

# Coconuts do not live in Townships: Cosmopolitanism and its Failures in the Urban Peripheries of Cape Town

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"Until recently (anthropological) Social Theory has failed to account for time as lived, (through space); not synchronically or diachronically but in its multiplicity and simultaneities, its presence and absences. The 'peculiar historicity' of African societies are rooted in a multiplicity of times, trajectories, and rationalities that although particular and sometimes local, cannot be conceptualised outside a world that is globalized." (Mbembe, 2001: 8).

The issue of temporality and gender – time as lived differently by diverse gendered bodies – has for the most part, not been a central concern of mainstream feminist theorists, particularly living and working in African contexts. Feminist geographers such as Gillian Rose (1993) and Doreen Massey (1994) have considered the meanings of time as lived by women through space as a means to interrogate the received notions of place as settled, timeless and occupied by people sharing a homogenous identity. Anthropologists in the South such as Antonadia Borges (2006) and cultural geographers, Oldfield and Boulton (2005) have considered a fine-grained analyses of time progression through the everyday activities in a particular place as a means to understand the complex negotiation of identity in space. Borges, writing about women's struggles for housing in Brazil, has provided an ethnographic analysis that examines how women's quotidian engagements with the state in their struggle to find housing shape and inform the gendered notions of citizenship in Brasilia province, Brazil. Oldfield and Boulton, writing on young people's negotiations to secure shelter in the context of Old Crossroads, Cape Town, South Africa, consider how these youth's gendered and embodied experiences of the housing crisis, inform their expectations

of partners, relationships and their interpretation of gendered citizenship in post-Apartheid South Africa.

These researchers who foreground the ethnographic method assume that the cultural meanings of space are contingent, produced relationally and cannot be assumed as given, passive and settled, or that it is produced inexorably from national or regional governmental policies. They ask whether the reception of national and local government planning policies are realised in the local place, and received by passive local inhabitants in as simple a manner as intended. Furthermore they focus centrally on the tensions about and negotiation over the meanings of these identities through the gendered everyday relations in the local context. In doing so, they question whether the identities of those who live in a local place are homogenous, anchored in that space. Their analyses raise broader questions that point to the importance of examining whether and how the presence of the global, national or regional forms of governance are received, engaged with and reproduced in the local place. Like Mbembe's critique of anthropology's homogenising, linear narration of identity anchored in place and time, they too, are critical of mainstream geography's tendency to assume space as neutral, passive and uncomplicated. Instead they muddy the ready tendency to map identity as 'timeless authenticity' onto place, by focussing on the tensions, the fractures, refusals and silences that occur in the progression of the everyday acts and relations that inform the meanings of place. In addition, unlike Mbembe, they examine how the meanings of time and place are experienced differently, as the gendered identities of individuals are brought to bear upon the progression of time through quotidian acts and relations, so that the experience of temporality, within specific locations is deeply gendered.

Anthropologists' ability to provide a sustained gendered account of time as lived in 'its multiplicity', from within and across a number of locations, still seems to have eluded all but a few ethnographers (for exceptions see Tsing, 2001; Abu-Lughod, 1999). Instead, often ethnographers tend to provide an account of people's activities through time, as told from the masculine perspective, which then serves as the disembodied, gender-neutral narration of 'the community's experience' or 'the community's identity'. The ability to provide nuanced accounts of the multiple temporal locations which researchers and research informants embody, and from which they give meaning to place, to reflect gendered subjectivities of place that, whilst also accounting for

the specific contexts that researcher and research informant simultaneously occupy and from which they speak, is indeed difficult to represent.

However in this paper, I argue that two critical methodological interventions need to be made in order to surface the gendered aspect of temporality. First, attention needs to be paid to finely grained ethnographic details about the tensions, silences and fractures represented in everyday relations and quotidian activities in local places, and how these are gendered and informed by generation. Secondly, methodological attention needs to be paid to the location from which individuals speak (positionality as per feminist methodologies), which can provide one with some means to represent ‘time as lived in its (gendered) multiplicity, its presence and its absences’. I draw on ethnographic research conducted in a racially homogenous neighbourhood, Manenberg in Cape Town South Africa during the transition from Apartheid to post-Apartheid, to show how the gendered meanings of post-Apartheid cosmopolitanism in South Africa, so often celebrated as the non-violent peaceful achievement of harmonious relations across socio-economic and racial divides, are differently reflected in younger women’s local experiences due to vulnerability to sexual violence, especially in the urban peripheries.

