# BARE LIFE

## Life of the Urban Poor During the COVID-19 Pandemic in South Africa

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

# ABSTRACT

This thesis is an investigation into topics that have been given new contexts and circumstances as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. The thesis focuses on processes of marginalization, enduring inequalities, social abandonment and violence. Ethnographically I focus on the "urban poor", by which I mean here fisherfolk, domestic workers, homeless and others. I employ a triple analytical focus using the concepts "bare life", "resilience" and "necropolitics" to highlight the shadow sides of the pandemic response as it has unfolded in South Africa. Throughout the chapters, I argue that the South African pandemic response – which has been among the strictest in the world - have exacerbated inequalities and consequently caused a reduction in quality of life which is especially related hunger, poverty and loss of livelihoods among the urban poor.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# BACKGROUND

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March 21, 2020, I woke up feeling well-rested. My last few hours in Durban had just begun and I sure was not going to waste them. I grabbed some fruit and cereal while listening to one of the latest South African smash-hits "eMcimbini". Apart from the music playing, it was a quiet day. There were no nearby squads of monkeys scouting from the roof and trying to steal food, and seemingly no activity in the lush garden outside the guest house at which I was staying. I finished eating and went outside to sit on some stairs to obtain some last rays of sun. I contemplated on the experiences I had had in the city of Durban. Everything from walking the beachfront almost daily, to the rastaman who parked his car outside a shopping mall and chased after me to ask for money all the while insulting the parking guard for simply being a parking guard. Overall, though, my time here had been fantastic - although, to not glorify the fieldwork experience too much - it had been lonely at times.

This contemplation of mine was interrupted when Mandla, my go-to Uber driver, called. I had contacted him the day before to secure a ride to the airport. He lamented on the phone how Covid was bad news for his driving business. His usual routine of driving back and forth from King Shaka International Airport (the airport in Durban) was now in grave jeopardy. Flights were being cancelled left and right which meant that the flow of people going to and from the airport was dwindling rapidly. Mandla was a married man and also had a daughter to provide for and was understandably worried. He had called to tell me he would arrive early because he had no customers anymore anyway and was bored. Mandla arrived at the property shortly after calling and at that point I felt compelled to pack my belongings and leave early. Mostly because Mandla was bored and I felt sorry for him even though he insisted "don't rush, I will relax in the car".

Regardless, I proceeded to bid my farewells to the family who lived in the main house, patted their very kind dogs and gave back my key. This particular moment was more emotional than I would have imagined it to be. Durban – the city in which I had spent countless hours reading up, writing a project proposal, as well as going through a most tedious and expensive application for a research visa. To be perfectly honest, at this point in time it did feel much

like a wasted effort, and COVID-19 had hit at the worst possible moment. As such, I went out of the property gate with feelings of remorse and bitterness.

As Mandla started driving, he was in high spirits. I was pondering the issues I was now facing with my M.A. project and was in a completely different world. Mandla had wildly different thoughts. He asked out of nowhere "how is the airplane food"? At first, I was annoyed by this seemingly bizarre question, but I deducted that he was genuinely interested in the topic. Mandla had never been on an airplane before. I explained how there are usually a select few dishes to choose from and that you can also order snacks and drinks if one so pleases. Mandla seemed intrigued: "what kinds of food?", he wanted to know. I answered that sometimes there is chicken, fish and vegetarian choices. Mandla wanted to continue this talk on airplane cuisine very much, but we had arrived at King Shaka International Airport. I shook Mandla's hand and gave him some R400 before he helped me retrieve my baggage from the back of his car. I thanked him and said, "I'll call you when I get back [to Durban]". Mandla nodded and that was that. I was not sad as I stood there in front of the airport. I was actually very confident that the pandemic would be over soon, and I could return. I had eight months left on my multiple-entry research visa and thus had plenty of time. Going through the airport, there were almost no people in sight. It was a form of ghost town compared to when I had arrived just a month and a half earlier. I checked in and before I knew it, I was in Dubai. Like in Durban, they checked every passenger on their whereabouts in the last few weeks. Several were disallowed boarding as they had been to the wrong country. Luckily for me, South Africa was considered a safe country at the time, and I was allowed to board. The South African lockdown was announced two days later, on March 23 and commenced March 26. Had I stayed, I would have been confined mostly to inside the property as the lockdown was among the strictest in the world at that time. However, if I had had the power of hindsight at the time and I had attempted to decide whether to leave or not, I undoubtedly would have stayed in the country. Back then however, leaving seemed like the best option.

Well-seated back home in Bergen life was going slow. I began working through my field notes to make some sense of the fragments I had managed to gather. Originally, I was interested in the maritime culture of Durban, specifically subsistence fishing and the increasing issues of securitization and spatial exclusion in the city's harbor area. I was also looking into the development of the ocean economy in the country. However, given the abrupt ending to my fieldwork period, there had not been enough time to go into the depths of maritime culture in Durban. Thus, I needed a change of topic that allowed me to utilize the

unique data that I did manage to gather. With a lot of great support and ideas, I came to think of all the different groups of people I had encountered during my stay such as homeless people and domestic workers. I also thought back at Mandla and the uncertainty he was now facing as a result of the pandemic. The pandemic response in South Africa first received praise but as time went on, critiques were being released in media outlets and academic journals. As the situation developed, it was becoming clearer by the day that the "urban poor" were the losers of the pandemic. Women were being threatened by police for simply fetching water, homeless were being put into camps, subsistence fisherfolks were banned from fishing and domestic workers were losing their jobs left and right.[1] While all this was happening, I came to the realization that I have met many of these groups of people who were at the receiving end of the effects of the pandemic lockdown measures and the general downturn of the economy. I had interacted with them, talked with them. And I recalled the rallying voice of Zithulele, a subsistence fisherman: "Tell them what life's like here [Durban], let them hear".

So, then, this thesis has become somewhat of a mosaic. A mosaic that deals with very different groups of people and topics. However, what they all have in common is this thing called "life". I have tried to do justice to Zithulele by developing a particular framing to the best of my ability, this "life", or perhaps more accurately, "pandemic life" of these different peoples. A framing that does centrally focus on the pitfalls of the pandemic response and its life consequences. But I also attempt to bring attention to the vitalism and fighting-spirit in these people as they face difficulty. The pandemic has made fates coincide and struggles resurface in the blink of an eye.

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[1] See: Ellis (2020); Sunde & Erwin (2020); Damons (2020).

# CHAPTER ONE

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# INTRODUCTION

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis is an investigation into the life consequences of the pandemic response in South Africa. It is in part based on physical fieldwork conducted in the city of Durban located in the province of KwaZulu-Natal on South Africa's east coast. It is in part based on digital fieldwork composed of my own news archive, academic publications as well as limited social media research. The thesis aims to examine and problematize the impacts the pandemic response has had on fisherfolks, domestic workers, homeless and shack-dwellers. I focus on key issues such as unemployment, social marginalization and informality among these aforementioned groups who I call "urban poor". These people have been disproportionally affected by a pandemic response that seems to not have fully appreciated the precarious socioeconomic conditions under which many South Africans live today. These conditions include informal living, the need to move and be mobile and living lifestyles that generally are not compatible with strict regulations on movement and reduced economic activity. I draw on unique interactions and events to highlight the difficulties the urban poor have faced and continue to face under lockdown and how this in turn has affected their life situations.

While the fieldwork in Durban was originally intended to study maritime culture and development over the course of at least six months, the COVID-19 pandemic created methodological problems. Participant observation, as was the method employed, relies on sustained social interaction with interlocutors (Bernard 1994). When this was no longer possible and fieldwork consequently cut short, field data proved insufficient to support the original aim. It was thus necessary to reenvision and alter the project so that the fieldwork data could retain its value as a unique ethnographic endeavor while at the same time providing useful and sufficient data for the thematic at hand. The result is a thesis that straddles various socio-cultural groups of people in the varied urban landscape of South Africa, highlighting

differences but also similarities between their pandemic experiences. I utilize data from both physical fieldwork and digital fieldwork.

In analytical terms, I argue that the changes in daily life, such as home confinement for example, alters/transforms the qualities of lived life so that life come to take on characteristics of bareness. This indicates not only a potential reduction in the general quality of life but is also suggestive of a pandemic politics that specifies and controls how people may live and die.

## METHODOLOGY AND ETHICS

### Inception of Fieldwork

My initial research interests lay with maritime culture and economy in Durban, South Africa. I wanted to engage with local inhabitants that depend on the ocean to sustain themselves. The fisherfolks of Durban were therefore of primary interest to me. My chosen method was "participant observation" which is a qualitative research method which seeks to gain in-depth knowledge about a group or groups of people. I employed this method in order to familiarize myself and socialize with interlocutors and participate in their everyday lives. The aim was to obtain a sense of their reality and acquire knowledge about their everyday troubles and motivations (Bernard 1994; Zahle 2012). However, before entering South Africa, it was required that I obtain a research permit. The processing of obtaining a research visa was somewhat expensive and tedious, requiring, amongst others, health certificates, local affiliation in Durban, as well as travel from Bergen to Oslo on two occasions because the South African embassy did not accept remote visa applications at the time. Thanks to good help from people at the Department of Social Anthropology in Bergen with previous application experience as well as with connections on the ground, I was able to obtain the research visa. I was therefore legally allowed to conduct research in the country for up to nine months.

On arrival in Durban, I met with a contact at the Durban University of Technology. Here we discussed how to approach the field site and engage with interlocutors. It was established that the most fruitful path forward would simply be to walk down to the piers and areas in which

fisherfolks could be found and talk to them. I was also provided with some general areas with great density of fish shops to which I also regularly paid visit. This discussion with my contact was helpful toward providing a tangible beginning for my fieldwork endeavor. Shortly after, I began going to the piers, which are scattered all over the North and South sides of the Durban harbor area. These maritime areas came to be the main sites of data collection. Interacting with the Durban fisherfolks at the piers in the scorching hot summer sun provided glimpses into the lives of these varied folks: some Zulu, some colored but most stemming from the very first Indian indentured laborers arriving at a Durban Port in the mid-1800s. Facing exclusion from public space, these people showed remarkable resilience through their uphill everyday battles of accessing the ocean. The meetings, while producing some very serious sunburns before I realized these fisherfolks were not fully covered up without reason, were productive and educational.

On my walks to and from the piers, I also met a varied bunch of homeless persons. Often, they would ask for a favor – some food or drink – and I would get an interesting conversation in return. Topics ranged from haircuts to politics. While these were encounters purely of chance, they were instrumental toward understanding how everyday struggles are enacted and materialized in the urban landscape of Durban. Furthermore, living in one of Durban's wealthy suburbs during fieldwork, I was able to observe the lives of the wealthy. The various properties at which I lived, all had domestic workers. This formed a contrastive view on life in Durban and made a great impression on me.

## Methodological Challenges

The issue of safety is an important one when visiting South Africa. Durban has high rates of violence[2] and I had to take this into account when I chose the place at which I would reside. Thus, safety was a top priority during my stay. I resided in a relatively wealthy suburb with many large houses and gated properties. This allowed me to focus on my research without

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[2] Although Durban and South Africa in general rank high on global murder rates, statistics and being on the ground are two very different things. I never experienced any dangerous situations during my stay, even when walking along the highway which I was advised not to. This does not mean Durban is safe and that this was a good decision, but how dangerous any given area is, depends upon many factors. See Marks & Abdelhalim (2018) & Marks (2012) on conducting research in "risky environments". For violence in South Africa more generally, see

worrying about any external factors. It also had the benefit of providing good internet infrastructure and electricity. However, the placement of the suburb had a large drawback in that the distance from home to field site was too great to walk. This meant that I was dependent on taking Uber cabs from A to B. This solution to the aforementioned drawback worked relatively well. I was however, often stopped on the streets which was getting tedious after some time. People would usually ask for money or small favors. I took the hint and replaced my newly bought Converse shoes with R50 slip-ons from Mr Price[3], ditched my summer jeans for shorts and generally went for a more relaxed look. This worked so well that in fact people sometimes mistook me for a South African – perhaps aided by looks similar to those of a colored[4] person. I experienced no harm or dangerous situations in Durban and my most visited spots at the piers were safe areas with police present.

Visiting the piers was a fruitful tactic and I did manage to gather data this way. However, I had no initial "gatekeeper" (Zahle 2017: 474), meaning a person that has some "control over the access to the organization or group", so that it becomes easier to access social situations and gain rapport with interlocutors. As such, I experienced it as increasingly difficult to make any progress in the field. This difficulty occurred not only due to the lack of a gatekeeper, but also because the piers were occupied at random. If I went to a pier one day, there would be certain people there. Going the next day, the certain people there would be someone else. Sometimes the piers were empty, which I knew had something to do with the tides at any given time. In essence, then, there was a lack of a constant. Mid-March I was working on solving this issue in two ways: First, by trying to gain access to the township of Chatsworth – most notable due to it hosting a historically large fishing community. Secondly and lastly, I had contacted the leader of the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance (SDCEA) that frequently interacted with fisherfolks in Durban. These plans were put to an end with the advent of the coronavirus pandemic during which I left South Africa. Despite the setbacks, I obtained interesting data through the interactions I did have during my fieldwork period. I quickly discovered just how much data was hidden even in the more mundane and ordinary interactions. As such, I have done my best to integrate these varied interactions into this thesis.

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[3] Mr Price is a budget garment store.

[4] Racial categories are somewhat naturalized in daily speech in South Africa, and interlocutors used these terms to describe each other.

## Shifting Methodological Circumstances

The advent of COVID-19 pandemic made participant observation difficult to employ in practice. Already during the last few weeks there were subtle winds of change bringing some indication of what was yet to come. Hand sanitizers were being put up in malls around Durban, there were minor signs of hoarding of foodstuffs at the supermarkets, houseowners were sending home their domestic workers and people, almost overnight stopped, shaking hands. I was also starting to feel a sense of guilt visiting the piers and taking Uber cabs to get there. The last thing I wanted to do was make any interlocutors sick. I assessed at this point that my dependence on travel, and thus direct interaction with people, posed an unacceptable risk both to me and others. However, I must note that even at that point in time, when very little was known about the novel coronavirus, people were more afraid of a lockdown than the coronavirus. Interlocutors were hoping that the Durban heat would strike down the virus (a fine theory given the circumstances) while others were afraid of what could happen in a "dysfunctional country". Acute hunger and total poverty was only a doorstep away for many subsistence fisherfolks. All things considered, I found that fisherfolks did not talk much about the virus. Still, this did not free me from responsibility.

Regardless of the perceptions on the coming pandemic, I had to consider what it would mean to stay in South Africa. Firstly, as Europe was locking down, it was not inconceivable that the same could occur in South Africa. This potentially meant that I would be confined to the home with limited options of interacting with other people. Secondly, I was advised by locals and other abroad contacts to leave given the uncertainty of the situation and potential health risks. Lastly, the idea of returning to the field sometime in the future seemed realistic at the time and thus the consequences of leaving would not be graver than some time lost. When I decided to leave South Africa, it was therefore with a return in mind. This was a comfortable thought given the amount of work it had taken to carry out research in Durban.

## Eclectic Modes of Data Gathering

In order to supplement my fieldwork which was cut short, I began reading newspapers, reports, statistics and academic articles. This period was particularly challenging because campus was unavailable, and the days were spent mostly in solitude at home in front of the

computer. There are few other ways of describing this period than incredibly boring and demotivational. However, I was inspired by a sentence in a paper on academia in times of pandemic that read "We have not chosen confinement, but we can choose how to adapt and respond" (Corbera et al. 2020: 193). Indeed, while the looming feeling of confinement was always there, I could choose to respond to this in a more generative fashion.

I began by endeavoring into the world of "digital anthropology" (Miller & Horst 2012). This is a relatively new methodology in anthropology that aims to take the digital seriously, not as virtual or parallel worlds, but as "diverse arenas of framed behaviour within which we live" (Miller & Horst 2012: 15). This means that the digital is no less cultural and no less an aspect of being human than other arenas of study. Thus, I began following a Durban-based fishing group on Facebook. Here I could follow my field site live, albeit in a somehow curated format. Although the group was very varied in terms of the members' socioeconomic status and was not exclusive to subsistence fisherfolks, it was an interesting gateway into the thoughts of people affected by the pandemic. During the days leading up to the lockdown on March 26, 2020, people showed frustration over the coming restriction of being unable to leave their houses. People needed "vitamins from fish" and exclaimed that "the poor will be even poorer". Others did not want to risk being "killed by the virus". These were interesting topics of discussion that also extended beyond just the sphere of subsistence fisherfolks, relating for example to the issue of Chinese vessels roaming the maritime borders "emptying the ocean" but also how the pandemic was a chance for fish to become "plentiful" again. This caught my interest because my research on maritime culture in the city of Durban depended upon in-depth data on the fishers – data which I did not have at present and did not exist on the world wide web. I felt inclined, then, to change my focus on Durban to South Africa as a whole to be able to incorporate a larger corpus in my thesis. This also triggered a change of topic as I wanted to utilize my unique ethnographic data to its full extent, beyond just the subsistence fisherfolks. This utilization of data created a focus on, broadly speaking, "the urban poor". By this I mean, as I will extend on later in the thesis, subsistence fisherfolks, domestic workers, homeless people, shack-dwellers and urban individuals.

During this time, I also began reading academic publications on the pandemic in South Africa which were being published at a rapid pace. Critiques of the pandemic response were quick to be released and important discussions on poverty, informality and violence emerged. This led me in the direction of also looking to other alternate sources of data such as newspapers, blogs and visual media. In sum, then, I have made good use of the many most excellent journalistic

reportages, academic publications, as well blogs published during the COVID-19 pandemic. Examples of these are Divine Fuh's initiative "Corona Times Blog"[5] which contain a number of essays on life in RSA during the pandemic and excellent reportages by the non-profit news agency "GroundUp", such as their coverage on the "COVID Village"[6] in Cape Town which came into being during lockdown in 2020.

## Ethical Considerations

When I first arrived in Durban, the issue of ethics was pondering my head. Specifically, the issue of whether "informed consent" is an absolute principle and anthropological virtue (Zahle 2017). I had for this reason, pre-printed consent documents before my arrival and was ready to get out in the field (or so I thought). In the field, I quickly discovered, however, that this would not work. This is so because as my interlocutors were largely of the poor strata in society and were subject to social marginalization and many held the state in low regards – including its many forms of bureaucratization and paperwork with which I was associated. How could I, then, a complete stranger, walk to one of the piers and ask people to sign consent papers? It was, in hindsight, a somewhat "ridiculous" idea. The consent paper would mean instantaneous distrust, and as I discussed with some local academics, the consent forms would not work at all in Durban. Thus, I altered my method by simply talking to people and telling them about my research and obtaining oral consent this way. Most were very happy to contribute and did not care about the technicalities and formal ethics.

