correspondents at large
JOHANNESBURG

Afropolis: From Johannesburg

SARAH NUTTALL AND
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ON SATURDAYS WE SOMETIMES DRIVE ACROSS THE CITY TO BUY FISH. WE STAND AT THE COUNTER AND TRY TO CHOOSE FRESH FISH IN A LAND-locked city—pink salmon, gray sole, yellow kabeljou, silver red roman. Delicious fish, at least six hours from the nearest coast. After that, we're back in the car, on the road. If we take the highway around the city, we see the mine dumps, man-made hills of gold dust, yellow in the winter sun, relics of the old gold mines on which this city was founded, heaving earth to the surface, the debris of wealth extraction. From all around, among and beyond the gold dumps, the city rises.[1]

Driving is ubiquitous in Johannesburg. So much of what is seen appears through the enclosure of a car window, in private cars, buses, and minibus taxis. Since we're on the road so much, we have time to look around, to see what's going on. We move across the city, fighting for space with taxis, taking the lights on orange and even the first show of red, as everyone does here, to make it through at the last minute, to get somewhere fast, to compete with other drivers in a carefully calculated game of chance. Taking a chance, trying to get lucky, is at the center of a city increasingly known among the postapartheid generation as Jozi.

Unlike in most other African cities, traffic in Johannesburg moves in lanes, and roads are sometimes three or four lanes wide. Despite this, there is a constant tussle between private cars and minibus taxis, which pull up anywhere, anytime, to collect or drop off passengers. Then all the cars behind them must stop too, and horns start blaring. The city is now a complex mélange of city and township, and the township increasingly occupies, even as it is remade by, the city. This is one reason why a city architect recently referred to Johannesburg as a township metropolis.

We pass glass-clad buildings, gyms, shopping centers, garages, large residential homes, tree-lined streets, and people walking, mostly black people. They are walking, for the most part, with confidence, ownership, though still one sees older people with an apartheid stoop, looking down, navigating a world in which not enough

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has changed—on their way perhaps to perform domestic service, still unaware of or unable to use the rights and protections that are now theirs. Occasionally we spot a street-side phone service: a pert blue phone perched on a jaded box, usually manned by someone from somewhere else (in the country or elsewhere on the continent), providing a cheap service to a thin line of customers. Or a barber under a flimsy tent, shaving men's and boys' heads. In Johannesburg the formal and the informal, official and unofficial, cohabit and at times become entangled, so that the city resembles now Los Angeles, now Kinshasa or Cairo, now all three at the same time.

It is an environment studded with texts. Road signs, billboards, newsprint, magazine covers. A stream of global and local city signs, of Johannesburg representation. A city of surfaces, shining, shifting, superficial, sensational, singular. Alive, on the move, and at times as ugly as sin. It is also a city with an underneath, a city built on the extraction of gold. Beneath the surface of the city lies a system that was based on a rigidly hierarchical racial division of labor, an original violence. Race was used in the city as a weapon in the production of barriers and asymmetrical privileges.

Johannesburg is also a place in which the prejudices that race and color engender have always hidden a close weaving of black and white. A place where there has always been a tension between the apparent fixity of race and the potential unfixing of the commodity form. Where the end of legal segregation has made it possible for the city to reconnect with that part of its historical identity that became a synthesis of individuality and freedom. Our colleague and friend Robert Muponde, a Zimbabwean living in an apartment block in Braamfontein, said the other day, "I don't have to know anyone that much beyond 'heyta' [hello]. You know, I don't have to say what I do. I don't have to explain anything if I'm not greeted, or I don't say hi to anyone. The place is so full of us, you would think that space wouldn't exist—the space, I mean, to be someone else."

During apartheid, the right of black people to live in the city was constantly threatened. They were to work in the city but not to live in it. This explains perhaps the force and power of attempts to conquer the right to be urban in the present. To occupy the center of the city, its subjective core, to produce forms of city style at such velocity. To draw on a culture of indifference and restlessness that nourishes self-stylization. To produce an original form, if not of African cosmopolitanism, then of worldliness. The Afropolitan? Afropolis? At least, the entanglement of the modern and the African. To pursue and shape a city that has developed an aura of its own, a uniqueness.

