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To cite this article: Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon (2017) The ruinous vitalism of the urban form: ontological orientations in inner-city Johannesburg, *Critical African Studies*, 9:2, 174-191, DOI: [10.1080/21681392.2017.1337520](https://doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1337520)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21681392.2017.1337520>



Published online: 20 Jul 2017.



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The ruinous vitalism of the urban form: ontological orientations in inner-city Johannesburg

Le vitalisme ruineux de la forme urbaine: orientations ontologiques dans le centre-ville de Johannesburg

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(Received 12 October 2015; accepted 29 May 2017)

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork, conducted between 2011 and 2016, in unlawfully appropriated buildings, or the ‘dark buildings’, of inner-city Johannesburg in which thousands of the city’s marginalized black populations live, including many cross-border migrants. It argues that responses to traumatic and debilitating events, including fires and building collapse, invoke an unstable ontological multiplicity oriented around the fragility of the urban form. ‘Ruinous vitalism’ refers to this instability and malleability of urban infrastructures, the scars and traces these leave and the capacities for social relations and regeneration they provoke. Ontologies here are not thought of in terms of sets of pre-existent beliefs or essences, but rather modes of *orientation*. Ontological orientations involve attempts to interpret, stabilize and reconfigure relations of existence through embodied and material practice; they also encompass wider social and metaphysical relations through which meaningful personhood can endure. In particular, the boundaries between insiders and outsiders are formed around the unstable materialities of the city. Furthermore, these orientations are not ahistorical, but emerge in relation to the historical and contemporary conditions and inequalities of the post-apartheid city; they traverse the attempts by municipal agents and private developers to contain and control urban space.

Keywords: vitalism; ontology; Johannesburg; migration; Ruination

Cet article s’appuie sur un travail ethnographique sur le terrain dans des bâtiments qui ont fait l’objet d’appropriations illégales, ou les « bâtiments obscurs », du centre-ville de Johannesburg ayant eu lieu entre 2012 et 2016 et dans lesquels des milliers de membres de la population noire marginalisées de la ville vivent, y compris de nombreux migrants transfrontaliers. Il affirme que les réactions à des événements traumatiques et incapacitants, comme les incendies et les effondrements de bâtiment, impliquent une multiplicité ontologique instable qui s’oriente autour de la fragilité de la forme urbaine. Le « vitalisme ruineux » fait référence à l’instabilité et la malléabilité des infrastructures urbaines, aux cicatrices et aux traces qu’elles laissent, et aux capacités de relations sociales et de régénération qu’elles invoquent. Les ontologies dont il est question ici ne sont pas considérées en tant qu’ensembles de croyances ou essences préexistantes, mais plutôt en tant que modes d’*orientation* et de *stabilisation*. Les orientations ontologiques impliquent l’interprétation, la stabilisation et la reconfiguration des relations d’existence à travers la

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pratique incarnée et matérielle; elles englobent aussi des relations sociales et métaphysiques plus vastes auxquelles l'expression de la personnalité individuelle peut survivre. En particulier, les limites entre les personnes intégrées et les exclus sont formées autour des matérialités instables de la ville. De plus, ces orientations ne sont pas ahistoriques, mais elles émergent en lien avec les conditions et inégalités historiques et contemporaines de la ville post-apartheid; elles traversent les tentatives par les agents municipaux et les développeurs privés de contenir et contrôler l'espace urbain.

Mots-clefs: Vitalisme; Ontologie; Johannesburg; Migration; Ruine

Introduction

This paper is based on ethnographic fieldwork in unlawfully appropriated buildings, or 'dark buildings', in inner-city Johannesburg conducted between 2011 and 2016. In these buildings, thousands of the city's marginalized black populations live, including many cross-border migrants seeking refuge in the city. Their residents are unable to afford decent accommodation, are excluded from private sector and state-driven urban regeneration projects, which aim to raise and secure property market value (Winkler 2013), and are subject to the constant threats of accidents, violence, deportation or eviction. Similarly, they are subject to a kind of ontological erasure: denied meaningful recognition in the post-apartheid polis (cf. Fanon 2008). However, the residents of these spaces also engage in a proliferation of social, religious and convivial activities in a response to the political and material degradation they suffer. These 'emerging forms of being' (Landau 2009) elude attempts to regulate urban space by private and municipal agents, and are oriented around derelict urban infrastructures.

In relation to these conditions, I address what I term the ruinous vitalism of the urban form. This refers to the instability and malleability of urban infrastructures, the scars and traces these leave and the capacities for social relations and regeneration they invoke. While organic processes of dereliction, decay and growth involve a non-discursive and excessive vitalism which escapes urban governance, various attempts are made to contain and govern this vitalism and inscribe it within governmental, legal and ontological orders. This containment requires multiple spatial and temporal (re)orientations in an unstable urban landscape (Ahmed 2006; Povinelli 2016; Vigh 2009). These orientations are both embodied and material, but also encompass wider social and metaphysical relations through which meaningful personhood can endure. Ontologies here are not thought of in terms of sets of pre-existent beliefs or essences, but rather modes of *orientation*. These orientations are required in the face of the ruinous vitalism of the urban form.

The concept of 'ruinous vitalism' is developed dialectically from two theoretical lines. First, the concept is influenced by Bennett's (2009, 2011, 2014) vision of 'material vitalism' along with the ways this has been articulated in urban theory (McFarlane 2011a, 2011b) and to late liberal forms of governance (Povinelli 2016). Secondly, it draws from a line of theory concerning the processes and political implications of ruination (Chari 2013; Gordillo 2014; Stoler 2008). A primary concern in this paper is with what Gaston Gordillo (2014, Introduction, location 256) terms the 'ruptured multiplicity that is constitutive of all geographies as they are produced, destroyed and remade'. I argue in this paper that ruinous vitalism precipitates and demands diverse governmental, social and ritual responses. These involve an unstable ontological multiplicity oriented around the fragility of the urban form. Ruination hence elicits attempts at survival through which inner-city populations seek to re-compose their lives amid the physical, psychological and spiritual scarring they are subject to (see also Chari 2017, this volume).