Because my interlocutors were mostly of the poor strata of society and are in precarious and vulnerable positions, I have anonymized all people and their names as well as places, when necessary, to prevent them from facing any potential repercussions - although I think this not likely as people spoke freely and did not raise any concerns around their safety – nor was my research particularly politically, or otherwise, sensitive at that time. I have applied a concept of "the aggregate person", or as Hopkins (1996) choose to describe it "collage" or "composite". This entails creating an individual and imbuing it with interactions and events that did in fact occur but as an aggregate of different people presented as one or perhaps two.

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[5] See: https://www.coronatimes.net/ (Accessed 11 December 2021).

[6] See: https://www.groundup.org.za/article/despite-fires-no-sanitation-nor-any-basic-services-covid-village-persists/ (Accessed 11 December 2021).

# MAIN ARGUMENTS AND THEMATIC FOCUS

Ethnographically, as stated above and expanding from an initial in-field emphasis on fisherfolk, this thesis focuses on the pandemic experiences and events of the urban poor. By "urban poor" in this context I mean specifically, *subsistence fisherfolks*, *shack-dwellers, homeless and domestic workers* but also sometimes South African immigrants and more broadly the poor in the South African cities. Crucially, the South African lockdown which commenced March 27 first received massive praise for its efficiency (Harding 2020). Indeed, already when I landed in Durban February 11, there were temperature screenings of all incoming passengers at King Shaka International Airport. Interestingly enough, there was also a queue specifically for Chinese passengers which most likely had to do with the prevalence of the virus in China at the time. Indeed, "efficiency" is perhaps a very fitting word for this response. Norway, for example, had effectively zero measures in place at its biggest airport in Oslo at that time, so the speed of response was comparatively good. This is not necessarily that surprising given that South Africa is certainly no stranger to modern pandemics and epidemics given the prevalence of HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis in the country. The well-known AIDS-denialism of Thabo Mbeki[7] also must have left a lesson for the ages.

However, it did not take long before criticism of the lockdown came to the surface. The lockdown, as one of the strictest in the world and which largely confined people to their homes, had many drawbacks. These criticisms which arose dealt with different aspects of the pandemic response. First, it was the issue of the validity of the pandemic measures that was questioned. The measures were argued to be akin to "performative science" (Muller 2021) and "an emulation" of Western pandemic models (Hood 2020). This critique claims that the development of regulations has a scientific (epidemiological) basis, but regulations themselves are not socially holistic and, as a result, ignores the social reality which they are supposed to regulate, which differs wildly in material and social conditions. Broadly speaking, this means that the regulations affected specially the poor so harshly that it was not deemed justifiable. This brings us to the second critique that adhering to "scientific advice" becomes very difficult under precarious material and socioeconomic living conditions. Take

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[7] Although Mbeki is known for his neglect of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa which allowed the epidemic to go unchecked during his years as president, his lack of action was not necessarily driven by a lack of knowledge but instead he, as a pan-Africanist, went against the idea of the "diseased African". See Mbali (2004) for a discussion on this topic.

for example the instruction of home confinement during the early days of the lockdown, which prevented subsistence fisherfolks all over South Africa from accessing the ocean and the bodies of water upon which their livelihoods depend entirely (Sunde & Erwin 2020; Mbatha 2021). When fishing was yet again allowed, fisherfolk were arrested at the Durban piers for allegedly not adhering to physical distancing rules, this enraged people: "police are harassing innocent fishermen when the real thugs are running around killing. I guess it's easier to arrest those who are peaceful than criminals" and another person wondered why police were "targeting brothers providing for their families". Further on, there is also the general advice of hygiene such as washing hands often and the case of social distancing which is not realistic in many of the informal settlements in South Africa. The reality is that the majority of South Africans live in townships and shack settlements with lacking basic infrastructure. The ordinance of idleness and basic hygiene become sort of "cruel jokes" (Kihato & Landou 2020: 2). And lastly, as Friedman (2021) argues, a reason why the pandemic response may have developed in this trajectory, is that many South African politicians and policymakers live very much like "first world" citizens. This makes for a skewed worldview, perhaps a sort of political "ethnocentrism", that does not fully account for what may be thought of as that held by the urban poor.

What all these critiques might point toward, is the pandemic situation of the poor or the less affluent and the "…social bases on which people (barely) survive" (Kihato & Landau 2020). These "social bases" may be understood as the backbones of the informal economy, which by its status as informal is vulnerable in its juxtaposition against the formal. We might think of the ocean for the subsistence fisherfolks, that feeds and nourishes them, or the gated home for the domestic worker that employs them or the streets for the homeless that allows them to hustle. In the blink of an eye much of this was removed from them. I am interested in what happens in these moments of deprivation. I have therefore chosen to focus on the qualities or characteristics that come to define life as lived during pandemic time.


## Pandemic Life and Its Characteristics

In what ways is it possible to conceptualize pandemic life and the consequences of pandemic regulations? During the early days of the pandemic, Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben

wrote a series of blog posts[8] on the ills and adverse social consequences that might arise from the regulations. While Agamben's argument runs complex, it can be summarized as follows: that the "state of exception" (South African Disaster Act as conforming to such) funnels unfounded power to government.[9] This, in turn, transforms the world into a sort "gigantic concentration camp" (Duque Silva & Higuera 2020: 508). Within this camp, political and individual rights are stripped off of the people, lives are reduced to sheer "biological functioning" or so-called "bare life" (Agamben 1998: 183). Bare life entails in this sense a life that is without enhancement; by this I mean a life in which the primary strides are for basic food and water - and which can be thought of as a contrast to a believably more fulfilling *political* life in which one actively participates in society rather than residing on the periphery of it (Agamben 1998; see also Arendt 2012).

Example wise, bare life is often visible through the lack of options in daily life. A homeless interlocutor, named Langelihle was not able to afford a haircut and he walked around in shame because of it. This situation is indicative of two things: first, that he was poor, and lastly, that he wanted to act but found it difficult. As a human being, being poor sets severe restrictions on one's options and possibilities in life. It bars the access to full participation in because the struggle of putting food on the table takes primacy. In addition, the poverty he was subjected to is of a structural nature that is somewhat beyond his control, such as high unemployment rates[10] in South Africa that condemns even able-bodied young men as Langelihle to precarious living conditions.

In another case, an interlocutor named Johan did not have a bed to sleep on nor food to eat and felt compelled to ask people to help him so he could spend a night at a homeless shelter. Thus, Johan was at the mercy of strangers if he could actually have a night's sleep at in a safe location. As such, to chase the basics, to get a haircut, to be able to eat when you are hungry and sleep in a proper bed, are some examples of life situations that can be understood as

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[8] It must be noted that Agamben's views were controversial because he presented inaccuracies in his posts. One of these inaccuracies were that COVID-19 was no worse than the flu "a mild influenza" (although he later corrected this) and another controversy entailed that COVID-19 was an "invented epidemic". See: http://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/ (Accessed 11 December 2021) for a collection of Agamben's blog posts.

[9] See footnote 8 above.

[10] See: http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02113rdQuarter2021.pdf (Accessed 11 December 2021).

aspects of a bare life. As I have employed the concept in this thesis, then, bare life is a description of a state of deprivation of basic needs and a constant chase to meet these needs.

Critiques may, of course, be raised against the concept of bare life, one being that it is somewhat totalizing and static, meaning that it has clear limitations analytically. Furthermore, it is not so, empirically speaking, that any of the groups of people discussed in this thesis are completely confined to the ramifications of "bare life" and can be considered people that cannot escape, for example, acute hunger. There is a need for a corrective to the finiteness and totalizing direction of the concept of bare life, and to this end I employ the concept of "resilience" (Grove 2018). This concept has a dual aim, first to draw attention to the very real ramifications and limited possibilities caused by "resilient structures" of inequality (Nyamjoh 2020), such as patterns of persistence in spatial marginalization of fisherfolk, that create conditions for people to emerge as "lesser humans" (Bertelsen 2021) without right to practice their livelihoods. Secondly and lastly, the concept of resilience validates the effort and brings to light fighting-spirit in these same people. Together, these considerations of pandemic point to a type of "vitalism" that I have recognized in several anthropological works such as Biehl (2013) on social abandonment, "Ruinous Vitalism" (Wilhelm-Solomon 2017), Simone (2004) on city life in four African cities, Povinelli (2016) on life and non-life and Sharad Chari (2017) that speaks of an existence that is riddled with difficulties and hardships, but where people still persist and struggle past a dark reality, sometimes succeeding; sometimes not.

My argument, then, is that there are structures (pandemic regulations most centrally here) that confine and reduce aspiration (loss of work, social marginalization, bare life etc.), but that it is rarely so that this type of structural confinement forms a complete barrier which cannot be escaped – even as hard doing so might be. Or as Marrow & Luhrmann notes writing on bare life:

> In an anthropological analysis, even those subjects who are no longer able to be effective in their social worlds—those who are systematically rendered marginal and meaningless—still remain within a specific social location, within a specific pattern of expected social interactions (2012: 511).

This dynamic between bare life and resilience features centrally in all chapters. I heed Didier Fassin in that "life… should be seized from the inside, in the flesh of the everyday experience of social agents, immigrants and refugees, those who suffer war and poverty (2007: 57).

## Politics of a Pandemic

During the heyday of the early pandemic era in South Africa, it was quite apparent how novel regulations were forcing people to live in certain ways, often much to their detriment. The regulations were affecting their homes, workplace and social relations. Immobility, idleness, fear and even boredom were some of the troubles people discussed on social media. People argued back and forth that this was justified on the grounds that it would save lives in the long run and prevent the healthcare systems from overloading. At this point in time, graphs and statistics covered the frontpage of almost every media outlet, thus proving one's point right was hardly difficult. What may we make of this? Achille Mbembe, writing on the increasingly "calculative" nature of politics and government asks: "Who will define the threshold or set the boundary that distinguishes between the calculable and the incalculable…?" (2021: 28).

This question is interesting because it diverts attention from the numbers themselves - because numbers mean little without context - to the people or institutions who decides what is worth bringing into the calculations and what is not. The "who" necessarily point toward accountability. Who will be responsible, or who has the right to define? The prime point here is that pandemic regulations are developed to regulate life, to "define" or force it on a certain trajectory to supposedly avoid more fatalities than necessary by the state and its institutions, --- for example the South African Police Security force (SAPS) - that enforce its will. But what is lost in the process of regulating life? I argue that when the state subsumes the role of defining how life is to be lived during pandemic time, its power to perform this act of regulation rests on scientific prediction models, graphs and statistics that determine the best courses of action (Muller 2021) and grants the state definitional power. That is, power over life and death or what Mbembe has called "necropolitics" (2003). Mbembe's concept of necropolitics asks "whose bodies in society are expendable, marginal, and whose bodies are figured by the state as waste" (Levine & Manderson: 2021: 394). I employ this concept of necropolitics in the thesis as a way to think about and conceptualize the politics behind the regulations and draw attention to the active life-defining power behind them.

Throughout the thesis, then, I utilize the triple concepts of bare life, resilience and necropolitics to analyze the material presented in each chapter. While bare life and resilience are foregrounded and actively used, necropolitics is backgrounded as a behind-the-scenes machinery that produces situations of life and death, while bare life and resilience describes how this reality plays out on the ground.

## THE SOUTH AFRICAN PANDEMIC MEASURES IN BRIEF

Throughout the thesis I refer to *pandemic regulations*, *pandemic response* and *lockdown*. The pandemic response has been based on various *alert/lockdown levels*, each indicating severity from 5 most severe to 1 least severe.[11] In specific:

- Level 1 indicates a low Covid-19 spread with a high health system readiness
- Level 2 indicates a moderate Covid-19 spread with a high health system readiness
- Level 3 indicates a moderate Covid-19 spread with a moderate health system readiness
- Level 4 indicated a moderate to a high Covid-19 spread with a low to moderate health system readiness
- Level 5 indicates a high Covid-19 spread with a low health system readiness

The alert levels have varied throughout 2020 and 2021. The strictest level 5 has only been in place for one period from 27 March until 31 May 2020. Level 5, in brief, includes confinement to place of residence for anyone but essential workers,[12] ceased business operations for anyone but for those involved in essential goods or services[13], movement between different provinces prohibited, public transport prohibited unless for essential purposes, halting of evictions and shelter for homeless. Other lockdown levels, level 1 to 4, have incorporated easing of the above restrictions or removed the restrictions in their entirety. Level 5 is among the strictest in the restrictions in the world.[14] When it is referred to *hard lockdown* in this thesis, it indicates level 5 and approximately the time period between 27 March and 31 May 2020. Besides having direct consequences for most groups of people, the

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[11] See: https://www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system (Accessed 10 December 2021).

[12] Essential workers include those employed in health services, food production and transport.

[13] Essential goods or services include supermarkets and health services.

[14] See https://www.gov.za/documents/disaster-management-act-regulations-address-prevent-and-combat-spread-coronavirus-covid-19 (Accessed 10 December 2021).

lockdown also incorporated a more specific set of measures for homeless people. Now, it was mandated that homeless people be put in temporary shelters or camps and be provided for. As of December 15, 2021, lockdown level 1 is still in effect.

## A DESCRIPTION OF APARTHEID AND PATTERNS OF INEQUALITY

It is neither desirable nor possible to write about South Africa without discussing apartheid - the system of racial segregation that divided society into different groups based on "race". These races were "whites", "coloreds", "Indians" and "blacks". This system, in which whites were on top, began in 1949 and was put to an end in 1994 – which is very recent in historical terms and has implications for South African society today. Josep Llobera, drawing on the works of sociologist and anthropologist Pierre van den Berghe (2007: 232-233), writes that apartheid operated on different levels in society:

1. Citizens were rigidly classified in the four castes mentioned above [whites, coloreds, Indians and black]. Africans had to produce identification papers to white authorities on demand.

2. Power was practically the monopoly of whites. Parliament, armed forces, the judiciary, and other institutions were all controlled and staffed by whites.

3. In the rural areas, half a million whites owned 87% of the land while four million blacks owned the rest.

4. Whites reserved themselves the best-paid jobs. The income of whites was fifteen times that of black.

5. Prohibition of sexual relations and of intermarriage between whites and non-whites. Lawbreakers could be imprisoned for up to seven years.

6. Creation of separate public spaces for whites and non-whites (parks, transport, hospitals, schools, and other areas).

7. Creation of racially homogenous residential areas for blacks in towns (for example Soweto in Johannesburg).

8. Placement of Africans in racially segregated homelands (Bantustans).

This system had wide-reaching effects on sociality, culture, space and place – the consequences of which can still be felt today where many of the patterns of inequality permeates society. In the words of William Beinart: "for African people…the legacy of apartheid remains too vivid" (2001: 290). Indeed, while post-apartheid has been marked by a "de-racialization" in many domains, instead of dismantling the racial segregation of apartheid, it has been reinvented it into a class-based "multiracial" social formation consisting of "insiders" and "outsiders" Seekings & Nattrass (2005). The insiders enjoy affluence while the outsiders are in ever-deepening poverty (Seekings & Nattrass 2005: 45). However, despite this new social formation, as I will show in the thesis, "race" appears to have all but disappeared from the South African society. The black African, was under apartheid the poorest, and still is in the post-apartheid period, including being among the group that was hit the hardest during the pandemic.

## Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 focuses on the fisherfolk of Durban whose history spans over 160 years in the city. I lay out briefly some of their historical and cultural ties to the Durban port area which has been a place of contestation since colonial times. Physical ties to the Durban port area were severed when the hard lockdown was set in motion. I show how their cultural practice of fishing was consequently denied. Furthermore, I argue that the fisherfolk have been rendered "unessential" by others than themselves and that their very right to urban space is compromised, especially during pandemic time. This has furthered their marginal status, as well as exposing them to different forms of bare life such as hunger, poverty and spatial marginalization.

Chapter 3 deals with the homeless of South Africa, broadly speaking. I draw on encounters with interlocutors whom I met along the Durban beachfront and connect these encounters to pandemic developments. Homeless – as it also were before the pandemic – inhabit a precarious position in the South African urban landscape and were thus vulnerable in the face of the pandemic. The government acknowledged this and erected shelters as a response at the beginning of lockdown. These were a mixed blessing where the risk of infection could be higher than in the streets. I consequently argue that the homeless can be understood as socially abandoned people at the periphery of urban space and suggest that the government's eagerness to rid them off the streets is colored by a view of them as criminals. While the

pandemic shelter proved a mix blessing, I argue that they simultaneously represent bare life while also representing acts of genuine kindness.

Chapter 4 focuses on black female domestic workers. This group was severely affected by the lockdown and many thousands lost their jobs. Throughout the chapter, I show how resilient inequalities characterize the working place (the gated home) of the domestic workers and contribute to precarious working conditions. I argue that the gated come can be understood as a place of bare life in which resilient inequalities have continuously oppressed the domestic worker since colonial times.

Chapter 5 discusses the social phenomenon of xenophobia in South Africa. During fieldwork, interlocutors would often express negative sentiments toward Africans of other nationalities. Subsequently, I discuss the issue of xenophobia in a broad sense and draw attention the spectacular forms of violence that has taken place in xenophobic events pre-pandemic. I compare these shows of targeted violence toward foreigners – which includes episodes of macabre killings, shootings and looting – to notable spectacular events of violence that have been perpetrated against South Africans themselves both before and during the pandemic. I argue that the South African shares many forms of spectacular with foreigners, and ultimately that they both can be seen as victims of bare life.

Chapter 6 forms the concluding chapter in which I summarize some of the findings and arguments made throughout the thesis. I also bring attention to important topics that were otherwise left out in the main body of the thesis.

