

# Visual evidence of self-inscriptions of identity by marginalised communities in Mitchell's Plain, South Africa

**Liesel Hibbert**

Department of Applied Language Studies  
School of Language, Media and Culture  
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, Port Elizabeth  
E-mail: Liesel.hibbert@nmmu.ac.za

This article presents a selection of photographs as evidence of community engagement at the local level, in an area near Cape Town which is heavily stigmatised. Press posters, public signage and linguistically visible domains are analysed in terms of outsider versus insider inscription of identity, raising the issue of the degree to which residents are positioned to break spatial constraints. The images selected for discussion represent four categories: first, those depicting the geographical features of the area, second, neighbourhood signage (constructed by insiders in the community), third, billboards and advertisement (outsiders tapping into stereotypical perceptions of the local community) and lastly, newspaper and tabloid headline posters (reinforcing outsider perceptions of the community). The purpose of the analysis is to reveal how members and groups of the Mitchell's Plain community express ownership and participation through self-inscription. These self-inscriptions are viewed against the background of existing historical and official super-imposed inscriptions. Finally, the paper provides examples of how residents position themselves in terms of the spatial constraints and what forms of agency they exercise under severe socio-economic strains.

**Keywords:** linguistic landscape, ethnography, South Africa, community identity, self-representation, ownership, appropriation, visual representation

## Visuele getuienis van 'n selfingskrewe identiteit deur samelewings in Mitchell's Plain wat na die rand verskuif is

Hierdie artikel stel 'n reeks foto's as bewys van gemeenskaps betrokkenheid op plaaslike vlak voor in 'n gemeenskap naby Kaapstad wat erg gestigmatiseer is. Pers-plakkate, publieke naamborde en linguistiek-sigbare areas word in terme van buitestaander- teenoor lidmaat-inskripsie van identiteit geanaliseer. wat die kwessie van die graad waartoe inwoners in staat is om ruimtelike beperkings te verbreek, aanspreek. Die beelde wat vir hierdie bespreking gekies is stel vier kategorieë voor: die eerste stel die geografiese kenmerke van die area voor, die tweede is plaaslike naamborde en tekens (deur lidmate van die gemeenskap geskep), derde, advertensieborde en advertensies (geskep deur buitestaanders wat munt slaan uit stereotipiese persepsies van die plaaslike gemeenskap) en laastens, koerantopskrifte en hoofopskrif-adevertensies (wat die buitestaander se persepsie van die gemeenskap versterk). Die doel van hierdie analise is om te wys hoe lede en groepe van die Mitchell's Plain gemeenskap eienarskap en deelname deur self-inskripsie uitdruk. Hierdie self-inskripsies word beskou teen die agtergrond van bestaande historiese en offisiële inskripsies wat bo-oor die bestaande inskripsies gemaak is. Laastens verskaf hierdie artikel ook voorbeelde van hoe inwoners hulself in terme van ruimtelike beperkings positioneer en watter vorme van ondersteuning hulle onder erge sosio-ekonomiese druk beoefen.

**Slutelwoorde:** Linguistieke landskap, etnografie, Suid-Afrika, gemeenskaps-identiteit, self-voorstelling, eienaarskap, besitneming, visuele voorstelling

In 2007, two research assistants were given manual cameras to take photographs along the way on their usual route to Glendale High School in Mitchell's Plain outside of Cape Town. The research assistants visited a school as facilitators one afternoon every week as part of an After School theatre project. Further details of this project are documented in Flockemann, Al Bilali and Vass (2008). Both research assistants were not members of the Mitchell's Plain community (about which more later) but had been working in the area for one afternoon a week over a period of about two years. My decision to give them the cameras stems from remarks made to me about what they had observed while driving through Mitchell's Plain to get to the school each week. They had noted how the youth they were mentoring and training

were exposed to extremely negative representations of their own community. When asked to elaborate further, they referred to signage, billboards and placards they had driven past so many times, with inscriptions which aim to shock and dismay. The visible signage confirms how the community is consistently constructed as separate, different, crime-ridden, and generally problematic in terms of deviance. We began to speculate about the effect this may have on the youth growing into adulthood in this context, in which identity is consistently negatively inscribed.