Responses to the traumas, debilitations and scarring of ruinous vitalism involve an ontological pluralism (cf. Ashforth 1998; Descola 2013) through which social relations are re-composed in response to an uncontainable materiality. This pluralism emerges from within histories of racialized spatial divisions (Mafeje 2000), along with contemporary and historical lines of migration,

and involves a process of *becoming* rather than an essentialized or closed cosmology (Biehl and Locke 2010; Fontein 2015; Nyamnjoh 2015). Furthermore, these responses involve the constant play between ephemeral, social and infra-structural urban forms (De Boeck 2013; Larkin 2013; Quayson 2014; Simone 2008). This ontological multiplicity reveals the haunting quality and persistence of past traumas in the present (Derrida 1994; Gordillo 2014), along with attempts to re-orient towards potential futures.

In line with the concerns of this special issue, focused on ontological insecurity and African urbanisms, I argue that an ontological perspective, firstly, can be used to analyse the ways in which an uncontainable materiality disturbs and ruptures social and political discourse and requires stabilization (not only of the material environment, but also of categories and relations of existence); and secondly, the ways in which ontological pluralism and insecurity are immanently related to material vitalism. In particular, I give attention to manifestations of this ruinous vitalism in fire, building collapse, water and corporeality.

Research in the post-apartheid polis

My own entry to unlawfully appropriated buildings – also known as ‘dark buildings’, ‘hijacked buildings’, ‘bad buildings’ or ‘slum buildings’ – was in 2011 through post-doctoral research I began on urban humanitarianism with Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (Wilhelm-Solomon and Pedersen 2016). However, the project also evolved into a wider ethnography of the unlawfully appropriated buildings in the inner-city. This involved multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in several buildings, and interviews of residents, municipal officials and property developers among others. These buildings, as MSF had found, were home to tens of thousands of inner-city residents living in conditions worse than international standards for refugee camps with minimal access to waste, sanitation and electricity (Médecins Sans Frontières 2011). They were sometimes previously rented buildings that had fallen into dereliction or old warehouses turned into dwellings; they were sometimes, though not always, controlled by criminal gangs extracting rental.

As a white South African, negotiating access to these spaces was complex. Images of ‘hijacked buildings’ and ‘bad buildings’ epitomized, in a sense, suburban fears of the city. Darkness itself, in relation to the African context, has become an overdetermined term, associated with colonial characterizations of Africa as a space of absence without history (Achebe 1977; Mbembe 2001). However, ‘dark places’ or *umnyama’ndawo* in grammatically informal isiZulu and isiNdebele were terms used by many residents of these buildings and in the inner-city. Darkness represented both a sense of developmental failure (the lack of electricity), but also had associations with experiences of misfortune (Zulu and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). When I entered at first I felt fear, a response to the almost absolute darkness, and the overflowing water and waste, which contrasted with the order and decoration of individual rooms. As my relations with individuals and families grew over the years, this fear faded, replaced by a different emotional and social repertoire of conviviality, anxiety, sorrow, joy, despair and hope. The darkness itself appeared not as a space of absence but as a constellation of multiple histories and forms of being and life. I also became attuned to the manifold forms of direct and structural violence the residents of these buildings were subject to – not only experiences of accidents and crime, but also continued harassment by police and private security.

My own orientations in the buildings were always partial. They were reliant on networks of relations and trust which sometimes took months or years to forge, given the high levels of distrust, and the associations of whiteness with property development and the apartheid past. I was guided, at times, by a research assistant, who wishes to remain unnamed, herself a foreign-national migrant and former resident of an occupied building who helped with forming social networks and with translation from Shona, isiNdebele and isiZulu, though for the most part, I

conducted research alone after the closure of the MSF project. The research was conducted from late 2011 to 2016. Given that it was done in the city where I live and work, and was interspersed with other project work – writing, teaching, travel conferences and so on – I cannot attribute a definite time spent in the field. Rather the research became a mode of being and orientation in the city, shaping my own pathways and movements within it.

These methodological orientations, characterized by partiality – and my own position as a white, male, middle-class South African working in conditions of extreme economic and racial disparity – do not give a totalizing picture of life and social organization in occupied buildings. I hope though to give some insight into the plurality of forms of life and endurance in these spaces that are rapidly being displaced and erased by the forces of urban regeneration. These insights, inasmuch as they are partial, arise from subjective *disorientation*, a destabilizing of the pathways, assumptions and visions of the city in which I grew up. My interpretative act, like those of my interlocutors, involves both a spatial orientation and a threading, through language, of disparate and diffuse actors and forces. This requires tracing the remains of an excessive material vitalism, one which exceeds and disrupts social discourse, along with attempting to grasp the ontological plurality of others who share the same city, though in a different fashion. Whereas my orientations can be re-composed in the relative safety of the university or suburban home, those of my interlocutors are formed in the midst of perpetually insecure labour and dwelling. These disorientations require a critique of the project of urban regeneration in Johannesburg, primarily conceived in terms of raising property values,¹ and of the continued assumptions of suburban, and white, forms of life in the city. The life-worlds of the ‘dark buildings’ associated with criminality and illegality are rarely given any space or recognition in the post-apartheid polis. This paper cannot address the totality of these themes, which I have also addressed elsewhere (see Wilhelm-Solomon 2015, 2016a, 2016b) and in ongoing work. The aim of this paper, embedded in this wider project, is to contribute to theorization of the materiality of urban space, in relation to the plural forms of being through which inner-city residents survive and search for social regeneration.

Post-apartheid urbanism

Analyses of post-apartheid Johannesburg can be broadly characterized as, on the one hand, concerned with the continued material and racial divides of apartheid (Beall, Crankshaw, and Parnell 2002; Murray 2011; Tomlinson et al. 2013) and, on the other, emergent forms of migration, belonging, consumption and conviviality in the ‘Afropolis’ (Kihato 2013; Landau 2009; Landau and Freemantle 2010; Mbembe and Nuttall 2008; Simone 2008). The introduction to Harrison et al.’s (2014) recent and expansive edited volume *Changing Space, Changing City: Johannesburg After Apartheid* states the importance of integrating these perspectives, arguing that ‘human subjectivities are situated within a material context and that materialities and subjectivities of the city are mutually constituted’ – this is particularly pertinent in Johannesburg where ‘extreme inequalities in the material context, evident in many forms of spatial disparities, have contributed to hugely variant political, social and personal subjectivities’ (Harrison et al., 19–20); This paper aims to make a contribution towards this valuable endeavour.