# CHAPTER TWO

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# "Unessential" Fisherfolk by the Banks of the Indian Ocean

## INTRODUCTION

The pier was quite an eerie place when I first started hanging out there. Fisherfolk would stand a meter or two from each other as to not interfere with each other's casts. When I walked by, it felt like disrupting the peace and normal flow of things. Despite this initial uncomfortableness, the pier was an interesting place. Fisherfolk did their best to keep it clean. Cleaning fish on hard concrete while the sun was hammering down was a recipe for bad smell and best avoided. The pier, as it appeared to me, was a gateway into socioeconomic observations – and thus anthropologically interesting. Differences could be observed by the type of reel or rod the fisherfolk were sporting. Some had durable old-school all-metal reels and strong ocean fishing rods. Others had more equipment that varied in expensiveness. If one could afford it, having more than one rod could be advantageous and add a boost to the potential catch of the day. Subsistence fishing is a practice and a profession that relies on mobility and knowledge of tides, weather and fauna to maximize catch. This catch, they depend upon to sustain themselves and their families. Fisherfolk are vulnerable to pollution, securitization and privatization of previously public space, marginalization through their informal status as well as legislation that hinders their free movement along the endless beachfronts of Durban. The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted the mobile everyday life of the fisherfolk. Particularly, they could not practice fishing by any stretches during the hard lockdown. This added to their marginalization and made them susceptible to hunger and poverty. This chapter explores the dyadic relationship between fisher and maritime space. It traces a set of tendencies of marginalization from the arrival of the first Indian indentured laborers in Durban until the present. It describes the ruthlessness with which the pandemic response hit as well as its implications for the practice and even "culture" of fishing. I

subsequently argue that the South African pandemic response has further challenged the fisherfolk's right to access their traditional maritime space.



The Indian Ocean. North side beachfront. Author's own photo.

## THE DURBAN PORT AREA

The Durban port[15] is "the most significant port in the Southern Hemisphere and in Africa in terms of marine-related economic activity" (Dyer 2014: 1). The port is a natural lagoon and is surrounded by mangrove swamps. In the past, elephants and other animals would come here to drink from the river mouths that ended here. The history of the port spans incredibly long and complex, but of note here is that the area was relatively "untouched" meaning by this physical alteration was limited before 1842 when it became a "British maritime harbour" (Bender 1988: 1) and was successively developed from there on until today. The port today harbors of 59 berths[16] in total. Toward the north side of the bay, there is the *North Pier* that

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[15] For a history of the Durban Port, see: Bender (1988); Pearson (1995).

[16] See https://ports.co.za/durban-harbour.php (Accessed 5 December 2021).

stretches some 300 meters into the ocean. Adjacent to this pier, is where the famous Durban *beachfront* is located. Here, there are many piers along the coastline which allow the fisherfolk deep-water access. This side also hosts many facilities for creational activities such as uShaka Marine World, restaurants and shops. The north side is also the place at which I spent the most time during fieldwork. On the south side of the harbor, the *South Pier* is located. The pier stretches some 500 meters into the ocean and prevents strong waves from hitting the harbor. The ocean is very violent on this side. Despite this, it is a popular fishing spot. Adjacent to the South Pier is an area called *The Bluff* or *isiBubulungu* in Zulu. This area rests on ancient sand dunes and retains a peculiar shape. The isiBubulungu area geographically amounts to some over 20 square kilometers in an elongated square from the seaside. The area is home to heavy industry, notably two petrochemical refineries - SAPREF and Engen respectively. The townships of Merebank and Wentworth where some of the fisherfolk hail from are also located along isiBubulungu.



The beginning of South Pier to the left as seen from North Pier. The ridge is part of the ancient sand dune system on which isiBubulungu rests. Author's own photo.

# THE FISHERFOLK OF DURBAN: A BRIEF HISTORY

The fishing industry in Durban traces its roots back to when the first Indian indentured laborers arrived by the South Pier in the year 1860 to the then British "Colony of Natal[17]" (Govender & Chetty 2014: 19). They were brought to work in the booming sugar cane industry[18]. These laborers usually arrived on 5-year contracts, after which they would be free from the contract with the British government. The labor was essentially slavery and the Indians had to endure precarious and poor working conditions. In other words, the laborers were little else than "paid slaves" (Govender & Chetty 2014: 16). Their everyday lives were marked by hardship, violence and racism both from the colonial masters but also due to internal struggles of for example, the caste system[19] that was indeed brought from India (Desai & Vahed 2010: 2). Caste had implications for social cohesion. Yengde who has done archival work notes that "Caste fights often broke out on plantation sites [in Natal]. Many unrecorded events of caste atrocities did not make it to the papers now in the archives" (2015: 68). Yengde also writes that "High caste indentured laborers regarded Africans as more acceptable than the lower-caste Indians. In one instance, an indentured of a higher caste preferred an African woman to a lower caste Indian woman when it came to looking after his children" (2015: 68). However, by force of convenience and in meeting a different reality, particularly on the ship voyage from India to South Africa where mixing of different castes was inevitable, the caste system as well as old rituals and cultural elements were said to be ultimately "compromised" (Desai & Vahed 2010: 23). And "despite the colonial system of segregation, colour-bar and racial prejudice in South Africa at the time, they [lower-caste Indians] were still able to rise above their "station" which they could never have achieved in India" (Govender & Chetty: 23, brackets mine).

The first successful fishing community was vibrant in Salisbury Island which is located inside the port's bay. This venture began in 1865. Although in the later years, the fisherfolk began to experience racism and complaints from "white" neighbors calling for their removal from the island because they allegedly had a "filthy way of living" (Govender & Chetty: 77). Later, in 1883 policies were put in place that put fishing rights behind licenses which put further

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[17] Colony of Natal is now the province of KwaZulu-Natal in which Durban is located.

[18] See: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/indian-indentured-labour-natal-1860-1911

[19] A caste system is. Yengde (2015) writes that caste most certainly exists in South Africa today, although it is a little discussed issue.

restrictions on the fisherfolk. Complaints against the fisherfolk continued to be filed as can be read in this excerpt from the Durban Angling Club:

"…Our only hope is that the Government will assist the Club and rescue the legitimate fishing from absolute ruin. ...Persons belonging to Club are [white] men who work hard all the week, and their only relaxation is fishing on Saturday…" (Govender & Chetty 2014: 86).

Thus, it was claimed that the Indian fishing community was guilty of "illegal" fishing out of fear that they were depleting the fish stocks. This was inaccurate as the fisherfolks did have permits which allowed them to fish (Govender & Chetty 2014: 78-86). However, by the year 1900 the fisherfolk had all been removed from the island and scattered elsewhere around the port due to the immense pressure put forth by the local "white" populace and the colonial authorities on the Harbor Authority (Govender & Chetty 2014: 88). In 1965 they were completely displaced from the ample fishing ground around the port to the township of Chatsworth located southwest in Durban. After this move many gave up fishing or only took it up part time as a supplement because Chatsworth is far away from the shores of the Indian Ocean. This forced displacement was driven by ideas of race and purity as well as indiscriminate and racist marginalization policies that continue into the present as I will discuss later in this chapter.

## The Practice of Subsistence Fishing

The prevalence of Indians in the practice of subsistence fishing[20] is evident in the ethnic makeup of the fisherfolk today and speaks to its uniqueness. Many are indeed Indian, but people of all origins do practice it. I encountered coloreds, blacks and also whites. Although

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[20] Branch et al. define subsistence fishers as follows: "Subsistence fishers are poor people who personally harvest marine resources as a source of food or to sell them to meet the basic needs of food security; they operate on or near to the shore or in estuaries, live in close proximity to the resource, consume or sell the resources locally, use low technology gear (often as part of a long-standing community-based or cultural practice), and the kinds of resources they harvest generate only sufficient returns to meet the basic needs of food security" (2002: 475)

the whites, as far as I learned, mainly did recreational fishing in contrast to the subsistence fishing of the former group. Both women and men do fish, but the prevalence of men is much higher. In the following, I will note some observations here in as much as they conform only to a very fragmentary description of the practice of subsistence fishing. It is important to note that subsistence fishing in Durban, as I observed and understood it from my interlocutors, is not viewed as a profession as such. To them, it is more a *practice* and part of *culture*.[21] It also makes sense to describe it as *a way of life* to emphasize that it is a part of the everyday experience and that the fisherfolk bear attachment to fishing beyond its economic role in their lives. Subsistence fishing, then, is a practice in which its practitioners fish to sustain themselves. This means that fish and the gifts of the ocean form a foundational part of their lives and that they and their households are dependent upon it.

In descriptive terms, fisherfolk mainly use modern equipment such as common rods and reels with which to fish. Shore-based line fishing is the most widespread, although boats and nets are also employed, for example during the annual sardine rush. Many use live bait of various sorts, mud prawns for example, attached to the hook at the end of the fishing line. However, the use of bait may vary from person to person. The tactic most often observed was to cast the rod and wait, some also do reel in almost immediately after casting. As with most types of fishing, variation in bait and technique is key. However, due to the wealthy experience of many of these fisherfolks, it is probable that they knew which situations require what. They possessed knowledge of tides and winds to determine where and when to cast.

The fish is either eaten or sold, mostly to relatives and friends. There are as much as 200 species of fish in the waters of Durban. Of these, the shad[22] is undoubtedly the most popular fish that people want to catch. It is an extremely popular fish, although not only for subsistence fisherfolk, but also for the sport of fishing around in South Africa. There also exists or existed a ritual (Meenachi) among the Indians to call forth the shad:

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[21] Not everyone might view it as such, but analytically it is more descriptive of the situation on the ground that involves a long history of spatial belonging and fishing-related cultural practices (although the latter is not as prominent today).

[22] A young boy named Bafana used to run on the piers with his fishing rod hoping to catch a shad. It was his favorite fish by far. It is a fish that is supposedly very tasty although bony, and also provides a bit of a fight when caught.

Meenachi is literally the Fish Goddess and this was a ritual to entice shad. The women assemble on the beach where sweet rice, rice-flour cakes (koli-cutta), boiled lentils, beans, chick peas and fruits were laid out on huge banana leaves. A rough caricature of the Goddess made from a brick painted with tumeric paste and kumkum and wrapped with a silk cloth, was placed at the head of the offering. The fishermen, freshly bathed in the sea, would sing devotional songs accompanied by traditional drums and wind instruments (Govender & Chetty 2014: 148).

Although I only stayed at the piers during daylight for safety reasons, I was told that usually the best time for fishing is early morning and in the evening as the tides bringing fish in coincide with these hours during which large amounts of fishers stood at the beach.

Fisherfolks have deep attachments to the port area. The landscape has spatial and historical components to them as Indian communities, notably Salisbury Island, began to flourish in the port area shortly after their arrival. These attachments are shared across particularly the Indian fishermen across a history spanning over 160 years since 1860. Although the attachments could be different for the colored and blacks fishing there. Unfortunately, I did not interact enough with these latter groups of people to understand their attachments to the landscape. I must stress that this is important and should be included in any in-depth studies of the varied group of fisherfolks that exist in Durban. On this topic, Sunde & Erwin notes:

Rural-based subsistence fishers in Natal, predominantly of isiZulu and Thonga culture, also experienced exclusions and forced evictions during these colonial and apartheid periods. Early colonial writers and conservationists refer to these rural inhabitants of coastal Natal living around lakes and estuaries. There is an oral and written record of their dependence on a range of marine, lake and estuarine resources (2020: 15).

## Prominent Issues

Many of the main issues faced by fisherfolks, not just in Durban, but in South Africa as a whole, are covered by the timely reports written by Jackie Sunde & Kira Erwin (2020) and Philile Mbatha (2021). The fundamental issues presented in Sunde & Erwin's report, which focused on Durban and KwaZulu-Natal, are firstly, the issue of cultural practice. They argue

that securitization[23] of the port area as well as everyday marginalization and racism deny the fisherfolk their right to cultural practice. Secondly and lastly, they argue that this is given systemic expression in policy. That is to say that fishing policy discriminately does not acknowledge subsistence fisherfolks as a real category. This is because subsistence fisherfolk are given "recreational" permits and are consequently viewed as such in policy – and as was reflected in the pandemic response that ignored subsistence as its own separate category. This issue becomes a double problem due to the policymakers' misunderstanding or failure to understand what "true" subsistence fisherfolks are. It is not so that fishing must be performed every day, all day long to be considered subsistence fishing by the fishers *themselves*. Particularly, the case that, as I learned, many fisherfolk use fishing as a kind of *supplement* to their livelihoods. This has caused confusion that they are not "true" subsistence fisherfolk in the sense that they can only be fishing and nothing else to be considered as such. However, this view ignores that the fisherfolk *completely depend* upon this supplementation of foodstuffs and also economic capital in the case of sale (Sunde & Erwin 2020). These arguments are also echoed in other sources (e.g., Burger 2015; Kalina et. al 2019; Mbatha 2021; Sowman et al. 2021). Sunde & Erwin sums up their report as follows:

> Indian subsistence shore-based line fishers in KZN have been subjected to a century and a half of racism and class-based discrimination. This marginalisation and prejudice commenced in the colonial era, was consolidated under apartheid, and continues to shape these fishers' relationship with the state and their everyday experiences. The distinctive history of Indian fishers and the extent to which fishing forms the material basis of much of their culture has been ignored. This history shapes their specific approach to the concept of 'subsistence' which has not been understood

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[23] Securitization is the barring of access from certain parts of an area for "security reasons". The Durban port is of outmost importance to the South African economy, and as such is a contested site. Throughout the years, particularly access to the port, South Pier as well as North Pier has been a prominent point of contestation between fisherfolk and port authorities. In 2019, when Kalina et al. (2019) wrote their paper on securitization around the Durban Port, North Pier was closed for fishing. This remains true in late 2021 and it is only allowed to fish from the very back of the pier and not at its mouth which stretches 300 meters into the ocean and provides superior conditions for fishing. A fisherman, Makgatho, exclaimed to me that "surfers have more rights than us [fisherfolk]". This sentiment is echoed in the article of Kalina et al. who writes that "…at North Pier, fishers reported that, despite its closure, private water sports clubs at Vetch's Beach… had maintained unbroken and free access to the pier to launch boats, dive, or even fish" (2019: 375).

by the fisheries department, marine science community and some civil society partners and fisher movements in South Africa. The term subsistence is no longer officially recognised as a separate category in fisheries policy. This holds direct adverse consequences for these fishers (2020: 47).

However, while Sunde & Erwin's report covers these central issues that span across much time and space, relatively little attention is given to the problematic of how the pandemic has affected/is affecting the life situation of these fishers. In this vein, Mabatha (2021), focusing on South Africa as a whole, covers the COVID-19 situation. Mbatha deals more fundamentally with the issue of resilience in small-scale fisheries and that many South African small-scale fisheries were largely unable to absorb the "shock" of the pandemic - unlike the industrial sector:

> Findings suggest that, although Covid-19 and the levels of lockdown restrictions had an impact on the industrial sector, it was arguably better able to absorb the resultant stressors and shocks on operations. Stakeholders with access to finances, networks and other resources were able to implement suitable responses and have thus been more resilient. However, the same cannot be said about the small-scale fisheries sector. Small-scale fishers had difficulty adapting to the sudden changes and limitations in operations brought about by the various phases of the lockdown. These impacts were also not equal: small-scale fisheries in some coastal provinces faced more devastating impacts than others (Mbatha 2021: 5).

However, Mbatha does not deal with the specificities of the Durban fisherfolks (as is particularly evident on the focus of small-scale fisheries which only exist in Durban to a very limited extent (Sunde & Erwin 2020: 40) but instead covers South Africa in a more general sense. Thus, there is a gap that these reports do not fill in the case of the specificities of the Durban fisherfolks and the COVID-19 situation. As these texts are written in the report formats, there is also limited theorization and conceptualization on how to understand the life situation of these fisherfolks analytically. Thus, it is my goal to expand on this gap. I utilize the major points from these reports and expand upon them both in a theoretical vein as well as adding information from talks with interlocutors.

## History in the Landscape

A day late February it awfully windy when I shouted "hello boss" toward a man who was standing at one of the piers on the beachfront with a massive three-road fishing setup – quite unusual for a subsistence fisherman. This was a man I had to talk to. At the time, I did not know Zithulele, as he was called, and this was the first time I had encountered him. It was evident that he was the boss of the pier on this day. He had secured the very best spot at the front part of the pier and was in all probability hoping to land some shads before the end of the day. I asked if he had gotten any fish to which he admitted he had not. I introduced myself to him and he introduced himself in return. I immediately noticed that this was a very amiable man. He knew others on the pier and told them about my research which was a kind gesture given the difficulties I had had trying make friends on the piers. Zithulele turned out to be a veteran with deep knowledge of the fishing culture in Durban and was quite eager to talk about it. He differed from the usual abstemious fisher I had encountered along the sandy banks of Durban. He was in his mid-fifties and hailed from Chatsworth. Without posing him any overly specific questions, Zithulele began to narrate about the arrival of the Indian indentured laborers in Durban and pointed toward the South Pier which was the place of their first arrival. As a descendant of these laborers, he established his ties to the area we were standing on.

After this little history lesson, Zithulele remarked that his ancestors had worked hard to build the country of South Africa. It was through their sacrifice that the country had become what it is. "It's a shame", he expressed, that today the descendants of these laborers (including himself) were being trampled upon and subjugated to what he felt was unjust barring of access from their traditional fishing grounds: "He [former president Zuma] screwed us". Indeed, he was, among other things, referring to the shrinking acreage of the beachfront available to fisherfolks through the securitization and commercialization of the area, the dwindling fishing stocks, and random harassment and corruption enacted by police toward subsistence fisherfolks (see also Burger 2015: 24; Fisher Tales 2021a). "I'm a black man and I'm proud of it, but the black man has caused many problems in this country", he continued. He pointed toward one of the piers in the distant horizon that had previously been the very best pier on this side of the beach, and which was now reserved for recreational activities. The pier was taller and somewhat longer – providing much better access to deep water and shelter

from the crushing waves[24]. Zithulele expressed bitter remorse over this situation. This barring of access was showcased by the signs which could be found all over the beachfront exclaiming "no fishing". Layla, in a short story to Fisher Tales[25] expands on this problematic: "We pay for fishing licence and bait licence, and yet we are banned from the deep-water pier" (Fisher Tales 2021a). Reasons listed for this is that fisherfolk are too "dirty" to be on the pier. However, during my visits to these piers, the piers were clean. Not even once did I encounter a dirty pier. In another story from Fisher Tales, JP elaborates on fishing during apartheid:

> At the Durban beachfront piers, it was quite evident that racism really prevailed there because privileges were given more to surfers and swimmers. We weren't allowed to fish during the day off those piers, we were only allowed to fish from sunset to sunrise making way for swimmers and for surfers. If you were caught, you were charged by the beach authorities and had to pay a fine, and your tackle and all your fishing gear was confiscated. Nevertheless, we caught fish. We just had to stay home and get there towards the evening or overnight (Fisher Tales 2021b).

