

# State Racism and Biopolitical Struggle: The Evasive Commons in Twentieth-Century Durban, South Africa

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## Introduction

The production, defense, and enclosure of the commons have preoccupied scholarly work on an array of themes—from submerged histories of conviviality and insurrection to contemporary activist networks.<sup>1</sup> Massimo De Angelis, for example, proposes that commons are immanent in all acts of collectivism and that people produce new forms of mutuality in the ruins of capitalist value.<sup>2</sup> David Featherstone compares past and present activism to argue that subaltern articulations of common rights can be both connective and cosmopolitan.<sup>3</sup> These thinkers fruitfully extend an older radical argument that examines the connection between exclusionary private and state property and the transition to capitalism, as opposed to examining the inherent individual use rights to common things, however limited or protected by the state.<sup>4</sup> These revisionists call attention to cultural politics, or value struggles in the plural, and thus insist on the increasing importance of thinking about common rights in the wake of renewed forms of dispossession. Such scholars, however, rarely question how common rights come to be considered intrinsic or natural. Precisely because exclusionary property rights are routinely misconceived in capitalist societies as relations that inhere in things rather than in social relations that presume dispossession,

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the defense of commons often calls into question certain kinds of inclusion/exclusion while other kinds remain outside the realm of critique.

This essay asks how we might understand the defense of inclusionary rights to common means of life within spaces of entrenched exclusion by examining the dialectics of segregation and commons production during the South African War of 1899–1902 and the political and economic crisis of the 1970s. In particular, I explore the industrial-residential region of South Durban, an area that has invited considerable scholarly and activist interest, principally for leading the main community-based environmental justice movement in post-apartheid South Africa.<sup>5</sup> My main argument is twofold. First, I ask how a specific space was forged in South Durban through contradictory processes of racialized dispossession, segregation, and industrialization.<sup>6</sup> Second, as apartheid South Africa entered a phase of deepening political and economic crisis, I ask how some inhabitants of Durban began to organize in new ways to demand their right to the city, before the center of gravity of struggle shifted to a negotiated settlement with the apartheid regime. I elaborate on how both the construction and the critique of urban segregation have relied on what Michel Foucault calls *biopolitics*: the expertise, intervention, and subjectivity with respect to vitality, variously construed.<sup>7</sup> In South Durban certain populations were provided segregated housing, access to industrial work, and proximity to the city center. By the 1950s these amenities also included exposure to toxic pollution. This space generated specific opportunities and frustrations, as well as limited attempts to forge common use values. I demonstrate how spatial politics, in South Durban, took shape during an exceptional moment in which people came to question exclusions built into space and nature in order, ultimately, to demand universal access to the means of living. While actual commons may have been evasive, the idea of commons has been politically vital.

In 1977 Maynard Swanson published the foundational essay on the origins of urban segregation in South Africa, scarcely two years after Foucault had lectured on the centrality of biopolitics to state racism in Western liberal capitalisms, fascisms, and state socialisms.<sup>8</sup> Swanson argued that infectious disease provided the metaphors to rationalize the exclusion of Africans from Cape Town between 1900 and 1904 and that this “sanitation syndrome” set a precedent for urban segregation to come. Swanson’s argument proved remarkably prescient in addressing a blind spot in the prevailing Marxist historiography of segregation: the role of scientific expertise in national and class projects.<sup>9</sup>

More than three decades after Swanson’s observations, what has become clear through new postnational histories are the connections between projects of social reform and segregation across the North Atlantic world, specifically between the 1870s and 1920s, and their importance in a wider colonial context, as Keith Breckenridge has argued in a series of working papers.<sup>10</sup> These historians have shown how middle-class Progressive Era experts in “social politics” responded to spiral-

ing social crises through knowledge and intervention in public health, urban planning, workingmen's insurance, immigration controls, cooperative farming, and rural reconstruction.<sup>11</sup> The techniques used by Progressives varied according to context, but they shared a commitment to the authority of statistical social scientific methods and the deployment of policy-relevant expertise and models of social engineering. Eugenics and segregation were well-used tools in their toolkit.<sup>12</sup>

While Foucault saw biopolitical tools as harnessed by capital and sovereign power in state racisms of the twentieth century, he did not pursue their use in class and imperial projects, particularly in late Victorian settler colonies and in movements that rose in opposition to them.<sup>13</sup> Scholars of the colonial world have shown the imperial legacies of Victorian biopolitics to be complex and fraught.<sup>14</sup> In much of colonial Africa, metropolitan presumptions of Progressivism—including the emergence of middle-class experts, the acceptance of social scientific expertise and its calculative tools, and political expediency for state intervention in broad-based welfare—remained only presumptions.<sup>15</sup> Most African colonies, subject to what Sara Berry calls “hegemony on a shoestring,” could hardly afford to regulate the various aspects of life, sex, work, or movement that biopolitics implies.<sup>16</sup> British settler colonies witnessed fierce debate over immigration controls, fingerprinting systems, labor regulations, agrarian transformation, and urban cleanup as they tensely balanced the allegedly Teutonic legacy of responsible self-government with instruments to delimit populations deemed incapable of exercising democratic rights.<sup>17</sup> Where biopolitical intervention did become important was precisely in settler colonies in which the consent of white working classes became a pressing issue for imperial control.<sup>18</sup>

This essay draws on a chronology developed by planners and geographers who worked in solidarity with civic or neighborhood groups, unions, and underground activists as part of the renovation of biopolitical expertise in the turbulent 1970s and 1980s.<sup>19</sup> These experts were centrally concerned with what Henri Lefebvre saw as an active and social understanding of space as built, fought for, differently lived, and unequally lost or revived.<sup>20</sup> If the production of capitalist space mirrors the fetishism of commodities, the capitalist city is one such collective fetish that denies its inegalitarian foundations. “The right to the city,” Henri Lefebvre’s political clarion call, demands access as much as a redefinition of what cities ought to be, an actual commons.<sup>21</sup> Struggles by black residents of Durban in the 1970s and 1980s, and once again today, point to the key role of biopolitics to imagining an inclusionary urbanism.<sup>22</sup> I begin, however, with Afrikaner dispossession and with the way in which Victorian expertise was brought to bear on what the British called Burgher Camps during the South African War.