The remains and ruins of apartheid-era architectural divides remain a feature of Johannesburg’s landscape (Dirsuweit and Wafer 2016). Johannesburg remains an extraordinarily unequal and racially divided city, although one in transition – there has been the emergence of a black middle-class in the city’s suburbs while the inner-city, previously occupied by mainly white residents during apartheid, is now predominantly home to black residents. However, with the so-called ‘white flight’ of residents and business from inner-city areas in the early post-apartheid era, property prices plummeted and the inner-city became associated with

criminality. In such a context, the phenomena of ‘bad buildings’ or ‘hijacked buildings’ emerged. Unlawfully occupied buildings were often abandoned by their owners and are sometimes, though not always, controlled by criminal groups. Residents of these spaces are subject to extraordinarily poor living conditions, generalized daily violence, evictions, deportations and existential insecurity. In new millennium, however, the inner-city re-emerged as a profitable, if risky, site for real estate investment. From 2010 to 2016, an estimated 50,000 new housing units were built in the inner-city (RebelGroup 2016, 2). Many of these developments cannot be easily framed in terms of dominant categories of gentrification, neoliberalism or revanchist urbanism (Mosselson 2016) because much of the private sector development is actually aimed at low-income and working-class rather than middle-class households; however, thousands of residents are still excluded from access to these developments and have to live informally (Charlton 2014; RebelGroup 2016; Tissington 2013).

In addition, the urban landscape has been transformed by intense inward migration and asylum seeking. South Africa’s statistics on asylum seeking and refugees have been widely variable, characterized by numerous anomalies and reporting difficulties. According to the United Nations Refugee Agency in 2017, there were over a million pending asylum applications and 121,645 refugees in South Africa.² However, Stupart (2016) has questioned these data, arguing that asylum seekers whose cases were rejected, resolved or are no longer pending were not removed from the statistics and there are likely under 400,000 pending asylum applications. Furthermore, many asylum seekers have dropped out of the system due to long waiting periods, corruption and the closure of reception centres (Amit 2015). In 2008, anti-immigrant violence spread through Johannesburg and nationwide and led to an estimated 60 deaths and the displacement of over 100,000 people (Landau 2012). Migrants often resort to a series of constantly changing tactical alliances in order to survive and navigate the city (Landau and Freemantle 2010; Simone 2008). These alliances often do not run across simple lines of race, ethnicity or nationality, although these remain powerful categories of division and violence. Xenophobia and the threat of violence remains a constant feature of urban life in the city (Wilhelm-Solomon 2016b). The inner-city is home to a higher density of non-citizens than Johannesburg as a whole. According to 2011 census data, the percentage of non-citizens living in the inner-city wards in which I conducted most of this research was just over 27% compared to just over 10% in the city as a whole.³

Although large-scale social movements around housing, services and infrastructure have been a constant feature of post-apartheid civic life (Wafer 2012), in the inner-city, these social movements have not widely taken hold and civic organization remains fragmented, with religion the primary and most powerful form of associational life. Comparisons with other sites are illuminating though. Kerry Ryan Chance (2015, 396) has conducted research in KwaZulu Natal on the shack dwellers movement Abahlali baseMjondolo. She argues that ‘those living on the margins of the city, come to inhabit political roles that transform and are transformed by material life in emerging liberal orders’. Chance (2015, 398) explores how ‘fire and other elemental forms of material life congeal political practices, interactions, and identities through time’ and that in South Africa the use of fire invokes a plurality of uses and associations including: memories of apartheid-era violence, xenophobia and fears of witchcraft (409). She argues that political demands for electricity and services (including protection against fire) are also ambiguous given that they can warrant unwanted state intervention, and that the politics of infrastructure ‘becomes a staging ground for injuries that map onto long-standing configurations of urban space at the intersections of race and class’ (2015, 401). Chance’s reflections speak to the continued dilemmas of visibility and invisibility in relation to the state (Kihato 2013; Vearey 2010) along with the ways in which poor populations in post-apartheid South Africa remain disproportionately exposed to the harmful fumes, fires and detritus of the contemporary city (cf. Chari 2013). Her insights also speak to the plurality

of interpretative frames through which materiality is grasped. My aim in this paper is to deepen these reflections both on the unstable materiality of the urban form, and on the ontological orientations through which urban populations are dislocated, and recompose social relations and personhood in the face of this scarring materiality.

Ruinous vitalism and ontological orientations

The concept of ruinous vitalism holds, in dialectical tension, theories of both ruination and of material vitalism. It conceives ruination as generative, relating, as we outline in the introduction to this special issue, to the vital instability of the urban form (Wilhelm-Solomon, Kankonde, and Núñez 2017). Furthermore, it relates to ontology in a two-fold sense: first, it concerns debates around the vital character of material processes. Second, it relates to ontological concerns regarding the character of existence and conceptions of personhood. Ruinous vitalism not only scars and debilitates, but also places in question the ontological security and personhood of primarily black inner-city residents. Finally, it concerns the governmental dimension – state and private actors seek to contain and regulate the ruinous vitalism of the urban form; in doing so, they distribute its violent and scarring potential.

Jane Bennett has argued for an approach of ‘vital materialism’ to supplement that of historical materialism, the former requiring that ‘fleshy, vegetal, mineral materials are encountered not as passive stuff awaiting animation by human or divine power, but as lively forces at work around and within us’ (2011, loc 4674); furthermore, she has argued that material vitalism may be ‘a restless activeness, a destructive creative presence that does not coincide fully with any specific body’ (2009, 54). McFarlane (2011a) develops Bennett’s conception of vital materialism in relation to urban materialism and argues that the relational character of urban life, encompassing both the human and non-human, characterizes the urban assemblage.⁴ McFarlane (2011a, 221) argues that ‘in distributing agency across the social and the material, assemblage thinking involves attending to how a diverse set of materialities can play multiple roles in the experience and possibilities of urban life’. McFarlane is, however, also attentive to the violent and destructive dimensions of materialities, such as in cases of the destruction of urban informal settlements in Mumbai. Furthermore, McFarlane argues ‘learning the city’ is not only a cognitive process but an embodied ‘co-constitution of city and individual’ and reliant on ‘translation, coordination and dwelling’ (2011b, 7–9). Although McFarlane’s conception of learning in relation to the urban assemblage is powerful, my conception of *ontological orientations* differs somewhat – it encompasses the spatio-temporal orientations of embodied learning that McFarlane refers to, but relates to an orientation not only *within* the urban assemblage but also to questions around which types of existents constitute that assemblage. Secondly, it relates to the ruinous character of vital materialism which exceeds any capacity for learning, which dislocates and debilitates, and elicits the need for re-orientation.