While travelling to and from the school with my research assistants on a particular occasion, I too, in my capacity as chief researcher on the self-portrait project (Hibbert 2009), took note of the signage and its potential connotations. The brief given to the research assistants was, when taking photographs, to include neighbourhood signage, billboards, placards, advertisements or anything else which portrays the essence and character of the area, as they see it. They were asked to photograph as much written text which would be legible on ordinary snapshots as possible. The assistants took 70 photographs in total. The sample for discussion in this article constitutes a little less than a quarter (13 photographs) of the total set of 70.

The thirteen photographs were selected on the basis of being representational samples of two categories under discussion, namely outsider and insider inscriptions. In summary then, this article seeks to answer the following questions:

1. How have outsider views of the community been inscribed in the environment and for what purposes?
2. How have locals inscribed their mark of identity on the environment and for what purposes?

### **Theoretical and methodological underpinnings**

Broadly speaking, the study falls within the ambit of theories of linguistic anthropology and linguistic ethnography (e.g., Duranti 1997), linguistic landscape theory (Gorter, 2006) and theories of visual analysis (Mitchell 2005; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt, 2006). Notions of how the physical geography as well as cultural geography of the area, may shape, and be shaped, by the identities of the residents, are salient. A fairly open-ended and loosely structured ethnographic, multiple data method of investigation was used to pick up clues about how the area had been inscribed and by whom. In the search for clues about how the community and environment are labelled and inscribed, it is important to try to identify “relevant material, always in excess, for possible (no guarantees) creative and unprefigured answers to crucial questions, in the reader’s as well as the ethnographer’s theorising” (Willis 2001: 206). In order to avoid stereotyping and simplistic or false notions of supposed community cohesion and commonalities in characterisation, the interface of social and personal aspects of self-fashioning, within the community, were extracted. As Linger notes (2001: 218):

Person-centred ethnography reveals the slippage between social category and personal appropriation. It illuminates how people apprehend, reinterpret, and qualify categorical ascriptions, how they navigate among them, and how they sometimes invent new ways of seeing themselves and others.

As mentioned earlier, two amateur photographers (who were also research assistants and youth mentors and theatre trainers on the Theatre Training Project) were drawn in to take photographs. Disposable cameras were used to compile a collection of photographs produced by ‘straight photography’ (Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2006: 78), which is customarily defined as photography

by lay photographers done spontaneously. This does not mean that the sampling method was random, but rather spontaneous, produced by disposable cameras, albeit with a premeditated theme and fairly well-formulated ideas of what evidence the photographs should provide. This fits in with the notion of photographs as “history in the making”. This links in with the dual characteristic of photographs, that is, the temporality of a photograph on the one hand, with its immediate, spontaneous institutionalised categorisation and meaning making on the other, with the capacity of the photograph to amplify and extend beyond time and space.

The entire collection was produced in the space of 45 minutes, but can be continuously reinterpreted through shifting institutionalised “ways of seeing”. The photographs resonate with both clear and commonsensical connotations, but also have less obvious ones signals (Barthes 1977: 18/19) about how citizens shape their lives in an ongoing way. The photographs were analysed on the basis of knowledge gained from personal experience during interaction with the subjects, background research of the geographic area, the community and the school and the subjects/learners at the school, with the view to providing framing for the data of the school-based project. The school-based self-project was aimed at tracing the effects of theatre training on the sense of self-concept and adulthood of the learners attending the youth development project on a regular basis. The photographs were one set of data collected from the learners. Other data consisted of diaries and DVD recorded interviews.