### Concentration Camps as Problems of Social Hygiene, 1900–1902

In 1900 the British social reformer Emily Hobhouse traveled to the Cape and Orange River Colonies to conduct relief work among dispossessed Afrikaner women and children. Discovering several civilian detention camps, she broke the news of “concentration camps” to the press. At the British nation’s peak of patriotism, Hobhouse was reviled as a “Boer lover” and traitor.<sup>23</sup> Her testimonies of the sufferings of Afrikaner women and children played on the emotions in an established genre of Victorian pathos for the plight of the poor.<sup>24</sup> Yet Hobhouse’s transgression was that she merely called for public support to improve conditions in the camps, not for their closure.<sup>25</sup> While cognizant of the silencing of dissent under martial law—and also of the limits of testimony from people still traumatized by farm burnings, the looting of livestock, the destruction of grain stores, and the eviction of families—Hobhouse nevertheless collected, translated, and compiled testimony to give evidence to government and the press.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, the British government was compelled to appoint a commission, composed entirely of women, led by the suffragist Millicent Fawcett. Hobhouse was sidelined and denied permission to set foot in South Africa again.<sup>27</sup>

The Fawcett Commission, or as it was popularly known, the Ladies’ Commission, visited the camp at Merebank, south of Durban, in December 1901. They found 5,154 people forced to use a single bathhouse, with ten baths for women and two each for men and boys.<sup>28</sup> Their main concern was the disregard of hygiene by camp inmates, in apparently preferring to use a polluted river rather than wells, in not boiling water, in reusing dirty puddles for washing clothes, and in poor sanitation and a lack of disinfection in the hospitals. They asked the government to attend to overcrowding, supply better food and hospital care, and, most crucially, to shift the camp to a more suitable site than mosquito-infested marshland.<sup>29</sup> The commission concluded with an argument for charitable funds to improve sanitation, water, housing, provisions, and, among other things, “discipline and morals.”<sup>30</sup> The commission confirmed Hobhouse’s findings but sharpened the stakes. The suffering of “Boer” women and children was now posed as a matter of a population in need of serious health and hygiene reform. Yet the camps, and military authority, remained exempt from critique.

In her later writings, Hobhouse noted with some regret that black inmates, whom she never properly studied, were entirely absent from the report of the Fawcett Commission. The obvious difference between Hobhouse and Fawcett is that while the former faced imperial government as an irritant, the latter was a benefactor. The Fawcett Commission presumed that civilian concentration camps must be militarized and that movements must be strictly regulated because political risks would only add to the problems of disease and perceived immorality.<sup>31</sup> Hobhouse noted the failure of the commission to do what she felt guilty for not doing herself, which was to investigate suffering in “native camps.”<sup>32</sup>

Victorian interest in “concentration camps” shows, on the one hand, a profound erasure of black suffering and, on the other hand, concern for Afrikaners through sentimentality, morality, and a technical attention to deficiencies in camp infrastructure and services. Clearly, the camps were mismanaged and ill-equipped to deal with civilians and were beset by problems of sanitation, food shortage, overcrowding, and insufficient medical facilities, all of which exposed confined populations to what Ruth Gilmore calls “premature death.”<sup>33</sup> What is striking, however, are the different ways in which Hobhouse and the Fawcett Commission posed humanitarian relief against broader conditions of war and dispossession. Their recommendations point to the severe limits of intervention to protect life under colonial occupation and its aftermath.<sup>34</sup>

### **Post-War Reconstruction and an “Intellectual Breakthrough,” 1902–1923**

After eight years as British colonial provinces, the Orange River Colony, Transvaal, Natal, and the Cape Colony merged in 1910 to form the Union of South Africa. John Cell argues that an “intellectual breakthrough” transformed the terms of debate in the constitutional conventions leading up to unification, when the idea of segregation suddenly became ubiquitous as a rationale for the advancement of white supremacy.<sup>35</sup> There are two points to be made about this advancement. Until the early 1920s, the colonial norm of structured neglect of the majority was questioned in theory, if not yet in practice, as cities initially focused primarily on means of exclusion. Second, town planning within the postwar reconstruction of certain cities served to exclude Africans, and only then gradually to entrench white privileges, a process with lasting implications for the possibility of biopolitical intervention in the lives of white proletarians.<sup>36</sup>

Drawing from specific regional colonial legacies, Durban championed a colonial urbanism that perceived itself as essentially modern and white, while it tried to contend with various “non-whites” as different kinds of temporary residents.<sup>37</sup> With Africans relegated to “locations” and shack settlements outside city limits, early segregation was aimed at Indians.<sup>38</sup> African mobility was controlled through a municipal monopoly on the brewing and sale of sorghum beer. This “Durban System” received praise as an innovative method of self-financing municipal “native control.” Needless to say, the racial frame would not admit a broadened cultural politics of scientific social welfare to imagine transforming the lives of all.<sup>39</sup>