The vital materialism of the urban form puts in question the ontological security and personhood of those exposed to it. It elicits plural attempts to re-compose social and governmental relations in the face of an excessive materiality which is outside of social and governmental discourse or even reflexive ontological categories. The intersecting ritual and political dimension of material vitalism have been explored in the pages of *Critical African Studies* and elsewhere, particularly in relation to corporeality. With regard to the excessive dimensions of corporeality, Major and Fontein (2015, 96) have pointed to ‘the productive potentiality of corporeal excessivity which not only at once both demands and denies containment and stabilization, but also always holds promising affordances and potentialities for the remaking of people, society, places and landscapes, pasts and futures.’ The concept of ‘the ruinous vitalism of the urban form’ aims to extend this concern with the excessive vitalism of bodies to the very materiality of the city itself.

This raises the question of how we can think, in ontological terms, the materiality of the city. Larkin (2013, 328) has written on infrastructures that ‘their peculiar ontology lies the facts that they are things and also the relation between things’. Quayson (2014, 241) has also articulated the tension between the ephemeral and the structural and argues that ‘all that appears ephemeral contains consequences for understanding the relationships that undergird urban society’ and emphasizes that ‘nothing is ephemeral or concrete, but framing it makes it so’. Filip De Boeck has also written with reference to Kinshasa of the ways in which the city’s material structure is integral to an ontological uncertainty in which there is a constant play between the visible and invisible. As De Boeck (2013, 14) writes

Beyond the obvious level of the city’s material infrastructures (its brick, its concrete, its cement and its corrugated iron sheets), and beyond the ‘confusion’ that the decrepit nature of this infrastructure constantly generates, the urban form is social as much as it is material. It is, therefore, of a much more ephemeral nature.

Ashforth (1998), with reference to Soweto, has shown how urban insecurities are intimately bound with spiritual and epistemic anxieties regarding unseen actors. However, we may shift the perspective from the epistemic to the ontological by addressing the ways in which these multiple actors elicit an ‘always incomplete process of becoming, though which both objects and subjects are constantly being (re-)constituted, transformed and re-assembled’ (Fontein 2015; cf. Nyamnjoh 2015).

Hence, the material transformations of the urban environment and its scarring ruinations may be analysed ontologically in the sense that they place the very beings of urban dwellers, and the city itself, in question. However, these ruinations are also historically and politically implicated. Stoler (2008, 194) has characterized ruins as ‘sites that condense alternative senses of history. Ruination is a corrosive process that weighs on the future and shapes the present’, and puts the focus not ‘on inert remains but on their vital refiguration’. Gordillo’s (2014) notion of ‘ruptured multiplicity’ of geographies refers not only to the ‘sensory multiplicity of rubble’, but also to the multiple traces, histories, and legacies of erasure inscribed in rubble. Chari (2013) has argued, with reference to South Africa, that the corrosive process of ruination is not simply one assigned to the imperial past, but an ongoing and perpetual process within urban environments affected by the ‘detritus’ of industrial capitalism, around which strategies of hope and resistance coalesce. Chari (2017, this volume) has also drawn attention to the ways in which the scarring and the debilitating effects of industrial capital and racial biopolitics may be viewed as forms of *ontologization* (cf. Derrida 1994), a violent process of attempting to ‘stabilize the production of value or vitality’. In response, he characterizes ‘Black survival as a critique of ontologization’. My perspective here differs somewhat from this powerful formulation. I view attempts to endure and survive in the midst of a ruinous materiality – along with dealing with the dispossessing forces of real estate developers who seek to stabilize market value – not only as a resistance to ontologization as such. Rather these may be viewed as diverse and plural forms of ontologization which require a particular existential orientation.

Ontological orientations, as I conceive them, involve an embodied orientation in the immediate environment, but also a temporal orientation which relates to a life-course and lines of social and ethical obligations (Ahmed 2006). These orientations can be towards distant locales, to potential futures, or to the manifestations of beings beyond the immediate perceptual field. They circle, assimilate and evade the ways in which capital attempts to regulate and control urban space and populations, even if not formulated in terms of a movement for the ‘right to the city’ (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 2000). In this, I draw on Vigh’s (2009, 420–422) conception ‘unsettled social orientation’, in which ‘people move and manage within situations of social flux and change’

and Ahmed's (2006, 553) phenomenological conception of orientation as involving 'orientating ourselves toward some objects more than others, including physical objects ... but also objects of thought, feeling, and judgment, and objects in the sense of aims, aspirations, and objectives'. To elaborate on this, orientating oneself in response to a disorienting trauma or event requires not only turning towards given objects at hand, but also questioning the types of objects and existents towards which one can be oriented. Povinelli (2016, chapter 3, loc 1550) grasps these dimensions in her analysis of 'manifestations' (of spirits, ancestors and other beings as they appear to indigenous Australians) which 'comment on the coordination, orientation and obligation of local existents and makes a demand on persons to actively and properly respond'. Hence, manifestations elicit questions regarding the type of existent manifest, but also the form of material and ethical implications it invokes. Ontology hence does not invoke essence but rather an 'arrangement of existents' (Povinelli 2014) to which humans and non-humans are oriented and attempt to stabilize.

Ontological orientations, as I invoke them here, imply orientation towards other humans, but also non-human beings and objects. These orientations may cross not only both geographic borders, but also the borders of the living and the dead. Furthermore, these orientations also require drawing divisions between insiders and outsiders in establishing the boundaries of social recognition and personhood in the face of an unstable materiality. The re-establishment of personhood under conditions of migration, for instance, does not entail simply an invocation of a pre-migration social order, but may involve re-composing social and material, and ancestral, relations in the diasporic context (Nyamnjoh 2006, 2015; Nyamnjoh 2017). The requirements of new forms of conviviality come along with establishing divisions between self and other which are materially and corporeally inscribed. Here, I argue that ontological orientations are modes of becoming which require particular embodied orientations, but also social and ethical obligations. These orientations require the establishment of meaningful personhood in relation to the ruinous vitalism of the urban form as I will address in the ethnographies below.