### **A sense of place on the urban margins of Cape Town**

Manenberg is situated on the grey, sandy Cape Flats, north-east of the green belt of leafy suburbs that runs along the perimeter of Table Mountain. The suburb is one of numerous identical housing projects that were constructed in the 1960s and '70s for those classified coloured, who were forcibly removed from areas proclaimed white by the Group Areas Act<sup>1</sup>. In order to reach this suburb, one has to journey north-east from the city centre and Table Mountain along the N2 highway. As I proceed on my journey along this road, I am overcome with a deepening sense of historic and economic separation from the vibrant, cosmopolitan city centre that is etched into the landscape even now, fifteen years after the formal end of Apartheid. The physical boundaries that Apartheid architecture set in place to anchor and constrain artificially created racial communities in the urban landscape still endure in the post-Apartheid context.

Yet it is situated in the inner urban periphery, unlike areas like Khayelitsha, Happy Valley, Delft and New Crossroads. It is a site of forced resettlement; but some of its residents still recall a time when they lived and worked in the city centre. And indeed these people, who define themselves as “bruinmense”

(brown people) were the last to be forcibly removed from the city, unlike the inhabitants of Happy Valley and Browns Farm; who are perceived to be 'raw' – newcomers to the city from the far flung rural areas 'Out There'. They were still allowed to remain on the edges of the white city, and consider themselves as part of the Apartheid narration of modernity. In this racist scheme, coloureds were ideologically located midway on the linear chart of progress, not quite as high on the scale as whites, but not quite as low as other black ethnic groups either.

In the post-Apartheid, neo-liberal narrative of modernity, with its emphasis on non-racism, non-sexism and legislated equal access to the economic market, the 'New South Africans' are constructed as the brave new, 'non-racial' entrepreneurs with equal opportunity in the marketplace, who are 'free' to explore relations across erstwhile constraining racial and spatial divides. Yet what happens when this linear narration of neo-liberal economic progress comes up against the continued material constraints of economic deprivation and spatial marginality? Most residents on the Cape Flats, regardless of racial or ethnic classification, have experienced a deepening impoverishment, due to growing socio-economic inequity that is reflected in terms of spatial marginality, as the local state imposed a neo-liberal economic programme entitled Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR), similar to structural adjustment programmes employed elsewhere in African contexts, e.g. Ghana and Zimbabwe.

In the Apartheid moment, the Manenberg inhabitants have created a moral story about themselves, using the trope of *Gendered Respectability* to assert themselves as modern, as civilized. This moral narrative was based upon Manenberg's marginal location to the white city centre of Cape Town, and the inhabitants' racist exclusion from nationhood and citizenship. During the time of racist exclusion, this moral story relied upon coloured women's privileged knowledge of the Apartheid bureaucratic management of coloureds, built during their everyday experiences as social security recipients, as applicants for public housing and as employees of the textile industry reliant upon feminised labour, to construct a powerful ideology of *Gendered Respectability*, embodied in the performance and efflorescence of motherhood. Such *Gendered Respectability* also sets the boundaries of local communities and dictates the gendered norms of behaviour. In the post-Apartheid moment, the moral story of gendered personhood and respectability continues, except this time it is being contested by specifically younger women's innovative,

gendered norms of local cosmopolitanism, as they attempt to dislodge accent and aesthetics of the body from the locally constructed racialised, gendered and spatialised essentialisms.

I define the younger women's attempts to dislodge these essentialised, mutually recursive categories as the making of a newer *Coconut* identity that is fluid, and actively reworks the meaning of space. These younger women actively acquire material goods such as fashionable, sexily risqué dress, and cultural capital such as the ability to speak English, and/or isiXhosa and be seen to traverse the otherwise unfamiliar cosmopolitan spaces of the city such the touristy Waterfront or the more homely discotheques and shebeens in the surrounding though unfamiliar Xhosa-speaking suburbs. I attempt to map out the contestations between these two moral tropes, at least as it pertains to young women in the vignette that follows.