Progressive ideas about city government and planning did circulate, however, especially in the service of British attempts to use urban local authorities to consolidate power and presence. Lord Milner, for example, the governor of the Transvaal, imported a group of British men engaged by the avant-garde ideas of local government and town planning.<sup>40</sup> Lionel Curtis, the acting town clerk of Johannesburg, extended city boundaries, installed an electric tram system, and removed “natives” from “insanitary areas” slated for redevelopment, depositing them instead in the

first municipally established township, in the vicinity of today's Soweto. Similarly, Charles Porter, Johannesburg's first medical officer of health, advocated African eviction to protect the white industrial city from the ills of rent racketeering and overcrowding.<sup>41</sup> Porter drew selectively from British antislum and public health legislation, and from Ebenezer Howard's Garden City Movement, which sought to bring the countryside into working-class neighborhoods. Unlike his metropolitan counterparts, however, Porter suggested rehousing dispossessed slum dwellers on cheaper peripheral land, not on site.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the idea of "planning" was increasingly adapted from the scientific management of industry to the science of subdivision design. Self-described urban planners offered services through governmental and professional bodies to optimize subdivision through graphic representations of infrastructure and population.<sup>42</sup> In South Africa, these ideas and practices were slow on the uptake. Township boards, in 1906, provided sites and services in townships with higher land values, favoring those well-off and white, while private interests resisted land-use regulation, let alone planning.<sup>43</sup> The Housing and Town Planning Act of 1909 appeared to launch an era of state intervention for the township boards under the new Union Department of Lands. However, the Lands Department faced divergent regional politics and, in 1913, gave in to provincial authority over township formation and administration.<sup>44</sup>

Despite obstacles to town planning, transformations in urban space were effected in the name of health. Widespread tuberculosis in African locations, exposed in the Tuberculosis Commission Report of 1914, along with the devastating influenza epidemic of 1918, which killed five hundred thousand Africans, paved the way for the passage of the Public Health Act of 1919. This and the Housing Act of 1920 also increased African exclusion through the "sanitation syndrome."<sup>45</sup> The influenza epidemic also broadened concern for urban reform to wider public opinion, particularly through the Labour Party, which made poor whites and urban slums key issues in the national elections after the First World War.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, both the Public Health Act and the Housing Act were seen at the time in racially neutral terms because Africans had been written out of their frames of reference, as populations governed by parallel legislation.

The militant strike of 1922 was a turning point in hegemony as urban segregation came to be seen as a means of class control. When white miners struck against the introduction of African workers, the military was called in to put them down brutally. The fear of class war prompted Johannesburg's white housing scheme proposals in 1923, though they were never built; African removals remained a cheaper alternative.<sup>47</sup> In the 1920s white working classes throughout urban South Africa began to secure their place in the city, while Africans remained tethered to particular "locations." The Natives (Urban Areas) Act of 1923, which cast Africans as "temporary sojourners" in the city, further entrenched the distinction between

planning specifically for Africans in locations as opposed to planning generally for the rest of urban South Africa.<sup>48</sup>

In 1906 the majority of land on Durban's southern periphery in Wentworth and Fynnlands was divided into forty-acre farms on which Indian peasant-workers had made an "unplanned, densely settled . . . maze of shanties, houses, market gardens, winding dirt paths and roads."<sup>49</sup> A mixed black population occupied the low-lying lands adjoining the bay and in the marshy interior.<sup>50</sup> By the 1920s, however, market gardening that was oriented to subsistence and locality reached a peak, after which the possibility of an independent Indian peasantry on the urban fringe was squeezed out by segregation and market forces and Indians shifted increasingly into waged employment as peasant-workers.<sup>51</sup> There is a profound erasure in the historical record of the labor and expertise of this mixed black population who transformed the southern periphery into a working landscape. This became clear inside the borough when rate-paying white residents petitioned the attorney general for a justice of the peace to deal with what they saw as an overpopulated and disorderly landscape populated by black squatters.<sup>52</sup>

Meanwhile, public health knowledge in white civics was treated as authorized biopolitical expertise linked to stabilizing working-class white residents and to holding out for long-term industrial possibilities as the city began to see the southern periphery as prime industrial land.<sup>53</sup> After a series of outbreaks of infectious disease, white civic groups tried to use the provisions of the Public Health Act of 1901 to get South Coast Junction and Sea View on the southern periphery, incorporated under the Boroughs Boundary Commission of 1919.<sup>54</sup> The commission set up public health boards and encouraged members of the landholding white public to participate in their administration, financed through rates for services; those who did not comply would be fined. Indian residents in nearby Clairwood organized in the early 1920s in parallel ways to refuse rates, and struggles ensued between Indian and white bodies about who could represent the public in public health.

### **Dialectics of Industrialization and Segregation, 1923–1953**

The 1925 campaigns that produced the Pact Government coalition between the Afrikaner-led National Party and the socialist-leaning Labour Party promised stronger segregation through the uplift of "poor whites" and the protection of "civilized labor."<sup>55</sup> Once in power, the Pact Government facilitated "skilled" job creation through the South African Railways and Harbours and in the Iron and Steel Industrial Corporation (ISCOR), while also supporting white farmers who stayed in the countryside. Public finance and agrarian depression converged, however, after the state had resolved to significantly raise the living standards of the white working class through noncontributory old-age pensions.<sup>56</sup> By the end of the 1930s the Pact Government had cemented its alliance with the urban white working class through state investment in suburbanization and public transport. While Afrikaner



migration to cities varied regionally, the state became more fully committed to using biopolitical tools to transform urban space to support racially distinct standards of living.

