

Dislocating modernity: Identity, space and representations of street trade in Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa's cities have experienced dramatic changes over the past decade. Cities are now home to a multiracial population, and have been transformed by new forms of economic and social interaction. For some, these changes have become a significant source of fear and anxiety. In this paper, we examine reactions to urban spatial change in the city of Durban, as expressed in local newspapers and interviews with suburban residents. We describe how the discourses of urban change in Durban have centred on the increased presence of street traders within the city's public spaces, and the various ways in which the activity of street trade has disrupted long-established modernist norms governing the occupation and use of the urban space. Specifically, we offer a detailed reading of three prominent narratives within the discussion of street traders in Durban—chaos, congestion and pollution. We argue that street traders have come to embody a wide range of more deeply seated cultural anxieties, which have been brought to the fore in the context of South Africa's transition. These anxieties arise from the ways in which modern understandings of order, agency and subjectivity have been called into question by material changes in the city, and have implications for the nature of citizenship and civic engagement in post-apartheid South Africa.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade, South Africa's major metropolitan areas have experienced dramatic social and spatial change. The demise of formal apartheid, combined with the increasing globalisation of people and activities, have opened cities to a host of political, economic and demographic processes, which have altered both the spatial structure of urban areas and the social interactions of urban residents.

Perhaps the most significant of these changes has been the 'deracialization' of urban space, in terms of both residential location (Saff, 1994, 2001; Morris, 1999; Christopher, 2001) and economic activity (Donaldson and van der Merwe, 1999). Once the nearly exclusive domain of the country's white residents, South Africa's metropolitan areas have become sites of formal and informal domicile and livelihood for tens of thousands of previously

excluded non-white citizens. In the process, the post-apartheid city has become the setting for new forms of racial interaction, negotiation and conflict, which have transformed the nature and experience of urban space.

For this reason, South Africa's cities are also arenas in which historical categories of identity have been called into question. One of the hallmarks of apartheid urban planning was a concerted attempt to limit the spaces of engagement between cities' white and non-white residents, and to carefully circumscribe the nature of cross-cultural engagement. Through explicit territorial and residential segregation, apartheid policies worked to spatially delimit the nature of identity, drawing ever tighter the boundaries separating self from other. The rapid transformation of urban areas over the past decade has dissolved these boundaries, and thus the spatial divisions by which identity and alterity were historically managed in South Africa have been dislocated. As Thornton (1996, p. 144) puts it:

South Africa today, especially with respect to the edges of difference—or what, more prosaically, we

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might call ‘boundaries’—is a country ... in which all identities—previously legislated and believed to be immutable—are suddenly open to threat and negotiation.

The specific contours of South Africa’s ongoing transition will depend a great deal upon the ways in which the country’s citizens manage this negotiation of space and identity.

In this paper, then, we examine what Williams (2000) has called the “epistemological dimension” of urban transition. The post-apartheid city, we hold, is not only the site of new kinds of dwelling, activity and interaction; it is also a setting for the production of new urban imaginaries, through which the city is made intelligible and its social spaces rendered legible. At the same time, the subjective experiences of urban space provide one of the principle mediums through which ideas of identity, difference, democracy and citizenship are being reworked in post-apartheid South Africa. We agree in this sense with Williams’ (2000, p. 167) assessment that “the future of South Africa is inextricably linked to the future of its cities”.

Unfortunately, much of the evidence in this regard is not salutary. Although experiences of transition are heterogeneous, there is an increasing indication that many South Africans have a negative view of the social and spatial changes underway in urban areas, and that their impressions and reactions to these changes have been governed largely by fear and anxiety (Dixon et al., 1994; Oelofse and Dodson, 1997; Saff, 2001). We believe such sentiments have important implications for South Africa’s nascent democracy, and that it is important to examine them in greater detail.

In what follows, we focus our attention on one particular example of this more general urban anxiety, by examining a recurring negative discourse about street traders in the city of Durban. For many Durban residents, the spatial transformation of the city has become a significant source of anxiety and concern, which has been frequently expressed in public debates and in the pages of Durban’s local newspapers. As we describe more fully below, these discourses of urban change have centred on the increased presence of street traders within the city’s public spaces, and the various ways in which the activity of street trade has disrupted long-established norms governing the occupation and use of urban space. These commonly articulated views of the city, we believe, serve as markers of a more general set of modernist discourses through which the city has been, and is being, understood.

Our examples are drawn from two sources. First, we gathered selected material—including news stories, editorials and letters to the editor—relating to downtown Durban from the city’s major English-language newspapers between 1990 and 2001. These clippings were

then supplemented by transcripts from a series of semistructured interviews conducted with 59 white, suburban residents in 1996 and 1997. The content of this material was then organized into a series of prominent themes, or narratives, three of which are discussed in detail below. Through a deconstructive reading of these themes, we hope to show the ways in which, for some residents, modernist conceptions of space and identity are providing the interpretive lenses through which urban change is being experienced in Durban. This in turn has important implications for conceptualising the relationships between democracy, identity and urban space in contemporary South Africa.

Before proceeding, a few caveats are in order. First, in focusing our attention on street trade, we do not mean to suggest that this is the only issue around which modern ideals of space, identity and difference are being renegotiated. Indeed, the narratives used in describing traders are similarly deployed to make sense of a wide range of issues relating to urban change, from the encroachment of informal settlements to concerns about the practice of ritual slaughter in suburban areas (see Ballard, 2002).