What I want to argue, is that these poor young women's experiences of material deprivation and social violence place them in a 'time' that cannot be considered to be modern in terms of the linear narration of modernisation. For if we are to equate the quintessential modern moment with peace and stability, then how can we be living in the African modern paradise that most in the West perceive South Africa to be, at least by economic standards? How then do these young women, and other members of their community, make sense of this location, at once within the 'modern' and yet forever not a part of it; forever yearning for it? I argue that the solution of this paradox for the brave young women, whom Kopano Matlwa dubbed *Coconuts* in her fictionalised account of gendered cosmopolitanism (2007), is ultimately only in doing violence to themselves; in this way I suggest they are able to resolve the apparent contradiction that they embody.

### *Onnosel en onbeskof*<sup>2</sup>: young rebels challenging the boundaries of *ordentlikheid*

In a township like Manenberg, young women's morality is judged especially by the older generation of women, the *Respectable Mothers*, by the spaces they are seen to be occupying in the local area. 'Good Girls' attend school, dress modestly and occupy the domestic space exclusively during the day, doing house chores or running errands accompanied by friends. 'Slegte dogters' or 'slatternly/spoiled girls' were the ones displaying too much flesh in tight fitting clothes, who wore make-up, heels, were willing to cross social and physical boundaries of the community and sought out spaces of leisure

on their own. These 'slatternly girls' pushed the envelope of *ordentlikheid*, or respectability, and deliberately transgressed its norms rather discreetly manipulating them. They were contemptuously regarded as *onnosel*, or foolish, by the older generation of women and their more acquiescent peers. Yet, these new norms that these 'slatternly girls' now strive to adhere to, such as their increasing familiarity with previously unknown, more glamorous spaces such as the touristy Waterfront, or with suburbs where the 'Other' resided (such as residents who were English or Xhosa speaking, or from a different socio-economic class) and with the appropriate dress and linguistic codes acceptable in these spaces, were considered to be undesirable in the local context of Manenberg. As Lindsey's case illustrates, young women who dared to cross the boundaries of the old Apartheid social and racial spaces are defined as slatternly and blamed for their own misfortune if they were the victims of assault.

Sixteen-year-old Lindsey was cast out from the circle of friends in Rio Street in this fashion, after she was raped while she was returning home from Nyanga one Saturday evening after she had visited some friends. Lindsey lived with her mother, forty-six-year-old Monica and her infant brother in a second-floor apartment located above the unit occupied by Morieda and her family. Monica was the second wife of a Xhosa-speaking man, known as "Huisbaas" (Household Head), who ran the local shebeen. Unlike most Rio Street and Manenberg residents, Monica and Lindsey were trilingual and able to converse in English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa. However, they rarely took pride in this ability, choosing to conceal this unique skill instead, as they feared the questions it would raise about their diverse ethnic origins. Despite the fact that most residents in Manenberg were from creolised religious, cultural and linguistic origins, the Afrikaans language and the Christian ideal of monogamous marriage and the nuclear family were considered to be the codes, *sine qua non* of respectability and belonging. Monica feared and resented the malicious gossip about her Xhosa ancestry. In order to mitigate the street gossip and to prove her own and her household's respectability, she regulated Lindsey's behaviour very severely.

While Lindsey's peers were given some freedom to explore spaces such as the *hok* in Rio Street during the day, she was forbidden to hang out with them there. She was expected to spend most of her free time indoors, assisting her mother to care for her baby brother, with assorted household chores. When she was allowed outdoors, she had to provide Monica with a detailed plan

of where and how she would spend her time. Monica gained a reputation among Lindsey's peers for being an unduly severe parent who restrained Lindsey's mobility severely. They rarely invited Lindsey to accompany them on errands to Nyanga Junction or on visits to friends who lived in other local communities within Manenberg. When Lindsey implored her friends to request Monica to allow her to accompany them beyond the bounds of Rio Street, even bold young women like Janap refused, claiming that "your mother is too severe. She scolds one without any reason to do so. She'll only refuse". Lindsey often found herself on the outskirts of her peer group, frequently unable to participate in conversations about a recent afternoon spent dancing in the *hok*, listening to music, or the last netball game that the Rio Rangers had played on the nearby netball field. As a result she appeared diffident and unsure of her status in the group.