Insiders and outsiders

Many of the contestations around occupied buildings in inner-city Johannesburg revolve around their excessive materiality – their physical decay, lack of sanitation, accretion of waste and sewerage and threats of fire. Up until 2008, these adverse conditions could legally justify the eviction of populations occupying unlawfully occupied buildings. After the so-called 'Olivia Road'⁵ case, in which the residents of an evicted building in Berea succeeded in getting alternative accommodation provided by the municipality, and a series of subsequent cases, evictions were only allowed if alternative accommodation was provided by the municipal government. This was done to avoid homelessness. Nonetheless, evictions happen frequently. Dirt, waste and dereliction have remained central to defining social divisions in inner-city Johannesburg, as Hankela (2016) has argued with reference to the Central Methodist Mission, a former refuge for asylum seekers. They are central to the boundaries drawn between insiders and outsiders (cf. Nyamnjoh 2006), between those who have the right to the city and those who are excluded. My argument in this section is that the very materiality of the city, its flows and substances, its scarring capacity, is immanent to the divisions between insiders and outsiders and attempts to maintain a meaningful sense of personhood. The city's materiality is the stuff and process through which divisions are drawn and disturbed. This takes on an ontological dimension in a two-fold sense: first, it requires the containment and stabilization of an excessive material vitalism; second, this vitalism puts in question social relations and conceptions of personhood.

Let us turn to two cases. The first was an occupied building a little up the way from the Central Methodist Mission on Pritchard Street called Milton Court. The building had fallen into

dereliction and become a centre for the trade in drugs in the area. Its accumulation of waste had led it to be chosen for clean-up programmes by MSF and other NGO organizations in the area (Wilhelm-Solomon and Pedersen 2016). The building had one flowing tap, a stand-pipe, which bubbled out into a pool of wastewater filled with garbage and flowed out into the street. This tap itself had been the object of legal action as the city had attempted to close it, but the building's residents represented by a legal NGO had managed to keep it open. Nikhil Anand (2011) has argued how water infrastructures shape cultural politics and different forms of urban publics. More than this, though, I argue, these materialities raise the question of who has the right to inhabit the city, of what forms of social relations are involved – they imply questions of personhood and social being. The excessive vitalism of water also disturbs and re-orientes social relations within occupied buildings, along with drawing in a wider assemblage of juridical and governmental actors.

In Milton Court, issues around waste and dirt elicited not only divisions between the occupants and municipality, but were central to social divisions within the building. A division emerged between the 'original' South Africans who had lived in the buildings for several years, and newcomers, primarily foreign nationals. In a focus group I conducted in 2012 with members of the 'originals', they continually evoked dirt as the primary object of their dissatisfaction, along with fears over the drug trade in the building, with one woman continually cursing the 'shit' that was thrown out of the windows. Conceptions of personhood and social relations, the divisions between self and others, were constituted around the overflows of waste, faeces and water. Eventually, fed up, the 'originals' accepted a payoff by the property company to move out, thus leading the remaining residents to lose legal representation and eventually being evicted. Dirt and waste here constituted the material objects of social disputes, but also were closely tied to normative divisions and juridical processes.

The ways in which this excessive materiality – overflows of water, the sparking of electricity cables, and fires – is immanent to the formation of divisions between insiders and outsiders are also revealed in the case of another building I will call The Station. Let us begin with Simphiwe's⁶ story. When Simphiwe moved into the Station, she was working as a cleaner and formally rented a room with her partner. After the owner died, the building was sold to a property company focused on low-cost inner-city housing development, but the conditions began declining. By 2015, it had no security, electricity and cleaning, no toilets or showers and only one tap serving the building.

The building had a minority of South African residents, but was primarily occupied by foreign nationals – many of whom moved into the building after the xenophobic violence of 2008. However, for Simphiwe, the sense of the building's decline was associated with foreign nationals moving in, and also with the recurrence of apartheid-era discrimination. In 2010, there was an attempt to evict the occupants of the building through a legal struggle which centred around electricity cables. The basis of the eviction order was that the building was unsafe due to the electricity connections which criss-cross the interior. The occupants of the building approached a legal NGO who obtained an affidavit from their own electrician that denied this was the basis for an urgent eviction. The case went to court in February 2010 and the court ruled that the property company had to apply for an eviction order in order to comply with Prevention of Illegal Evictions Act. The company eventually re-instated the eviction proceedings in 2011, but the residents and their legal representatives argued that the Johannesburg municipality should be tied to the case and that eviction could not proceed until the city had provided alternative accommodation. At the time of writing, the case is still in limbo.

However, the takeover of the building by the property company also invoked a bitter past for Simphiwe, who recalled confronting a representative of the company trying to cut off the power cables. She recalled being racially abused by the representative when she confronted him. I cannot of course verify or falsify this allegation, but what is clear that Simphiwe viewed the takeover by

the property company through the lens of apartheid-era race and class relations. What was placed in question here was not merely her right of residence, but also her right to exist as a human being in post-apartheid South Africa. The constitution of Simphiwe's personhood was intimately bound up with the material conditions of her existence – one threatened in her view by both property developers and the influx of foreign nationals.

From Simphiwe's perspective, the decline in the maintenance of the building, the loss of electricity, coincided with the influx of foreign nationals into The Station after 2008. The historical conditions for this were manifold – high rates of asylum seeking, the death of the building's owner, the lack of low-cost accommodation and so on. She often railed against foreign nationals, complaining of their strange songs and dances, along with the lack of cleaning in the building. Nonetheless, the borders between self and other were composed not in terms of a strong nationalist ideology, but rather a sense of impending dereliction associated with strangers. Furthermore, the other residents of the building were being harassed by representatives of a property company complaining that their wastewater was flowing into a newly gentrified area. Hence, I have repeatedly found, in this case and others, that socialities and divisions in the city form around the uncontrollable materiality of urban space. Nothing epitomizes this more than the experiences of fire.