In parallel, urban planning in the 1930s in Durban began to shift in important ways. “Betterment planning” in the “reserves” to which Africans had been consigned in 1913 and 1936 failed dismally in stemming the livelihoods crisis. Town planning addressed segregation and industrialization as largely technical questions. The 1930s the heyday of import substitution industrialization (ISI), a development strategy then emerging from Latin America, which emphasized the substitution of import dependency with investment in domestic manufacturing. Town planning found productive outlets in planned industrial towns. One such town, Vanderbijlpark, the site of South African Iron and Steel Corporation’s new steelworks, was a testing ground for bridging postwar ISI, rational spatial organization, and ethno-racial social engineering made manifest, for example, in the construction of a light engineering zone to create a buffer between black and white residence.<sup>57</sup> Later planned industrial towns drew from Vanderbijlpark, as did industrial decentralization to the north and south of Durban in the 1940s.

Durban was well ahead of the curve in managing the contradictory imperatives of industrialization and segregation, retaining a white center with ethnic enclaves surrounded by a “black belt” of shacks and more distant new white suburbs.<sup>58</sup> As the city incorporated “Added Areas” in 1932, including today’s South Durban, the Chamber of Industries sought South Durban for industrial expansion. The Slums Act of 1934 gave local authorities new powers to demolish and replan existing housing, to dredge marshlands for industrialization along Maydon Wharf and south of the bay, and to clear the black belt.<sup>59</sup> Urban cleansing began in the central ethnic enclaves and then spread to surrounding settlements in Cato Manor, Springfield, Mayville, and South Durban, but there was little will to rehouse displaced populations, thereby deepening the crisis of housing for Durban’s black working classes.<sup>60</sup> The state did invest in limited spaces for African middle-class life in “model villages” in the 1930s, in Durban’s Lamontville, Chesterville, and Baumanville, the first two funded by the Durban System. These schemes were eclipsed by public housing for whites and by the massive demand from African shack dwellers, whose number in 1948 was estimated at twenty-seven thousand.<sup>61</sup>

Importantly, the Durban City Corporation (DCC) began to internalize the interests of capital in its spatial strategy by leaving the port and railways to the central government and specializing in acquiring land and making it available for industry.<sup>62</sup> After incorporating Added Areas, the corporation planned for sewerage and waste disposal, water supply, “nonwhite” housing, roads, mosquito-breeding prevention, and public health, as well as for industrialization in South Durban.<sup>63</sup> Existing industries had made the city aware that industrial effluents posed a problem beyond



the means of the sewerage system, an indication that externalities would have to be borne by someone.<sup>64</sup> Industrialization also required a massive infrastructural overhaul. The swampy alluvial flats of the South Durban basin were drained; the Umzinto, Umhlatazana, and Umlaas Rivers canalized; and the Amanzimnyama and Mobeni estates cleared of shack dwellers and leveled for industrial use by the early 1950s.

What is often forgotten in the historiography of infrastructural change are the labors of primitive accumulation in creating a capitalist landscape.<sup>65</sup> In conversation with me in 2007, an older resident of Merebank pointed with pride to the cut in the hillside where the Umlaas Canal reaches the ocean, saying his father had dug it out of the ridge. The city had accepted by the 1930s that some “nonwhites” should be stabilized as industrial workers in South Durban. The Merebank-Wentworth Housing Scheme, later called the Merebank-Wentworth Indian and Coloured Housing Scheme, was built between 1942 and 1962 on land acquired in the 1930s. One thousand and fifty acres were set out for Indians and 235 acres for so-called Coloureds, on a cadastral layout with roads, sewerage, storm water drainage, and pavements.<sup>66</sup> The Natal Indian Association and the Merebank Indian Ratepayers Association (MRA) protested against the housing scheme as a form of covert segregation, and mass protests were held by the Durban Expropriation Joint Council of Action, delaying the Central Housing Board’s approval.<sup>67</sup> The MRA waged a campaign against the City Council for about a decade. When they lost the battle in the courts, they were forced to fold. The council used the Housing Act of 1920 as a legislative means to expropriate 656 acres from whites and 629 acres from Indians, purportedly for productive purposes.<sup>68</sup> Community activists reorganized, concerned that the council was expropriating homes to provide space for industry. Indeed, the shack settlement called Wireless became the site for the Frame Group textile mill, and then for the Beacon Sweets factory.<sup>69</sup> The more dramatic contrast between industry and residence was built at the end of this period, in 1953, when 285 acres in Wentworth became the site of the Stanvac Oil Refinery, today’s Engen Refinery.

While South Durban was being transformed into a particular kind of industrial-residential space, residents in shack settlements found their situations increasingly precarious. In 1944 areas declared slums to be removed included Cato Manor, the north bank of the Umgeni River, Karim Lane in South Coast Junction, and Happy Valley between Wentworth and the Bluff. Brij Maharaj and Dianne Scott have argued that the bulk of South Durban’s forty thousand “forced removals” were effected in the 1930s and 1940s for industrial or infrastructural land use and authorized by provincial and local legislation before apartheid’s Group Areas Act of 1950.<sup>70</sup> The racial zoning plan of Durban’s Barnes Report of 1944 prefigured the national career of apartheid’s Group Areas Act in the 1950s.<sup>71</sup> The dominant spatial ideology is well articulated in *The Durban Housing Survey*, published by

the University of Natal in 1952, which recommended racial consolidation through residential space adequate for expansion and with good access to the right kinds of work, separated by physical barriers or, if needed, open “buffer zones.”<sup>72</sup> Durban’s undulating hills, rivers, and steep ridges were seen as natural geographical barriers for differentiating biopolitical sovereignty.