At school however, she was a popular friend amongst the Xhosa-speaking girls who were newcomers to Manenberg high school – the previously coloureds-only school. A handful of coloured girls like Lindsey, who were capable of crossing linguistic boundaries with ease, befriended them and helped them settle into the new school environment. One of these young women, Xoliswa had invited Lindsey to visit her at her home in Nyanga. When Lindsey confided in me about being raped, she said that she knew that Monica would not permit her to visit her friend. Xoliswa lived across the line, in the area considered 'beyond the respectable boundaries of the local Rio community'. So, on the first few visits, Lindsey told her mother that she was going to spend the afternoon with Nazli and Nadia in their home. She was able to visit Xoliswa on a few occasions in this fashion without being detected.

On the fateful Saturday, she had spent that afternoon walking with Xoliswa in Nyanga and then at her house, chatting with some friends. When it grew dark, Xoliswa and another friend accompanied Lindsey to the pedestrian bridge at Nyanga Junction, which linked Nyanga and Manenberg across busy Duinefontein road. She said that they did not realize that they were being followed by three men until they were halfway across the pedestrian bridge, which by this time of the evening was quite deserted by the usual stream of busy shoppers. She said that she and her friends became extremely fearful and increased their pace, as they glanced over their shoulders frequently to assess whether they were gaining ground against their pursuers. At that moment, the men ran after them and held onto Lindsey and Xoliswa by their shirts, while

they struggled to break free. Their friend Zola was able to run away and call for help, while Xoliswa bit her attacker so severely on the hand that he let her go. She too ran off to find help. By this time the enraged men turned on the still-captive Lindsey and dragged her to a deserted spot at the end of the bridge. There they brutally raped her. They were disturbed by Xoliswa and Zola, who had returned with a few police officers. The rapists escaped, leaving a severely traumatized Lindsey lying half-naked in the dark. The police officers assisted her home to inform her mother. They then drove the weeping girl, her friends and her mother to the police station, where they took a statement from the young victims in turn. Lindsey said that it was not easy for her to provide the police officers with a statement because her mother constantly intervened, scolding her and reminding her about the numerous times she had been told not to leave the confines of Rio Street. She said that she felt ashamed because her mother repeatedly asked her, "What will the people say about me now? You don't listen to me! Now look what has come of your own disobedience!"

Lindsey confided in me at least three days after the rape had occurred. I was visiting the home with a friend who happened to be a health professional and who had agreed to counsel the girl briefly about HIV/AIDS. Lindsey had disobeyed the police officer's injunction not wash and to go to the district surgeon immediately. She went to the local clinic to be examined, because she feared that she would contract HIV/AIDS. The nurses there had conducted a cervical examination and had then given her a number of plastic sachets, each containing different coloured tablets that they said would prevent HIV/AIDS. Lindsey's mother Monica welcomed us into her home that afternoon, and showed us to the only two chairs in the room. She called Lindsey, whom she said spent most of her time in her bedroom. Lindsey entered the room with downcast eyes. I introduced Monica and Lindsey to Anne and told them that she had agreed to talk to Lindsey about HIV and AIDS. Monica then began telling us how the rape had occurred. As she spoke, she began weeping, repeating that "I told her repeatedly that she shouldn't go Nyanga. She doesn't know the place and the people there don't know her. Now what will people here say about me and about her? She's brought this thing upon herself". Lindsey stood against the wall silently, nervously twisting her fingers. I tried telling Monica that Lindsey should not be blamed for the rape, but she shook her head despairingly at me. She repeated adamantly that Lindsey had not obeyed her warnings and so she was to blame for her plight. Anne



and I left the despairing mother and daughter, feeling helpless about offering further advice.