Second, it should be acknowledged that the representations discussed herein have in part been influenced by our source material. We have focused our attention, for example, only on English-language newspapers, which presumably reflect an opinion quite different from that of, say, the Zulu-language media. Letters to the editor, in particular, tend to reflect extreme viewpoints, viewpoints which may in fact be deliberately chosen by editors seeking to attract readers by promoting sensationalism. Likewise, the interviews we draw upon were conducted in the context of a larger project examining the nature of white identity, and thus do not reflect the attitudes or opinions of Indian or African residents in Durban. For these reasons, we make no claims in this paper about the pervasiveness of the anxieties expressed in these narratives. The extremely negative characterizations typically found in letters to the editor may indeed reflect a minority opinion about urban change. Nevertheless, the fact that particular terms and phrases have recurred in dozens of newspaper articles, and are frequently repeated in the context of interview conversations, is for us evidence that they have gained a public purchase, and have circulated widely within Durban’s discursive landscape.

We should also make clear that we do not wish to associate negative attitudes exclusively with any particular cultural or ethnic group. Although it is clear that many of the newspaper items, and all of the interviews, reflect the opinion of white Durban residents, some of the most vociferous opponents of street traders are Indian or African. Likewise, the trading community itself is diverse, and marked by occasional tensions between Indian and African traders. Our analysis, then, is not

focused on the psychology of ‘white’ opinions about ‘black’ traders. Rather, we are interested in tracing the contours of a particular discursive construction of the city, and in thinking through the implications of this discourse for the ways in which we think about cities, space and democracy in post-apartheid South Africa.

And finally, by focusing our attention exclusively on negative conceptions of urban change, we do not mean to deny the existence of more hopeful and progressive narratives. Examples of optimism abound, not least in the accommodating stance toward street traders taken by the city of Durban. Thus, we do not aim to provide a complete picture of the attitudes and opinions about street trade in the city. Instead, we focus our attention here more narrowly on the expressions of fear and anxiety that form just one part of the interpretive landscape. We believe such negative views are important, for at least two reasons.

First, the uncertainties and anxieties expressed by some South Africans resonate with experiences of transition elsewhere in the world. Writing about the transformation of Eastern Europe, for example, Hermochova (1997, p. 110) notes that “large-scale changes are always a burden and a major stress because they are an encroachment on what is normal. Painfully, people have to reassess their often very fragile identities, which were constructed under difficult and stressful conditions”. In this sense, the negative reactions that we examine below shed light on the process by which existing norms and categories are reworked, and thus our discussion contributes more generally to the ways in which we theorize social transition (Hörschelmann, 2002). Second, and foreshadowing our argument in the remainder of the paper, we believe that the negative discourses circulating in Durban are representative of an urban imaginary constituted through a renewed *spatialization of difference*. It is important to understand the contours of this construction of difference, we believe, if we wish to foster more open and democratic imaginings of urban space.

2. Apartheid, order and space

Our investigation focuses on Durban, South Africa’s second largest metropolitan area, and a city whose present character has been shaped by its colonial and apartheid past. The city’s early development was tied to its role as a port from the late 1800s, and by the turn of the century, Durban had become a thriving Victorian merchant city. Already at this time, the city’s European settlers set about controlling the racial and spatial features of the city, passing legislation to control the entry of non-whites, and restricting their domicile to separate residential ‘locations’. In this way, Durban was managed

as a European space; non-whites were deemed to be temporary sojourners whose true residence was one of a patchwork of rural ‘homelands’ to be governed by ‘native law’ (Swanson, 1976; Lambert and Morrell, 1996).

As a number of recent commentators have pointed out, the impulses behind such policies were not unique to South Africa, or even to colonial contexts more generally. Rather, they stand as particularly salient examples of modernist planning principles, expressing a vigilant concern with order and control (Parnell and Mabin, 1995; Popke, 2001). We draw here on the work of Zygmunt Bauman, who suggests that one of the hallmarks of modernity has been a concerted attempt to eliminate ambivalence, through the application of practices and procedures designed to produce order. He argues (1991, p. 6) that:

The *concept* of order appeared in consciousness only simultaneously with the *problem* of order, or order as a matter of *design* and *action*. Order as an obsession . . . Our world is shaped by the suspicion of brittleness and fragility of the artificial man-designed and man-built islands of order among a sea of chaos.

Within South Africa, cities have been viewed as perhaps the ultimate embodiment of such ‘islands of order’. Urban areas have long been perceived as reservoirs of European modernity and progress amidst a host of threats from their uncivilized ‘outsides’. European conceptions of space and identity, in other words, were structured in part through a modernist urban imaginary, which provided a utopian image of order, control and ontological security in the face of difference.

In the South African context, of course, this difference was structured in opposition to the perceived backwardness and degeneracy of the African continent. Indeed, as post-colonial critics have recently argued, the imagination of Western modernity more generally was to some extent dependent upon this image of Africa, which provided the cultural material against which the norms of civilisation and progress could be articulated (Mudimbe, 1994; Chabal, 1996). As Mbembe (2001, p. 2) puts it, “it is now widely acknowledged that Africa as an idea, a concept, has historically served, and continues to serve, as a polemical argument for the West’s desperate desire to assert its difference from the rest of the world”. In South Africa, urban areas became important sites for this process of ‘asserting difference’. Cities were defined as European spaces, within which the nature and frequency of non-European presence was highly circumscribed. In this way, cities provided the spaces through which a particular kind of (Modern, European) subjectivity was structured in opposition to the purported ambivalence and chaos of Africa (Popke, forthcoming).