The ephemeral violence of fire

Unlawfully occupied buildings are frequently the sites of fires. Their material conditions and political marginality predispose them to fires due to use of paraffin, the lack of water sources and fire extinguishers. From the perspective of city officials, 'bad buildings' pose a particularly high health and safety risk. As a spokesperson for Johannesburg emergency services informed me via email,

The highest risk areas will be the hijacked buildings because most of those buildings do not comply with the emergency management services bylaws, even though we have fire safety enforcement officers in the area it is very difficult because there is almost a new building emerging everyday ... most of them they are using illegal electricity which poses a danger to fire incidence, also danger to young children who might be playing next to those live electrical cables.⁷

Unlawfully occupied buildings are spaces of threat and emergency for city officials: viewed as both sources of criminality and of accident. Another spokesperson for the City's head of public safety explained to me via email that the buildings are threats for the following reasons:

It is a common practice that bad buildings attract criminal elements; illegal connections of electricity; illegal connections of water; health hazard; fire risk; lack of management of the building creates a safe haven for criminals to store stolen goods and vehicles [*sic*].⁸

The buildings represent, in a sense, the uncontrollable flows of both infrastructure and of people – of electricity, of water and of illicit economies. From a governmental perspective, both emergency services, including the fire department and municipal policing fall under the same department. Hence, a governmental response to the ruinous vitalism of the city is undertaken through the paradigm of emergency and through maintaining market values. This contrasts significantly with the responses of residents of unlawfully occupied buildings as the case study below shows.

In August 2013, I visited one building known as Cape York that had just suffered a serious fire. In the fire, four people, including a child, had died. I had visited the previous year to meet with an organization of disabled migrants who lived and had their offices there. After the fire, I climbed the stairs again, walking past the charred remains of the sixth and seventh floors. Young men were busy taking apart the structure for recycling material, its wires and perhaps even its steel frame. The building was owned by the Banco do Mozambique. It housed the Mozambican Consulate until 2011,

which managed the building. In 2011, the Consulate moved out and rented two floors of the building to an association called International Federation of People with Blindness and Albinism (IFPAB). The association was led by an albino Pentecostal pastor. Its members were mainly migrants and asylum seekers from Southern Africa, particularly Zimbabweans, who were forced into begging for a livelihood in the inner-city. Inside Cape York, they had run a school and housed offices and living spaces for the blind, disabled and albinos. Furthermore, they had to do a cleansing ceremony as they found *muthi* (herbs) used both for medicinal purposes and malevolent practices; they also found what they thought could be human bones on the floor, alleged signs of witchcraft, murder and misfortune. In order to cleanse the building, they held an all-night prayer vigil, led by several pastors who went through the building anointing it with holy oil. At first, however, the place was perceived as safe by the group, but it began to fall into disrepair and service arrears leading to the management cutting off electricity and water.

When I visited the building shortly after the fire, the walls of the floor were a scab of charcoal. On the upper floor, where disable members of the association lived, I found a group huddled around. It was cold and a wind blew the cracked windows. The group were in a state of confusion and fear. They first told me the cause of the fire was that a man wanting to kill his wife for cheating on him had fire-bombed the room. The group also recounted how part of the blame for the fire lay with the building management who had cut off the water supply and so residents could not put out the fire. However, one woman I spoke said, 'Satan is large here' and speculated that satanic spirits were at work. She also speculated that there were malevolent spirits at work. It could, she explained, be the work of *ngozi*, a vengeful spirit in Shona cosmology, and which often manifests in the form of fire. The others concurred that this was a possibility.

An elderly blind musician explained that *ngozi* could be the work of a family seeking revenge for murder: they could light a fire over the grave of the dead and send the spirit to seek revenge. The woman beside him explained that a tree could be planted over the grave of the dead and when the petals began to fall, three people would die. The group felt that the spirits of the dead in the building needed to be prayed for but were anxious as the families had not communicated with the remaining residents of the building nor arranged a proper burial or cleansing ceremony. In Johannesburg, among migrant communities, there is widespread anxiety about the bodies of the dead not being returned home (Nunez and Wheeler 2012). In addition, corporeal substances like blood, if not cleansed properly, are thought, particularly by Zimbabwean migrants, to exert misfortune or *umnyama* (see Zulu and Wilhelm-Solomon 2015).

Let us analyse this event. First, the scarring vitalism of the fire produced a profound and existential threat to the lives of those living in Cape York. Their space of refuge was no longer safe, and their lives were at threat. Under these conditions, they sought re-orientation in the city, which eventually led them to leaving the building. However, what was put in question was also the nature of which existents and actors were at play. Fontein (2015, 68–69) insightfully writes that *ngozi* may contribute to the 'agency of sacred places'. He notes, in relation to the graves and ruins around Mutirikwi in Zimbabwe, that 'ancestral graves and sacred *mapa* create social obligations and can cause drought, sickness, misfortune or even political and economic strife', in which case the

agency of sacred places derives, ultimately from the intentionality of the spirits (whether ancestors or troubling, dangerous *ngozi*), and war veterans, new farmers, chiefs, even members of Pentecostal and African Independent Churches, as well as government administrators and technocrats, must, in some way respond to that.

The potential presence of *ngozi* in Johannesburg, far from the sacred spaces of Zimbabwe, requires an ethical obligation which points both to the city and to the corporeal substances of

the unburied body and its traces in the urban terrain, but also an orientation to distant relations and landscapes. The ontological pluralism at work here is that the meaning of this manifestation is not entirely clear but needed to be discerned (cf. Povinelli 2016). These different interpretations were not simply an epistemic confusion but required a particular ontological orientation. First, they required an embodied response to finding safety and shelter in an unstable infrastructure. However, the fire also elicited plural attempts to interpret and stabilize the existents at work. The threat of ngozi invoked metaphysical, social and ethical relations with Zimbabwe's distant territories. The question of Satan also drew on Pentecostal theology regarding the workings of demonic forces in the buildings. The fears of xenophobia or gender-based violence also brought into question the constant and daily threats to being and personhood experienced at a daily level in the city. In other-words, the ruinous vitalism of the fire invoked a complex assemblage of relations that the residents of Cape York were required to navigate in order to survive and recompose a sense of security and personhood. These were not simply rumours but rather attempts to maintain ontological security amid 'bad surroundings' (cf. Finnström 2008).

