

‘Growing up’ and ‘moving up’: Metaphors that legitimise upward social mobility in Soweto

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Abstract

A growing body of research on the middle classes in South Africa is concerned with patterns of consumption while fewer scholars engage with the inequality that accompanies greater social differentiation. Little existing research addresses the ways in which new members of the black middle class legitimise newfound wealth and social mobility. Taking inspiration from anthropologists who have documented societal responses to changing configurations of wealth and inequality elsewhere in Africa, I employ the life-history method to ask how one Sowetan man, who self-identifies as being black and middle class, frames his own social mobility. I find that spatial metaphors play an important role in legitimising social mobility. I also find that one response to accusations of materialism and conspicuous consumption levelled against the urban black middle class is a renewal of certain cultural practices in which private wealth can legitimately be converted into social wealth.

Keywords: black middle class, social mobility, metaphor, life story, legitimisation, Soweto, Johannesburg

1. Introduction

A growing body of research on the middle classes in South Africa is reigniting an older debate in the social sciences between competing theoretical conceptions of class, and the methods we use to research class in the contemporary world (Seekings & Nattrass, 2000; Southall, 2004, 2014; Crankshaw, 2005; Schlemmer, 2005; Alexander et al., 2013; Melber, 2013). Seekings (2009) and Southall (2004) have discussed how the two dominant and contrasting approaches to class – neo-Marxist and neo-Weberian – have shaped social science discourse in South Africa (see also Burger et al., 2014). Seekings' (2009) explanation for the dominance of neo-Marxist approaches in the social science literature on South Africa since the 1970s is especially important, as is his call for scholars to familiarise themselves with an earlier 'Weberian moment in South African social science' and to build on an existing 'history of non-Marxist analysis of stratification in South Africa' (2009:881). This earlier Weberian moment was characterised by a number of important sociological and anthropological texts published in the 1960s and early 1970s on urban life under apartheid, specifically Kuper (1965), Brandel-Syrier (1971), and Wilson & Mafeje (1963).

The emerging body of research on changing configurations of class in South Africa draws on multiple traditions. In their edited book on class in Soweto, Alexander et al. (2013) utilise several approaches, with some authors taking an explicit Marxist approach to theorise not only the middle class but also the working class and

proletariat (Ceruti, 2013), while others temporarily leave aside Marxist approaches when investigating the linguistic terms Sowetans use when talking about class (Phadi & Manda, 2013) and Sowetans' perceptions of class (Wale, 2013). In his study of the perceptions of social mobility and economic inequality among black individuals in Cape Town, Newcastle and Mount Frere, Telzak (2014) finds varying perceptions about the relationship between race and mobility, what people regard as equitable wealth distribution, and the relationship between education and mobility. He finds that 'perceptions of economic inequality and social mobility are shaped by local economic conditions and by an individual's economic position within his or her community' (Telzak 2014:28). This finding corresponds with arguments presented in the film *Phakhati* that urban black South Africans' perceptions of class is shaped by their own positioning in a social system, and that they tend to 'class' themselves in relation to their surrounding communities rather than some abstract (national) class model (Phadi, 2013). Their reference groups, then, are decidedly local and social rather than national and abstract.

None of this research, however, addresses the ways in which new members of the black middle class legitimise newfound wealth and social mobility. The only recent study that explores some of the ideological dimensions of the changing class structure in South Africa is the report on 'Middle Classing in Roodepoort' by Ivor Chipkin (2012). Chipkin notices among the black middle class living in urban Johannesburg a process of individualisation, the replacement of the primacy of kin-based relationship with more voluntary forms of association, coupled with the strengthening of kin-based relationships. He notes that this process of individualisation is accompanied frequently by 'an ideology of self-realisation' (Chipkin, 2012:63). The aim of this article is to contribute to this gap in the literature.

Taking inspiration from anthropologists who have documented societal responses to changing configurations of wealth and inequality elsewhere in Africa (Niehaus et al., 2001; Smith, 2001), I employ the life-history method to ask how one Sowetan man, who self-identifies as being black and middle class, frames his own social mobility. As class configurations and wealth distributions in any society changes, so do the meanings associated with class differentiation. Accusations of witchcraft, for example, may function as a levelling mechanism amidst the emergence of wealth inequalities, while it may also be a symbol for new modes of obtaining wealth (Niehaus et al., 2001; Smith, 2001). With that, new ways of legitimising class differentiation and new wealth are likely to emerge. How, then, does my research participant narrate social mobility in his own life story? How does he frame and legitimise such social mobility? How does he respond to growing criticisms of anti-social behaviour among the urban middle classes? How does he reconcile the tensions that arise from short-term, individual material acquisition and its resultant social mobility, with longer term processes of social and societal reproduction, including obligations to kin?