As Bauman notes, this spatial management of social difference has been a guiding principle of modernity:

[Boundaries must be] sharp and clearly marked, which means “excluding the middle”, suppressing or exterminating everything ambiguous, everything that sits astride the barricade and thus compromised the vital distinction between *inside* and *outside*. Building and keeping order means making friends and fighting enemies. First and foremost, however, it means purging *ambivalence*. In the political realm, purging ambivalence means segregating or deporting strangers ... (Bauman, 1991, p. 24).

In Durban, this basic distinction—between European ‘insiders’ and Indian/African ‘outsiders’—was strengthened throughout the first half of the 20th century, a period that saw dramatic growth in the city’s population and economy. During this time, urban administrators began to apply the principles and practices of modern planning methods, tightly regulating land use and residence along racial lines. This control reached its apogee with the passage of the Group Areas Act of 1950, which led to the forced removal of thousands of Indian and African ‘strangers’ to newly constructed townships located far from the Central Business District (CBD). From this period, apartheid in South Africa became the watchword for order through separation. In many ways, the desperate measures of successive apartheid regimes can be viewed as a logical expression, albeit a particularly violent one, of modernity’s more general will to eliminate ambivalence through the control of space. As Bauman describes it:

the outsiders are the gathering point for the risks and fears which accompany cognitive spacing. They epitomize the chaos which all social spacing aims staunchly yet vainly to replace with order ... If only they could be confined to the outer fringes of social space, perhaps the outsiders could take all the rest of ambivalence, scattered all over the place, with them (Bauman, 1993, p. 162).

As we know, of course, the ‘otherness’ thus banished to township and ‘homeland’ spaces in South Africa could not be so easily confined, and this led in the 1970s and 1980s to a whole series of crises and attempted reforms, leading eventually to the democratic settlement reached in 1994.

In Durban, for example, by the late 1970s the boundaries so carefully constructed between rural and urban, and between township and suburb, began to break down. Declining conditions in the KwaZulu ‘homeland’, combined with the rise of ‘black-on-black’ political violence, brought thousands of African mi-

grants into Durban, sparking the development of large informal shack settlements within the townships and on the city’s periphery (Minnaar, 1992). At the same time, smaller numbers began settling in downtown Durban, either as illegal tenants in residential areas (so-called ‘grey areas’), or as squatters on plots of vacant land (Hindson et al., 1994; Maharaj and Mpungose, 1994).

The political changes of the 1990s brought about a further desegregation of space in central Durban. The repeal of the Group Areas Act in 1991, combined with ‘white flight’ to the suburbs, has increased Indian and African residence as well as entrepreneurial opportunities, transforming the social and economic landscape of the city. Businesses that catered primarily to an ‘up-market’ European clientele have been replaced by ‘mass market’ enterprises, focused on lower cost goods for the city’s newly arrived residents. As one newspaper article put it: “The CBD has become the stamping ground for black entrepreneurs ... with lawyers and accountants, telephone bureaus, hairdressing salons, cellphone dealers, and cash loan operators chasing office space of 20–60 m²” (Parker, 2001).

Undoubtedly, however, the most visible change in the spatial organization of downtown Durban has been the dramatic influx of informal street traders. Informal trade has long been a feature of the city’s urban landscape, but was generally confined to particular locations and products: African curios and trinkets along the beachfront, and fresh produce and *muthi* in the Warwick Avenue trading district around the Berea Road Station (Fig. 1). With the demise of formal segregation, however, pavement trading has become common throughout the city and, as in many South African cities, has expanded to encompass a wide range of goods and services (Holness et al., 1999; Rogerson, 2000). Most notably, street vendors are now common in Durban’s formerly white commercial district along Smith and West Streets and in the area around City Hall.

Although initially hostile toward street traders, the City of Durban has recently sought to accommodate and formalize the practice of street trade in the city (Skinner, 2000; Nesvåg, 2002). Working with local traders’ organizations, particularly the Self-Employed Women’s Union, the city has provided infrastructure, basic services and a measure of security for Durban’s traders. There are now an estimated 26,000 traders in central Durban, hawking products ranging from fresh and cooked food to cosmetics, clothes and shoes, as well as offering services such as hairdressing and shoe repair (Lund et al., 2000).

Taken together, these political and economic changes have had a dramatic impact on the social spaces of downtown Durban. The city is now home to a multi-racial population, and has been transformed by new forms of economic interaction, social affiliation and cultural meaning. Novel forms of entrepreneurship and