People who lived through this period of violent spatial transformation began to organize in new ways, galvanized by the miners’ strike of 1946.<sup>73</sup> Young militants challenged the old guard of the African National Congress (ANC), and the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA) began to see the ANC as an ally in struggle. Participants in the bus boycotts of the 1940s pointed to prosaic burdens like heightened transportation costs aggravated by forced removals. New legislation following the Nationalist Party electoral victory in 1948 had made everyday black presence in the putatively white city more risky.<sup>74</sup> The imposition of the pass system on women was the main complaint behind the ANC-led Defiance Campaign of 1950–52.

The late Billy Nair was a young boy in Durban during the turbulent 1940s, working, studying, and actively participating in the nascent labor movement, then the congress movement, in the South African Communist Party (SACP) reconstituted underground after the banning of the CPSA, and finally in Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC. During his early years as a labor organizer for the Dairy Workers Union and the South African Congress of Trade Unions, Nair recalls widespread and uncounted rural and urban activism before the repressions of the early 1960s. He also recalls black frustration with respect to state support for Afrikaner working-class migrants coming to Durban from the *platteland* (rural interior), pushing for stronger labor market segmentation and housing segregation. As the white working classes were drawn into a new relation with the state through work, welfare, housing, and infrastructure in a racially segregated city, some black residents were beginning to formulate a critique of racialized biopolitical government.<sup>75</sup>

### **From Urban Crisis to Biopolitical Revolt, 1953–1970s**

The 1950s and 1960s mark the high tide of spatial engineering of the impossible utopia of apartheid’s “separate development.” Underwritten by strong growth, manufacturing and finance capital found profitable outlets in the mass provision of black housing and in the construction of the apartheid city. Regional planning became a key part in the state’s development and security strategy during the political clampdowns of the 1960s. Metropolitan planning became more tightly connected to the urban accumulation and circulation that followed elite expectations of first world standards of living. Importantly, apartheid’s mass black housing provision was underwritten by strong economic growth in the 1950s and early 1960s and by the political repression of black nationalist organizations.

As the apartheid economy, with its grossly uneven investments in the built

environment, shifted into political and economic crisis, the state cut investment in African housing in 1967. This was a crisis of capital and of racialized biopolitics. Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd shifted to a dual strategy of militarizing the frontiers and granting self-government (read noncitizenship) to the Bantustans, the successors of the Native Reserves. Meanwhile, apartheid's coercive urban segregation system required the forced removal of masses of people into racially designated Group Areas. More than half of the city of Durban was forcibly evicted and moved under the Group Areas Act.<sup>76</sup> The Durban Council established a technical subcommittee in 1950 to oversee the displacement from the west of the old Borough of more than seventy thousand Indians, eighty-five hundred Coloureds, forty thousand Africans, and less than twelve thousand whites, the last figure reduced to thirty-one hundred after white public outcry.<sup>77</sup>

A key assumption in the technical subcommittee's ideal of the apartheid city was that interracial contact in residential areas bred conflict. The recent African-Indian riots of 1949 were used as evidence of this truism. Yet industrial and commercial areas were thought of as "common" areas in which people met on unequal and impersonal terms, as white employers and "nonwhite" artisans or laborers, in contrast to the relations of intimacy and equality implied by residential contact.<sup>78</sup> On the latter point, a variety of civic groups opposed forced removals in the hearings of the Group Areas Board. Systematically, Indian protests went unheard while European protests worked to adjust the abstract plan. In particular, lower and middle-class whites in Added Areas like Malvern and Woodlands resented the idea of moving to accommodate Indians in "white homes." The subcommittee recognized the need to fulfill an ideal of united "European" presence that might not be contiguous on the map but would be connected through white supremacist biopolitics.<sup>79</sup>

The transformation of the city proved profitable for the construction industry and, increasingly, for finance capital. A key moment in this process was the shifting of capital from mining into other spheres of manufacturing, spearheaded by the Anglo-American Group's formation of the National Finance Corporation in 1949 and a merchant bank in 1955. Finance capital allowed urban redevelopment without state assistance in the building of central business districts, freeways, and white suburbs. By the 1970s the Durban Corporation had invested in expertise to fuel and finance segregationist development under the guidance of Town Clerk E. B. Scott and City Treasurer Ossie Gorven.<sup>80</sup> The latter brought into being Durban's Capital Fund, built on property investment, which kept Durban debt free and reliant on only moderate rate increases since the late 1970s. As Bill Freund has observed, the Capital Fund "turned Durban into a kind of engine of development potentiality," its potential remaining unrealized due to inconsistent economic development and the political exclusion of the majority.<sup>81</sup>

Political exclusion meant that subaltern ingenuity with respect to spatial transformation has remained largely forgotten. The Govender family has moved

across Durban since the early 1940s, farming on leased land whenever it could. For this peasant-worker family, periodic expropriation became an unavoidable fact of life. From an early age J. Govender helped his father transport vegetables to the Warwick Avenue Market in the heart of Durban, which is itself on the verge of expropriation today. Their livelihoods were abruptly transformed in 1948, however, when the City Council bought their land for industry and told them to move elsewhere. Govender's father moved to Merebank and farmed on leased land with "one [or] two laborers, Indian ladies." Eventually, they owned an acre near the end of South Coast Road, where the Umlaas Canal turns to enter the ocean. Govender recalls an arduous daily routine, shattered once more when, in 1960, the City Council expropriated the land "to build houses and build factories, and to build freeways."<sup>82</sup>