2. Method, mobility, and metaphor

There is little qualitative research on mobility in contemporary South Africa. Apart from earlier sociological work by Brandel-Syrier (1971), Mayer (1977) and Nyquist (1983), and the more recent work by Telzak (2014), Adato et al. (2006), Nieftagodien & Gaule (2012), and Phadi & Manda (2010, 2013), most of the recent literature is

quantitative in approach (see Burger et al., 2014). While there is a substantial literature on migration and movement of people across southern Africa, Lee's (2009) recent book *African Women and Apartheid: Migration and Settlement in Urban South Africa* starts addressing the issue of social mobility and metaphor more directly. Lee traced the ways in which three generations of women adapted to and made Cape Town their home. Innovatively investigating the inter-generational household histories of several families, she traces their migration experiences, employment histories, home renovations and membership of and participation in church groups and voluntary organisations. For the youngest generation of women, 'mobility became something third-generation women actively embraced as a marker of newly won political freedoms and their growing consumerism' (Lee 2009:103; see also Chipkin 2012:67–8). Lee finds that movement has become an important metaphor for mobility that has 'become deeply embedded in women's consciousness and firmly integrated into the text of their lives' (2009:174) – African women have employed these markers of mobility 'as metaphors for a wide variety of transformations experienced in the course of their lifetimes' (2009:180). Like Lee (2009), I too was confronted with the importance of mobility among a young generation of Sowetan fathers during my field research in Johannesburg (Krige, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014).

For two years I conducted participant observation (see Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) whilst residing in an old yet relatively well-off neighbourhood in 'deep' Soweto. I conducted open-ended interviews, participated in everyday life, became a member of a voluntary association (Krige, 2014) and sought to develop an insider's perspective on social and economic transformations taking place in the largest and most unequal township in South Africa (see Bonner & Segal, 1998; Piazza-Georgi, 2002; Nieftagodien & Gaule, 2012). In my ethnographic engagement with Sowetans, movement and mobility was one of the most important metaphors in discussing social change. While there is evidence in the literature that movement across the cityscape was a marker of social class during apartheid (Brandel-Syrier, 1971), I concur with Lee that mobility has become a metaphor for a range of transformations a younger generation of Africans have experienced. The desire for and energy directed towards mobility by a contemporary generation of Africans is unsurprising, given how apartheid sought to restrict physical movement, and how it limited physical mobilities and cultural crossings (Chipkin, 2012; Krige, 2012).

To explore the theme of mobility more directly, I recently conducted a number of life-story interviews with Sowetan men who self-identify as being black African and middle class, while a colleague followed a similar research method directed at women (Khunou, 2014). We opted for life histories as the research method because we wanted to explore emergent meanings and processes attached to being black and middle class, rather than explore the size of new classes or processes that can be measured with statistical data. Social scientists have recently re-discovered the life history, or biographical method, as one of the tools in their proverbial research toolbox (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998). In a recent article, Fassin et al. (2008) write about violence utilising the biography of a young South African woman, whom they call Magda A. In his response to Fassin et al., Niehaus – who himself has utilised the life-story method in writing about witchcraft, disease and healing in the Mpumalanga Lowveld – writes that 'Life stories enable social scientists to reconcile anthropological and historical concerns and to discern how private domestic relations

intersect with the public sphere' (2008:238). Life histories, he surmises, 'are more valuable for that they reveal than for their representativity' (Niehaus, 2008:238). The material collected through interviews I had conducted with one informant – here called Arthur, as he wished to remain anonymous – was chosen because it elicited important facets of how one man narrates his own mobility, and how such narration relates to reference groups that include his close kin as well as the wider society. I have known Arthur for more than a decade, so my interpretation of his narrative is informed by a longer relationship. In this article I am not in the first instance interested in the factual correctness of Arthur's narrative, which is why little effort has been made over and above my familiarity with his circumstances to substantiate events and facts. Again, the strength of the life-history approach does not lie in its representativity, but in what it may elicit.