Zithulele also showed me his Transnet[26] fishing permit which he described as "useless" due to the difficulties of accessing the harbor even with the permit. Due to frequent spills and pollution from port activity, the area was also less desirable at which to fish than in the past. In 2018 Transnet, due to port upgrades, imposed a barring of access to the harbor and planned on doing so permanently, but after pressure from fisherfolks and the KwaZulu-Natal Subsistence Fisher Forum (shortened KZNSFF)[27] it was re-opened (Kalina et. al. 2019). Zithulele continued by drawing a parallel to apartheid, during which he felt that his rights as a fisherman were better maintained than in the present. Indeed, he could fish from the piers, he could access the harbor and the fish stocks were better too. This, as he mentioned earlier, he

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[24] Waves were a real problem. I myself got nearly soaked in water on several occasions standing on these piers.

[25] Fisher Tales is a Durban-based project which aims to collect histories as told by the fisherfolk.

[26] Transnet is a majority share state-owned company that operates *seaports*, railways and pipelines in South Africa.

[27] KZNSFF is a Durban-based NGO that champions the rights of fisherfolks in the KwaZulu-Natal province.

equated with "the black man" coming to power, invoking the imagine of Zuma[28]– the notoriously corrupt former president of the republic. Zithulele was not alone with his perception of apartheid, also Mzamo (a hobby fisherman) expressed his dismay: "the country just needs to be properly managed [as it was before]". It must be noted that neither Zithulele nor Mzamo thought apartheid was "right" or "good" in the general scheme of things, but rather saw, ironically, the marginalization of their rights as fishermen continuing even during the rule of "the black man" who was supposed to be on their side.

William Bissel argues that, on Zanzibar, "colonial nostalgia has emerged in a postrevolutionary context and is best understood as a diverse set of responses to neoliberal policies of urban restructuring" (2005: 284). Similarly, neoliberal restructuring has also taken place along the Durban Port particularly in the shape of securing the port in accordance with international standards that if not implemented could affect South Africa's trade relations (de Boer & Madlala 2008; Kalina et al. 2019). "Operation Phakisa: Oceans Economy" is a neoliberal project that aims, amongst others, to invest in infrastructure upgrades in the country's ports, including the Durban port.[29] (Furthermore, in April 2021 South African authorities announced a R100 billion modernization plan of the Durban Port "to reclaim its status as the best-performing port in Africa" (Muchira 2021). Three weeks before this announcement, in an unverified document, rumors of privatization of the port had been circulating in connection with a recent decision to move Transnet's headquarters away from Durban: "Transnet's decision to move its ports division headquarters from Durban to Ngqura in the Eastern Cape was a precursor for privatising the port" (Mavuso 2021). Regardless of this allegation, these developments of the port could prove to have repercussions for marine users in the area.

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[28] Jacob Gedleyihlekisa Zuma, nicknamed "Msholozi", has been accused of corruption on multiple occasions. He was jailed on the 7th of July 2021 for contempt of court (refusal to appear before the court) relating to an investigation into his role in "state capture" during his years as president. He was allowed medical parole on the 5th of September and was subsequently released (source).

[29] See: https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201706/saoceaneconomya.pdf (Accessed 12 December 2021).

## Double Deprivation: "No Fishing and No Market" During COVID-19

The livelihood of subsistence fisherfolk like Zithulele became increasingly vulnerable with the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic (Erwin 2020; Mbatha 2021). This happened for particularly two reasons: first, movement was restricted, and the general South African citizen was not allowed to leave his or her home unless they affirmed to the definition of "essential worker" (see chapter 1). This directly led to the second issue: subsistence fishing was not "essential" unless one could meet the Department of Forestry, Fisheries and the Environment's definition of "small-scale farming cooperatives[30]" (Sunde & Erwin 2020; Mbatha 2021). Thus, many subsistence fishers, not bearing any attachments to such cooperatives, fell into the category of "recreational fishers" as mentioned earlier. During this time, there was considerable doubt, uncertainty and anxiety surrounding fishing. In a social media group, people were confused for months until one day they could resume fishing. When they were finally allowed back to their fishing grounds, quality of life did not catch up: approximately 43% of the fisherfolk asked in a questionnaire saw a decline in quality of life or no improvement at all (Mbatha 2021: 10). In addition, subsistence fisherfolks were met with a limited market and few buyers available to them (Mbatha 2021; Wegerif 2020). Selling catch and conversion to cash is necessary in order to purchase other essential goods such as clothing. Thus, the initial hard lockdown which began late March 2020 inflicted both chronic and acute hunger for many (Mbatha 2021) and the consequences are still felt long into 2021. This dire situation was further exacerbated by the lack of aid from the state, including that fisherfolk were not eligible for food parcels (Sunde & Erwin 2020: 2).

In essence, the lockdown also entailed that subsistence fisherfolks were actively excluded from making a living. A most important observation in this regard, was that along the northern beachfront as well as along isiBubulungu (southern beachfront), fishers stood anything from dozens of meters apart to sometimes even a kilometer or two consequently posing no realistic risk of COVID-19 transmission had they been allowed to fish, though admittedly this was during hours which were not that popular in terms of fishing. Moreover, many fisherfolks live close to the port area in the townships of Merebank and Wentworth and could walk without making use of public transport. The piers were, on the other hand, more

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[30] Small-scale fishing/farming cooperatives are found all over South Africa. They often consist of a small group of fishers. Small-scale cooperatives are generally more sustainable than many large-scale commercial fisheries. It has proven, however, difficult to organize such cooperatives in any meaningful scale in Durban (Sunde & Erwin 2020: 40).

crowded and posed a different challenge but since there already was law enforcement policing the beachfront area during the lockdown, instead of arresting and harassing fisherfolks, these police could have regulated access to piers which otherwise offer ample space for at least some individuals from which to fish. Thus, it can be argued that the state needlessly made life difficult for the Durban fisherfolk and wasted resources on attacking the poor and creating ideal conditions for hunger instead of broadening their "sense of imagination", as one professor at Durban University of Technology (DUT) once remarked in a somewhat different context, to a more locally adjusted pandemic response. In other words, the state actively applied an indiscriminatory policy which created precarious socioeconomic conditions for the fisherfolks. The state apparatus has created neat, reductionist categories, such as "recreational fisher" which echoes the discourse of the "true" subsistence fisher and actively exclude those who do not see themselves as belonging to these categories. Consequently, despite the contribution by the fisherfolk to the "informal" economy, the state downplayed and undermined this economy as if people making a living through fishing was a source of shame (Wegerif 2020).

So, then, what to make of these technicalities on a paper of "true subsistence fisher or "recreational fishers"? The technicalities and specificities embedded in the pandemic regulations, draw surprising similarities to the "politics of the water meter" (von Schnitzler 2016; von Schnitzler 2008; Loftus 2008). Put differently: Technicalities are not just technicalities in a formal sense but they go beyond this, toward "the development of sociologies that *anticipate* users' behavior*"* (von Schnitzler 2008: 912). For this reason, von Schnitzler argues, drawing on French sociologist Michel Callon, "the process of developing technology" – here "policy" – "is thus not merely a mechanical process, but inherently social and moral". But this process creates in own regime, and in the process, conceals the state's active role in its creation, and thus removes accountability as it draws legitimation from its technical regime. Therefore, it might be fruitful to ask in the context of the pandemic: from where does the South African pandemic response receive its legitimation?

While this is a broad question that is difficult to answer and concerns all chapters in this thesis, I suggest that one might look to the "science" behind the regulations. In this regard, Muller (2021) ultimately argues that the pandemic response indicates an unusual deference to science and that it is this "scientism" that sustains and have sustained the South African regulations. Following this line of thought, Mbembe's (2021) holds that governing bodies are increasingly utilizing calculative means to control how populations live. Whichever the case

may be, it is the very right to the city – hereunder its waterfront - that comes to be at stake in addition to the constant fear of starvation and hunger.



An empty isiBubulungu. I encountered only a handful of fishers on this day. Author's own photo.

## The Right to the City[31]

Following the works of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey defines the right to the city as follows:

"…the right to the city which… is not merely a right of access to what the property speculators and state planners define, but an active right to make the city different, to shape it more in accord with our heart's desire, and to re-make ourselves thereby in a different image" (Harvey 2003: 941).

Therefore, it is a right that includes the users and citizens of urban areas.

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[31] Expression first appeared in the works of Henri Lefebvre (1968) *Le Droit à la Ville.*

Fisherfolk do not travel from one building to another, they travel to the outside. They are visible and thus subject to marginalization simply because they are visible (Sunde & Erwin 2020). This has an interesting parallel to the events that occurred on Salisbury Island where indeed the fisherfolk were *visible* and allegedly *smellable* (Govender & Chetty 2014: 76-91) and for this reason they were not wanted along the banks of the Indian Ocean. Anthropologist Fiona Ross, writing on hygiene in Cape Town, asserts that:

> The history of colonial ideas about hygiene are well-documented. In South Africa that history remains scarring. Cape Town's spatial geography rests on old assumptions about the relation between hygiene, disease and race. The first forced removals were undertaken in the name of hygiene and disease prevention (Ross 2020).

As has been discussed, the fisherfolk of Durban do have a long history in the city. They have witnessed their rights as human beings being diminished more and more at the turn of each decade. The situation of the fisherfolk during hard lockdown comes close to being an ultimate expression of bare life: confined to the home, defined as "unessential" by others than themselves while being subjected to acute hunger and poverty. Particularly, the processes defining others were evident in the fishing groups on social media. In June 2020, when fishing was yet again allowed and subsistence fisherfolk went back to the piers, some individuals were calling the fisherfolk "a-holes", "idiots", "shut down the piers for fishing" and that fisherfolk "are messing it up for everyone".  This wave of hostility was created by photos of fisherfolk standing too close to each other on the piers and not adhering to social distancing. However, someone pointed out that the municipality should "open more piers" for fishing rather than blaming fisherfolk for simply obtaining food.

But what about protest again the restrictions during hard lockdown? Protest naturally was difficult when people were genuinely afraid of the coronavirus. The lockdown at that point in time also held by its credibility and sound justification of saving lives. People were arguing on social media that it is "better to stay home than risk going outside", although some did not agree. The sheer fact that it was not possible to practice fishing does possess some inherent structural element of violence in it, and by this, I mean official law, regulation and policy that inflicts harm upon citizens of the state. Is COVID-19 a good enough reason to essentially deny people the right to the city? I want to rephrase this question to a more fitting one. Given

the assumption that subsistence fisherfolk do have a right to the city, to what extent can it even be established that this is being honored by the South African state, or specifically eThekwini municipality in this case? Even since before COVID-19, from what I learned, one would be hard-pressed to find a fisher that held the state in high regards.

A case point here is Mzamo who thought his country was beautiful, but ultimately it was not "properly managed" as he put it. This is a sentiment that appears widely shared given the numerous protests organized by the KwaZulu-Natal Subsistence Fisherfolk Forum throughout the years and now most recently against Shell's oil and gas exploration survey in KwaZulu-Natal (Carnie 2021). While the past of the Durban Port is riddled with stories of racism and spatial marginalization, this post-apartheid neoliberal era continued with these exclusionary social phenomena. Now most recently COVID-19 which has barred access to many parts of the ocean and made traversing the city a bigger challenge than ever. Ultimately, if there is such a thing such as the right to the city, then it would seem that this right is not for everyone and that it is systematically being infringed upon. COVID-19 makes this abundantly clear.

## Closing Remarks

In the beginning of this chapter I have showed that the fisherfolk has a long history at the Durban port that is riddled with difficulties of race, marginalization and contestation. I have subsequently showed that the pandemic has continued these unequal political and social processes that affect fisherfolk in detrimental ways that, in turn, create conditions of bare life, for example through hunger and suppression of their cultural heritage of fishing. This results in lives that are continuously being suppressed by port authorities, state intervention but also the same people who label them as "a-holes" and "idiots". Despite the fisherfolk's resilience and ability to resist and contest these necropolitical processes relating the Durban port itself and their presence there, their right to the city remains under scrutiny before, during and after the pandemic.

# CHAPTER THREE

# Homelessness and Social Abandonment

## Introduction

The urban landscape of Durban truly showcases a divide of worlds. There was this old man who always sat in the park which was located along the way to the nearest supermarket. He was usually eating on a piece of loaf. He always smiled and looked happy despite his apparent loneliness. But maybe he came to the park for peace and quiet? Regardless, it was heartbreaking seeing countless human beings like him being condemned to walking the streets. Every time I went to the beachfront, there were middleclass South Africans enjoying themselves inside uShaka Marine World. While just outside of it, homeless roamed the promenade looking for a kind soul to give them just enough so that they literally may see another day.

Homelessness is a complex social phenomenon that is relatively understudied in the South African context (Margaretten 2015), and there exist no official statistics on this group of people in a country that otherwise has a graph for everything (Kok et al. 2020). The pandemic posed a new challenge for the South African state to provide for the homeless. The response to this challenge was to a large degree provide shelter to the homeless and remove them from the streets in order to prevent the spread of the coronavirus.

This chapter concerns itself with the homeless and the marginalization they face in their everyday lives. I draw on conversations and walks I had with interlocutors in Durban in order to provide an image of their everyday struggles as it was before the pandemic. I draw on these interactions to contextualize a discussion on the homeless situation during the lockdown, particularly focusing on the shelters and camps that were erected as a pandemic response. I argue that urban space, including shelters and camps, come to represent simultaneously social abandonment but also a place of genuine aid and "urban mutuality" (Hentschel 2014). By this

I mean an urban place that produces cast-outs and destitute, but also builds relationships between different groups of people.



Durban beachfront promenade. Author's own photo.

# LOSING "POWER": A MEETING WITH FANYANA

It was a warm and humid summer day early March in the afternoon that I went looking for one of the public toilets along the Durban beachfront – popularly used by a wide range of people, from homeless to well-off surfers. I had just hung out with some of the fisherfolks on one of the many piers in the area and was headed toward a pick-up point before ordering an Uber cab home. But first, I had been out for many hours and planned a short trip to the lavatory as I wanted to fully enjoy the trip through downtown Durban, which always presented exciting new impressions. I went to the nearest lavatory facility I could find, and to no one's surprise there was no running water, and the stench was quite unbearable. I went on to do my business when a young man, mid-twenties about 1.8 meters tall standing by one of the water-deprived sinks, who was probably looking for some drops of water and a break from the scorching sun, began to lament "my power is going down". Exiting the lavatory, I attempted to dodge the man as to avoid the almost certain confrontation and the unpleasantry of having to decline pleads for help. This time around, I did not succeed, and the man started to follow me all the while continuing to lament "my power is going down". Feeling more bothered than before, I told him I did not have any cash on me. This was true, as I had given a plastic collecting youngster[32] some R100 just minutes before. I experienced it as difficult to not try to "help" at least some of these people and provide them with some cash to buy sustenance, but the trips to the beachfront were getting expensive for a student with limited funds, and there was no end to the pleads for help. Having to observe such extreme poverty for the first time in my life, I found few other options but to learn the art of avoidance and saying "no". But this time around, something was different. This man genuinely seemed exhausted. He was walking in a very slow-moved manner that made me wonder what was wrong with him. I slowed down and waited for him to catch up. He introduced himself as Fanyana. Looking more closely at him, lines were visible all over his face and his eyes were sluggish. He explained to me that he was homeless and hungry - he had not eaten for an unspecified amount of time. Indeed, he did look fatigued and worn out, no doubt a testament to his difficult life on the streets. I began to sympathize. Fanyana asked in the most respectful manner if it was possible to buy him a meal. I agreed to this, and we went to the nearest Steers restaurant (which was not far given that the beachfront is riddled with fast-food restaurants,

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[32] This boy was around 12-13 years old and was collecting plastic bottles alone on the beach. R100 is a lot of money, but it was the only bill I had left in my wallet. It is difficult not to feel empathy seeing children working precarious jobs in the scorching summer heat on a daily basis.

which is quickly becoming something of a public health issue in South Africa). While we were ordering, Fanyana's face lit up quite literally. Those fatigued eyes faded and started to glow; he smiled out of excitement while choosing the burger menu he wanted and seemed revitalized. After a few minutes of wait time, he received his menu and we sat down on some stairs for a little while. While eating, Fanyana shifted to a lighter mood and started to talk about girls: "you must be getting many girls where you are from". We laughed and I replied with the standard "no, no, no". He responded by saying he would take me to a nearby mall to meet South African girls soon, and this was followed by even more laughter. After a short while of light banter, I decided it was time to leave and go home. Fanyana asked if he would see me again, to which we agreed to meet up on Friday. Unfortunately, Fanyana was not anywhere to be seen on the beachfront when Friday came.

After our encounter, I realized that Fanyana had been in a serious state of hunger. His skinny figure, slow movement and fatigued eyes were good indicators. His lament "my power is going down" was not just some obscure metaphor it was quite literally the truth. Susan Sontag (2002) writes about "illness as metaphor", where the metaphor in popular discourse hides and conceals the illness in a reductive manner to the detriment of the affected. However, is it reductive when the "patient" himself employs such language to convey his condition to the world? Holmes (2011) argues that physicians have much to learn about metaphors and ultimately that taking metaphors seriously is an important step toward being accepting of the principle of self-determination on the part of the "patient".

Through this metaphor "my power is going down", it became clear that Fanyana's vitality was leaving his body because he did not have access to sustenance, and no one wanted to help him – initially including myself. As a student of anthropology, a discipline dedicated to fighting inequality, I felt deeply ashamed of my initial tactic of avoidance toward Fanyana. Despite his precarious circumstances, he had managed to convey without filter what he was feeling, and subsequently laugh and smile when he felt that his "power" was coming back to him. No doubt a strong-willed individual.

## SOCIAL ABANDONMENT AND HUNGER

As my encounter with Fanyana also shows, homeless are often socially marginal and exist on the periphery of the city – also often found in marginal spaces such as in and around lavatories. The street functions as a venue of aspiration, refuge, kindness and possibilities but

also hardship, poverty and deprivation. In other words, a place that is simultaneously a "place of mercy" and a "place of suffering" in the words of Le Marcis (2004).

In Fanyana's case, several people had already passed by him when he began to follow me. They had walked straight past him, not giving him an ounce of acknowledgement. When he ordered food, the cashier at Steers seemed reluctant to take his order and looked at me skeptically, almost like she wanted me to approve of "this guy". I waved my credit card to avoid any unpleasantries. Was it because of his clothes? His skinny figure? His lack of experience ordering fast food? I could not tell, but I suspect a combination. It might also have been that he frequented the beachfront and thus the workers were likely to recognize him. While these events and actions of skepticism and disapproval are subtle, it seemed unlikely that Fanyana was not aware. No doubt he was used to this sort of treatment, but what could he realistically do?