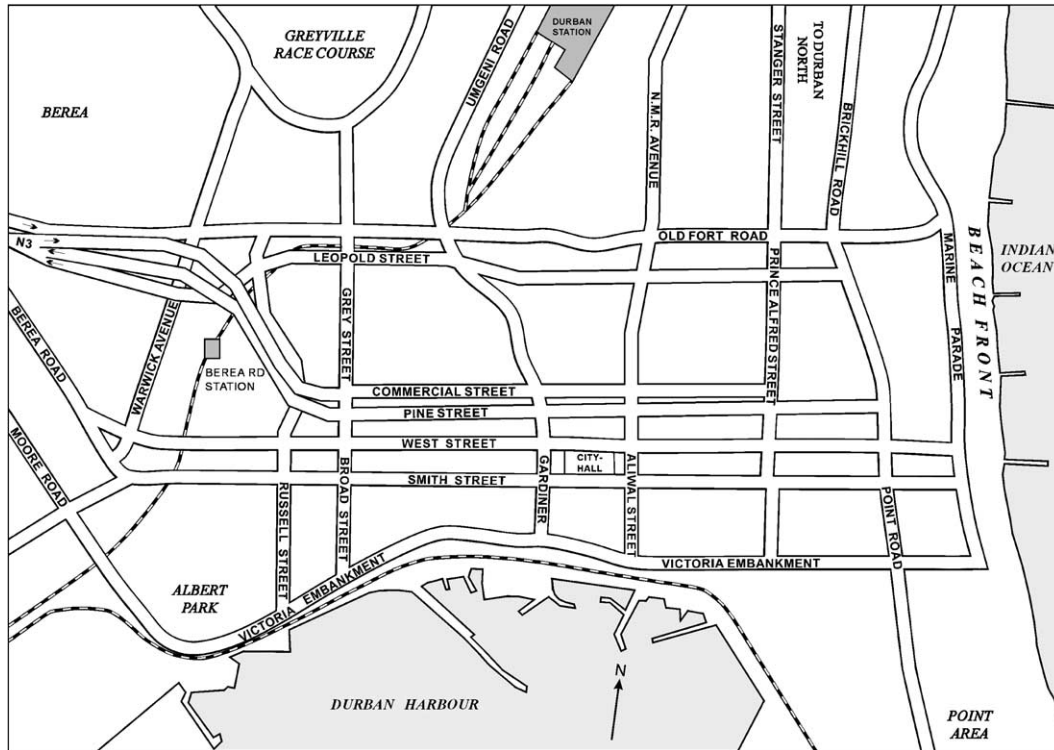


Fig. 1. Central Durban.

circulation have given rise to a host of new activities, practices and understandings. As Bouillon (2000, p. 3) has put it, the city is “*newly occupied* and used by a population made up of residents, migrants and visitors alike: a new locality, in fact new *localities* are performed, new *neighbourhoods* are produced and new *contexts* generated”. Although these changes have been celebrated by many, for others they have become a source of considerable anxiety. As Lipman and Harris (2000, p. 1) note:

While the prospect of radical social and economic change is eagerly, joyously anticipated by most citizens, there are many for whom such thinking, let alone talk, embodies their nightmares. For them, the many whose dreams of the good life are filled with fond memories of apartheid, the present is to be shored up against the future.

3. Modernity and melancholia

These ‘fond memories of apartheid’ have frequently circulated in the pages of Durban’s local newspapers. Indeed, one of the most prominent features of the discourses of urban change in Durban has been a repeated sense of nostalgia for an idealized urban past. The following letter to the editor is typical in this regard:

Having been born and lived in Durban for more than 70 years, I ... love this city dearly ... However, now I am so ashamed that I wouldn’t take my worst enemy to the CBD because of the filth there ... [O]ur once spacious pavements ... have now been taken over by beggars, vagrants, muggers and hawkers of every possible commodity ... There soon won’t be anything left to love in this once lovely city of ours! (Ashamed Durbanite, 1995).

This statement expresses a common theme of loss, and articulates a sense of shame at the changes taking place in the city of Durban. Similar letters describe Durban as a “once beautiful city”, and lament the decline of its “former pristine glory” (Richardson, 1997; Judd, 1997). One letter writer notes grimly that the “once clean and vibrant city centre ... [has been] turned into a squalid, dingy market-place” and an interview respondent lamented that “whereas before you had masses of lovely shops in town now there’s nothing” (Christeusen, 1998; interview with Lindsay). For some, this overpowering sense of loss at the city’s decline is expressed as bereavement. The city, for such residents, is “dead” (Gilbery, 2001; interview with Mel), has been “sacrificed” (Knowler, 1998b) or, in a particularly violent analogy, is “having its throat cut” (Berea Mail, 1995).

Such descriptions—of a city vacated, devoid of activity, dead—stand in striking contrast to the recent proliferation of social and economic activity within the

streets of Durban. Consider, for example, the following description in a local newspaper:

The streets are alive with sound: trundling trains filled with workers, hooters of buses and taxis, the screeching of brakes. And music. Oh, the music. To an outsider it's a noisy nuisance. To those in the know, there is some semblance of order. . . . This is the face of Africa. . . (Radebe, 1997).

This reporter's description hints at the crux of our argument: representations of urban change are related to the changing status of 'insiders' and 'outsiders' within the city, and hence the ability of various groups to recognize the 'order' of what is increasingly taking on the character of an 'African' urban milieu.

Perceptions of urban death, then, refer not to the abandonment or desertion of the city, but rather the demise of a *certain kind* of city, and the modernist imaginary through which the very possibility of progress and stability was secured. The sense of shame and embarrassment over this loss might thus be read as a form of spatial melancholia, an inability to acknowledge and mourn the loss of certainty brought on by South Africa's transition (Robinson, 1997). The ambivalence engendered by this melancholic dissolution of urban boundaries has prompted a form of psychic compensation in the identification of 'others' to whom blame can be attributed and in whom diffuse uncertainty can be embodied and reified. In Durban, the most common focus of this blame has been the increasing presence of street traders, and the ways in which they inhabit the spaces of the city.