In this paper I move beyond Lee's use of life histories by linking the use of the concept of mobility in narrated life histories to an important strategy for discursively legitimising upward social mobility, simultaneously silencing its uncomfortable twin – social inequality. I argue that mobility and spatial metaphors legitimise upward class mobility in the life history of Arthur by constantly referencing social relationships (community and kin), and by placing the (linear) life story of the individual into a larger framework of (cyclical) societal reproduction. The process of 'growing up', the most natural phenomenon that transpires between birth and death, is shown to inform and to legitimise another social process – that of 'moving up' or social mobility. I argue also that the metaphors Arthur deploys in telling his own life story potentially render impotent the harshest critique levelled against the black middle class, namely that it is becoming materialistic and that its attachment to consumption is anti-social (see Krige, 2010). In this way, Arthur (consciously or unconsciously) resolves a tension that Parry & Bloch (1989) argue exists in every society: between individual short-term strategies for material acquisition and long-term demands for social reproduction.

In their seminal work on metaphors, Lakoff & Johnsen (2003) argue that the essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one thing in terms of another. Structural metaphors – such as 'time is money' – are metaphors where one concept is metaphorically structured in terms of another (Lakoff & Johnsen 2003:7–9). In industrialised societies, they write, time is a valuable commodity because it is a limited resource used to accomplish goals. Because of the way in which the practice and idea of work has developed in recently industrialised societies, work is typically associated with the time it takes, and this time is precisely quantified because people are paid by the hour, week and year. The association of time with money, and the associated practices (air time, wages, hotel room rates, interest on loans, etc.), is relatively new in the history of the human race. Orientational metaphors have to do with spatial orientation: up–down, in–out, front–back, on–off, deep–shallow, central–peripheral (2003:14). Resulting from the fact that we have 'bodies of the sort we have and that they function in our physical environment', orientational metaphors give a concept a 'spatial orientation' (2003:14). For example, 'happy is up'. The spatial orientation of metaphors is not arbitrary: 'They have a basis in our physical and cultural experience. Though the polar oppositions up-down, in-out, etc., are physical in nature, the orientational metaphors based on them can vary from culture to culture' (2003:14).

Lakoff & Johnsen claim that most fundamental concepts are organised in terms of one or more spatialisation metaphors, and that there is an internal systematicity to each spatialisation metaphor (2003:17). In some cases, they argue, 'spatialisation is so essential a part of a concept that it is difficult for us to imagine any alternative metaphor that might structure the concept. In our society 'high status' is such a concept' (2003:18–9). The 'high status' metaphor, they write, has both a social and physical basis in that status is correlated with social power and physical power. Not all societies associated 'high status' with 'up', but typically physical and cultural experience provides the possible bases for spatialisation metaphors. We will see how Arthur deploys spatialisation metaphors in telling his own life story, and in articulating his understanding of social learning and social mobility. In making sense of social mobility and an abstract notion of 'the middle class', Arthur deploys a range of spatialisation metaphors that at once frames the situation and provides a legitimisation for his own position. These spatialised metaphors speak to the transition from an urban–rural nexus to a township–suburb one; becoming conscious of social and cultural distances as he is exposed to a multicultural learning environment; the way his primary social group moves through time and space; how status in society is conceptualised; and movement metaphors revealing occupational and lifestyle changes.

3. The family unit, the rural–urban nexus and education

Arthur was born in 1971 in what is today known as Limpopo and spent the first few years of his life living in a peri-urban area in this northern region of South Africa. By 1975 his mother was working as a teacher in a Sowetan school while Arthur and his siblings remained in the then Northern Transvaal because she did not qualify for a municipal house. Later that year she was given 'the rights and the papers' to a municipal house, which she occupied in December 1975. After successfully negotiating the bureaucratic process of getting permits for the children to stay with her, they joined her in 1976.