Van Leeuwen (2006: 145) suggests that interactive meanings are reinterpreted within the framework of the narrative and conceptual framework designed for the project. The photographs help define the nature of the relationship which is set up between those targeted by the billboards, advertisements and newspaper posters and those who are visually exposed to them daily. In addition, the objective was to demonstrate how ownership can be inscribed. Collier (1986, in Van Leeuwen 2006: 35-60) suggests five methodological resources for making visual collections. These include, first, to discover connecting and/or contrasting patterns; second, to design an inventory; third, to count and compare the items; fourth, to re-establish the relationship between context and layout and finally, to view the collection as a whole for interpretation with its dominant themes.

In the analysis of the photographs, locally produced perspectives and more structural explanations are combined to produce a “situated perspective” (de Haan and Elbers 2006: 317) on identities in motion. In attempting to describe a ‘space’ one tries to capture the dynamics between ‘being positioned’ and how the residents take up various positions. In other words, what tools for self-location (Van Leeuwen 2006: 85) do the residents have at their disposal and put to use, in shaping the ‘space’ to their own needs, convictions and aspirations?

The main researcher and the two photographers/assistants discussed many questions which arose: How do the people of the Mitchell’s Plain community (the insiders) inscribe, appropriate (or resist) spaces from within? What clues do the photographs provide about notions of ownership and control and how space constructs and constrains practices within the community? What do the photographs say about the relationship between those who are targeted by the texts, those who produced the texts and those who view them on a daily basis? The answers are sought by tracing positional and cultural elements (Holland et al. 1998: 127) in the environment which have an impact on identification processes that residents experience.

The photographs displayed in this article, which constitute a final selection for purposes of the main argument here, are photographs displaying the geographical features of the area, photographs displaying outsider inscriptions on the area, and photographs displaying insider

inscriptions of identity, all of which provide clues to the features of the cultural ‘landscape’ to which the youth on the Theatre Training Project are exposed while approaching adulthood.

### **Mitchell’s Plain**

Mitchell’s Plain is a predominantly ‘coloured’ area, especially created in the 1970s to move coloured communities out of the metropole. I, the researcher, became interested in focusing on this specific area when I was visiting Mitchell’s Plain every week in order to trace positional and cultural factors which may impact on youth identification processes, that is, of the youth involved in Brown Paper Studio After School Theatre Training Project. Much of the background information to the project was recorded by Evans and September (2004). According to Evans and September (2004: 9), Mitchell’s Plain covers an area of 54 km<sup>2</sup> and is divided into nine areas. It lies about 27 km from the Cape Town Central Business District. In 2011 SA Statistics provided an estimate of a population figure of about 310485, although the actual figures may be higher. Mitchell’s Plain was originally conceptualised by the apartheid government in 1971, when so-called ‘coloured’ people were forcibly removed from areas targeted for ‘white’ development. Construction of the first phase (Westbridge) began in 1974. The first residents moved there in 1976. The quality of housing construction slowly deteriorated as demand for housing grew.



**Figure 1**

**A view of Mitchell’s Plain**

**(All attached photographs were taken by research assistants Althea Trout and Xolani Tembu).**

Statistics SA (from the 2011 Census) provides further information on youth statistics, which follow. Youth in the area (those between the ages of 10 and 29 years of age) comprise 35% of the total population of Mitchell’s Plain. The main languages used by learners in schools are English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. However, the medium of instruction is either in Afrikaans or English. Statistical data reveal a community plagued by socio-economic difficulties. In all, 78.80% are unemployed and for those who do find employment, conditions are not much better. Of those included in the Monthly Income Census, 75% earn a monthly salary of between R400 and R3 200 (currently 50-400 US dollars). Unfortunately, updated Census data only started becoming available again in 2012, due to the ANC not allowing statistics to be publicised in the interim period, for various reasons which cannot be discussed in detail here. SA Statistics 2011,

available at the time of writing, however, provide enough detail for any reader to gain a good idea of the circumstances under which youth in this area are growing up.