4. The discursive construction of street trade

Within the discourses circulating in Durban about the nature of urban change, the most commonly articulated cause of the city's decline has been the arrival of street traders. Consider, for example, the following: "It used to be such a pleasure and an excitement to spend a day in the city. Then the street traders descended on the CBD and with them came crime and grime, thus spoiling the magic and we all lost" (Knowler, 1998a). Others agree: similar letters have been published under headlines such as "Pavement Trading Causing Ruin" (Richardson, 1997), "Pavement Traders to Blame for Demise of the CBD" (Christeusen, 1998), and "Save our CBD: Ban Vendors" (Save Our CBD, 1997).

In one sense, the attention given to street traders is not difficult to understand. Of all the changes to Durban's social and economic space, the increasing prevalence of traders on the city's streets is perhaps the most visible. Indeed, many commentators express their concern about street trade in visual terms, highlighting the

aesthetic changes resulting from the informalization of downtown space. Street trade has been described as being "untidy", "unsightly", and a "major eyesore", and hence damaging to the "image" of the city (interview with Lindsay; Concerned, 1997; Berea Mail, 1995; Christeusen, 1998).

As we hope to show, however, the targeting of street traders as the primary cause of Durban's decline is based upon more than simply aesthetic concerns. Rather, street traders have come to embody a wide range of more deep-seated cultural anxieties, which have been brought to the fore in the context of South Africa's transition. These anxieties, which can be gleaned from the discourses surrounding the 'problem' of street traders in Durban, provide insights into the ways in which modern understandings of urban space and subjectivity have been called into question by the material changes in the city. In what follows, we offer a more detailed reading of three prominent narratives within the discussion of street traders in Durban—narratives of disorder, congestion, and disease. These narratives, we suggest, can be read as reactions to the breakdown of a particular racial and spatial ordering of the city, the result of which has been a concerted attempt to re-specify the boundaries between self and other in and through urban space.

4.1. *Chaos and control: the quest for order*

One of the most frequently expressed concerns about street trade in Durban is that it represents a *breakdown of order* within the city. "The centre of the city is absolute total chaos", said one interview respondent, "I never go to the city if I can help it . . . [because of] all those traders on the pavement" (interview with Marie). Newspaper articles have expressed similar sentiments, calling attention to the "absence of control over street hawkers" and the "makeshift and sordid arrangement of cardboard boxes, tables, etc." in the city (The Mercury, 2000; Christeusen, 1998). The result has been an "uncontrollable situation where 'everybody just puts up a stall' in the CBD" (Meintjies, 1998). As we have noted, one of the hallmarks of urban apartheid was the spatial regulation of urban activity, frequently through the application of familiar planning tools such as zoning. Within this administrative rationality, the 'informal economy' has generally been regarded as a problem, "dirty and unsightly, an aberration from the ideal of a modern city" (Hart, 1991, p. 70; see also Swanson, 1977; Beavon and Rogerson, 1986). For this reason, street trade was banned from the European spaces of South African cities, and for the most part confined to 'African spaces' and tourist markets. A sense of order, then, has been integral to an urban imaginary built around the functional segregation of economic activities.

Although the practice of trading has now been legalized in Durban, there is still a widespread impression that the presence of traders is disruptive and chaotic. As one letter writer put it, “the CBD was designed for shopfront shopping and business to be carried out within premises and not on the open street outside” (Knowler, 1988a). Traders disrupt the spatial epistemology of planning and administration because, lacking a proper place, they occupy space in a haphazard or ‘chaotic’ manner. As Tim Cresswell (1994, p. 39) has argued:

Order is inscribed in and through space and place—the landscape is the truth already established . . . Places gain meaning in history and those meanings stick. To act out-of-place is simply to fail to recognize (or recognize all too well) the truth which has been established.

In Durban, traders disrupt the ‘truth’ of space by the manner in which they ‘take up space’ within the city.

Because traders do not obey spatial conventions, they can show up anywhere in the city, leaving the impression that their numbers have become uncontrollable. Letters to the editor have referred to the “encroachment” of “an ever-increasing population of street vendors who seem to have found their ‘promised land’” (Christeusen, 1998; Gopal, 2001). Others have bemoaned the fact that “the street traders descended on the CBD” because the city “allows all and sundry to set up shop” (Knowler, 1988a; Save Our CBD, 1997). “The city tends to be overcrowded . . . [with a] multitude of people” and “itinerant traders and their offspring sprawl all over the pavements” (interview with Martin; du Bois, 1995).

Given this, it is hardly surprising that discussions of street trade in Durban are replete with calls to “bring pavement trading under control” (Stevens, 1996; Richardson, 1997; Daily News, 1997). For most, this means relegating traders to specific areas within the city, thus re-establishing some measure of command over the spatial contours of the city. What is required, in other words, is a new spatial strategy to contain the disorderly tactics of street trade. A letter to the editor (Cox, 1994), for example, stated that “I am all for people trying to earn an honest living rather than beg . . . but let them be sited in a designated part of town” and an interview respondent suggested:

I think . . . [street trading] is something that one must face up to but I think that the authorities in each area, whoever controls it, should make them operate in very restricted areas. *Give them* an area . . . [you] can’t just have this haphazard street trading, I think it’s appalling (interview with Jenny).

It is clear that for some Durban residents, traders are tolerable as long as they ‘have a place’, and thus can be

located, isolated, controlled. By disrupting the ‘truth’ and order of urban space, however, traders have become unpredictable, the very embodiment of the spatial ambivalence that, according to Bauman, modernity works so hard to eliminate. In so doing, they have challenged long-standing notions about the nature of urban agency and subjectivity as well.