Arthur was enrolled in Grade One in 1976; however, between June and August no schooling took place because of the chaos that accompanied the June 16 uprisings (Bonner & Segal, 1998; Chipkin, 2012:64). In September 1976, Arthur and his siblings returned north and it was only during 1979, 'when things started cooling off', that they returned to their mother in Soweto: 'Then after coming back already the standards were a little bit different [than at school in the north]'. His mother held on to her job, the only thing that could secure her right to the city given that she was not born in the city (Posel, 1991). He finished his schooling in Soweto and like most other youths his education was affected by the various states of emergencies that rocked South Africa in the mid-1980s. Little schooling took place during these periods, yet Arthur passed all his subjects, and in 1987 the family started considering moving him to another school, after hearing of good schools opening up their doors for black African students. In his case, Arthur told me, it was possible because of the way in which he excelled in sport, specifically tennis and athletics.

Arthur applied to a private college in Johannesburg, took their entry examinations and was admitted on the condition that he repeats Grade 10 (Form Three). In 1987 he enrolled in the mixed-race college, going on to complete Grade 11 in 1988 and studying for his Matric in 1989. He was awarded a sports bursary at the college,

where he completed his high school, and later received another bursary for tertiary studies at a Johannesburg university where he spent three years studying towards a degree in BCom Marketing before the company sponsoring his studies discontinued their bursary out of fear for the political changes that may have resulted from the first democratic elections that was to take place in 1994. He thus experienced some of the contradictions of political freedom – the doors of learning being opened but the funding for such learning drying up. He continued his studies at Vista University in Soweto by enrolling for a BA degree in ‘economics, public administration, and political science’, completing it in 1997.

The outline of this part of his life that Arthur sketched was filled with comparisons, movement across time and space, and a narrative employing a series of spatial and social metaphors that both underplayed and emphasised his own agency in the processes of social mobility and inter-generational reproduction. As the child of a teacher, education was central to Arthur making sense of his own life trajectory:

Education played a very, very important role ... but as you grow you find that the one thing that really kept us going – or [kept] the fire burning – was that because we were raised by a teacher and a principal, we were really reminded that if we don't get education our life will never change [...] despite the circumstances of the then time, you find that when you move from one part of the country into the other part of the country, that's exactly when your life changes. I mean growing up in Limpopo [...] you then again grow up in Johannesburg, Soweto, then you go back and forth.

His physical prowess in various sports certainly played a role in consolidating a strong ‘spatial orientation’ of personal and social mobility, and possibly a masculine one. His narrative is cognisant of the fact that life opportunities increased massively as Africans migrated to urban areas (Bozzoli, 1991; see also Louw et al., 2007) and the way in which his movement between the urban–rural nexus structured his earliest reference groups. It also acknowledges that his life opportunities increased as he attended a mixed-race school:

It's important. It gives you exposure. Exposure to the language, exposure to culture, exposure to other people's dreams, and exposure to other people of colour who have or possess what you do not have. You are a bursary student. You don't come to school with a car; you come with bus or a train. And you meet other people who they take you to their homes over the weekends. You look at the type of food they eat, what their father does, what their mother does, it's a total different aspect. It's like moving me from the North Pole to the Equator at the same time.

Even as he was able to enjoy the privilege of attending a mixed race school, Arthur was conscious of his own position in relation to other students, and the different class positions they occupied. This class and social distance that was at once very personal yet public is also spatialised and naturalised with reference to a global spatial metaphor (the North Pole and the Equator), while cultural and gendered distances are spoken of as physical and geographic distances. While the distance is great, such movement is indeed possible.

4. The world of work, wages and home ownership

In 1997 Arthur entered the world of work as a graduate trainee at an information technology company in Johannesburg, but had to leave after two years because the company 'went down'. With the retirement savings ('pension monies') he decided to collect on his exit, he opened a hair salon and a shop in Soweto, employing four hairdressers and one receptionist. The enterprise was robbed at gunpoint twice in the space of a year, and because the salon was closed at times for weeks on end before opening again, he started losing clients and eventually he had to close (down) the business. After several years of working at various companies, with periods of unemployment in between, by 2004 he was working for 'one of the biggest then companies in IT [information technology]' – and it is with the accompanying increased income that he could claim to have joined the black middle class:

That's when I started. I bought my house but I already had cars. I bought land and I built a house with an X [sic] amount of money invested into it. And then having to finish the house with the furniture, then having to also up the type of car that I used to drive.