In anthropological terms, actions such as those that Fanyana experienced conform to what sociologist and anthropologist and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu termed "symbolic violence" (1992: 127). It is a type of violence that is inflicted, not physically, but through subtle signs in everyday life through, for example facial expressions, language and treatment received by others[33]. This inflicted violence is often related to social status of the person at hand. This can give root to social phenomena such as discrimination, stigma and even social abandonment and death. In a similar vein, anthropologist João Biehl (2013) writes about Catarina who lives in a "zone of social abandonment" in which she has been left by family and government institutions to fend almost completely for herself. Her social life and status are effaced over the years, going from institution to institution while her family inflicts symbolic violence by reducing her to "the crazy one". However, through writing and speaking she fights for her life history and makes sure that it is known.

To be sure, "the zone of social abandonment is a life in which the fundamental goods of social life do not exist" (Marrow & Luhrmann 2012: 495). It is resemblant of the biological reduction of life that is bare life. The apathy Fanyana was met with, the skepticism and the symbolic violence thereof, is in a similar vein, indicative of a socially dying person, on the borderlands of not being acknowledged as a living individual. This seemed far away from the ideal behind the famous Zulu proverb of "umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu" (I am because you

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[33] See Seth M. Holmes (2013) for an ethnographic account on migrant workers in the US which experience symbolic violence through racial slurs and discrimination.

are). So, to speak, then, hunger is not "simply" hunger. "Losing one's power" is not just about the hunt for food. A more holistic interpretation of this expression should include the sociocultural phenomena, such as symbolic violence, that perpetrates and zaps power from the person, creating ideal conditions for social abandonment and of consequently hunger. This is what might occur in moments during which people are no longer willing help another person and the spirit of ubuntu withdraws. However, once Fanyana had regained some of his power, he was quick to look to the future, to set up a meeting between me and himself and to see past the immediate. In the following section, I use this expression of "losing power" as a catalysator of inquiry, exploring the pathway toward the needs of now and needs of future emanating from Fanyana's words.

## Needs of Now and Wants of Future

How does one imagine the future in a situation of few means, where one has to rely on strangers to get by? The unemployment rate is around 30% in South Africa, whereas youth constitute a disproportionally large portion of this group (Statistics South Africa 2020). The majority of this demographic seems to be male[34]. This matches what I observed in Durban[35]. Youths are visible all over the urban landscape, from teens working precarious unofficial jobs, to homeless strolling the streets. Historian Mamadou Diouf writes on how African youth went from being seen as the hope and future builders of African nations to forgottenness:

> This loss of status is reflected in the physical and intellectual collapse of the
> institutions of supervision and education, the absence of health coverage, and the
> massive and aggressive presence of young people on the streets, at public garbage
> dumps, and in urban and rural undergrounds. The reclassification of young people is
> manifested in hostility toward them. This takes increasingly violent forms which,

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[34] Kok et al. (2010) conducted a demographic study and concluded that that are relatively few women in the streets compared to men. In their survey, 87% of respondents were found to be male which matched previous studies.

[35] All homeless I observed and encountered were black males. The exception was Johan (mentioned earlier) who was a homeless white male. I also recall having seen a white woman, though this was not recorded in my fieldnotes.

combined with disdain and indifference on the part of the elites, renders their present difficult and future unpredictable (Diouf 2003: 6).

Both Fanyana and Langelihle were able-bodied young men, but structural deficits in society make it difficult enough to fend for the present let alone plan for the future.

An early afternoon I was strolling the streets just above the beachfront area. I was interested in various merchandise that was being sold. The product items ranged from colorful African bracelets to small drums and other local-themed goods. I noticed there were almost exclusively women selling these goods – usually two per store. Dwelling on if I had read anything on women traders in anthropological literature and being completely in a different world of my own, a young man walked up to me and asked a question I did not expect: "Could I have a few rand for a haircut"? I stumbled very surprised. The man, who seemed to be somewhere in his twenties, proceeded to introduce himself as Langelihle. I immediately noticed he was wearing a jacket and a hoodie beneath the jacket – which must have been unbearably hot in the warmest month of the year. He took off his hoodie so I could better see what he was talking about. His hair was about medium length and looked relatively well-kept.

I responded: "you could grow it long, like a rasta". In my ignorance, I genuinely thought this was a cool idea as I myself was saving for longer hair. Langelihle explained further that he felt so ashamed to walk in public that he had to cover his head with a hoodie to avoid stares and being undignified[36]. The added fact of being homeless therefore created a double burden for him to carry. However, through getting a haircut, he could at least reclaim the streets without being looked down upon. Langelihle proceeded to ask: "are you from Johannesburg? You walk differently".[37] I explained where I was from and what I was doing in Durban. I also gave him some change for the haircut as I had understood by now that it was quite serious. Langelihle furthermore offered to join in on my short walk down the street and I happily

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[36] There appears to exist a taboo or norm governing long hair for men in South Africa, though little or nothing can be found in the literature. Although anecdotal, I myself was receiving stares with medium length afro hair.

[37] This was an interesting comment by Langelihle. He recognized through my gait that I was not from there. Mauss (1973) writes about "techniques of the body": certain ways to use the body – walk, talk, swim etc. that are shaped by the culture in which any given person grows up. Durban has a very relaxed urban atmosphere, and perhaps I was walking too uptight and not relaxed enough.

accepted. I told him about my maritime research, and he remarked: "ah, I also want to buy a rod and start fishing". He had seen the fisherfolk on the piers and wanted to join in, but first he needed to do his "hustle" so he could afford it. While rods and bait can be had for a few hundred rand, that is prohibitively expensive for someone who lives hand-to-mouth. Langelihle also mentioned he had never been outside of Durban, never travelled beyond the city borders. I took this as an indication that this was something he wanted to do in the future.

What is interesting about the encounters with Fanyana and Langelihle is that they both immediately looked to the future when their needs of now were met. To look for girls at a mall in Fanyana's case or to become a fisherman in Langelihle's case. However, as Emily Margaretten writing on youth homelessness in South Africa notes: "the attainment of these aspirations are unlikely" (2015: 6). The reasons for this, she argues, stretches far beyond the everyday symbolic violence and social marginalization that I have already indicated above. These aspects also draws their origins from the apartheid system of spatial injustice (Strauss 2019) and inadequate housing policy. During apartheid, large city centers such as Durban and Johannesburg dealt with overpopulation by building racially segregated residential areas outside the city. Many of these were overpopulated, and because some "races" were favored over the others (typically blacks were the least favored compared to Indians or coloreds), this created an enormous housing deficit for this group of people (Margaretten 2015). This draws its parallels until the present during which most homeless are indeed blacks.

Also neoliberal "aid" projects have played their part in segregating the city (Diouf 2003). However, the needs of now are immensely pressing. This was particularly evident in the case of Johan who, an approximately 30-year-old white man who was desperately power-walking left and right on the beachfront trying to get someone to hand him a few Rand so he could stay at a homeless shelter for the night. Regardless of cause, the present remained difficult and the future hazy.

# HOMELESS IN PANDEMIC TIME: EXPERIENCES FROM THE CAMPS

The pandemic has made life more difficult for homeless people in many ways. Hustling or so-called "skarrelling"[38], such as Johan and others above have been described as doing in order to make a living, is much harder than before. A previously homeless woman named September told DailyMaverick that: "It was hard skarrelling because there was nobody. There was no cars on the street, shops were closed and stuff like that" (Shoba 2021). Samson, who has worked as a recycler up until the lockdown shares his experiences to New Frame, a social justice NGO media outlet: "It's sad. I'm here to provide. But now I can't provide. Not for them [his family], not for my friends here. Not even for me". I can't even buy a half loaf of bread today. With this corona thing, I have nothing" (Eliseeva 2020). Tswane, a buddy of Samsons agrees: "Now there is no work. Dumps are closed. Everything is closed. We just sit and wait" (Eliseeva 2020).

Much changed with the arrival of the pandemic and the hard lockdown in South Africa. The camps and shelters that homeless were allocated to, as I will discuss later, were somewhat of a mixed blessing, and not all homeless were comfortable going to these camps. A group of men who had gone to a shelter in Hillbrow[39], Johannesburg commented on this. One man named Jerry says: "Everyone is going there. How can the shelter get food for everyone? And what if we get locked in there and someone is sick? Then we die of corona?" (Eliseeva 2020). His friend Sipho responds to this: "That's why I stay in the street. Yes, okay, I'm afraid here. But I know here. I think it's safer" (Eliseeva 2020). People like Jerry and Sipho were not out of the street by choice, but because they thought it was safer than an overcrowded camp. Yet, with police patrolling the streets, they are at constant risk of being harassed and being told to move. But as one Peter asks: "No. Where is it they think I can go?" (Eliseeva 2020).

"The camp[40]" in Agamben's (1998) view, is the site at which bare life is most visible. Agamben argues that some camps were born out of the "state of exception" (1998: 167). This draws remarkable similarities to the pandemic camp in South Africa which came to be

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[38] Skarrelling is performing activities to make do, such as asking for money, taking on odd jobs and searching for food.

[39] Hillbrow is a residential area in Johannesburg notoriously known for its high rates of crime. The street is certainly not safe. How bad must it be at the camp for the homeless to stay clear?

[40] Agamben mentions the Nazi concentration camps most centrally, but also mentions others (see Agamben 1998: 167-180).

precisely during a state of exception. Although Agamben exemplifies this point using the Nazi camps, it is the camp as a form of political and exclusionary power that he is concerned with. A form of camp that may take on the enclosed shape of a classical camp, but which may also be a feature of a social order more broadly.

Agamben's understanding of the camp is intriguing in that the pandemic camp does project the image of bare life by its overcrowding, bad hygiene and security personnel preventing escape. However, sometimes and radically so, it rejects such a perspective and comes to resemble more a "place of mercy" (Le Marcis 2014). As such, the camp may be a place in which processes of "urban mutuality" are ongoing (Hentschel 2014). Meaning, a place where encounters and interactions between people take place in meaningful and beneficial ways.

Perhaps the most covered in media and controversial of the South African pandemic camps was the homeless shelter camp in Strandfontein, Cape Town. There are several key aspects of this camp that that can be considered dubious both in economic and ethical terms. The large tent that was erected cost a mind-boggling R43.8 million to rent. As GroundUp reports, this money could have been spent on purchasing permanent locales or provided each of the approximately 1,500-1,700 homeless people put in the camp with a tent for much less money (Herron 2020). People who have been inside claimed people were being "treated like cattle" and that it was freezing and muddy with lacking basic facilities (Meyer 2020). It has also been reported that police used rubber bullets to prevent homeless from leaving the camp (Nowicki & Stent 2020). A report released by Médecins Sans Frontières reads:

> In conclusion, the Strandfontein shelter hosts large numbers of people in tents, many with increased vulnerability to infections, and provides insufficient infection prevention and control, apparent absence of health promotion, and limited access to health care, including mental health care and specific care for frail people and drug users. There is a high likelihood that people are at higher risk of infection with COVID-19 in the shelter than if they were in the streets. (2020: 1).

In other words, the Strandfontein camp was the opposite of what it was supposed to be and seemed more a move towards ridding the streets of homeless, rather than providing a solution. Killander, writing on perceptions of the poor notes that: "The view that the poor living in the streets are criminals or at least potential criminals is alive and well" (2019: 91). This

connection between homelessness and crime seems also to have informed the policing of and within the camp and homeless did experience violence both within and outside the camp. The closure of Strandfontein camp was finally announced on May 21, 2020, after merely 6 weeks in operation (Stent 2021).

## RESILIENT ACTS

However, not all camps or shelters were the likes of Strandfontein. Lwazi Sithole who stayed at the Denis Hurley Center in downtown Durban, sums up his experience of the pandemic: "I had forgotten what life is like off the streets. Here at the shelter we get food three times a day, we shower and have a place to sleep, but out there, you have to fend for yourself to survive" (Majola 2020). While the pandemic camp strongly showcases the social vulnerability and spatial injustice inherited from the apartheid era and its grave potential to deteriorate the everyday life of homeless even further, this focus has a tendency to overshadow the positivity and perhaps even well-meaning intention behind the pandemic measures. It is not necessarily so that the camp was not intended as a good thing or that the camp does not hold people who are willing to lend a hand. In a stadium shelter in the City of Tshwane[41] a clinical team showed remarkable effort in an attempt to treat drug users while the stadium was suffering from overcrowding. Meanwhile, their actions aided the city in relocating homeless to more suited places (Marcus et al. 2020). Moreover, there have been success histories of homeless taking action themselves when given the opportunity.

Another example is the "the Elangeni Green Zone" (farm) is an agricultural project that was started in Durban during lockdown by homeless. The farm is located close to where its founders were sheltered during the hard lockdown (Hennig 2020). The project has enjoyed widespread coverage in South African news outlets and even has its own Facebook page[42]. The farm produces organically grown vegetables which are then sold to locals. There is also the sparkling case of several informal settlements being erected during the lockdown. "Izewelethu" ("our land" in Xhosa) or popularly called "Covid" is one of these settlements. This settlement or village was erected in Cape Town by people who were already homeless or

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[41] Tshwane lies in the northern Gauteng province, south-east in South Africa.

[42] Access here: https://facebook.com/egz2030/

became homeless during the pandemic. "Covid" has now grown into a vibrant community (Reinders 2020).

## Closing Remarks

The homeless are a group of people at the margins of society, experiencing deprivation, symbolic violence and low social status. Many are socially abandoned people that cling to the streets to survive. These very same streets which during the hard lockdown were turned against them into a place of suffering. Shelters were erected to aid the homeless but were in multiple ways ineffective in putting these people out of harm's way. This resulted in some homeless rather choosing to roam the streets in constant fear of being apprehended by police for not adhering to lockdown restrictions. The idea that homeless are criminals seem to have permeated particularly the notorious Strandfontein camp and as such the camp might be understood as a construction that embodies bare life and precarious living conditions - a zone of social abandonment "in which the fundamental goods of social life do not exist" (Marrow & Luhrmann 2012: 495).

However, as the shelter in the City of Tshwane and the Denis Hurler Center in downtown Durban showed, these shelters were also places of mercy and urban mutuality where acts of kindness and compassion were performed. The homeless themselves also acted in resilient ways as the farm of Elangeni Green Zone showcases.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE GATED HOME AND THE DOMESTIC WORKER

## INTRODUCTION

"Vulindlela" ("make way" in Xhosa) by the late popstar Brenda Fassie was playing on the radio when I was sitting by the pool reading through fieldwork notes. Having heard Brenda's music during my childhood days, the Afropop and Kwaito[43] musical blends hit me with a wave of nostalgia. I appreciated greatly moments like this for off-loading the otherwise daunting and stressful experience of being out in the field trying to make new acquaintances. Indeed, life was very good inside the gated property at which I stayed. It had a pool, a lush garden and singing birds, as well as the occasional terrifying baby snake. It was in almost like an eco-system of its own. Still, life was also contrastive within the gate in terms of social and economic inequalities. This was particularly evident in the use of domestic workers, a group of people that on average earn far below a living wage, and whose situation also worsened during COVID-19 (SweepSouth 2020: 6). The domestic workers I encountered were women for the most part, with only a sole Zulu man standing out in the crowd. Their tasks involved garden work, changing bed sheets, washing, watching children, cooking and cleaning around the house. Meanwhile, the houseowners would come home to a neat and tidy home. Most of these workers were from Durban, although one came from as far away as Zimbabwe. I learned during my last weeks in the city that some of these workers were being sent home to uncertain fates due to the arrival of the pandemic. The professionalism and work ethics of these women had seemed impeccable, and I was worried that the situation would affect them badly given their marginality in South Africa society. This chapter examines the working

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[43] The Kwaito music genre "… is a mixture of a number of different rhythms from marabi of the 1920s, kwela of the 1950s, mbaqana/maskhandi of the hostel dwellers, bubblegum music of the 80's, and imibongo (African praise poetry)" (SAHO 2019).

conditions within the gated home. I focus centrally on the inequalities of the interpersonal relationships between the black woman worker and houseowner or employer as well as inequalities that arise from the "informal" status of domestic work. I argue that the gated home is characterized by bare life and persistent inequalities that have been important contributors toward the detrimental outcome of the pandemic for domestic workers.

## A DESCRIPTION OF THE GATED HOME

The affluent gated South African neighborhood as seen from street level is quite hostile and intimidating. This can largely be attributed to the towering gates, walls, security guards, guard dogs and electric fences – occasionally there was also a surveillance camera present. The sheer hostility is thus evident for anyone daring enough to enter. The security measures did not exist without reason. Last year, close to where I resided, someone had broken into a garage and stolen a car. The houseowners also feared the impending threat of violence. The neighborhood itself, on a city-scale, is a part of what might be thought of as an upper-income "urban enclave" (see Caldeira 2000; Nielsen et al. 2020). This means that the neighborhood is separated part of the city with a certain degree of self-sufficiency, and which is inhabited by relatively affluent people. For this reason, the neighborhood is not only segregated in terms of material properties such as walls, but also by class and economic capital. Beyond the gate and inside the walls, there exist beautiful stone houses that host elaborate gardens, with plants such as aloe vera and palms, as well as other exotic growths that may be living there. Moving closer to the city center, the walls and their hostility would gradually subside. In some ways, this was a relief and being back to open and available space in contrast to the restrictive and impersonal gated neighborhood.

The walls and the other parts of the area's security complex do have other functions or, at least, social effects such as the confinement of sociality to unfold strictly within the spaces controlled by the gate. Furthermore, the domestic worker, that performs work that is "done in the hidden abode of the household, which is jealously guarded as a private sphere, it is work which is ignored and is not counted in the statistics, in the economic measures of a country's productivity" (Cock 2011: 132). It is in other words "invisible work" that evades the gaze of private people as well as government institutions (see Star & Strauss 1999) aided by the physical prowess of the walls themselves.

In anthropologist Brenda Chalfin's (2014) paper on "infrastructures of bare life", the argument is that certain infrastructure comes to resemble "bare life". Chalfin, with a focus on the sad state of public toilets in the Ghanian city of Tema, argues that infrastructure itself takes on qualities of bareness and projects lived experience of the city's population. In a similar vein, it is possible to perceive of the gated property as possessing some of these qualities of bare life as well – for instance the invisibilization and, thus, erasure of the domestic worker. It "presses" on them so to say and confines their labor to within the walls and no further, through the physical prowess of the wall itself but also centrally through inequal and non-reciprocal relationships between her and houseowner. As I will argue in the following sections, this gated sociality is characterized by various forms of inequality that have consequences for the domestic worker and her livelihood.