Govender emphasizes improvements undertaken by marginal farmers like him in the face of willful negligence by the city's planners. Apart from expropriations, the key events of his life were two major floods, in 1958 and 1987, for which he blames the poor planning of the Umlaas Canal as it bends at the future site of the Mondi Paper Mill. At this point, he explains, high tides forced down the barrier and flooded his plot. In 1987, Govender was evicted on the grounds that toxic waste had traveled downstream, contaminating the soil. He faults prior acts of callous and poor planning of canal construction and toxic waste disposal. Govender was forced into unrewarded improvisation, tinkering, and innovation, which he describes in great detail. His anguish as he faces expropriation once more from the land on which he has farmed for the past 20 years on the edge of Durban's airport has to do with a lack of recognition for improvements that people like him have undertaken. His practical management could never attain the status of expertise.<sup>83</sup>

While some of Merebank's residents have recourse to histories of attachment and labor in Durban's southern periphery, most of Wentworth's Coloured residents do not. Merebank was an older, cosmopolitan area cleansed of non-Indians by apartheid's forced removals. In contrast, Wentworth was a product of disposessions across Durban in the 1960s and 1970s, and its residents came to a biopolitical space in which industrial use values were dominant. They also came from varied mixed-race backgrounds, and several describe their passage to Wentworth as crystallizing their classification as Coloured. In time, residents in Wentworth developed their own elaborate poetics, a kind of Wentworth blues expressed in humor, music, street style, and photography, an expressive tradition used by gangsters, artists, social workers, pastors, and political activists.<sup>84</sup> Wentworth's counterculture in the 1970s was only one manifestation of a broader configuration of crisis.

Political and economic crisis in the apartheid space economy coincided with the onset of a global crisis, and also with a highpoint in black worker militancy in Durban in 1973. These worker struggles, the Black Consciousness Movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the Soweto Uprising of 1976, remind us of fomenting critical sentiments in the 1960s. This may require a reconsideration

of popular support for liberation movements during the alleged “political vacuum” of the 1960s, as Raymond Suttner argues.<sup>85</sup> When the township and worker revolts broke into the open in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they were expressions of more than a decade of careful strategizing about points of legal, open conflict over racial infrastructure. Experts like social workers, health-care professionals, urban planners, geographers, sociologists, lawyers, photographers, and others were drawn to harnessing their knowledge in the call for an actual commons. Wentworth and Merebank participated differently in this renewal of organizing through community groups, trade unions, churches, schools, and youth groups. With the leadership of putatively Leninist liberation movements exiled, jailed, banned, or forced to operate underground, open and legal activism demonstrated a new kind of political vitality. From the Black Consciousness Movement’s Black Community Programmes to the work of organizations documenting forced removals of black populations to the widespread housing struggles that gathered under the banner of the United Democratic Front in the 1980s, the contradictions of differential biopolitical sovereignty helped generate widespread organized revolt. Forms of expertise once put to use in building segregation were now part of an ideological struggle to deracialize Durban. There is much to be said about the many strands of the turbulent 1970s and 1980s, but what is crucial is that this moment of civic biopolitics began to call for a different kind of city in a time after apartheid.

### **Conclusion: Biopolitical Struggle and the Evasive Commons**

Over South Africa’s long twentieth century the exclusion of black populations from the white city contradicted the ongoing need for labor, as well as the actually cosmopolitan world of proletarian Durban. As many have argued, Durban has long sought to present migrants, shack dwellers, street traders, and other informals as incidental rather than central to the life of the city, even as their knowledge and practice have long been at the heart of urban life.<sup>86</sup>

The history of segregation and industrialization built the twin values of capital and state racism into the landscape. While some exceptional figures formulated a critique of biopolitical sovereignty in the 1950s, it became clear to many people by the 1970s that the lived realities of racial capitalism had been built into grossly inequalitarian infrastructure. Urban crisis provoked intense questioning from people about how to understand the urban fabric in order to change it. The forms this questioning took varied considerably even in the microcosms of Wentworth and Merebank. Activists who sought to stitch these protests into a movement saw their transformative potential as part of a broader refusal of racialized access to the means of life. This was nothing less than an exceptional moment in which background exclusions, remnants of specific histories of dispossession, were thrown up into the air, and in which a different kind of city, and country, could be imagined. There is much to be said about the way in which this powerful biopolitical revolution was contained

in the period of negotiated settlement with the apartheid regime, and also about the ways in which biopolitical struggles have reemerged in new guises after the struggle for democratic sovereignty has apparently been won. The radical renovation of biopolitical expertise in the 1970s and 1980s is important to understand today as we witness another such moment in contemporary struggles for housing, food, medicine, and universal access to the means of dignified life.<sup>87</sup>

## Notes

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1. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon, 2000); Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).
2. Massimo De Angelis, *The Beginning of History: Value Struggles and Global Capital* (London: Pluto, 2007).
3. David Featherstone, *Resistance, Space, and Political Identities: The Making of Counter-global Networks* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Featherstone uses the term *subaltern* to refer to marginalized groups, and also as a marker of emergent collective and connective praxis.
4. C. B. Macpherson, *Property: Mainstream and Critical Positions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978), 4–11. Thanks to Keith Hart for steering me here.
5. The foundational work is Dianne Scott, "Communal Space Construction: The Rise and Fall of Clairwood and District" (PhD diss., University of Natal, 1994), written explicitly in defense of an Indian commons in South Durban. Also see Dianne Scott, "Creative Destruction: Early Modernist Planning in the South Durban Industrial Zone, South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 29 (2003): 235–59; Stephen Sparks, "Playing at Public Health: The Search for Control in South Durban, 1860–1932" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, Department of Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2003); Stephen Sparks, "Civic Culture, 'Environmentalism,' and Pollution in South Durban: The Case of the Wentworth Refinery" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, Department of Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2005); Stephen Sparks, "'Stink, Maar uit die Verkeerde Rigting': Pollution, Politics, and Petroleum Refining in South Africa, 1948–1960" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, Department of Historical Studies, University of



- KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, 2004); Bill Freund, "Brown and Green in Durban: The Evolution of Environmental Policy in a Post-apartheid City," *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25 (2001): 717–39; David Wiley, Catherine Root, and Sven (Bobby) Peek, "Contesting the Urban Industrial Environment in South Durban in a Period of Democratisation and Globalisation," in *(D)urban Vortex—South African City in Transition*, ed. Bill Freund and Vishnu Padayachee (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002): 223–58; Sven (Bobby) Peek, "Doublespeak in Durban: Mondi, Waste Management, and the Struggles of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance," in *Environmental Justice in South Africa*, ed. David McDonald (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2002), 202–19.
6. On racialized dispossession, see Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization: Places of Power in Post-Apartheid South Africa* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 10–11. On the renovation of biopolitics, see Jean Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life: AIDS, (Bio)Politics, and the Neoliberal Order," *Public Culture* 19 (2007): 197–219.
7. Paul Rabinow and Nikolas Rose, "Biopower Today," *BioSocieties* 1 (2006): 197.
8. Maynard Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome: Bubonic Plague and Urban Native Policy in the Cape Colony, 1900–1909," *Journal of African History* 18 (1977): 387–410; Michel Foucault, "Society Must Be Defended": *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).
9. There are now several important books doing this work, including Saul Dubow, *A Commonwealth of Knowledge: Science, Sensibility, and White South Africa, 1820–2000* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); William Beinart, *The Rise of Conservation in South Africa: Settlers, Livestock, and the Environment, 1770–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jock MacCulloch, *Asbestos Blues: Labour, Capital, Physicians, and the State in South Africa* (Oxford: James Currey, 2002).
10. Keith Breckenridge "The Biometric Obsession: Trans-Atlantic Progressivism and the Making of the South African State" (paper presented at the First Network Workshop on the Documentation of Individual Identity: Historical, Comparative and Transnational Perspectives since 1500, University of Oxford, September 26–27, 2008); Keith Breckenridge, "Progressivism Unleashed: Reinterpreting Reconstruction" (paper presented at the History and African Studies Seminar, Department of Historical Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, October 28, 2009).
11. Daniel T. Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: Social Politics in a Progressive Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); Michael McGerr, *A Fierce Discontent: The Rise and Fall of the Progressive Movement in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Breckenridge, "Progressivism Unleashed," 9–10.
12. Breckenridge, "Progressivism Unleashed," 10.
13. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), 138–45; Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Colour Line: White Men's Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); but see also Ann Laura Stoler, "Racial Histories and Their Regimes of Truth," *Political Power and Social Theory* 11 (1997): 183–206.
14. Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Warwick Anderson, *Colonial Pathologies: American Tropical Medicine, Race, and Hygiene in the Philippines* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); for South Africa, see Keith Breckenridge "Verwoerd's Bureau of Proof: Total Information in the Making of Apartheid,"



- History Workshop Journal* 59 (2005): 83–108; Andrew MacDonald, “Durban-bound: Chinese Miners, Colonial Medicine and the Floating Compounds of the Indian Ocean, 1904–7,” *Journal of Natal and Zulu History* 23 (2005): 94–128.
15. Breckenridge, “Progressivism Unleashed.”
  16. Sara Berry, *No Condition is Permanent: The Social Dynamics of Agrarian Change in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).
  17. Lake and Reynolds, *Global Colour Line*.
  18. Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*; and Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
  19. Dan Smit, “The Political Economy of Urban and Regional Planning in South Africa, 1900–1988: Towards Theory to Guide Progressive Planning Practice” (PhD diss., University of Natal, 1989); Jeff McCarthy and Dan Smit, *South African City: Theory in Analysis and Planning* (Cape Town: Juta, 1984).
  20. Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2001).
  21. Henri Lefebvre, *Writing on Cities*, trans. and ed. Eleonore Kofman and Elizabeth Lebas (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2004).
  22. I treat all racial categories as historical and colloquial terms, although I sometimes use *black* as a generic alternative to *nonwhite*. The terms *African*, *Indian*, and *Coloured* harden alongside deepening segregation.
  23. Brian Roberts, *Those Bloody Women: Three Heroines of the Boer War* (London: John Murray, 1991), 120–21, 135. *Boer* was a pejorative term for Afrikaners, regarded by the British as racially inferior. Camp hospital records show ethnic affiliations rather than generalized racial typologies.
  24. Emily Hobhouse, *The Brunt of the War and Where It Fell* (London: Methuen, 1902); Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship between Classes in Victorian Society* (New York: Pantheon, 1984).
  25. John Fisher, *That Miss Hobhouse* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1971), 129.
  26. Hobhouse, *Brunt of the War*, 46.
  27. Emily Hobhouse, *War Without Glamour: or, Women’s War Experiences Written by Themselves, 1899–1902: Historical Records Collected and Translated by E. Hobhouse* (Bloemfontein, South Africa: Nasionale Pers Beperk, 1924), 4–5.
  28. Roberts, *Those Bloody Women*, 193.
  29. *Ibid.*, 65–66.
  30. Millicent Fawcett et al. [Concentration Camps Commission], *Report on the Concentration Camps in South Africa by the Committee of Ladies Appointed by the Secretary of State for War*, Cd. 893 (1902), 1.
  31. *Ibid.*, 8.
  32. Roberts, *Those Bloody Women*, 206.
  33. *Ibid.* Ruth Gilmore calls modern racism “the state-sanctioned and/or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death”; Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 247.
  34. Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” *Public Culture* 15 (2003): 11–40.
  35. John Cell, *The Highest Stage of White Supremacy: The Origins of Segregation in South Africa and the American South* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 213.