It was at the beginning of this period in his life that I met Arthur. At the time of our first formal interview a decade later, Arthur had just found employment again after a year of being unemployed. This is why he could express, during the interview, that he is successful in his working life. But a few months prior to our interview he had in private expressed much despair and angst, as the bank was about to repossess the house he had built in an upmarket Sowetan neighbourhood for falling behind on repayments. He had lost his one car and was hurting from a ruinous marriage. But in 2013 'things were looking up'. While he was quick to say 'I was never born middle class', despite his mother being a teacher, he did not hesitate to say that he joined the middle class: '[When] I started owning my own house'. Ownership of a car at a previous point in his life was not as important as this moment: 'My house, that's how you define me because of the bond, the furniture'. The social science literature attests to the importance of private home ownership as a symbol of class in Soweto (Parnell, 1991; Ginsberg 1996; Morris et al., 1999; Crankshaw et al., 2000; Krige, 2012), even if economists disagree about the relationship between home ownership, labour market mobility and social mobility.

Arthur was proud that he had purchased the furniture with cash, not on credit (see Phadi & Ceruti 2013:156). Following this statement he immediately recounted, as if to counter possible accusations of individual acquisitiveness, how he also spent money on purchasing a tombstone for his late mother's grave. In much of Sowetan society, the close kin of someone who has passed on has the responsibility of erecting a tombstone on the deceased's grave after a period of mourning has lapsed. This 'unveiling of a tombstone' is an important ritual in ensuring that the deceased's relations with the living is peaceful, and that the deceased is on the way to becoming an ancestor. Conflicts within families, economic and social problems, and ill health may all be the result of kin not having fulfilled their responsibilities towards a deceased family member (Ashforth, 2000). Similarly, the 'unveiling of a tombstone' may be an expression of gratitude towards an ancestor for bestowing spiritual and material well-being. In this manner, Arthur inserted his short-term acquisition, which brought him into the middle class, into longer term social processes that include his

wider kin group. His narrative allowed his personal wealth to be converted into social wealth. A range of similar cultural practices have found a ready audience among some young members of the urban black middle class, ranging from various 'thanksgiving ceremonies' for various markers of social upward mobility (getting a job, buying a car, relocating to the suburbs, etc.) to more established events signalling a change in social status (birthdays, initiation, graduation, marriage, death).

As a self-identified 'traditionalist', Arthur commented:

The house is the only [material] thing otherwise everything [that] was supposed to be done [was done]. I mean my mother's tombstone; that was a bit of traditional move that I did, I had to do it because I believe that I couldn't have waited.

After he qualified for the bond, bought the property and moved into the house he had built on it, Arthur consulted with his father about the design and purchase of a tombstone for his late mother's grave: 'I did it at that time because I believed that I wouldn't like the old man to pass on without having done that'. Seen in this light, erecting a tombstone is not merely a short-term decision about purchasing a commodity with a short lifespan; it is also an investment in longer term cycles of social reproduction related to one's kin group that promises social, physical and economic health. Arthur made this point explicit by saying: 'So it represents a great, bigger scheme of things. Ja, it's not only for me, it's for everybody and then now it's there and it will – it's time immemorial. I mean it stays, stays, stays there'. Anthropologists Parry & Bloch argued that all societies need to make:

some ideological space within which individual acquisition is a legitimate and even laudable goal; but that such activities are consigned to a separate sphere which is ideologically articulated with, and subordinated to, a sphere of activity concerned with the cycle of long-term reproduction. (1989:26)

They argue that the maintenance of the long-term order (and social reproduction generally) is both 'pragmatically and conceptually dependent on individual short-term acquisitive endeavours' (Parry & Bloch 1989:26). The ancestors of Arthur, including his deceased mother, were dependent on Arthur's material acquisitiveness and upward social mobility for becoming proper ancestors. Simultaneously, investing in a tombstone was a way in which Arthur could articulate his own material acquisitiveness with social processes that transcended his individual life, and included his living and dead kin. Importantly, this process of articulation legitimised the acquisition of new wealth in public too: among residents of Soweto, friends and a more abstract public in which accusations of materialism have become an important trope for talking about the black middle class.

