the blind and divisions between the two camps were exacerbated when a list containing the names of people who were granted exceptions was stapled to the High Court order, distributed in the building by Willem. Hence the legal and spiritual codings of the blind led not only to their increased isolation in the building, but also to more power in negotiating alternative accommodation for themselves. In this we witness the complex ways in which the codings of bodies through spiritual and ancestral idioms are conjoined to legal codings.

The blind kept the fact of their moving secret and in late 2011 moved within a day with their families to the alternative accommodation—boarded rooms on the disused floor of a furniture factory. In the weeks preceding their move, they had been subject to constant threats of violence, though no one was actually harmed. The blind themselves were well aware of the danger of the strategy but chose to pursue it rather than risk eviction themselves. Gonese, the former chairperson of Chambers, explained:

> As we moved from Chambers a lot of things were said about us being sell-outs, because a group of us blind people were chosen to move out of the building and were sponsored to move to a new place . . . I was chairman of all the people, but some South Africans wanted to take control, so there was a power struggle, which led me to resign and resort to the disabled people. There was a man, Lwazi, who wanted to become chairperson. And even some of our people, Zimbabweans, were rallying around him . . . We were receiving threats from people saying you are people, you are foreigners, you can't lead us, you are blind people. We were afraid that one day we would wake up dead (pers. comm., Johannesburg, August 2012).

The eviction

In December 2012 a constitutional court judgement in the 'Blue Moonlight' case (Constitutional Court of South Africa, 2012) found that the metropolitan municipality

'is obliged to provide temporary accommodation' even if the eviction was carried out by private owners, and that 'the date of eviction must be linked to a date on which the City has to provide accommodation' in order to avoid homelessness. Specifically, the sections of the Constitution on which these judgments are based enshrine these rights for everyone and not just citizens. The constitution provided protection against homelessness, even when evictions were carried out by property companies. But for the evicted residents of Chambers, it was too late.

A week before the eviction, I was sitting with a young South Africa Rasta called Xolani and a Zimbabwean shop owner, Daniel, on a crate outside Chambers, when a black van from a security company arrived. Inside the van were a thin white man wearing sunglasses and his black co-worker, both wearing black and red security outfits with stars on the lapel and carrying walkie-talkies. According to Xolani, the white man, Liam, was a good man, even though he worked for Willem, the area manager. Liam had helped them and had even visited Xolani and his child in his room in Chambers. Xolani also told me that Liam would buy marijuana from residents in the building. I introduced myself to Liam, who then went on a rant, 'Hopefully we get these guys kicked out . . . There's always fires in the fires, fires with little children' (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2012). It was precisely the notion of protection that was used to legitimize the violence, even though those children too would be evicted. 'Hopefully these guys will be out by the end of the year,' he continued.

As we were chatting, he suddenly noticed a man carrying a mattress into the building and shouted, 'Hey you, with the mattress, where you're going. Stop that guy, I don't know him.' Suddenly Liam was out of the car and hobbled on crutches towards the gates, shouting at the female security guards dressed in black and white, screaming, 'Hey nobody I don't know is allowed in here. I don't fucking know that guy. Nobody is moving in.' Part of the difficulties with the legal process was that the some residents returned after the initial eviction, and new occupants moved in. The attempt by the company to control access was futile, as the guards could not control who entered and left the building. This scene reflects the ways in which real estate capital, security and law become closely enmeshed in local affiliations, alliances and social codes. Inasmuch as the darkness of chambers is something excessive, which the property owner sought to regulate through the control of the gate and spaces, so the residents of chambers observed, categorized and marked those who worked for Afhco.

Only a week later after this scene, I was called to the building by Xolani. In the early hours of the morning the occupants of Chambers had been evicted by the Red Ants, a notorious private security company. The street was filled with the bricolage of dispossession: suitcases, kitchenware, clothes and electronics. Many evictees complained of losing money and property. While many sought shelter elsewhere, I estimated that between 50 and 100 people (though the total evicted was likely over 300), including a number of children, remained on the street for several days, until it became apparent that legal recourse had been exhausted, and they began the process of finding new dwellings. Ironically, the eviction was to make way for an 'affordable housing' project to be funded from a concessional loan of over ZAR 150 million (approximately USD 11 million) from the Agence Française de Developpement (French Development Agency). The housing project would not benefit those that were evicted. The loan itself reveals how inner-city urban regeneration is shaped not only by local real estate markets, but also by transnational developmental projects.

The day after the eviction, Lwazi, the leader of the parallel building committee, which by now was the only committee operating, told me:

> We must expose this government. No one from the government comes. The government is for everybody, it must help everybody. Last night people and children slept in the street. I want to fight this thing. It seems like corruption. Our constitution says everybody must have shelter, and nobody must sleep on the streets (pers. comm., Johannesburg, January 2012).

Lwazi expressed a pervasive sense, among South Africans, of being abandoned by the post-apartheid state, which had not lived up to its promise of providing employment and housing.

On that day of forced eviction, three white men, including Willem and the regional representatives of Afhco, arrived on the scene. I witnessed the evictees accusing Afhco representatives of being corrupt and racist in a heated argument. Lwazi screamed at them, 'Why did you give accommodation to the blind?' The group of evicted residents started *toyi-toyi-ng*, a South Africa dance of protest, and singing a song whose key refrain can be translated as 'we will wait here for our rights'. The Afhco representatives hastily fled in their four-by-four van, while the crowd followed them. After the men had left, part of the group turned on the guards protecting the newly welded door. The guards were believed to be Zimbabwean, though the building management denied this. The group of evictees shouted at the guards that they should swim back across the Limpopo River, where they could be steak for the border's crocodiles.