Monica's concern about what the people in Rio Street would say was not unfounded. A few days later, I met Aunty Aisha sitting in her usual spot outside her gate on her upturned milk crate. After the usual exchange of greetings, we began talking about the young people in the road. This issue preoccupied most of the older people at the time, because two youths had been at the root of recent crises in the street. One incident concerned Lindsey's visit to Nyanga and the rape that had ensued. Aunty Aisha then said contemptuously, "these days they do as they please. They have no respect any longer. But when they find themselves in trouble, then they want to cry. This Lindsey of Monica's – she went to Nyanga looking for a man, and now she claims that she's been raped. Does she think that we're all so stupid? What does she want there? She knows 'we' don't go there. They will kill us there. She's just a bad one that one".

In the myth-making of the new South Africa, communities that remain separated by racial and socio-economic chasms are being sutured together in a heady mix, through powerful imagery of beer advertisements and locally-produced soap operas that reflect bodies now unmarked by race, accent and gender. These '*Coconuts*' can be seen in cosmopolitan spaces such as the Waterfront, the township shebeen or the glamorous Cape Town City centre clubs. One would expect that the bold boundary crossings of Lindsey and her attempts to reflect the practices of the cosmopolitan new South African, even in the urban periphery, would be looked upon with pride, indeed applauded. Yet in the local community of Rio Street, such boundary crossings are frowned upon, looked on with fear and considered to be the means that will unravel the moral and social wellbeing of the local communities. It seems as though such boundary crossings, as the "Stranger/Other" is sought out and now becomes the friend and neighbour, the people of Rio community will also undo the social, moral and physical boundaries through which they define themselves.

In truth it seems as though, paradoxically here in this periphery, these impoverished residents remain written into the Apartheid story of modernisation as they are unable to acquire the more substantive material aspects promised by the new South Africa, such as fixed employment, better social security, secure shelter, and as I have attempted to show in this paper, safety from gender-based violence. Poor young women's location in the new South Africa

as fully participating citizens remains tenuous, because they remain defined through 'lack'. This time however, the racial 'lack' of whiteness has become the cultural and economic lack of the ability to be empowered as consumers. They have therefore looked to their local, gendered narrative of morality with *Respectable Motherhood* at its core to sustain their self-perceptions as worthy persons. At the same time, the Rio inhabitants are also troubled by the presence of "the Other" in their midst; masquerading as the friend, the neighbour and the relative. The vocal criticisms of Monica and Auntie Aisha resonate loudly here. If they are modern and yet not modern, how do they resolve the conundrum? To look inward for the contaminating "Other" (in this case, Lindsey and her mother Monica) and to sniff them out, shame them, and ostracise them from the community. And what of young Lindsey (who so courageously tried to live the new South Africa) and of Monica? What of them, except to point out that in their pain, they did violence to themselves – Lindsey by acquiescing in self-blame and giving up on her search for justice through the legal system; and Monica, by holding her beloved, courageous daughter responsible for the shame suffered on the household.

### **And a last note from the native feminist *Coconut* anthropologist**

The production of knowledge about "Us" and "Them" in the local context, through the construction of gendered personhood and the tropes of civility indeed, must be linked to wider systems of history, of place and of discourse, through exposing implicit assumptions, and the meanings of the lacks, absences. The aim of the feminist anthropologist is to unravel the textures and the threads of these local narratives, through fine ethnography, to indicate exactly *how* these links are made to wider, universal histories as well as the diverse localities. This requires us to ask questions about the locales and the audiences for whom the knowledge is being produced as well as to interrogate our own place as 'gendered researchers' in the local context. For we too are a situated audience for whom knowledge about the local is selectively presented and we are read, quite rightly so, as mediators between spaces and can be used as unwitting agents.

Social theories are as much located in time and place as so-called emic knowledge. Put in a different way, academic narratives about gender in local contexts are emic knowledge as well. Consequently, anthropologists need to take account of the diverse and multiple contexts in which knowledge in the North and the South are produced, who produces it and to figure out

exactly whom the knowledge is about, and for which audiences it is being produced.

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## Endnotes

1. The Group Areas Act legislated race-based residential segregation in 1950 and caused the forced removal of approximately 750 000 people in urban areas between the 1960s and 1980s.
2. Foolish and uncivilised.