4.2. Congestion and movement: locating agency in the city

The focus on chaos, we believe, suggests not only a concern with the spatial location of particular activities, but also the extent to which residents of the city feel a sense of control over their spatial movements and interactions. In this sense, street traders have come to signify a *loss of agency*, and a sense of autonomy that was part and parcel of apartheid’s urban imaginary. This particular transgression can be seen in a second common problem highlighted in discussions of traders in Durban, that they are obstacles or impediments to the comfortable flow and movement of people through downtown space.

Many commentators have called attention to “the hundreds of street traders who . . . [block] the main shopping thoroughfare”, “obscuring the view from the street of up-market high profile shops” (Berea Mail, 1995; Richardson, 1997). “Informal stalls”, it is alleged, “clog . . . street frontages”, “causing obstruction and congestion” and turning the city into “a shambles” (Daily News, 1997; Richardson, 1997; interview with Pauline). Street traders, in other words, do not only defy a particular spatial ordering of the city because they are ‘out of place’; in their sedentary use of the pavement, traders also obstruct movement and flow, inhibiting smooth circulation throughout the city. In particular, traders are accused of ‘clogging’ the pedestrian movements and spatial practices through which urban space is lived and experienced. As Keith and Pile (1996, p. 381) write, “the geography of the city is about the movement of actual bodies through the streets, where the streets constitute the moving body by making them ‘in place’, ‘out of place’, ‘on the move’, and so on. Moving or still, the body maps the spaces of social power”. In Durban, the existence of street traders has dislocated the prevailing power relations, giving rise to new bodily experiences and forcing people to redefine the ways in which they move about the city.

Traders are condemned because they “[restrict] . . . the free flow of pedestrian traffic on the pavements” (Christeusen, 1998); vendors “clog” and “congest the already narrow paths for pedestrians”, and as a result there is “no place left to walk on the pavements” (du Bois, 1995; Gopal, 2001; Concerned Citizen, 1998). Even worse, traders pose a challenge to the movement and agency of individuals, becoming threats and hazards to those using the pavements. Pedestrians become

“caught up in congestion” and “have to wade through piles of fruit cartons” and “step around and between piles of perishables” in order to negotiate the city’s now-cluttered urban spaces (Christeussen, 1998; Campbell, 1993; du Bois, 1995).

We should recall here that the production of urban modernity in South Africa relied in part upon a carefully regulated circulation of (non-white) bodies through urban space, producing a normalization of bodily comportment and social interaction. In its idealized form, the city could be ‘cleansed’ of unwanted bodies and activities, thereby normalizing the position of white South Africans as both subjects and agents of modern progress. Now, by contrast, “the man in the street . . . [is] unable to walk down the pavement without tripping over hawkers, making a leisurely shopping expedition an unpleasant experience . . .” (McElligott, 1993). Similarly, “One cannot walk down the street without being bumped, trod on and hassled by street traders” (Foyn, 1996). And, during one recent visit to downtown, an interview respondent related that, “I walked along and I just put my head down and walked, got pushed this way and that . . .” (interview with Jenny).

Such representations highlight the ways in which changes in the uses of urban space have altered the norms governing the corporeal interactions between urban subjects. What we are suggesting, in other words, is that concerns about the ‘obstruction’ and ‘clutter’ of street trade registers more than simply annoyance at stepping over fruit crates. It speaks to the breakdown of some of apartheid’s most important spatial strategies for defining the agency and autonomy of the modern subject.

4.3. *Pollution and disease: subjectivity and the other*

The modern impulse to eliminate ambivalence, we have argued, is not simply a matter of ‘cleaning up space’, but also about a way of conceptualising the subject, about drawing distinctions between insiders and outsiders. In this sense, street traders embody more than simply spatial chaos and restricted agency; they also signify the *dislocation of subjectivity* brought about by the dissolution of the boundaries that had separated self from other in Durban. We can understand this by examining one of the most pervasive narratives evident in discourses around the ‘decline’ and ‘death’ of the CBD, that of pollution and disease.

Newspaper articles over the past several years contain repeated assertions that the city is now polluted, characterized by mess, grime, and filth. The downtown has been described as a “festering sore”, “awash with litter and stamped with squalor”, and a place where “the cockroaches and rats [are] happily breeding” (Le Maitre, 1997; Thomas, 2001; Tillett, 1990; Berea Mail, 1995). For many Durban residents, it seems, these visual im-

pressions are the most salient evidence of the loss of Durban’s former ‘glory’, and in this way pollution can be viewed as a symbolic marker of the city’s changing fortune and status, as symptomatic of the defilement of its once ‘pristine’ urban image. It is noteworthy that the blame for the ‘filthy’ conditions in the CBD has almost exclusively been placed on street traders. Letters to the editor allege that “street vendors have trashed Durban”, and that “the decay set in when the informal traders were allowed to take over the pavements” (Concerned, 1997; Christeussen, 1998). The traders, it is asserted, leave behind a “trail of rubbish” which is a “wonderful encouragement for the rat colonies” (Gopal, 2001; Thomas, 2001).

Dirt, as Douglas (1984) argued, can be defined as matter out of place, and thus cultural constructions of pollution are intimately related to normative attitudes about the ‘proper’ organization and use of urban space. In Durban, street traders and their activities contravene the social and moral order, and are thus deemed to be ‘defiling’ the city. This kind of equation is of course nothing new. Images of urban cleanliness and order have long been associated with the activities of its residents, and the sanitation of urban space equated with the ‘moral hygiene’ of its citizens. From the urban reform movements of the nineteenth century through the ‘slum clearance’ programs of the 1960s, attempts to ‘clean up’ the city have been linked to the spatial management or isolation of outsiders or undesirable groups—the poor, the working class, immigrant communities, ethnic and religious minorities—who were then removed from public space (Stallybrass and White, 1986; Sibley, 1995; Cresswell, 1996).