In Arthur's conceptions of being middle class, ownership and access to material objects of consumption – which are also markers of modernity (Appadurai, 1995) – are necessary, but not a sufficient condition for being middle class. That the purchase, use and exhibition of different types of consumables such as food and cars play a role in the construction of social class registers goes without saying (see Meintjes, 2000). As important is the ability to establish new relationships of hierarchy and dependence (see Ferguson, 2013), including the ability to give and not only take

wages. Recounting in the present tense his material situation of a few years ago, before he became unemployed, Arthur said:

Back home I've got a computer, I mean I'm connected, I'm wired. How many people are wired? You know, I've got an office at home. I mean I've got two fridges, once in my time I had five cars. I wouldn't really doubt myself to say that I am a middle-class type of a person. I used to have a domestic worker. I have a gardener who comes every week and does my garden. Hence, I said I've got a boy who used to come and wash my cars. I am paying a salary to somebody or I'm paying a wage. If I was to be sick or dead, those three people wouldn't get a salary from me.

This was the only instance during our interviews that Arthur self-identified so strongly as being middle class – and for him an important part of middle-classness was being a source of income for others through offering wage work, and thus entering into new hierarchical relationships and dependencies with people (see Dilata, 2008).

5. Inter-generational mobility and barriers to an expanding reference group

This brief overview of Arthur's engagement with the world of work should already give us a sense of the way he moved – in the space of a decade – inside and outside and between the various categories that we use to make sense of the 'market for labour'. They constitute moments of highs and lows, achievement and loss. Narratives such as Arthur's had become quite familiar in Soweto. Those who had moved out of the township 'with a better-than-you attitude' at the height of their earnings were often scorned by working-class men and women on their return to their mothers' houses in the township after they had fallen on hard times. What happens to your self-identification as middle class during these momentary or prolonged periods of 'in-between', when you try and hide your unemployment and even poverty (Meintjes, 2000)? Arthur was adamant:

No. You don't move out of the middle class. As much as you still occupy that space – the house, the car. I moved from a bigger BMW to a [smaller] BMW. You will say that it's still a BMW. Do you know what I'm trying to say? I still cook the same way. Ja, I had the same type of – even though certain things were not there but I did enjoy the comfort zone of that type of a thing, I mean the clothes everything ... I think anybody who has actually advanced from a basic type of a lifestyle into a basic luxurious lifestyle, they will never go back. They will hustle to keep it there because remember you are not an upper class. I mean moving from a middle class to [not] – it's quite a stretch; it's not as easy as we move from basic to middle class, to lower class.

Arthur was implying that the movement from middle class to lower class was not as drastic as the move from upper class to unemployment. This led us to talk about what Arthur called the 'yo-yo movement', the upward and downward movements of individuals and households between social class categories. In his case he was expressing the dynamics of both inter-generational and intra-generational mobility. Whereas inter-generational mobility compares parents' social class levels with that of their children, intra-generational mobility plots social class shifts within a person's lifetime. The resulting movement is called social mobility – which can be either

upward or downwards – and occurs whenever people move across social class boundaries. Again, this movement is expressed using spatialised metaphors that also index the social: ‘leaving the township’, ‘moving to the suburbs’ and ‘returning to your mother’s home’.

Several barriers made it difficult for Arthur to conceive of his reference groups as inclusive of members of the white middle class and to conceive of a grouping that could constitute a national middle class with some shared interests. He noted: ‘I would mostly compare myself to black people and to the people that I know they’ve gone to school, they are working, and then they are doing something about themselves’. Racial inequality was not only the result of apartheid history, but was exacerbated by practices within the corporate world that included salary scales, the culture of the workplace, and informal networks of power and influence:

No, there is no national middle class because an average white graduate and an average black graduate will never earn the same ... Even today [...] In the corporate industry position advancement, and training, and remuneration of white people, it’s been tailored differently to black people.

Company managers were using arguments about property prices, rent and living expenses being cheaper in the townships as a reason for paying black managers lower salaries (echoing Bundy’s argument about how the owners of gold mines justified low wages to migrant labours because they were said to be supported by subsistence economies in the homelands; cf. Bundy, 1979). So even if you are employed on the same level (‘bracket’), the white worker is likely to earn more. Whereas the white worker stays close to Sandton and commuting to work takes him only 15 minutes, black workers living in the township have to travel 45 kilometres. What economists would call the ‘asset deficit’ of the black middle class (Burger & Van der Berg, 2004) plays out also in terms of other aspects of their lives. Racial inequality is spatialised in that where you live and how far you have to travel to work opportunities structure your income, expenses and mobility.