I also spoke to two women who had been living on the floor that was burnt. They too were Zimbabwean migrants who, they told me, survived off petty theft in the inner-city. Their story was different: they told me that there had been a rental dispute when an isiZulu gang had threatened Zimbabwean residents on the floor to pay them rent. When they refused, according to the women, the gang fire-bombed the floor. Having nowhere to stay, the women returned to the building but lived in fear. One said that she had been walking up the stairs with her child who had said that he had seen the ghost of the child who had died in the fire. Stories of haunting were widespread in the dark buildings of the inner-city: the hauntings of those who had died 'unnatural' deaths from violence, illness or accident (Wilhelm-Solomon 2015). Gaston Gordillo distinguishes haunting from memory, arguing that

it is not reducible to narratives articulated linguistically; it is rather an affect created by an absence that exerts a hard-to-articulate, non-discursive, yet positive pressure on the body thereby turning such an absence into a physical presence that is felt and that thereby affects. (Gordillo 2014, loc 715)

The hauntings of the inner-city were part of the ruptured multiplicity of space, the layering of violence irreducible to formal histories or narratives. This very multiplicity requires containment and orientation.

The building itself had become entangled in the complex politics of urban regeneration. One of the largest companies in Johannesburg, the Affordable Housing Company, had itself taken the owners of Cape York, Banco do Mozambique, along with the City of Johannesburg, to court for neglecting the building. Renny Plitt, the CEO of a property company called The Affordable Housing Company was quoted in the media as saying,

We are also in the process of launching a damages claim against the bank for about R2.4 million. We have had to empty out the apartments in our redeveloped building that faces Cape York. Also, the crèche in our building was forced to close by the Education Department as a result of the stench and rats.⁹

In the article, he exclaimed: 'People living in the hijacked building throw human waste, rotting food, dirty water and other rubbish out of the windows. The outside of the building and all the fire escapes are piled high with rubbish'. The very unstable materiality and non-human forms of the city are strongly evident in its politics and the drawing of social divisions between legitimate and illegitimate control and the right to the city. Shortly after the fire, according to publicly available title deeds that I traced, the entire building was sold for an amount of

R750 000 (46,000 pounds). Even derelict, burnt infrastructures are not exempt from the forces of real estate markets. This form of real estate speculation, in which occupied buildings are traded, is common in the inner-city. The uncontrollable material vitalism of the city, metonymically revealed in the form of fire, elicits multiple contestations, explanations and attempts to compose order and value.

Making rubble: Caledonia Hall

But what then are the political and structural conditions which reproduce material instability? It is not simply a matter of the ‘destruction of space’ (Gordillo 2014, Introduction, loc 314) required by capitalist development, but also processes of abandonment (Povinelli 2011; Biehl 2013) in which marginal populations are forced into being complicit in producing their own processes of ruination and exposure to scarring, debilitation and death. Sarah Charlton (2014) has documented the value and significant role that informal recyclers fulfil in Johannesburg in salvaging waste, and also how they are subjected to police harassment in the night. She notes (2014, 544) that ‘what with the strange combination of unsupported invisibility during the day and vulnerability to sanction at night, efforts at economic growth and self-development falter’. Michael Titlestad (2013, 108), writing against an apocalyptic imaginary of the city of Johannesburg, argues that recyclers offer a different form of temporality that he terms an ‘eddy’: ‘a swirling, reverse current produced when a fluid flows past an obstacle. Our world is defined by rectilinear flows of commodities channeled by financial contours.’ Titlestad argues that ‘the informal recyclers, excluded from the flow of the formal economy, capitalize on an eddy, an evanescent reverse flow’.

While I agree with both of these arguments, there is an element neglected in these accounts which my ethnographic work has made clear: recycling sometimes involves the recycling of the city’s physical infrastructure and not just waste. This we saw in the case of Cape York, but it is more widespread. In many buildings, metal roofs, fire escapes, wires, and even – as we will see – steel beams are taken for recycling. While recycling represents a different, if ambivalent, mode of survival and temporality, the economic conditions in which many recyclers live often lead them to take the very buildings in which they dwell as matter to recycle. They are complicit in their own ruination, though, to paraphrase Marx, in conditions not of their own choosing. They do not simply relate to rubble (Gordillo 2014), they make rubble. This very process of ruination amid de-industrialization and urban decay invokes a multiplicity of historical, social and political meanings while continuing to debilitate populations in proximity to this ruination (cf. Chari 2013; Stoler 2008). And this scarring process itself requires a particular set of ontological orientations.

In early 2012, I first visited Caledonian Hall several weeks before its collapse but after it had been wrecked by a fire. This early twentieth-century building had been built by Scottish migrants of the Caledonia society. During the 1990s, it had been a popular middle-class nightclub, but it fell into disrepair in the 2000s when many vacated the building. After the fire, its interior was blackened. Groups of men stood around the threshold guarding the path to its inner belly. Various rumours circulated around the cause of the fire – that it was a xenophobic attack against the migrants who lived there or an attempt by the owner to claim insurance. The more prosaic had it that a woman had fallen asleep in her room and spilled her paraffin lamp. During the fire, a group of Rastafarians who had a bed-making business built a large structure of beds onto which those fleeing the fire could leap.

A few nights before the fire a man had been found with his throat slit in one of the rooms. Neighbours had found his body when the smell became rank. The fire which followed, the subsequent collapse of parts of the edifice, and deaths were thought to have been ghostly vengeance for the murder. Others thought that that the Venda relatives of the man had cursed the building. The building was subsequently cordoned off with barbed wire by fire services, but residents who

had lost all their possessions began recycling, literally, the inner skeleton of the building. They piled floor-height steel beams on small steel trolleys to take them off to a nearby recycling yard where they could get nearly R1000 for the steel. The walls began to sway and eventually the remaining structure collapsed a second time killing two young men who had been trying to remove a remaining beam. Samuel had been inside the building helping them when a wall had collapsed. He had escaped with a large gash on his head. I asked him why he returned to the building, to which he replied ‘When it is your time, you must go. God decides.’ The families claimed the bodies from the mortuary to return home to Zimbabwe and the Rastafarians who had lost their friends gathered up the clothes and possessions of the family. The asked me to take photos because they were the ‘survivors’.