Figures surface in novels that try to catch the city on the page. The stranger, the aging white man, a new minority figure, trying to remake a public self; the suburban talker, name-dropper, insular professional; the hustler, deftly rummaging among, with a view to rerouting, the conventional modes of institutional life. In Ivan Vladislavić's Johannesburg novels, *The Restless Supermarket* and *The Exploded View*, the ecologies of ignorance and also the complex entry and exit points, fragmentary encounters that inhabit the making of racial friendship or collegiality in the city, are traced. Niq Mhlongo, in *Dog Eat Dog*, catches in words the figure of the hustler, who monitors the atmosphere. Operating with energetic and often underhand activity, turning others into suckers, luring less skillful players into competing against him in a game of chance, the hustler turns the codes, conventions, and clichés of human rights culture to his advantage. He plays the "race card" and invokes "my culture" when it suits him, to get what he wants from white and black officialdom, recording on his CD Walkman a policeman who tries to extract a bribe when he is caught drinking in a public place. The city is an intricate entanglement of éclat and somberness, light and darkness, a great generator

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of cruelty and pain and of novelty. Emotional investments in the modernity of city life betray an oversimplified history of segregation. Diverse, and sometimes shared, meanings of that life move falteringly beyond the strictures of an apartheid imagination.

Two billboards loom large over us as we drive by. In your face. In the first is a huge image of a black man's face (fig. 1). To the side the text reads:

> I HATE BEING BLACK. If it means some people think that they know my criminal record. My rhythm. My level of education. Or the role affirmative action has played in my career. I'm not someone else's black. I'm my own. And I LOVE BEING BLACK.

On the next billboard (fig. 2), an equally large image of a white face:

> I HATE BEING WHITE. If it means some people think that I'm not a real South African. That I'm racist. Privileged. Paranoid. Or Baas.[2] I'm not someone else's white. I'm my own. And I LOVE BEING WHITE.

Together these ads suggest an imperative that is both antiracist ("I hate being black"; "I hate being white") and prorace ("I love being black"; "I love being white"). The message they project is that being white or black becomes banal, that one can erase or evacuate older meanings to inscribe onto the words *black* and *white* whatever meanings one wishes. Yet in the ads themselves, the racial habitus remains—even as, socially, culturally, and politically speaking, there are now more possibilities for entering new racial spaces.

These billboards recall two ads in a magazine. One shows a person being arrested by the police while others, standing beneath a sign that says WHITES ONLY, look on (fig. 3). The scene alludes to a widely known genre of urban image, typical of 1970s South Africa: a black man is arrested for not carrying a pass to legitimize his presence in the city. The image in the magazine, however, is not quite what it seems. The offense that the man being arrested has committed, it turns out, is a style crime: he is not dressed in white; most egregiously, he is not wearing the white sports shoes that are being advertised. The greatest crime is now a style crime; whiteness and blackness are matters less of race than of style. It's about the way you look. There's truth in this, as you walk shopping malls, dance in clubs, sit in traffic in this city. But it's also a lie: actual crime, though down from a few years ago, is the darkest shadow on the city's future.

In the second ad, the scene is a men's urinal (fig. 4). One man is cleaning the floor while others use the urinal. Under apartheid, the spaces of segregation included macrospaces—such as schools, churches, and cemeteries—and microspaces, which functioned as key loci for the staging of humiliation. One such locus was the "whites only" urinal, which a black man could enter under one condition only: to clean it. The image gestures to that past and its legacy in South Africa's collective memory, but with a twist. The men using the urinal are both black and white. What differentiates the users from the man cleaning the floor is the color not of their skin but of their clothes. The users are dressed in the "sign" of whiteness, white clothes, and more specifically white shoes; the man cleaning the floor is not wearing the right shoes—the ad suggests that he is badly dressed, out of style, unwilling or incapable of playing the market to project a particular (life)style.