A street with gated properties complete with electric fencing. Author's photo.

## Everyday Tasks inside the Gate

During my arrival at the property at which I would stay for the first couple of weeks in Durban, I was greeted by a very kind woman named "Anoona" from the other side of the property's gate. She unlocked the gate and to the guest house we went. As I was later to learn, Anoona hailed from Zimbabwe and she attended some university classes in Durban on the side of her doing domestic work. Anoona showed me around the property and noted where I could do my dishes and the arrangement of laundry. Then she provided me with a key to the property as well as the guest house at which I would be staying. I unloaded my baggage and immediately hit the bed as I was exhausted from traveling. This early afternoon slumber was only interrupted by a quick chat with the homeowners as they came home from work. When morning came, I was immediately struck by the immense Durban summer heat. This prompted me to get up, and outside I went. I found Anoona sitting by some stairs. She was watching the homeowner's children and the laughter from child's play could be heard all over the property. I talked for a bit with Anoona and she shared with me that she had come from Zimbabwe to work and study. Her work centered around watching the homeowners' children during work hours as well as doing laundry and cleaning around the house. She also said that she would be tending to the guest house once a week[44]. Anoona was a person who was always in high spirits, it was therefore quite sad when I was moving elsewhere and had to bid my farewell to her. I had been accustomed to seeing her every time I headed out on the streets.

As I moved, I encountered several other domestic workers. One of these was Nomcebo who was working for a retired couple from which I rented a guest house. Nomcebo was in her mid-thirties if I were to guess and always dressed impressively neatly in maiden's clothes. Nomcebo worked twice or thrice a week – she was not needed as often because the

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[44] Anoona changed my sheets as well as washing laundry. I felt uneasy about this as I had some ideas about the working conditions of domestic workers, particularly in terms of pay. On this uneasiness, Flora Botelho (2021) writes on Scandinavians in Maputo, Mozambique that employ domestic workers. The Scandinavians seem to not acknowledge the inherent inequalities in socioeconomic status between themselves and the domestic workers. Rather, they view these workers as "equals" even though they are not. As a consequence, the Scandinavians also avoid having to confront the responsibility and obligations that their status has in Mozambican society at large. I believe I was guilty of this too as I should have paid Anoona for doing my laundry, but I was afraid that I would offend her by offering money and not treating her as I would with anyone else. Perhaps this uneasiness was also influenced by having read anthropological perspective on "pollution" (see Dubisch 1996; Douglas 2002).

houseowners were retired and seemed to have plenty of time on their hands. Nomcebo would clean the main house as well as the two guest houses on the property, take our garbage and change sheets. She also charged R30 for doing laundry which was a more than fair price for the service. Once I moved to my last place of residence before the pandemic hit with full force, I met Zenzele. Zenzele was a male garden worker. He tended to the various plants in the garden, cutting branches that were too long, clearing weeds and growths that otherwise disturbed the tranquil garden. However, Zenzele did not perform other tasks than those related to the garden. It was Noxolo who performed these tasks. She would clean, change sheets and take out garbage, very similarly to the work of Anoona and Nomcebo.

The work of domestic workers was remarkably similar in all the places I was staying. While the tasks might seem mundane, they are incredibly important and contribute to the upkeep of the household. It is precisely the mundane nature and routineness of the work that adds to the concealment and underappreciation of the worker's labor on a national scale. While it is unclear how the workers were treated behind the curtains, they did appear to be well treated in this case.

## The Social Status of the Black Domestic Woman Worker

Given the structure of the South African society, the tasks performed by the domestic workers are indispensable. These tasks, cleaning, watching children and cooking, must be done in every home. Thus, the work is on the opposite spectrum of what the late David Graeber called "bullshit jobs" (2018). Additionally, they free up an enormous amount of time for the homeowners' families so that they can choose to spend it with each other or pursue other activities. The domestic workers are instrumental in increasing the homeowners' standard of living, and they do this in a very professional fashion. I could, for example, not make my bed as neatly as Noxolo nor iron my clothes as smoothly as Nomcebo. These workers do a whole lot for their host families, but unfortunately on a national basis receive very little in return. This has a correlation with the social status of the workers, the black woman worker specifically, that often come from marginalized backgrounds (du Toit 2020). Sociologist Jacklyn Cock writes that in a sociocultural context such as "[i]n Southern African society domestic service is the least prestigious of all occupations" (1980: 71) and it is performed by mostly black women (Dinkelman & Ranchhod 2012: 29; Hickson & Strous 1993).

During my stay in Durban, I was warned more than once by interlocutors: "don't touch any of the [black] women, they all have disease" as an interlocutor Marcus, an interlocutor, put it. He was referring to HIV/AIDS and the prevalence of the disease.[45] While comments such as these may be strange because they are blanket generalizations of a complex group of people, at another level they are unsurprising as there is little doubt that the black woman is one of the most disenfranchised, marginalized and abused persons in RSA, both historically and presently (Parry & Gordon 2020). For one, women in general earn less than men and have been more likely to lose their jobs during the pandemic (Ranchhod & Daniels 2021).[46] They have also been subjected to increasing levels of violence in the home and have faced the "double burden" of working for an employer while also tending to their own homes and families (Rogan & Skinner 2020: 22; Parry & Gordon: 7; Francis et al. 2020). During both the colonial period and apartheid, these workers were hired as "servants". Today, they have been professionalized into "domestic workers" by new legislation. As Shireen Ally (2009) argues in her comprehensive study of labor relations between domestic workers and the state in South Africa, this particular shift has not necessarily prompted improvements in the overall working conditions for domestic workers. Instead, the shift may have reinforced the low social status and vulnerability of these women in the labor market. Ally further argues that this is because the state has failed to articulate legislation that adequately addresses the deeply personal, intimate and emotional aspects of this type of work (see Hochschild 2012), and thereby failing to acknowledge the true value of domestic work. A domestic worker named Lessie Masango articulates the issue in a moving manner:

> Sometimes I lie awake until late at night thinking about how much I endured while working for the family, from their two daughters who could not even pick up their used sanitary pads on the floor to me sitting them down and teaching them about menstruation and their growing bodies, and even keeping their secrets. I lie awake thinking about how their mother failed them, because by the time she spoke to them I had already spoken to them (Khoza 2020).

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[45] As of 2021, approximately 19% of South Africans aged 15-49 was HIV-positive (Statistics South Africa 2021). Interlocutors estimated much higher figures, some claimed up to 50% of the populace for reference. I have also been told that the figure is likely to be higher by academics.

[46] See also the Quarterly Labor Force Survey:
http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02114thQuarter2020.pdf (Accessed 13 December 2021).

All these factors amount to a composite vulnerable and marginalized status, being a woman, being black and performing domestic service. This entails that the more affluent and privileged houseowners are in a position of power.


## Asymmetrical Power Relations

Sociologist Bridget Anderson argues that "paying for domestic work enables an employer to assert power and superiority over the domestic worker" (2001: 32). In a review of literature on master-servant relations, Lakshmi Srinivas elaborates on this point and highlights that this literature draws attention to relationships which are "structured around difference and… difference translates into cultural superiority and ideological dominance" (2001: 269). In this case and in South Africa – as also the examples I outlined above show - that difference is articulated both in homeowners' economic affluence as well as being "white".[47] Were it not for the low sociocultural and economic status of the domestic worker and domestic work itself, would domestic workers take on the job? There is evidence to suggest perhaps not. In Jacklyn Cock's (1980) incredibly in-depth study on domestic workers in Eastern Cape, all participants in her study admitted to finding the work dull and unproductive. In a newspaper publication on experiences by domestic workers in South Africa, interviewee and domestic worker Lessie Masango, describes her view on her profession: "We are forced to do it [being a domestic worker] because we are poor. You don't even get paid [well] for all that you do from the bottom of your heart" (Khoza 2020). As noted Above, Anoona, the domestic who I interacted with, was raising a child, cooking and cleaning all at once. The work is physically demanding and requires an attentive mind (especially in the presence of children). The salary is often not in line with the effort required to perform such work as the minimum wage of a domestic worker is below what is considered a living wage in RSA (Damons 2021).[48]

However, the reason domestic works feels unfulfilling might also be related to Ally's (2009) argument that legislation has not caught up with the emotional toll and burdens of the

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[47] Maqubela's (2016) study shows how asymmetrical power relationships are reproduced also when black houseowners hire black domestic workers.

[48] See Government gazette on new minimum wages in 2021:

https://www.labour.gov.za/DocumentCenter/Regulations%20and%20Notices/Regulations/Basic%20Conditions%20of%20Employment/Annual%20Review%20and%20Adjustment%20of%20the%20National%20Minimum%20Wage%202021.pdf (Accessed 13 December 2021).

profession. If domestic work was fully *appreciated* for its importance, would the work be more desirable? Whichever the case might be, currently the domestic worker seems to perennially be at the mercy of the houseowner in an asymmetrical or "power relationship" (Donald & Mahlatji 2006: 207) or in different terms "reliant on humanness and on the whims of the employer" as expressed by senior attorney Thulani Nkosi (Cabe 2020). Particularly, this asymmetrical relationship is given ultimate expression in the account by one domestic worker named Felize:

> *In the morning I had to make their beds…start picking up clothes from the kitchen to the rest of the house…when my employer is sick, she does not mind vomiting on the floor and I have to clean that up…when she goes to the bathroom and uses the toilet, she does not flush, I have to flush…* (Tolla 2013: 14).

This experience indicates an unequal delegation of power between employer and employee. Ally (2009) argues that the employer-employee relations of today are a continuation of the master-servant relationships of apartheid. The domestic worker is still black and while there has been some changes into the racial makeup of South Africa's middle and upper-income class, the profession remains racialized with primarily white employers (Ally 2009). This phenomenon has been termed "class-based cultural imperialism" (Donald & Mahlatji 2006: 211). Now, particularly in the context of the pandemic, being "on the whims of the employer" has further consequences if the job is lost. Particularly, as domestic work is still to a large degree "informal", the reality is that the profession has few institutional structures from which to gather support and aid.

## Informality during COVID-19

While it holds true that domestic workers in South Africa on paper have enjoyed better rights since the fall of apartheid, there remains some key issues that have become apparent during the pandemic relating to job loss and informal status. As much as 259,000 domestic workers lost their jobs in the second quarter of 2020.[49] Furthermore, in a report by *Women in Informal*

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[49] See: http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0211/P02112ndQuarter2020.pdf (Accessed 13 December 2021).

*Employment: Globalizing and Organizing* (WIEGO) it is calculated that only 20% of domestic workers were registered with the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) in 2019 out of a lot of 1.2 million (Skinner et al. 2021: 12). Employers of domestic workers are required by law to register their workers, but clearly this is not the case given these numbers. For, in May 2020 employees themselves were allowed to register but only some 60,000 workers were reached after the implementation of this change. Consequently, "the vast majority of informal wage workers who lost their jobs in 2020 have been left without any income or only the minimal support offered through the COVID-19 SRD Grant"[50] (Skinner et al. 2021: 12).

Structural failure and deficits in top-down legislation like the issues with non-registered domestic workers, is one of the reasons why domestic work to a large degree still remains an "informal" profession. Informality and lack of ties to official institutions, makes it easy for employers to dismiss workers in the blink of an eye. Elisabeth Tlou, a 56-year-old domestic worker tells of her dismissal: "They paid and gave me my UIF [Unemployment Insurance Fund] documents and that was the last time I heard from them. I had told myself that I would retire there" (Khoza 2020). However, when she went to claim her UIF benefits, she found out that the papers she had been given by the employer were in actuality her resignation papers: "How could she [employer] do that, because she knew that I am uneducated? Now I have to depend on the family for assistance for food and other necessities" (Khoza 2020, brackets mine). The employer took advantage of Tlou's inability to read and dismissed her in a dishonest fashion. The matter is exacerbated by the event that even those employers who wanted to register their workers, faced difficulties in accessing the UIF system (Skinner et al. 2021). In 2019, GroundUp faced the same problem and even attempted contact by phone to no avail (Liao 2019).


## PRIVILEGE OF AFFLUENCE AND ORIENTATIONS OF FEAR

An important element of discussion that I have no treated so far in this chapter, is the life of the more affluent – in this case the houseowners. Friedman (2021) argues that South Africa is a divided society, in which some live like "first-world" citizens while others like "third-

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[50] The Social Relief of Distress Grant (SRD) is a payment of R350 for 6 months to individuals who have no other income. The grant is realistically too small of which to live off. However, it remains a lifeline for some (e.g. Majola 2021). The grant has its own government page: https://srd.sassa.gov.za/ (Accessed 13 December 2021).

world" citizens. Perhaps Friedman's perspective is not too surprising given South Africa's status as one of the most unequal nation in the world (Francis & Webster 2019). Further, as I have also hinted at several times above, this division of the nation's peoples have implications for how the pandemic is experienced and lived. For example, the stone house of an affluent Durban neighbor is much different from a shack along the city's highways and provide different approaches to living (see Chance 2018). The places at which I resided during my stay in Durban were all of a high standard. There was fast fiber internet, running water, electricity, air conditioning as well as solid walls and a proper roof in contrast to the shabby tin plates of the common shack. Houseowners typically also have "formal" jobs that in many cases can be performed remotely. This is not an option for most informal workers who depend upon moving to specific locations to perform their work. Over 80% of black South Africans cannot work from home.[51] The lifestyle of the affluent is very similar to that of the global North – from which I had come. The biggest surprise that met me was the use of domestic workers, which adds another dimension of luxury. When I was leaving Durban those with more means usually expressed fear of the ailing health infrastructure in South Africa and that South Africa "would probably get pretty bad". Some interlocutors were scared of what could happen in an "unstable" or a "dysfunctional country" where "anything could happen".

In the case of domestic workers, I was never able to obtain any fear-related considerations from them. However, Mandla, my to-go Uber driver was afraid of how he would be able to provide for his family now that his primary route to and from the airport was barely being traversed. Manderson & Levine (2020) argues that other factors that pose a risk to life, such as poverty, may be a more pressing matter than infection from COVID-19. Following their argument, the domestic workers' primary fear *may* have been geared towards poverty and ultimately hunger. This find is important because – and in line with Manderson & Levine's argument - fear may not be primarily situated in the risk of *infection* by COVID-19, rather, it is situated in *outcome* or "fall-out". In this vein, Bulled & Singer suggests that: "…the strict COVID-19 lockdown implemented… could have long-lasting public health ramifications that transcend the immediate health risks posed by the virus" (2020: 1237). I interpret this in such a way that infection with COVID-19 may not have been what the urban poor generally feared. They feared other potentially existential threats beyond being infected or being infected and *then what*. However, I argue that these articulations of fear, ailing healthcare and the nation's

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[51] See: https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/2.-Benhura-M.-_-Magejo-P.-2021-Who-cannot-work-from-home-in-South-Africa_-Evidence-from-wave-4-of-NIDSCRAM..pdf (Accessed 13 December 2020).

instability versus the imminent danger of poverty and hunger, are unequal and oriented differently.[52] This is because it is a privilege to not have to worry about putting food on the table. One *may* occur, the other most likely *will* as has been seen so far during the pandemic and its effect on the poor as I have showed in this chapter, as well as in chapter 2 and 3.

## THE PANDEMIC LIFE OF THE BLACK WOMAN

*Early on Monday morning*
*Police arrest my brother*
*For working for a black community*
*Monday afternoon*
*Went to see my brother*
*Policeman*
*Treated me like a donkey*

*I say to policeman (bad attitude, bad attitude)*
*You've got a bad attitude (bad attitude, bad attitude)*
*Oh no, I'm no criminal*
*I'm a good black woman*

This struggle song called "Good Black Woman" was released by the late Brenda Fassie in 1989 as a part of her hit album "Too Late for Mama". The song deals with the treatment of black women during apartheid. It draws attention to inequalities that existed back then, and consequently that still exist in today's South Africa. How as this treatment of women changed or what is possible to say about the treatment of black women during the pandemic?. There

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[52] I also note that when I learned that the houseowners would be "sending back" their domestic workers as they put it, my own presence was never questioned. In fact, I was welcomed back on more than one occasion despite my research involving daily travel and risk of infection by default. One of the houseowners even drove me around in his own car. Although it was a kind gesture, it begs the question why I was not more feared compared to the domestic workers.

has been produced a steady flow of coverage on poor women in the midst of the lockdown. This coverage notably concerns itself with issues of performing everyday tasks in a pandemic context relating to fetching water, risking violating the curfew, being attacked and consequently arrest (see: Ellis 2020; Amnesty International 2020; C19 2020). Reports of increasing domestic violence against women in the home (UN Women 2021; Nduna & Tshona 2021). And the "burden of unpaid labor" which has increased with closed schools and leisure that would otherwise offload women's workloads (Parry & Gordon 2020; Seedat & Rondon 2021). Many of these issues are not limited to South Africa but spans across the globe. These issues might be thought of as "syndemics" (Singer & Rylko-Bauer 2020) or, worded differently, parallel epidemics. They arise from structural inequities in society at large, such social status, UIF registration and unequal personal and interpersonal relationships as have been discussed in this chapter. African anthropologist and sociologist Francis Nyamjoh (2020) writes about the "resilient inequalities" in society through the triple concepts of "suppression, oppression and repression". Nyamjoh's point of argument is that if the poor are resilient, then why cannot the social structures that contribute to their situation be so as well - especially during a pandemic more so than ever.


## Social Suffering

Ultimately, the African domestic worker and African women in general seem to suffer immensely during the pandemic in a constant fight against apartheid legacy, social status and informality. Kleinman (2010: 1519) writes that:


> …the theory of social suffering collapses the historical distinction between what is a health problem and what is a social problem, by framing conditions that are both and that require both health and social policies, such as in urban slums and shantytowns where poverty, broken families, and a high risk of violence are also the settings where depression, suicide, post-traumatic stress disorder, and drug misuse cluster.