As in the case of Cape York, the fire in Caledonia Hall reveals an excessive plurality of co-existent ontological orientations that took form around the excessive vitalism and ruination of the fire. The multiplicity of rumours and explanations did not reveal simply conspiracy or different interpretations, but a more generalized urban insecurity, in which variously malevolent spiritual actors, antagonistic property owners, the threat of xenophobic violence could coexist as agents acting and shaping the city’s form. And yet, the excessive violence of the event also revealed the fragility of these frameworks, the inability to frame them coherently in language, and requiring living bodies to give testament to survival and endurance amid conditions of abandonment and ruination (cf. Chari 2017; Fassin 2010; Povinelli 2011). Those subject to the ruinous vitalism and scarring of the urban environment suffer physical disorientations and displacements but also require the need to reorient social and metaphysical relations, in order to calm the disordered environment.

Conclusions

Johannesburg is characterized by high levels of social division and inequality and unstable infrastructures. These are subject to decay, dereliction and ruination amid the incessant drive for reconstruction and urban regeneration. In this unstable territory, inner-city residents seek to contain the disordered environment and maintain a sense of meaningful personhood. They do so through diverse ontological orientations. These attempts at composing ontological security and personhood in relation to the materiality of the city have a three-fold dimension: first, they involve a division of humans into those who have the right to inhabit the city, and those who do not (a division drawn for instance between renters and hijackers, between citizens and foreigners); second, there is the division regarding the attribution causality (whose fault is a fire, an accident, a collapse, capitalist relations, crime and so on); and finally, an analysis of which existents are at work and manifest in urban infrastructures. These ontological orientations involve attempts to seek safety under conditions of abandonment. For migrants in the city, they traverse borders. At times, as this paper has documented, these orientations unsettle the fixed divides between the living and the dead. These ontological orientations are not grounded on stable ontological frameworks – rather, they are incomplete and evolve in relation to the evanescent and unstable materiality I have termed the ruinous vitalism of the urban form.

These ontological orientations are not easily inscribed within the logics of the market or urban governance, but neither are they outside of these logics. Municipal government and property developers also impose their own orientations and attempts at ontologization. They seek to appropriate, control and stabilize urban materialities and populations in ways which foster market values. Dereliction is not outside of the market, precisely in that it provides investment opportunities through which real estate investors can garner enormous profit through investing in decaying infrastructures and occupied buildings. State and private security seek to regulate who has access to and controls the space, and criminal gangs mirror this, attempting to also regulate

and control urban spaces. They seek to impose their own ontological orientations by fixing the ways in which urban infrastructures can be regulated and controlled, and who is excluded from recognition, by subsuming the material vitalism of the urban form into market value, or regulating the flow of movement through immigration control. The ontological orientations of inner-city dwellers living in the ‘dark buildings’ are also formed in response to these erasures and continued displacements. Furthermore, these ontological orientations are not ahistorical: the spectres of violent and racialized dispossessions are constantly invoked. Ontological orientations are hence not ahistorical essences, but rather modes of becoming towards uncertain futures, of finding meaning and security, in an unstable, unequal and ruinous urban terrain.

Acknowledgements

Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon is a researcher based at the African Centre for Migration & Society, at the University of the Witwatersrand. Elements of the section ‘Making Rubble’ were reworked from the narrative piece ‘Dispossessed Vigils’ in the African Cities Reader (Wilhelm-Solomon, 2015). The author would like to thank Adriana Miranda da Cunha for her support in this research, the editors of Critical African Studies and the two blind peer reviewers for their invaluable comments on this piece, and the many interlocutors who shared their time and stories. This piece is part of the special issue *Vital Instability: Ontological Insecurity and African Urbanisms* edited by Matthew Wilhelm-Solomon, Peter Kankonde Bukasa and Lorena Núñez Carrasco.

Funding

This paper was developed as part of a project grant by the Volkswagen Foundation Knowledge for Tomorrow - Cooperative Research Projects in Sub-Saharan Africa programme, entitled ‘Salvaged Lives: A Study of Urban Migration, Ontological Insecurity, and Healing in Johannesburg’ and conducted in collaboration with Prof. Dr Hansjörg Dilger of Freie Universität Berlin, Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes

1. https://joburg.org.za/index.php?option=com_content&id=126&Itemid=9 (last accessed June 15 2017).
2. <http://popstats.unhcr.org/en/overview> (accessed 15 June 2017). A screenshot of this date is available here – <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s256/sh/f3321ec9-f34c-44fd-b79f-832d365066ed/988155fb8f2dbef5919b7ab826d40bbc> (last accessed 15 June 2017).
3. These data were generated and analysed by the author through the Statistics South Africa interactive site – <http://interactive2.statssa.gov.za/webapi/jsf/dataCatalogueExplorer.xhtml> (last accessed 15 June 2017). The data analysed are for Johannesburg wards 60 and 123 where most of the research was carried out. They should not be generalized to the inner-city as a whole. A screenshot of the data can be found here: <https://www.evernote.com/shard/s256/sh/9ec06989-d50b-4c71-8cf3-145ddbcc7c59/d8922576ebb0242f92ec4ea106816154> (last accessed 15 June 2017). A ward map of the areas can be found here – <http://www.demarcation.org.za/index.php/gauteng/gp-prov-wards2010/jhb/6842-jhb-ward-123-1/file> (last accessed 15 June 2017).
4. Bennett’s conception of material vitalism has been accused of idealism and attributing a spiritual quality to matter (Žižek 2014). However, my reworking of Bennett’s perspective here makes no speculative claim regarding the metaphysics of matter; rather it aims to grasp, ethnographically, the ways in which material vitalism is manifest as a disorienting force within particular socialities, leaving traces and scars, and requiring social and ontological re-orientations within these.
5. See <http://www.safii.org/za/cases/ZACC/2008/1.html> (last accessed 28 February 2017).
6. All individual names used in this text are pseudonyms other than those already on public record.
7. Personal email correspondence from Robert Mulaudzi, City of Johannesburg, 3 August 2015.

8. Personal email correspondence from Thabo Rangwaga, City of Johannesburg, 15 August 2015.
9. <http://beta.iol.co.za/news/crime-courts/fatal-hijacked-building-blaze-sparks-anger-1557553>. [last accessed 15 June 2017]

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