**Figure 2**  
**A view of a bus stop.**

Living conditions are of a sub-economic standard. Although many people live in ‘proper’ brick houses with running water, with electricity and refuse removal services, these houses are overcrowded. Overcrowding is further exacerbated by the influx of people to informal settlements on the outskirts of existing suburbs as well as into properties that are sub-let. Gangs are active in most suburbs of the area. Although they are not solely responsible for the existing crime in the area, they are a major contributing factor to the high crime statistics in Mitchell’s Plain. Drug and alcohol abuse are rife in the area. In some cases, whole families are addicted, and many children in the Western Cape wine-growing region and surroundings are known to be born with foetal alcohol syndrome. Public transport into and around Mitchell’s Plain is expensive in relation to the generally low incomes generated. It can also be dangerous, unreliable and overcrowded. Images 1 and 2 show how flat and windswept the area is, as well as indicating how far it is from the main city, Cape Town, with the iconic Table Mountain in the distant background. The irony of Cape Town being one of the world’s most popular tourist destinations, on the one hand, and, on the other, having the highest HIV/Aids figures in the world, the highest crime rates in the world, and the highest rates of alcoholism in the world, cannot bypass any sensitive viewers of this these two images.

From the signage in the area, four images (figures 3, 4, 5 and 6) were selected as samples to illustrate how the area has been historically inscribed from the ‘outside’ and how this represents, and thereby perpetuates, stereotypical negative conceptions of the area and its people. These images are discussed in further detail in the next section.



**Figure 3**  
**A view of signage indicating directions to the Psychiatric Hospital.**



**Figure 4**  
**A view of a municipal sign placed inside school premises.**



**Figure 5**  
**A view of schoolchildren leaving school premises against negative tabloid headlines.**

## Outsider inscriptions through public signage

In Figure 3, the sign of The Lentegour Hospital indicates the direction in which to travel to reach this psychiatric hospital. Ironically the word *lentegeur* translates into English as something like “the sweet smell of spring”, which jars a bit in the light of the fact that the area is largely treeless and houses people living mainly below the breadline. The hospital is appropriately situated in this area, which has the second highest rate of alcoholism in the world, the second highest rate of chest stab wounds in the world, and is known for the high rate of conditions such as HIV/Aids, foetal alcohol syndrome, and child abuse and malnutrition. The hospital tends mainly to women, as women are more inclined to come forward for help than men are (information conveyed in conversation with a Clinical Psychologist, Mr M. Wright, working at the hospital at the time of data collection). Children are referred to the Red Cross Children’s Hospital, some 20 km away, in the affluent suburb of Rondebosch, but often do not get there because of the cost and inconvenience involved in travelling this distance, or because of reluctance of the parents to admit to and expose abuse, illness and poverty-stricken conditions.

The “City of Cape Town” sign (figure 4) shows the barbed wire and reinforced fencing which characterises the area. In the post-apartheid era, municipal activity in the area increased due to municipal rezoning in order to incorporate Mitchell’s Plain into a larger, very well-resourced zone, which was previously zoned for “whites only” and managed by “whites”. The colourful sign imposes a sense of ownership of the area, and signifies the reclamation of a previously excluded area, albeit with minimal long-term financial government and municipal investment evident. In this instance, the municipal provisions such as hospitals, sports fields and so on, taken for granted in other zones, are constructed as supposed “generous gifts” to the residents in the area, as indicated by the personal pronoun in “brought to you”. Besides the tone being patronising, it probably constitutes a ploy to appeal for votes during municipal elections. Figures 3 and 4 represent outsider/public sector/council/municipal inscriptions of ownership and appropriation of the area. These signs signify the historically entrenched and politically perpetuated racial, ethnic as well as spatial and territorial divisions that characterise South African society (Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002: 63/4). It can be surmised that transformation of territorial divisions and redeployment of real resources is slow or non-existent in economically depressed urban areas where the returns on such investments are predictably very low.