Indeed, in medical anthropology the idea that health and well-being in general is tied to sociocultural and political structures as well as the individual, is widely recognized (Ingstad 2007; Scheper-Hughes & Lock 1987). The imagery of the donkey in Fassie's song in the

previous section is intriguing not only due to the donkey's being a derogatory term in popular usage, but because it is a hard-working animal that does, perhaps, not receive credit where credit is due and, in many ways, resembles the domestic worker. Thus, while we might end up thinking about the domestic worker as hard-working, providing for her family and doing what she can but she is severely constrained both by larger social structures, personal and interpersonal relationships that continuously "suppress, oppress and repress" in the words of Nyamnjoh (2020) seemingly condemned to living out the bare life in an ocean of violence where not even the home is safe. Angel, a 52-year-old woman from Western Cape recounts how she left home as she was experiencing violence by her partner:

> It was very frightening to leave [home] during corona, because of the fact of the virus itself. I am also a chronic patient, so I have higher risks. But my fear didn't stop me from leaving. It didn't frighten me enough to not leave the relationship. Because, the first thing that came into my mind was, I will die in this relationship. I could die out there of corona, but I would rather take my chances with that. I will rather be killed by corona than by him, because if I stay here, he will kill me, so I will rather take my chances with corona (Dekel & Abrahams 2021: 8, brackets mine).

This grim experience is recounted by many other South African women who have taken to women shelters during the pandemic and fleeing from domestic abuse (Dekel & Abraham 2021). Angel's story encapsulates parts of the grim reality that domestic workers might return to when their workplace disappears during lockdown.

## Closing Remarks

In this chapter I have showed that black female domestic workers experience resilient and enduring inequalities in their profession. Despite government measures to improve their working conditions, many of these women continue to struggle with asymmetrical power relationships, low social status and informality. The pandemic has experienced an increase in domestic violence and has removed the workplace, despite its indignities, as a place of refuge. This has resulted in profound social suffering that is inflicted upon hardworking women whose labor otherwise improve the lives of the families they work for.

# CHAPTER FIVE

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# SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE AND THE FIGURE OF *MAKWEREKWERE*

## INTRODUCTION

In addition to the exclusionary and marginalizing dynamics I have already accounted for in the preceding chapters – from historical racialized forms of exclusion among fisherfolk, social abandonment and bare life of homeless and the oppressing working conditions of domestic workers- a further compounding feature affecting South African society is xenophobia, a social phenomenon that permeated my stay in Durban. It was given expression through everyday language and conversation on issues relating to the current state of South Africa. Commonly, Africans from other countries were said to be "stealing jobs" and "selling drugs". Xenophobic attitudes such as these have given rise to numerous violent attacks on Africans of other nationalities, and especially so since then fall of apartheid. However, the shadow side of xenophobic attacks is that South Africans themselves are also subject to the same forms of violence embedded in xenophobia within the borders of their nation, particularly of macabre killings, social marginalization and poverty. For this reason, I bring attention to the violent similarities between the South African herself and the much-loathed figure of *makwerekwere*, "…a derogatory term for foreigners and onomatopoeia for someone who speaks unintelligibly, a "babbler" (Hickel 2014: 103). The *makwerekwere* is a person, a foreigner, for example a person from Mozambique, Somalia, Nigeria or Zimbabwe.

The pandemic has created a new context for violence in which to occur. The continuation of evictions and demolitions of informal settlements, police beatings and arrests are just some of the violent events that have come to characterize South African pandemic life of the poor. The brutality of this largely state-sponsored violence came to a climax in July 2021 following the jailing of former president Jacob Zuma for contempt of court (Harding 2021). A country-wide

upheaval was ignited, and a massive violent looting-spree ensued, leaving several hundred South Africans dead in the process. In Phoenix, a town northwest of Durban, "racial" tensions arose between Indians and blacks, leaving some over 30 dead on the town's streets (Erasmus & Lwazi 2021).

In this chapter, I draw on past xenophobic events and compare them with past and present violent incidents in South Africa in a pandemic context. I focus on spectacular forms of violence – by which I mean violence of extraordinary character - characterizing the South African society. I ask: how does the fate of the *makwerekwere* coincide with the pandemic poor? What experiences of spectacular forms of violence do they share? I argue that the abused South African come to embody aspect of the *makwerekwere* – or despised foreigner – through shared forms of violence and "racial" dynamics that exist among South Africans themselves. In other words, I am concerned with what these people have in common, and not as much in what ways they differ.

## THE PROBLEM WITH THE *MAKWEREKWERE:* "THEY STEAL OUR JOBS" AND "SELL DRUGS"

The problem of difference and "the other", is a classic anthropological topic both as a critique of the discipline's traditional ethnographic focus but also as a topic of study (see Fabian 2014). Difference, imagined or otherwise, is an ample way to summarize what this chapter is about in broad terms.

Originally, I did not intend to write this chapter, or at least not in its current form. However, I chose to write it because the issues presented here are something that stuck with me during my stay in Durban. The issue of difference (between people or groups of people) was most ubiquitous in Durban. This discourse went beyond the city's "racial" categories of white, black, colored or Indian and issues of poverty and hardship. Interlocutors often shared their perspectives and opinions about African nationals that had immigrated to South Africa, so-called *makwerekwere*.

In my talks with Zithulele, the fisherman from chapter 2, he made it clear what he personally thought were big issues in South Africa – the rise of the "black man" to power, for instance. But Zithulele also thought strongly about immigrants in the country, particularly other Africans: "You see, they don't come here legally, with papers. You came here legally, but

they don't. Then they start selling drugs". Zithulele referenced the M4 south bridges in central Durban which infamously goes by the name "Whoonga Park". The "whoonga" refers to "black tar heroin".[53] According to Zithulele, the Nigerian was a key perpetrator of such illicit drug-selling acts.[54] He was not the only person to share such sentiments. The Nigerian, the Zimbabwean and the Mozambiquan - all often labeled *makwerekwere* - were popular topics. On my travels to a from the beachfront, the cabs would drive past this Whoonga Park. It was a truly dystopian sight to behold, riddled with overcrowding, zombie-like people walking around, garbage, dust and concrete bridges forming the background scenery. Uber drivers would comment that "they [makwerekwere] are selling drugs here instead of working [formally]". The *makwerekwere* were said also said to be "stealing our [South Africans'] jobs and "causing trouble". The drivers were angry with the *makwerekwere* for causing this suffering, but they also did put blame on the victims themselves.

## Reasons for xenophobia

Loren Landau argues that the apartheid political machinery "turned black South Africans into "foreign natives within the country, guests of the South African Republic should they stray beyond the homelands… to which they ostensibly belonged" (2011: 5). Central to this argument is the impeding threat of the *moving* migrant that may threaten the nation's stability, which was during apartheid and colonial times, those who were not white. Today, "A deep suspicion of those who move… continues to infuse official and popular discourse" (Landau 2011: 5). These ideas are embedded in hostile legislation and policy toward the moving migrant (Kabwe-Segatti 2008).

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[53] Heroin that looks like tar due to impurities.

[54] During this same conversation, Zithulele asked where I was from. "Norway" was not a good enough answer. Thus, I explained that one of my parents was from Nigeria. Zithulele almost immediately stopped talking about Nigerians. Having grown up hearing stories of hard work and poverty in Nigeria, I was well aware of the struggles in that particular country. While I did not experience any issues related to this, it did make me consider whether I should disclose this information to interlocutors or not. Ultimately, I chose to share it because lies can have unforeseen consequences. This was interesting and is a clear example one of the ways in which the anthropologist's positioning and choices along the way does affect what people talk about and how they talk about it.

David M. Matsinhe argues that the "ideology of makwerekwere", draws its energy from Africans being invisible intruders in South African society. They are "the enemy who looks like us, the enemy who is us" (2011: 309). They are "like us" (South Africans) because they too are African, bringing with them many similarities in culture, language and physical characteristics. But it is fundamentally that they are also poor (Matsinhe 2011). Thus, they are able to intrude efficiently – and by implication move- to "steal" from South Africa's wealth. The foreign perpetrator that is camouflaged provides ample ground for affects of anxiety and fear (Comaroff & Comaroff 2001: 650) and "distrust" (Steenkamp 2009). Tshitereke writes about the "frustration-scapegoat" (1999: 4) which arises in times of deprivation. The scapegoat is put to blame for misery ("stealing jobs" and "selling drugs") and thus must be eliminated.

These above perspectives form a sort of psychosocial explanation for xenophobia. Joshua D. Kirshner (2012) suggests that popular rhetoric used by politicians and community leaders also plays a role. Kirshner exemplifies this using a case study of the township of *Khutsong* in the Gauteng province during a wave of xenophobic attacks that swept across South Africa in 2008. Kirshner suggests that violence was halted in Khutsong – despite violence being rampant in Gauteng during this wave of attacks – because Khutsong was involved in a struggle against municipal demarcation. Thus, it was this unifying cause that emphasized spatial belonging for all of Khutsong's inhabitants, including migrants, rather than phobia of any kind. South African presidents ranging from Thabo Mbeki to Jacob Zuma and until today's Julius Cyril Ramaphosa, have all three stated that "South Africans are not xenophobic".[55] They have thus positioned themselves dubiously in continental African politics (du Plessis 2021). Further on, and in line with Kirshner's (2012) rhetorical argument, they seem to not wish to admit the harmfulness of symbolic violence that is drawn from their vague public statements and particular use of language (Lalbahadur 2020). It is in this situation that Julius Malema, one of the most outspoken political leaders in the country, despite his controversies, stand in stark contrasts to these tree aforementioned political figures. In a speech against xenophobia aired on SABS[56] News, Malema expresses that

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[55] See: Simao 2008; Zuma (2015); Khoza (2021).

[56] Stands for "South African Broadcasting Corporation".

"There are no soldiers on Nigerians, there are no soldiers on Mozambicans, there are soldiers on South Africans themselves".[57]

Another perspective on xenophobia is that language and expressions can be used in a violent way in order to characterize others from the outside as sub-human (Kgari-Masondo & Masondo 2019). This is precisely what *makwerekwere* the word itself does: it mimics and mocks the language of "the other" who does not speak a native South African tongue; "a babbler" to be precise (Hickel 2014: 103). Others believe that witchcraft or *ubuthakathi* in Zulu is at play. A woman named Thandile explains:

> When the makwerekwere come here we no longer develop, and our children no longer progress. If we have reached 80 percent then we fall back to 10 or 0 percent. For example, if I have a shop and a foreigner comes here and sets up a shop nearby, then his shop will succeed and my shop will fail. They will go up and we will go down. The only way to explain this is that they are using something . . . that they are using ubuthakathi. You see how they come here, they are so poor, they come from a poor country and they come across the border with nothing but a passport. There's no way that they can become rich after only three years or so here! There must be something behind it...they are using ubuthakathi. There's no other way to explain it (Hickel 2014: 108).

Witchcraft can function as an explanatory model for what is going on in society (Niehaus 2001). As I have showed, the reasons and workings of xenophobia are multicausal. In this vein, Harris remarks, that above all, xenophobia is something that is performed (2002: 170). It is a violent *practice* that is being nurtured by various social processes – such as the ones above.

## UNDERSTANDINGS OF VIOLENCE

One of the most gruesome murders enticed by xenophobia, is the case of the so-called "burning man" Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave (Underhill & Khumalo 2010). The Mozambiquan

was stabbed, wrapped up in his own blankets and set ablaze and left to die on the streets of Ramaphosa informal settlement in the East Rand, southeast of Johannesburg in 2008. This murder was very similar to method of "necklacing"[58] that was utilized during apartheid to kill those who were deemed traitors to the anti-apartheid movement (Buur & Jensen 2004). Cases such as this showcase those xenophobic ideas of particularly other Africans that can be transferred into physicality. The violent ideas and opinions themselves can be understood as something akin to what Matsinhe has called "the ideology of makwerekwere" (2011: 310) in which South African "exceptionalism" plays a vital role. The South African might say "We're the richest in Africa"; We're the most powerful in Africa"; We are the best in Africa"; We have the best technology, best economy, best schools and universities" (Matsinhe 2011: 310). If the focus shifts, the same people might say that *makwerekwere* "are selling drugs", "stealing our jobs" - and even "stealing women" (Sigsworth et al. 2008: 22). In anthropology, such opinions and ideas can be understood as *symbolic violence* – which involves the "subtle naturalization of inequalities" (Holmes 2013: 61) through for example language, attitudes and behavior toward others.

Symbolic violence generates hostility and violence toward certain groups of people. Slavoj Žižek writes that "…language itself, the very medium of non-violence, of mutual recognition, involves unconditional violence" (2008: 65). Žižek means much by this, but centrally that language has the power to divide and ultimately may feed into "violent imaginaries" (Schöder & Schmidt 2001) which in turn can be transformed and materialized into acute physical violence epitomized by the necklacing of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave and the common occurrence of destruction of foreign-owned shops, homes and other killings during xenophobic attacks (Misago et al. 209: 23-28). These attacks have been often "effervescent"[59] in characteristic, implying some degree of suddenness and some degree of collective action, in

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[58] *Necklacing* involved trapping an individual in a car tire, pouring petrol and setting the person on fire. In the case of Ernesto Alfabeto Nhamuave, blankets were used instead of a tire.

[59] "There are periods in history when, under the influence of some great collective shock, social interactions have become much more frequent and active. Men look for each other and assemble together more than ever. That general effervescence results which is characteristic of revolutionary or creative epochs…. Men see more and differently now than in normal times. Changes are not merely of shades and degrees; men become different. The passions moving them are of such an intensity that they cannot be satisfied except by violent and unrestrained actions, actions of superhuman heroism or of bloody barbarism" (Durkheim 2008: 211).

their eruption. Additionally, as they play out, the violent clashes are quite extraordinary and brutal. It is this extraordinary violence that I define as "spectacular".[60]

# THE SPECTACULAR VIOLENCE OF THE PANDEMIC

The xenophobic wave of attacks in South Africa throughout the years has been characterized by extreme brutality. In a list of major xenophobic attacks carried out between 1994 and 2008, the following types of violence have occurred: beatings, killings, looting of spaza shops,[61] burning immigrants to death, shooting, individual South African citizens "evicting" immigrants from their shops and homes, rape, mass-displacement, stabbings, hacking to death and petrol bombing (Masigo et al. 209: 23-28). My aim in this chapter is to compare these spectacular forms of violence[62] that have occurred in these past xenophobic to new pandemic occurrences of similar types of violence – for example evictions, demolitions, killings, ethnic and "racial" tensions as well as police brutality toward the poor.

## The Shack Abode in Pandemic Time

The shack is one of the defining figures in much of South Africa's urban landscape.[63] They are found throughout the country and are often the only type of housing that can be afforded by low-income households and families. Nationally, many millions of South Africans live in informal dwelling.[64] These abodes often lack basic amenities of water and electricity and consist of simple building materials like tin plates. I would often see the shacks along the highways in Durban – sometimes in big clusters and other times quite lonesome. These shacks are predominantly constructed upon land that is not regulated for housing purposes and are therefore defined as "informal" and sometimes "illegal" by the government even though the

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[60] On spectacular forms of violence, see: Penglase (2018); Larkins (2015).

[61] A spaza shop or a tuck shop, is a small informal shop that sells everyday items.

[62] Erika Larkins (2015) argues in her book *The Spectacular Favela* on violence in poor neighborhoods in Brazil that even though violence can be spectacular, spectacularism can also become the everyday norm.

[63] See Kerry Chance (2018); Pithouse (2008) for in-depth work on shack-dwellers.

[64] See: http://cs2016.statssa.gov.za/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/NT-30-06-2016-RELEASE-for-CS-2016-_Statistical-releas_1-July-2016.pdf (Accessed 15 December 2021).

settlers have no other choice than to erect their abodes there. These informal settlements are demolished regularly in certain areas, and the shack dwellers living on unregulated land masses are always at risk of losing their homes. However, ever since the arrival of the pandemic, the South African government has introduced a halting to evictions and demolitions through a country-wide moratorium.[65]

A notable violent event that occurred in April 2020 at the hands of eThekwini municipality concerns the eKhenana occupation, which is an informal settlement in Durban. The settlement has been "attacked" on multiple occasions by private contractors and the municipality itself throughout lockdown. During these attacks, residents were shot at, evicted and shacks demolished. This all occurred despite the settlement being legally protected by a court order from 2019 as well as lockdown regulations forbidding evictions during the pandemic (Draper 2020).

> On 15 April 2020, 13 occupied houses were demolished in eKhenana informal settlement. On 22 April 2020, the City of eThekwini and its contracted security agency, Calvin Family Security Services demolished 14 homes in the eKhenana informal settlement. These evictions were conducted without a court order and while an interdict was still in effect. SERI filed an urgent application to the High Court for an interdict, contempt and compensation for the damage to the property. The matter was settled, and an undertaking was signed on 24 April 2020 wherein the City undertook to "refrain from demolishing, burning and removing or disposing of the Applicant's informal housing structures in the informal settlement or from causing this to take place". However, minutes after the judgment was issued the eThekwini Municipality's Anti-Land Invasion Unit attacked the occupation and shot one of the occupiers who was rushed to hospital with serious injuries.[66]

This case shows the contradictions, irony, paradoxes and the chaotic face of the pandemic response in practice. How can it be possible for a government body to carry out, not once, but

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[65] See: https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2021/06/15/disaster-management-act-regulations-alert-level-3-during-coronavirus-covid-19-lockdown (Accessed 1 December 2021).

[66] See: http://www.hlrn.org/violation.php?id=p21sY6s=#.YbfEFHyZMuV (Accessed 13 December 2021).

twice a raid on a protected settlement in the midst of a pandemic? To a large extent, the workers that are forced to carry out these violent evictions and this destructing are often themselves *poor*.[67] In October 2021, two houses in eKhenana were burnt down by alleged perpetrators connected to the local police and local ANC[68] branch (Abalahli baseMjondolo 2021).

At the Azania Land Occupation in Durban in April 2020, a group of women were evicted from their shacks by a private contractor. Later, the same women were arrested for being homeless and sleeping in the open: "After they were evicted last week 29 women were accused of contravening the lockdown, arrested and taken to KwaKito. Their crime was to sleep on open ground after their homes had been destroyed…" (Abalahli baseMjondolo (2020). The shacks and abodes of foreign nationals have also frequently been targeted by xenophobic mobs in the past. The perpetrators are in many ways the same: poor Africans versus poor Africans. For example: February 2008 in Laudium township in the City of Tshwane: "At a community meeting in the informal settlement of Itireleng some members encourage residents to chase non-nationals out of the area. Violent clashes take place. Shacks and shops belonging to non-nationals are burned and looted" (Masigo et al. 2009: 23). On 11 May 2008 at Alexandra township in Johannesburg: "An armed mob breaks into foreigners' shacks, evicting them and then looting and/or appropriating their homes. Two men are killed (1 Zimbabwean, 1 South African) and two women are raped, one by four men. 60 people are injured" (Masigo et al. 2009: 24). It is South Africans employing tactics that they themselves are also victim of, and unfortunately it often ends with death.