In Durban, one of the central concerns about street traders is that they are too public, in ways that challenge the dichotomy between the public and private (Durrheim and Dixon, 2001). Indeed, the most alarmist representations of street traders are those that focus upon the use of public space for activities that are generally regarded as private. One letter to the editor, for example, reads as follows:

It is appalling to see the extent of filth in Durban, worse still, extremely obese foreign women suckling their offspring, multi men displaying their wares of various sorts emitting a putrefying stench everywhere . . . These people erect shacks at the Durban Station and Berea Road Station. They live there and work there; public toilets are used as bathrooms and sometimes bedrooms at night (Concerned, 1997).

An interview respondent expressed a similar sentiment: “You’ve got a whole nation living in Umgeni Road that are washing, cleaning, cooking, going to the toilet . . . the infestation, the germs, the stench—they are *living* there”

(interview with Jackie). These passages display a sense of shock and revulsion that private activities are being carried out in ostensibly public spaces, blurring the boundaries between the personal realm of the home and the urban civic domain.

Such feelings of revulsion correspond to the psychoanalytic notion of abjection, the need or desire on the part of the subject to expunge what is felt to be polluting, contaminating or defiling (Kristeva, 1982). Activities associated with bodily fluids ('washing, suckling, going to the toilet') are primary sites of abjection, for it is only by eliminating such contaminating fluids that a stable and healthy subject position can be secured. But abjection can be seen to function in a social sense as well, by maintaining a social separation between the proper and the objectionable. The apparent purity and stability of 'our' social order, in other words, can be maintained by projecting the unclean and impure elements of the social onto abject spaces and bodies, thus containing the threat that they pose. These abject social elements become for us the cultural alterior, the absolute 'other'. One interview respondent had difficulty in articulating the almost visceral sense of disgust at the abject spaces of downtown Durban: "Appalling. Appalling, appalling. I will not go to town—too filthy and . . . yech! . . . You know it's just filthy and revolting now" (interview with Sarah).

If the diseased and polluted abject cannot be spatially isolated, then it threatens to invade all of social space, and with it to render impotent the sociocultural boundaries separating self from other. Indeed, one of the primary concerns expressed about the traders' 'unsanitary' and 'unhygienic' lifestyles, is that they will not remain contained within their abject spaces, that the 'problems' they have brought into the city will spill over the boundaries within which they might be contained. Traders, it has been asserted, have "infected" and "contaminated" Durban, and the city is now "stricken" (Gopal, 2001; 'Save our CBD', 1997). "The rot has set in" and the "existing decay . . . [must not be] allowed to spread" (Berea Mail, 1995; 'Save Our CBD', 1997; The Mercury, 2001). The deputy mayor of the city, Mark Lowe, warned that the "intolerable problems of litter, squalor, street children, stealing and mugging" that have plagued the CBD are "spreading into once peaceful suburbs of Berea and Durban North" (Berea Mail, 1995).

What we are suggesting is that the narratives of dirt and pollution used to describe street traders in Durban register more than simply a concern with litter. They represent a reaction to the dissolution of the boundaries through which the subjects and spaces of the city have historically been given meaning. As we know, apartheid's logic of identity relied upon the spatial delineation of self from other. Now, however, the 'outsiders', formerly 'banished to the outer fringes of social space',

have invaded the inner sanctum of subjectivity, resulting in what Dixon and Durrheim (2000, p. 36) describe as "a *dis-location of identity*". The ways in which South Africans respond to this process will have crucial implications for overcoming the legacies of division, segregation and difference, which provided the epistemological foundation for apartheid. It is to this issue that we turn by way of conclusion.

5. Conclusion: on citizens and strangers

In this paper, we have examined one particular response to the changing boundaries of space and identity in the city of Durban, one which focuses on street traders as a source of anxiety. Taken together, the narratives about street trade discussed in this paper are emblematic of a particular type of urban imaginary, one that is filtered through modernist understandings of space and identity, and staged in opposition to an 'Africa' which represents the negativity of the absolute other. By transgressing boundaries that previously excluded them from cities, traders have destabilized the familiar order of the city, and in response to the melancholic sense of loss brought on by the dissolution of apartheid certainties, new boundaries are being drawn between the subjects and spaces of the city. Street traders, as the embodiment of urban change, have been reinscribed as the absolute 'other'—chaotic, diseased, and African. This renewed discursive constitution of difference has significant implications, we believe, for South Africa's nascent democracy, in ways both practical and theoretical.

In the first instance, the issues we have addressed bear upon the question of citizenship and civic engagement in post-apartheid South Africa. The practice of citizenship means more than the extension of formal rights and privileges to previously disenfranchised populations (McEwan, 2000). It also requires an active and collective engagement with the histories of difference and division which have defined the nature of South African political identity. This suggests to us a need to cultivate spaces not only of active participation, but also of negotiation, mediation and dialogue. South Africa's urban areas are an important arena for this negotiation. As Jeremy Grest (2000, p. 1) has put it, "the concrete meanings of urban citizenship are being defined by the daily practices of citizens, [and] by their interactions with each other, whether organized or unorganized". Thus, one important element of South Africa's ongoing transition is the extent to which the country's urban residents become active and collective participants in the shaping of civic spaces and democratic identities.