The next section discusses images from newspaper headlines and from the tabloid press. These samples are seen to strongly reinforce negative impressions of stigmatisation of the area by outsiders, which is discussed further the next section.

## Outsider inscription through newspapers and the tabloid press

Figure 5 from *Die Son*, a community paper, with the inscription “Flats ou killed for a bus ticket”, is an example of outsider appropriation of ‘local discourses’/languages on billboards and newspaper posters. What is dominant in this photograph is the grey cement and the Vibracrete in the background, which also dominate most of the other photographs. The two posters in this photograph stand in sharp contrast to each other. The top one is from a neighbourhood newspaper, indicating the low value of a human life (reminiscent of Can Temba’s line from the Drum/Sophiatown Era “Live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse”, an ironic utterance which typifies the dangerous lives the rising black middle class were forced to live under pre-apartheid clampdowns on freedom of expression and movement. It depicts the extreme economic desperation of the community. This headline from a working-class tabloid is

in working-class language, while the bottom poster, from a Cape Town mainstream, daily paper, generally for a more middleclass readership, indicates a totally different set of priorities. Here, the focus is on the increasing municipal rates that have the whole city ‘up in arms.’ In addition, the “Yield” sign, above the other two signs, has been vandalised or damaged by a passing vehicle, also not an unusual sight in the area.



**Figure 6**  
**A view of tabloid and daily city newspaper headlines at a traffic crossing.**

Figure 6, with the inscription “My pals made me a human torch” depicts a group of boisterous teenager pupils spilling out of the gates of Glendale High School. They are confronted and overshadowed in the photograph, by this grim sign: “My pals made me a human torch”. The sign is designed to attract instant newspaper sales. One guesses that, presumably, two people started a fight and one was set alight by the other. Again, the poster is designed to elicit instant interest in order to sell the local tabloid, which trades in such sensationalist stories. This and the previous photograph reflect negative stereotyping of the community, where the normality of interpersonal violence is repetitively and continuously inscribed in such headlines. Furthermore, the street sign above the newspaper poster, showing a human stick figure with head, legs and body blotted out, appears macabre, especially when viewed together with the newspaper poster.

Figures 5 and 6 can also be linked to discourse on youth at risk. A review of the literature on the issue (Hull, Zacher and Hibbert 2009) shows an overriding focus on “risky behaviours” such as unprotected sex, gangsterism, high school drop-out rates, and violence, such as xenophobic attacks by youth against youth perceived to be from ‘elsewhere’ but living within the same community. However, few studies have addressed the structural factors that have an impact on youth development in such economic conditions. The focus on misbehaviours of groups and



individuals further stigmatises and stereotypes what has been labelled as “marginal youth”, in South Africa, referred to as “youth from the previously disadvantaged sector”. This study, then, attempts to provide a sketch indicating the lack of official provision of stable community structures, indicated by the visuals displayed. Figures 5 and 6 thus represent outsider media inscription of the local community (newspaper posters aimed at, and about, the local community, characterised by crime, lawlessness, drug abuse and escalating high school ‘drop out’ rates (as described in Evans and September, 2004).

In conclusion, the analysis of the category of images depicting outsider inscriptions reveals historical as well as on-going layering of inscriptions, appropriation and ownership over time, from the 1970s onwards (a time when a second large sector of the so-called coloured population was forcibly relocated to outside of Cape Town, in order to control and isolate potential resistance to apartheid). An attempt was made to juxtapose structural as well as cultural aspects of community identity, in order to locate instances of agency. In summary, figures 4, 5, and 6 represent outsiders tapping into stereotypical perceptions of the local community by people who never go there, while the headline posters from the local tabloid press enforce outsider perceptions of the community. The images in this category provide strong visual evidence of self-inscription through which citizens tap into the environment in order to conduct their lives and further their aspirations. These will be discussed in detail in the next section.