36. Sue Parnell, "Creating Racial Privilege: The Origins of South African Public Health and Town Planning Legislation," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 19 (1993): 476.
37. Bill Freund, *The African City: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 109.
38. Maynard Swanson, "Urban Origins of Separate Development," *Race and Class* 10 (1968): 31–40; Maynard Swanson, "The Sanitation Syndrome"; Maynard Swanson, "'The Asiatic Menace': Creating Segregation in Durban, 1870–1900," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 16 (1983): 401–21; Brij Maharaj, "The Local State and Residential Segregation: Durban and the Prelude to the Group Areas Act," *South African Geographical Journal* 77 (1995): 33–41.
39. Breckenridge "Progressivism Unleashed," 11.
40. Phil Harrison, Alison Todes, and Vanessa Watson, *Planning and Transformation: Learning from the Post-Apartheid Experience* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2008), 22.
41. Parnell, "Creating Racial Privilege," 480.
42. On subdivision design as "practical inventions" in the early twentieth-century United States, see Keller Easterling, *Organization Space: Landscapes, Highways, and Houses in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 130–31.
43. Sue Parnell and Alan Mabin, "Rethinking Urban South Africa," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 21 (1996): 50.
44. Alan Mabin and Dan Smit, "Reconstructing South Africa's Cities? The Making of Urban Planning, 1900–2000," *Planning Perspectives* 12 (1997): 196.
45. Parnell, "Creating Racial Privilege," 488.
46. *Ibid.*, 485, 487.
47. Thanks to both Keith Hart and Richard Walker for the reminder that biopolitical tools are used in class war; this is necessary but insufficient in explaining the emergence of racialized welfare; Smit, "The Political Economy of Urban and Regional Planning in South Africa," 59–60.
48. Mabin and Smit, "Reconstructing South Africa's Cities?" 199; Smit, "Political Economy of Urban and Regional Planning," 54.
49. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 135. The term *market gardening* is of English origin and refers to small-scale fruit and vegetable production for cash sale.
50. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 168.
51. Bill Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders: The Indian Working Class of Durban, 1910–1990* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1995); Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 217.
52. Sparks, "'Playing at Public Health,'" 3.
53. *Ibid.*
54. *Ibid.*, 4.
55. Jeremy Seekings, "'Not a Single White Person Should Be Allowed to Go Under': *Swartgevaar* and the Origins of South Africa's Welfare State, 1924–1929," *Journal of African History* 48 (2007): 382.
56. Jeremy Seekings, "The Carnegie Commission and the Backlash against Welfare State-Building in South Africa, 1931–37," *Journal of Southern African Studies* 34 (2008): 536–37; Seekings, "'Not a Single White Person.'"
57. Smit, "Political Economy of Urban and Regional Planning," 79.
58. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 65.
59. Mabin and Smit, "Reconstructing South Africa's Cities?" 202.
60. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 66–67.

61. Department of Economics, University of Natal, *The Durban Housing Survey: A Study of Housing in a Multi-racial Community* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1952), 347.
62. Freund, *Insiders and Outsiders*, 14.
63. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 243.
64. Province of Natal, *Report of the Durban Borough Boundaries Commission* (n.p., Natal Provincial Gazette, 1930), 15, Durban Archives Repository (DAR), 3DBN ANN A4.11, Mayor's Minutes 1931.
65. Linebaugh and Rediker, *Many-Headed Hydra*.
66. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 261.
67. *Ibid.*, 264–65; G. Chetty, interview by the author, Durban, June 25, 2005. All names except for those of public figures who are easily identifiable, or those who are no longer alive, have been changed; pseudonyms have been used for living people.
68. Scott, "Communal Space Construction," 263.
69. G. Chetty, interview.
70. Scott "Communal Space Construction," 118; Brij Maharaj, "Local State and Residential Segregation." *Forced removal* is the term used for eviction on the basis of "race group" in apartheid South Africa.
71. Scott, "Creative Destruction."
72. Department of Economics, University of Natal, *Durban Housing Survey*.
73. Tom Lodge, *Black Politics in South Africa since 1945* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1983).
74. Paul Maylam, "The Rise and Decline of Urban Apartheid in South Africa," *African Affairs* 89 (1990): 69.
75. Billy Nair, interview by the author, Durban, August 28 and September 4, 2008.
76. Smit, "Political Economy of Urban and Regional Planning in South Africa," 103.
77. Leo Kuper, Hilstan Watts, and Ronald Davies, *Durban: A Study in Racial Ecology* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1958), 192.
78. *Ibid.*, 37.
79. *Ibid.*, 202–9.
80. William Freund, "City Hall and the Direction of Development: The Changing Role of the Local State as a Factor in Economic Planning and Development in Durban," in Freund and Padayachee, *(D)urban Vortex*, 15.
81. Freund, "City Hall and the Direction of Development," 16.
82. J. Govender, interview by the author, Durban, September 10, 2005.
83. *Ibid.*
84. Sharad Chari, "Photographing Dispossession, Forgetting Solidarity: Waiting for Social Justice in Wentworth, South Africa," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 34 (2009): 521–40.
85. Raymond Suttner, *The ANC Underground in South Africa* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana, 2008).
86. Richard Pithouse, "Struggle Is a School: The Rise of a Shack Dwellers' Movement in Durban, South Africa," *Monthly Review* 57 (2006), [www.monthlyreview.org/0206pithouse.htm](http://www.monthlyreview.org/0206pithouse.htm). See also Richard Dobson and Caroline Skinner, with Jill Nicholson, *Working in Warwick* (Durban: School of Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, 2009).
87. Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life."