## Killings in Pandemic Time

Stories on killings have been commonplace during the pandemic, especially as a result of police brutality.[69] Waging urban warfare against those who cannot protect themselves is a recurring issue in South African society. Particularly the killings resulting from police

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[67] South African photojournalist James Oatway has followed private eviction contractor "Red Ants" on eviction operations that are carried out in circumstances of extreme violence. In one case, they even evicted one of their own. "The irony is that the rich landowners are using the poor to do their dirty work" (Palazzo 2018).

[68] ANC is the ruling party. Stands for "African National Congress".

[69] See for example: Knoetze (2020); Knoetze (2021); Ardé (2020); Ngqakamba (2021); Christianson (2020); Bruce (2020).

brutality has roots back to the apartheid area during which residents would protest against their living conditions and the police would react violently (Heinecken 2020). The Institute for Security Studies released a report September 2020 on the prevalence and reasons for police brutality in South Africa (Bruce 2020). In the report, there are detailed statistics on the occurrence of police brutality during the early lockdown:

> According to the report during the first 40 days of the COVID-19 lockdown, IPID [Independent Police Investigation Directorate] had recorded 589 complaints of assault against the police, 141 complaints relating to the discharge of an official firearm, 32 deaths as a result of police action, 25 cases of torture, eight alleged rapes by police officers during the first 40 days of the lockdown in 2020. Of the total 827 cases during this period, 376, including 10 of the 32 deaths as a result police action, were allegedly linked to the enforcement of the lockdown. In total, during this period, IPID had received 32% more complaints against the police when compared to the same period in the previous year (Comins 2021, brackets mine).

This sometimes extremely brutal killings takes up an extra characteristic of spectacularism given the pandemic context in which it occurs. In the following, I will note three of these killings in brief.

## Killing of Zamekhile Shangase

The killing of 32-year-old Zamekile Shangase, mother of two, who was shot by the police during a raid nicknamed "Operation Show Your Receipt" in Madlala shack settlement in Lamontville, southeast of Durban (Abalahli baseMjondolo 2021; Makhaye 2021). The background for the operation was to confiscate allegedly stolen goods acquired during the July unrest during which malls and shops were looted. As the police were breaking into shacks, residents threw stones to make them stop. Police responded by firing live bullets, and two of these bullets hit Zamekile. She subsequently fell and died shortly after. She left her husband and two children. Given the enormous increase in food insecurity and endemic hunger in South Africa during the pandemic (van der Berg et al. 2021), it is almost to be

expected that people would take the opportunity to find sustenance. A representative from the shack-dweller organization *Abhahlali baseMjondolo,* Thalepo Mohapi, explains the situation:

> People who took food did that out of desperation. [They] are different from people who broke into malls and warehouses [and] burnt and destroyed buildings… Poor people took food. Many of them were arrested and will face charges of sabotage and so forth, like they are criminals, when they only took food (Makhaye 2021).

## Killing of Collins Khosa

Saturday, April 10th, 2020, the South African National Defense Force (SANDF), found a glass of alcohol in the garden of one Collins Khosa.[70] This occurred amidst the hard lockdown during which the sale of alcohol was prohibited – personal in consumption in the home was not. The SANDF soldiers decided that this was grounds for entering Collins Khosa's house. Inside, they found two bottles of beer which further escalated "the severity" of the situation. The SANDF further on slammed a gate onto Khosa's car and proceeded to abuse Khosa with beatings, choking and pouring beer on him. When his brother-in-law later came to comfort Khosa, he was not moving and indeed was dead. A later autopsy revealed that he had been killed by blunt force trauma to his head (Bailie 2021).

## Killing of Petrus Miggels

During the first day of the hard lockdown 27 March 2020, Petrus Miggels a 56-year old man bought two bottles of bear for his neighbor in Utsig, Western Cape (Christanson 2020). Two police officers discovered his actions and began beating him and subsequently put him into their van and drove off to another location where they continued the abuse. Eventually they drove him back to where they had found him. Miggels later managed to get home but shortly after fell ill and died. It was revealed from the autopsy that Miggels had died from a double heart attack.

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[70] The killing of Collin Khosa has received widespread attention and has been covered in many South African news outlets such as DailyMaverick, News24 and GroundUp.

## JULY 2021 UNREST IN SOUTH AFRICA

While these macabre individual killings have adorned the headlines in South Africans news outlets throughout the pandemic, little matches the spectacularism of the July 2021 unrest which primarily occurred in the provinces of Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal (here I will discuss the latter with a focus on the town of Phoenix). The unrest left at least 342 people dead across the country as of August 2021 (Davis et al. 2021). The unrest was marked by an unprecedented looting spree of malls and shops and is the most violent incident since the fall of apartheid (Cohen 2021). Violent clashes occurred as communities and shop owners attempted to protect their areas via road blockades. The event seems to have been sparked by the jailing of former President Jacob Zuma for contempt of court, although the jailing does not seem to have been part of the underlying cause or motivations for the unrest. Rather, long-standing structural inequalities, hunger, poverty and deprivation fueled even further by the pandemic seem have been instrumental (see: Erasmus 2021; Visagie et al. 2021; Tolsi 2021). The unrest has also been marked by *alleged* "racial tensions" between different communities, particularly Indian and black in Phoenix. In this vein, I will lay out in brief the killings and alleged racial tensions thereof that occurred in Phoenix in KwaZulu-Natal, northwest of Durban.

## Killings in Phoenix, KwaZulu-Natal July 2021

During the July unrest, there was an outburst of violence during the looting spree in Phoenix. People were shot and beaten to death during different circumstances and for different reasons. Leading up to the Phoenix killings which ultimately left 36 people dead, were "fake news"[71] of Indians targeting blacks. 350-500 blacks were said to have been killed by Indians in Phoenix (Dutton 2021). This story was ignited by a false report:

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[71] What is fake news? Lazer et al. writes that: "We define "fake news" to be fabricated information that mimics news media content in form but not in organizational process or intent. Fake news outlets, in turn, lack the news media's editorial norms and processes for ensuring the accuracy and credibility of information. Fake news overlaps with other information disorders, such as misinformation (false or misleading information) and disinformation (false information that is purposely spread to deceive people" (2018: 2).

An executive of the National Funeral Practitioners Association of South Africa was quoted as saying that 500 bodies were piled at the Phoenix state morgue. Without evidence, a connection immediately seems to have been made by uninformed members of the public and some media that the "hundreds of [black] bodies" were all as a result of the "Phoenix massacre". This either wittingly or unwittingly fanned racial flames (Erasmus & Hlangu 2021, brackets mine).

Following this report, a rumor was created that Indians were systematically targeting blacks and thus were the perpetrators that had created this pile of bodies. This story gained significant traction during the days of looting. Threats were exchanged between Indians and blacks on social media such as Twitter and WhatsApp. For instance one group proclaiming that: "Tomorrow we coming in all your Indian people town to close everything… You will wake up and see flames" and a different group expressing that "…if we are stopping somebody, we're not going to stop the Indians… We're going to question the Africans" (Eligon & Mji 2021). At this point in time, police was almost non-existent in the area. The result was widespread vigilantism[72] in the Indian-dominated Phoenix where armed residents patrolled the streets, set up roadblocks and took the law into their own hands to protect their town.

In media coverage of the July unrest, it was primarily black South Africans that were depicted as looters. Thus, there seemed to exist a widespread sentiment independently of the racial tension build-up resulting from fake news that only black South Africans were looters. This may have exacerbated racial profiling at the checkpoints where vigilante groups confiscated goods of black South Africans if they could not produce a receipt for the goods in their car (Tolsi 2021).

Ultimately, 36 people were killed – 33 of which were black South Africans and 3 were Indian South Africans. Out of these 36, most were allegedly shot, some were beaten and some were burned (Erasmus & Lwazi 2021). In the aftermath, *Daily Maverick* conducted an investigation and interviewed family members of the diseased, vendors, police officers, community leaders and more. They deducted from their findings that "…there is some credible evidence being investigated by police of what appear to be the indiscriminate murders of Black people in Phoenix, as there are credible incidents of Black people allegedly being assaulted in Phoenix

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[72] For vigilantism in South Africa, see Kirsch (2010).

for "just being black". In addition to the above they found that "There are also credible incidents being investigated of those of Indians being shot by Black people who are suspected of being involved in looting" (Erasmus & Lwazi 2021).

Whichever the case may be, these tensions are not new. The Durban Riots of 1949[73] which lasted from 13 until 15 January, left 142 people dead and 1087 injured. The riot began with reports that an African boy had been assaulted by an Indian shop owner. This event triggered a wave of violence, a so-called "pogrom", in which black South Africans targeted Indian South Africans. This triggered "…insecurity, economic desperation, and psychological torment…" (Soske 2009: 145) among the Indians. However, T. G. Ramamurthi argues that these riots of 1949 were, for the most part, not about "race", but "deeper frustrations" in society related to structural inequality (1994: 545). Unfortunately, this violence was repeated in the Inanda[74] Riots of 1985 when violence against Indians were yet again ignited and 1500 were forced to flee their homes which were looted and set ablaze in a process of mass-displacement (Moodley 2020; Hughes 1987). In 2021, however, it would seem it was the Africans' turn.

Thus, an event that was seemingly not at its inception about race came to be molded into it, fueled by fake news and past trauma. Niren Tosli notes in her well-written article that ultimately, what could be seen during the July unrest was:

"People of different races were attacking each other… Information started filtering in of proposed attacks and counterattacks on and by communities in Chatsworth, Umlazi, KwaMashu and Phoenix, all working-class townships created by apartheid's Group Areas Act" (Tosli 2021).

Indeed, could the outcome had been different if many of these residential areas had not been created along racial lines?

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[73] See: https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/1949-anti-indian-pogrom-durban (Accessed 8 December 2021).

[74] Inanda is located some 7 km from Phoenix. Mahatma Gandhi had his base here during his 21 years in South Africa. See: https://www.southafrica.net/gl/en/travel/article/communal-living-gandhi-s-phoenix-settlement-at-inanda-kwazulu-natal (Accessed 8 December 2021).

## Closing Remarks

I have, in this chapter, showed that poor South Africans fall victim to the same types of spectacular violence as the *makwerekwere*, such as macabre killings, shootings and evictions. The effervescence, the seemingly arbitrariness and the brutality of these events, highlight the uncertainty and vulnerability face by these groups of people. They show remarkable resilience in being able to endure wave after wave of violence. The South African and the *makwerekwere* do not only share these forms of spectacular violence, but they are also attempting to escape the same damning conditions of bare life such as poverty and hunger.

The necropolitics of the pandemic have forced many South Africans to loot and steal under what became a spectacular show of violence in July 2021. While there exist many explanations for the July unrest ranging from the jailing of Zuma to poverty and hunger, the event, as it played out, seems to point to specific processes and consequences which are embedded in the social fabric of the affected areas. This may be local history and social trauma as seem to have a played a role in Phoenix, and the apartheid legacy of police brutality as seen in pandemic killings.

While the pandemic killings in Phoenix show signs of historical continuity, so does xenophobia. In late 2020 anti-immigration groups were demanding that non-South Africans be deported (Gatticchi & Maseko 2020). In May 2020 in midst of the pandemic, the South African state erected a 40-km long border fence with Zimbabwe "to stop the spread of the coronavirus" (Writer 2020). What can this entail for the future of spectacular violent incidents in South Africa?

# CHAPTER SIX

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# Closing Remarks

## INTRODUCTION

President Cyril Ramaphosa conveyed to the public in October 2021 that "South Africa had managed the pandemic as well as it could" (Suttner 2021). Given the struggles of the urban poor – as I have discussed throughout the thesis – this is a remarkable statement that begs the if it could have played out differently.

This chapter summarizes my findings from chapter 2, 3, 4 and 5 as well as connecting the dots to the theories of bare life, resilience and necropolitics. Towards the end, I will briefly touch upon not so much what could have been done differently, but how one might imagine a different pandemic response.

## THE RUINOUS CONDITIONS OF BARE LIFE

In this thesis, I aimed to uncover the various ways in which bare life is given expression during the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa. I have showed throughout this thesis some of the shadow sides in South Africa's "ruthlessly efficient fight" (Harding 2020) against the coronavirus. We see that the urban poor, who often suffered before the pandemic from the blights of apartheid legacy and structural inequities, have suffered even more immensely during the pandemic. In chapter 2, on the fisherfolk of Durban, I showed how racial and spatial marginalization has played a role in the usage of the Durban port area since colonial times. In pandemic time, the fisherfolk were expelled from their fishing grounds and consequently denied their practice and culture of fishing. This produced ideal conditions for bare life and exposed fisherfolk – not just in Durban but across the whole of South Africa – to hunger and infringement upon their right to the city.

These issues of spatial marginalization, hunger and denial of livelihood extends also to the homeless discussed in chapter 3. The homeless face the consequences of social abandonment, as I showed with Fanyana losing his "power" and were subsequently left in a diffuse positioning in the pandemic response. On the one hand, the shelter seemed like a measure that would be of help, but on the other hand, the shelter fell short of its intended purpose and instead rising the risk of infection. In addition to this, when some homeless chose to stay in the streets, they faced the imminent threat of being arrested. Their "hustle" on the streets – asking for money, obtaining food and so on - that nourished these people, were also gone when the hard lockdown hit with full force.

In chapter 4, on female domestic workers, I showed how enduring inequalities along racial lines and social status in the gated home persist and are made worse during the pandemic. Issues with asymmetrical power relationship and low social status are key contributors to these enduring inequalities. In addition, the informal status of domestic work caused issues also outside the gated workplace and consequently many domestic workers who were already earning below a living wage, having no security to fall back on after the mass-job loss in the sector of over 250,000 workers.

Finally, in chapter 5 I showed how spectacular forms of violence, such as macabre killings, are shared among South Africans and Africans from other countries. I argued that the July unrest, as it played out in Phoenix, KwaZulu-Natal, was characterized along racial lines and especially brutal, showing how the fates of South Africans and the *makwerekwere* coincide through their exposure to spectacular violence.

However, what bare life also indirectly shows, is that through this hardship of resilient inequalities that often have their roots from colonial times and apartheid, the urban poor persist through all this hardship and sometimes find new meaningful ways to keep going. I believe the Elangeni Green Zone farm project illuminates this resilience and enduring power of the urban poor and that could be harnessed for a better future - if only they were allowed to.

## NECROPOLITICS AND THE "HUMBLING" PANDEMIC (?)

In answering this question, I wish to dedicate a few sentences and consider what Mike Ryan – the executive director of the World Health Organization (WHO)s said at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020: "Viruses know no borders and they don't care about your ethnicity, the color of your skin or how much money you have in the bank" (Gstalter 2020). In other words, the virus is "humbling" for all (Nyamnjoh 2020).

To a large extent, this is not true for the situation of the urban poor. While those more affluent with gated homes have much different circumstances for handling the pandemic. This idea of the "humbling pandemic" does not hold for people whose lives depend on informal economy and movement in the face of heavy restrictions on their respective activities such as fishing, street hustle and domestic work. Therefore, the pandemic response – which employs tactics that come to determine how lives are to be lived - can be seen as an exacerbator of inequalities, by the hands of which precarious circumstances of living are a larger threat than the risk of infection (Manderson & Levine 2020).

It is here, then, – at the intersections between ideas of a humbling pandemic and the realities of bare life - that Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics comes to its full force. Mbembe wants to know "whose bodies in society are expendable, marginal, and whose bodies are figured by the state as waste" (Levine & Manderson: 2021: 394). If the pandemic measures in South Africa show anything, it is that the urban poor – as discussed in this thesis - seems to have been affected in a way, that not only is unjust, but also showcases the in plain sight the continuities of apartheid and its system of labeling some human beings as being worth less than others.


## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

As the Omicron variant of the coronavirus made headlines throughout the world after South Africa alerted the world of its discovery on 24 November 2021 (Roberts 2021), President Cyril Ramaphosa slammed the ensuing travel bans on South Africa:

> The prohibition of travel is not informed by science, nor will it be effective in preventing the spread of this variant. The only thing the prohibition on travel will do is to further

damage the economies of the affected countries and undermine their ability to respond to, and recover from, the pandemic (Ellis 2021).

Following this statement, several people were asking in the commenting fields of South African news outlets on social media if the pandemic response was "informed by science", and by indication meaning that it was not. In connection with this comment - and as I briefly noted in chapter 1 - there has been critique of the pandemic measures as "performative science" (Muller 2021) and "emulation" of Western pandemic models (Hood 2020).

Ideally, these critiques would have been followed analyzed further in this thesis in order to fully dissect the pandemic measures themselves beyond their immediate consequences among the urban poor as has been the focus of this thesis. However, in the following, I will note two important critiques in brief that have emerged as a part of the COVID-19 pandemic literature that I argue could be of use to locally-adjusted pandemic responses, also further studies.

## The Idea of a "Social Topology"

Manzo (2020) argues that pandemic models and measures around the world have not accounted for "complex social networks". By this he means that the mappings or "topologies" of movement and social interaction have not been realized in the measures. He argues that in order to reduce harm, this could be useful in preventing spread. As I mentioned in chapter 2, the fisherfolks of Durban fish in large open spaces (excluding the piers) that could have potentially. Thus a social mapping of where people are and how they interact could have alleviated the impacts of the pandemic measures on this particular group of people.

## Ethics of Ubuntu

Sambala et al. calls for *ubuntu* to be implemented as a guiding principle in the face of public health crisis in order to "achieve a balance between population health and individual interests" (2020: 12). But what is ubuntu, and what does it offer? It is argued that *ubuntu* – which is an African ethics of mutuality - stands in contrast to what is termed the biomedical and/or bioscientific perspective which is heavily based on science and prediction using graphs, numbers and models to predict outcomes and ultimately responses to these outcomes. *Ubuntu* on the other hand, is dialogical: "I help you, you help me". It is perceived as a more basic

approach to humanity, something that is more relatable, something that comes to be through dialogue and not coercion.

## Closing Remarks

To return to President Ramaphosa's statement that South Africa has handled the pandemic as well as it could, to what extent can this be held to be true? I believe his statement detracts from the natural follow-up question which would be: What could have been done better? Perhaps this is the question that must be asked. As the thesis has showed, conditions of bare life do occur. Hunger and violence have surfaced in response – in part at least- to precarious living conditions exacerbated by the necropolitical pandemic response. Therefore, - in the future - different ways to approach pandemic responses could be instrumental toward the prevention of hunger, poverty and violence so permeating during the COVID-19 pandemic.

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