Given our discussion above, there is reason to believe that, at least for some Durban residents, this kind of engagement has been evaded. For some, certainly, the

anxieties we have analysed have led them emigrate. For many more, however, the response has been to concede the space of downtown Durban to ‘them’ by avoiding the CBD altogether (interviews with Debbie, Pam). “I never go to the city if I can help it” suggested one interview respondent, echoing the views of many. A Durban business leader similarly noted that “I don’t know anyone who wants to go to the city centre today” (Glibey, 2001). Throughout South Africa, and no less in Durban, residents with the means to do so have retreated to suburban fortresses, gated communities and enclosed neighbourhoods guarded by high-tech security systems (Bremmer, 1998; Landman, 2000). The private shopping mall has become for them the new public sphere, sites where the city’s well-off can escape any engagement with the city’s transformations. This phenomenon has been described in a recent newspaper article as ‘semigration’—the withdrawing or opting out of the obligations of citizenship (Barrell, 2000).

To the extent that those semigrating in South Africa are largely white and/or middle class, it might very well be asked whether or not we should care. If the streets of Durban have become spaces where the historically dispossessed can exercise claims to political and economic resources, then perhaps there is no need to concern ourselves with the impressions of a small, disgruntled minority. We believe, however, that the consequences are significant. In the first instance, as Hook and Vrdoljak (2002, p. 216) have persuasively argued, the process of self-segregation serves to entrench existing relationship of power and privilege, removing certain South Africans from any obligation to contribute to a collective project of nation-building: “in this way, accountability is detoured, calls of integration elided, historical bases of privilege consolidated, a new separatism entrenched”.

There is another, more theoretical reason for attending to these new realities of post-apartheid South Africa, because they provide a particularly salient example of the ways in which new kinds of boundaries are being drawn between self and other, in ways that hinder the process of civic engagement and democratic transformation. The discursive construction of street traders in Durban represents, in this sense, what Bauman (2000, p. 108) views as a powerful spatializing impulse within modernity: “[the effort] to keep the ‘other’, the different, the strange and the foreign at a distance . . . [a] decision to preclude the need for communication, negotiation and mutual commitment”. This suggests to us two related tasks.

First, we would stress the importance of examining other social sites within which the boundaries between self and other are being contested. To take but one example, we might consider the widely noted increase of xenophobia in South Africa (Croucher, 1998; Morris, 1999; Mattes et al., 2000; Vale, 2002). Although the

specific contours of division are different (based in particular notions of national citizenship), negative impressions of foreigners arise from a similar impulse to ‘keep strangers at a distance’. These recent attempts at what has been called ‘(b)ordering’ resonates with similar forms of xenophobia around the world (van Houtum and Naerssen, 1999). For this reason, we think it is instructive to think critically about the multiple ways in which modern ideals of self and space are implicated in a wide range of attempts to circumscribe civic engagement and democratic negotiation in ways that reflect limited communitarian or sectarian interests.

Finally, our discussion leads us to speculate about more open and progressive notions of public space and collective identity in contemporary South Africa. The deepening of democracy in South Africa requires the cultivation of forms of identity that are not only post-apartheid, but also to some extent post-modern. This does not mean abandoning the emancipatory potential of modernist ideals of democracy, but more narrowly in dislocating modernity’s (and, apartheid’s) nexus between space and identity. This would require, as Bauman (2000, p. 104) puts it, “the ability to interact with strangers without holding their strangeness against them and without pressing them to surrender it or renounce some or all the traits that have made them strangers in the first place”. This in turn prompts us to imagine the ways in which the changing nature of South Africa’s cities might help to foster such an engagement.

The city of Durban today, writes Bouillon (2000, p. 4), is “a *newly foreign territory*, an *estranged* place for its users . . . the town is no longer imaginarily and symbolically appropriable, it belongs to everyone and no one in particular: it has to be shared”. This fact—that the city must be *shared*—allows us to end on a more hopeful note, for the experience of place can serve also as an impetus for progressive change. The changing spatial landscape of South Africa’s cities presents in this sense an opportunity. The dislocation of identity has the potential to foster new forms of responsibility and engagement, and foster the imagining of new ways of inhabiting urban space:

in their everyday activities, subjects are witness to the possibility of *other forms of spatiality* through their bodies and their movements, as well as in their imaginations, in the dynamism of their inner worlds which are both made through, and themselves remake, the ‘external’ spaces of the environment (Robinson, 1998, p. 166, emphasis added).

This ‘other’ space might force us to recognize, with Kristeva, the foreigner in all of us, the ways in which our identities depend upon a mediation or negotiation with alterity. “The foreigner is within us”, notes Kristeva (1991, p. 191), “and when we flee from or struggle

against the foreigner, we are fighting our unconscious—that ‘improper’ facet of our impossible ‘own and proper’”. South Africa’s cities, in other words, might become sites of personal and collective transformation, of engagement and recognition that comes from regarding the foreigner as a form of responsibility: “living with the other, with the foreigner, confronts us with the possibility or not of *being an other*. It is not simply . . . a matter of our being able to accept the other, but of *being in his place*, and this means to imagine and make oneself other for oneself” (Kristeva, 1991, p. 13). To imagine such new forms of citizenship and styles of interaction and engagement requires breaking from the modernist epistemology that has governed South Africa’s racial and spatial imaginations for more than a century. This surely must be one of the most significant and pressing challenges for those who are trying to manage the flux of urban change in South Africa.

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