The ads are not about multiculturalism. It's a word we never use here. It reminds us of the equal-but-different charade of the apartheid government, of Bantustans. Multiculturalism appears to most South Africans as simplistic, uninteresting, suspect. The billboard and magazine images invoke the past but recast it in the present. They try to move beyond but also reconfirm the power of race in the city. They tap into the life of things—the way things, as Bill Brown would have it,

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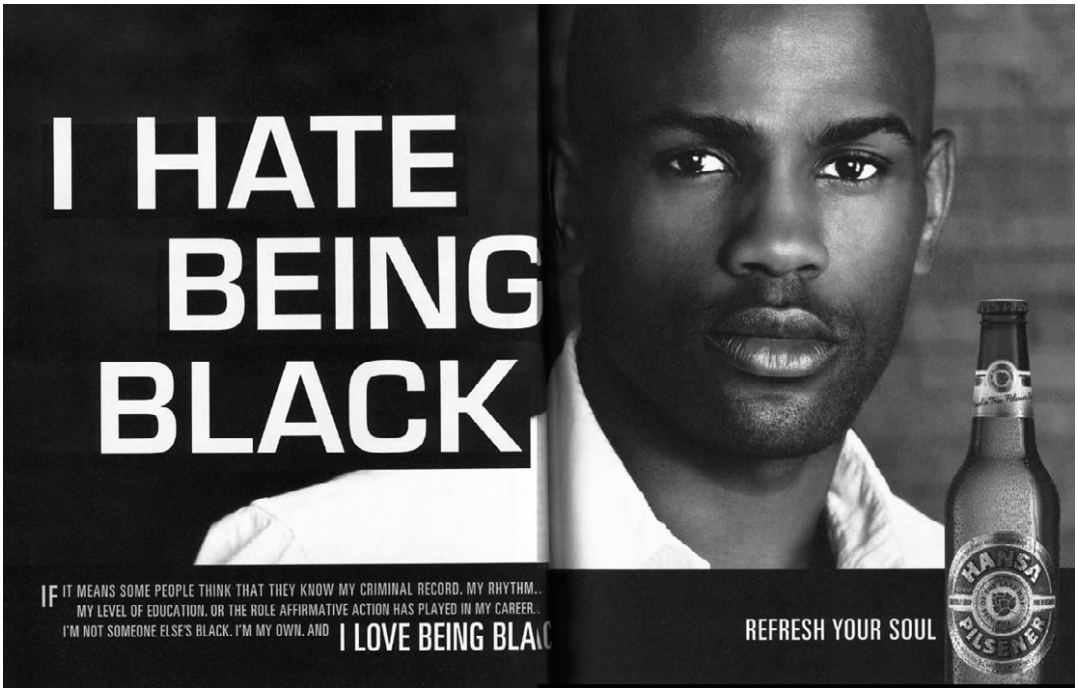


FIG. 1
Hansa Beer, print version of billboard advertisement. *Soccer Life* Apr. 2005: 16–17.