### **The community writes back**

Figures 7, 8, 9 and 10 were chosen on the basis of their displaying insider appropriation of public and global discourses, ‘in-between’ spaces, as well as displaying innovative self-inscriptions on the linguistic landscape.

The handmade “good used tyres” sign (figure 7) is wedged onto a walkway, with high visibility for passing cars on a major thoroughfare. The sign is constructed from a piece of plywood, nailed onto wooden beams, and painted with blackboard paint, with the wording in chalk, thus non-permanent, in case of a price change or product switch. The sign is placed so as to be visible to pedestrians and traffic on both sides of the pavement. In keeping with the other images, it is dominated by grey cement and an unpaved, make-shift sidewalk, with sand and stone gravel surfaces instead of suburban tarred paving, as one would find in the metropolitan area.

The hand-painted Rocklands Sports Complex sign (figure 8) shows community inscription and ownership of a municipal facility. A handmade logo in orange and green with information for potential club members is inscribed on the officially provided grey, unpainted raw cement wall. The sign is strategically placed at the curve in the wall facing a wide main traffic intersection. This hand-painted sign on the surrounding wall advertises the facilities inside and signals strong identification with the sports facility. The sign wraps around the street corner of the traffic intersection for a panoramic view and expresses pride in the ownership of a municipal provision, as well as appropriation of the actual wall space.



**Figure 7**  
**A view of handmade signage and appropriation of public space.**



**Figure 8**  
**A view of community/club self-labelling of a sports facility .**



**Figure 9**  
A view of graffiti on a shop wall.



**Image 10**  
A view of the modified Coca Cola advertisement.

The graffiti on the unoccupied business site frontage (Figure 9), as well as Figure 10, shows insider appropriation of local commercial spaces. The varied inscriptions on this wall are non-interpretable to outsiders, this presumably being the intention. The ‘SHOPS TO LET’ sign foregrounds the economic crisis prevailing in the area. The half-painted harsh, nursery-blue wall (the colour is not discernible on the black and white reproduced images) has probably been over-painted repeatedly to cover the graffiti. The graffiti, however, are spilling over the blue area into the top half of the wall. The size of the trading sites (approximately 100m<sup>2</sup>-1000m<sup>2</sup>) indicates that there is a vast un-demarcated space available for subdivision, depending on vendor needs. Short-term rentals of bits of floor space are often taken by informal community-based traders who cannot afford shop rentals in existing shopping centres which cater for the formal commercial chain-store sector. “Giffies” presumably refers to marijuana. (“gif” in Afrikaans meaning poison). The blue paint halfway up the wall indicates the repeated painting and painting-over of graffiti. The half-wall painting is a cost-cutting exercise. Quite often, unsold, stale wall

paints in unpopular colours end up being sold in bulk at hugely discounted prices in townships. This particular blue looks like one of those colours often seen in economically depressed areas.

In the Coca-Cola advertisement (figure 10), the caption “keep it real, *gooi 'n coke in jou keel*” is written in “*Kaaps*” which is an Afrikaans-English dialect well-entrenched in the Western Cape. The line translates (badly) into English as “Keep it real, pour a coke down your throat”. Underneath this line, Coca-Cola appears almost as a formal signature, reinforcing the product brand name. The caption “*Coke met ysies virrie warme meisies*” is overtly sexist and matches the tone of the image of the two girls on the boat swigging back a drink in an assertive/aggressive fashion. The line translates into “Coke with little blocks of ice for girls who are hot”. It would probably work better as “Coke with ice for girls who are nice” to retain the rhyme but the innuendo of the pun on “hot” would be lost. Again, the formal signature brand reference appears just below this. Coke is a soft drink, but these girls are depicted as ‘hard core’ drinkers, swigging back a drink straight from the bottle. This also has fairly macabre connotations, if seen against the social situatedness of the advertisement in the middle of the area with the second highest alcoholism and stabbing rate in the world. The posture is fairly aggressive and typically a male, macho stance. A half-naked woman covered in chains and draped over a boat perpetuates and reinforces the labelling of youth in the area as displaying “risky behaviours”. This applies similarly to the depictions in Figures 5 and 6. These images constitute a resistance mode of sorts, a “writing back”, in order to imprint their insert ownership on their home territory.