The peculiar paradox of this xenophobic outburst was that among the evictees on the pavement, many were of Zimbabwean or other nationalities. On the pavement, South Africans and foreign nationals were very much part of the same community, sharing their food and troubles, and none of these foreign nationals were attacked or blamed. Anti-immigrant sentiment was targeted at those associated with the evicting company. Representatives of the evicted group including both South Africans and Zimbabweans attempted again, together, to get the eviction overturned, by seeking help through a prominent local clergyman, Bishop Paul Verryn, although no legal firm would take up the case. Again the eviction had precipitated a proliferation of different ways to interpret, code and seek to stabilize the situation.

Three days after the eviction, on a Saturday, the Metropolitan Police arrived with a municipal waste collection truck to throw away the possessions left on the street, including mattresses, blankets and clothes. Over the preceding days the city government had not sent a single social worker or health or housing official to help those on the street or give them information on where they could seek shelter or alternative accommodation. Those left on the street gradually dispersed throughout the city, many to other unlawfully appropriated buildings.

Conclusions

The case of Chambers reveals the complex ways in which urban regeneration processes may generate diverse lines of affiliation, alliance and dispossession. The eviction itself brought to the surface multiple forms of corporeal and social coding, which reflected the backdrop of apartheid and post-apartheid history along with the social worlds of the inner city: racial division, xenophobia, and economic and spiritual insecurity. The patterns of dispossession and alliance that emerged are not easily framed in terms of dominant categories of class and race, or even nationality or ethnicity. First, the case for eviction from Chambers was not made along class lines, as the residents were evicted to make way for a low-cost housing development funded by a transnational development grant. Nonetheless, the policies were still based on market logics incentivized by tax breaks, and most of the evictees would likely not be able to afford residency in the

new development. Hence stratifications occur even among low-income communities. Second, the internal divisions and dynamics of Chambers played an important role in shaping the dispossession. Urban regeneration policies became enmeshed in experiences of not only racial dispossession during apartheid, but also post-apartheid xenophobic violence and the material and spiritual insecurities of everyday life. But the eviction also generated new, contingent and unexpected lines of affiliation and division that were not historically rooted or predictable in terms of comparative cases of urban dispossession, notably the division between the able-bodied and the blind, and alliances that crossed national and ethnic lines.

Though the two committees were split between South Africans and blind Zimbabweans, the South African committee was also supported by non-nationals who were to be evicted. In addition, in conditions of high levels of insecurity, and particularly spiritual insecurity, these dynamics became enmeshed with fears around witchcraft and spiritual powers, heightening suspicions and stigmatization towards the blind (though perhaps also providing them with protection from violence). Notably, social divisions did not simply precede the legal process or urban regeneration schemes but emerged from the enfolding of these process with coproduced urban social spaces—these divisions and alliances ultimately led to the blind being allocated alternative accommodation to the exclusion of the rest of the community. If we understand dispossession, following Harvey, as an ongoing feature of contemporary capitalism and not simply as a commodification of an urban commons through displacement or solely stratified on class lines, a more nuanced vision of dispossession emerges.

In this paper I have developed a concept of urban dispossession following Deleuze and Guattari as involving 'decoding and deterritorialization' and 'overcoding-reterritorialization'. This concept, I have argued, opens up the ethnographic space to grasp the dynamics of ongoing urban dispossession as revealing both diachronic and synchronic forms of repetition, and also as subject to immanent divergences and rhizomatic forms. This perspective entails analysing dispossession and paying attention to the ways in which real estate investment becomes enfolded in urban lifeworlds and legal and corporeal codes. Dispossession requires displacing minority populations and reorganizing and recoding social life and space, and also generates new forms of affiliation and division that surface in the margins of markets and municipal governance—in the case of Chambers these emerged from the insecurities of life in the dark buildings.

The dark buildings can be viewed from the outside (from the perspective of real estate investors and municipal officials, among others) as uncodable, unknown and threatening spaces; however, those who dwell in them also seek to decode the unpredictable operations of real estate capital and their representatives (area managers, private security), along with state and judiciary in its various manifestations (the police, municipal officials, court processes). The 'dark' is not therefore not a space of absence or a social vacuum but rather a space of multiplicity and opacity, of fear and uncertainty, which divergent actors seek to contain and control, to 'draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile centre, to organize a limited space' (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004: 343). Eviction represents not only a spatial dispossession of urban informal workers, but also a decoding and disrupting of intersubjective relations and memory, which are spatially situated. The ghosts dancing on the roof of Chambers exemplify these spatialized forms of social memory and insecurity. As Jameson (1998: 188) notes, 'urban renewal seems everywhere in the process of sanitizing the ancient corridors and bedrooms to which alone a ghost might cling'. Eviction displaces people and erases forms of urban life and memory, while generating new alliances and identities in both complicity and resistance. The case of Chambers

reveals emergent dynamics within post-apartheid Johannesburg, even while it forms part of longer cycles of migration and dispossession.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes

1 All currency conversions are rounded off based on the rate of ZAR 14 195 to the US Dollar on 15 September 2016.
2 Social housing is classified as housing for households with incomes between ZAR 1500 and ZAR 7500 (USD 110–530) according to the Social Housing Regulatory Authority (n.d.).
3 His real name is used here on his own request after the text was read to him; otherwise all names are anonymized
4 According to Ashforth (2005a: 212), *muthi* refers to 'medicine' or 'poison' that involves 'cleansing, strengthening, and protecting persons from evil forces, or negative ends of witchcraft, bringing illness, misfortune, and death to others or illicit wealth and power to the witch'.

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