His salient views on continued racial inequalities as a barrier to conceive of a national middle class was complemented by the economic impact of cultural practices such as high costs relating to marking changes in social status among black people (specifically marriage) and to important variations in inter-generational wealth transfers between black and white households. It was expected of Arthur as he established himself as middle class to transfer wealth upwards on a generational scale – towards his living parents by repaying study loans (‘payback is a bitch’), supporting them financially (‘you leave the home spic and span’), and eventually towards his deceased ancestors by successive thanksgivings. Anecdotal evidence suggests that when it comes to white households that have been middle class for one or two generations, the direction of the inter-generational transfers of wealth is reversed: parents typically transfer wealth to a younger generation through ritualised gift-giving: a motor vehicle for a 21st birthday; a bed as wedding gift; or a washing machine upon buying a new home.

6. Concluding remarks

There are many aspects of Arthur's life story I did not include in this discussion, including his marriage and his relationship with his children. As someone who describes himself as a 'traditionalist', Arthur does not belong to a family that have known wealth. While his mother was a teacher, he did not consider himself being born into the middle classes. Within two generations, Arthur's family unit migrated from a semi-rural context to an urban one, retaining kinship connections in both contexts. The rural context remained an important reference point throughout his life. His household transitioned important political and economy eras, from the racial capitalism of apartheid (Terreblanche, 2003) to a liberal constitutional democratic order – and both educational and employment opportunities opened up as a result of this political shift. But he also experienced early on how this shift closed down other opportunities for him. Nonetheless, he remained successful, avoiding in the process the shortened life that befell many of his generation of Sowetan men. His education history is one characterised not only by what he had learned, but how and where – tracing the ways in which race and class have been spatialised. It documents his movement from a space of social homogeneity and greater similarity to social heterogeneity and unsettling differences.

He moved between various kinds of employment, from being self-employed and employing others in a capitalist enterprise, to being a manager in a corporation. Importantly, he also stood in an employer relationship to a gardener and domestic worker, and his ability to give wages and not only take wages allowed him to renegotiate social hierarchies not in his place of work but in his residential and social world. It is within these local contexts and reference groups that the metaphors of upward mobility he employs have their strongest resonance. He traversed several spaces within Soweto and Johannesburg, from living with his parents to renting property and becoming a property owner in an upmarket Sowetan neighbourhood. He was self-employed in the township; and became a manager in the suburbs. He was a wage-giver in the township and a wage-taker in the suburbs. The social mobility resulted in a complex process of constantly having to negotiate new and older relationships of dependence and hierarchy across spaces. Like being an employer, owning property was a decisive threshold for him in the process of 'growing up' and 'moving up'; climbing a class ladder that is intimately linked to his social status in Sowetan society.

Arthur's life story is characterised not only by inter-generational mobility, but also by intra-generational mobility as he moved from being a student to employment, self-employment, unemployment and then becoming a manager in a corporation. His own trajectory between different kinds of occupations and levels of employment is not unique, and he compares it with the 'yo-yo movement' that describes the movement of Sowetans as they negotiate different class positions over time depending on their income and residence arrangements. This movement he also linked to a more public process that took place during the early 1990s when some Sowetans moved from 'eating pap and meat and cabbage to sitting in Parliament'.

In telling his life narrative, Arthur made an effort to turn every event that marked upward social mobility into an opportunity to connect with the social space of his kin group and the obligations he feels he had towards them. The purchase of a new car,

landing a new job, moving into a new home are all events that allow for, if not require, a re-adjustment to the social world given new hierarchies and new positions. Thus 'thanksgiving events', including 'tombstone unveilings', are also events that allow for the working out of new social hierarchies and new behaviours. In this admittedly 'traditionalist' way, reconnecting one's personal mobility and new standing with enduring social groups such as kinship and residential communities also legitimises one's new standing; and personal wealth is transformed into social wealth. This is not to say that Arthur is insincere in performing these ceremonies, that their legitimising function is the reason for conducting such ceremonies in the first place. Rather, it is to recognise the legitimising consequences of such social ceremonies in a society where social relations, in addition to class relations, remain important for working out social hierarchies and for negotiating upward social mobility. Spatial metaphors play a central part in giving expression to this social mobility that intersects with physical mobility at times, while these mobilities are legitimised through metaphors that reference social relations rather than abstract categories.

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