Regarding multilingualism in commercial signage, Reh (2004: 1) suggests that the number and types of texts in a given area are largely dependent on factors such as the number of languages used in the area, the official language policy “landscape”, the status of the speakers, the self-esteem of the speakers, and the reader orientation of the text suppliers. A “linguistic landscape”, in research on multilingualism (Gorter 2006: 3) “refers to linguistic objects that mark the public space”. Some of these objects are reasonably permanent, while others may change from day to day. Therefore, any analysis of official, non-official, commercial or privately constructed signs needs to consider these collectively as representing both a moment in the history of the community as well as a document of the landscape as historically continuously over-laid in inscription. The area is still inhabited largely by ‘coloured’ people, because of the strong historically entrenched and politically perpetuated spatial and territorial divisions which continue to characterise South African society (Cornelissen and Horstmeier 2002: 63). At the same time, residents’ aspirations are linked to larger trends in the social matrix; in this case, the Americanisation of global urban ghettos, as discussed in the previous example, stands out as a major influence.

In summary then, figures 7, 8, 9 and 10 provide visual evidence of self-inscription of identity and constitute neighbourhood signage constructed by residents themselves. The analysis of the signage, and other visuals constructed by residents, reveals a strong sense of agency, in an area which is conceived of as economically marginal and perceived as, in the popular imagination, “voiceless”. The group of images discussed in this section provide some idea of how residents are engaged in what is termed “postcolonial negotiation of identity” (De Boeck and Honwana 2005: 9):

Looked at from the outside, the worlds of these young people are often shockingly self-referential, their horizons astonishingly limited, and their lives self-contained, despite the global *bricolage* that gives form to these youth universes’ local contents (Behrend 2002; Biaya 2000; Hansen 2000; Remes 1999). But, lived from within, this limitation is experienced as a necessary attempt at self-protection. One has to reach deep inside and tap into one’s own sources of strength in order to be able to create meaning and transparency amid the opacity of a fragmented world.

## Negotiating self-identifications through neighbourhood signage

Aspects of the interplay of positional/structural, as well as cultural elements of identity formation (Holland et al., 1998: 127) were traced through visual data. The aim of the investigation was to point out the potential effects of the signage on the residents in the area for whom they were intended. By “using neighbourhood signage as a window on contested identities” (Hull and James, 2007: 8), one is positioned to speculate how the cultural and physical geography of Mitchell’s Plain shapes and reshapes youth identity. The fairly negatively stereotyped area, with its horrific supporting statistics, provided motivation to me to re-interpret the broader, commonsensical frames of interpretation, in order to create a discursive space for highlighting, more positively, the gaps, opportunities and means of self-expression in the given space available to residents. Contested postmodern identities are revealed through viewing identification processes ‘from above’, as well as ‘from within’. A process of defamiliarisation (Marcus and Fischer, 1999: 137), which entails critiquing commonsensical notions regarding specific micro-cultures, has enabled an analysis which maps out how residents recognise the boundaries of space and negotiate those to their own advantage. This is seen by, for instance, the handmade signage on the sports field wall and the advertisement for the sale of used tyres. The residents work within the space provided and shape it in line with their economic needs.

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**Liesel Hibbert** is Professor in the Department of Applied Language Studies at Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University in Port Elizabeth in South Africa. She received her Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Cape Town. Her research spans global trends in youth development and multilingualism, academic and language development in higher education, linguistic ethnography, and South African writing, including children’s literature. Her work has been published in *Review of Research in Education*, *English Today*, the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, *Mannheimer Beitrage zur Sprach und Literaturwissenschaft*, *Per Linguam* and a variety of other local journals.