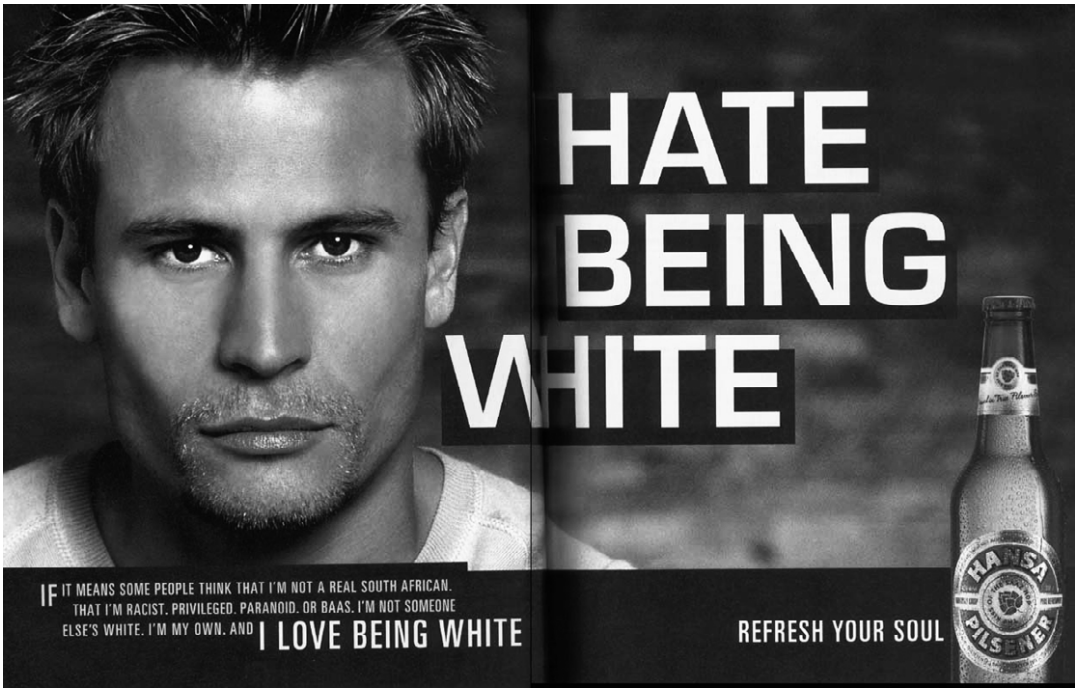


FIG. 2
Hansa Beer, print version of billboard advertisement. *Soccer Life* Apr. 2005: 18–19.

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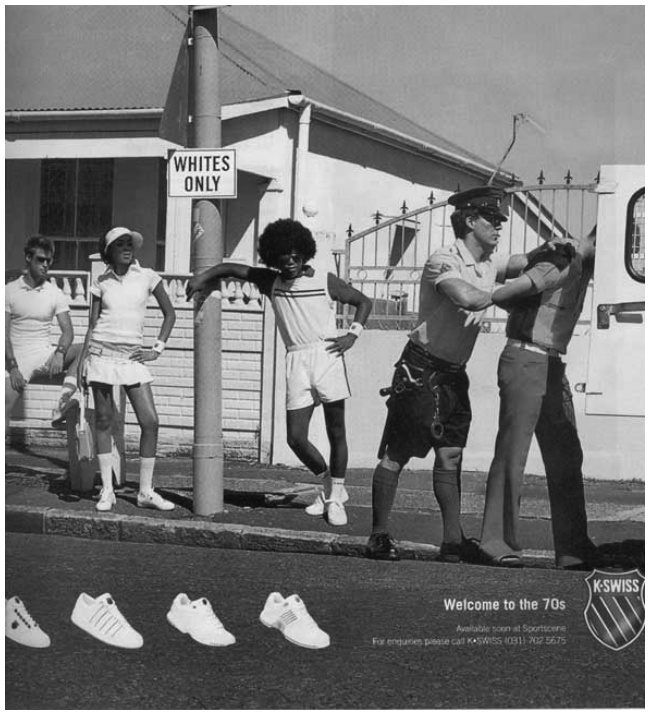


FIG. 3
K-Swiss Shoes, advertisement. *Ymag* Apr.-May 2005: 3.



FIG. 4
K-Swiss Shoes, advertisement. *Ymag* Apr.-May 2005: 4.

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represent us, comfort us, help us, change us. The shift is made from a form of crude governmentality characteristic of the apartheid period to a different sort of social potency, which displaces the terms of recognition. The market operates as a vector for calming racial passions.

These images, city texts, and postarchitectural spaces tell us something about the life of the metropolis, or at least of the racial city as it transitions into metropolitan form. They retain something of what Muponde calls "the viscocity of an unresolved history." Soon that viscosity will be gone, and consumer culture will take on its more vacuous American form. But for now they reveal deep investments in the idea of urban living. They are screens across which flickering desires track, traces that reveal only indistinctly the record of urban lives.

The billboards are surfaces, like skin itself. But skin always has an underneath, flesh, a buried life. Skin intertwines with our depths, or meets a viral load beneath.

In the work of the Johannesburg artist Penny Siopis, skin is detached from what lies beneath, from interior affect. The effect is to draw attention to the relation between the two. Many of her creations are thick and tactile, accretions of bodily life that give weight to what might be resisting our comprehension. She paints a figure called Pinky Pinky (fig. 5), a figure of urban legend, an intricate imaginary composite: "Some people say he is white. Other people say he is black but a black that is so white that he has to wear a hat to protect himself from the sun" (qtd. in Nuttall 3). Everyone says he is actually not a he even though many of his actions are like that of a man. Real and fake fingernails are anchored in and pierce the skin, rather than enfolded by it; eyes poke out with a dissociated stare.

Surface and depth: a city of shallows and depths, surfaces that have forgotten their depths, or, as David Bunn writes, a once-supple skin now hardened by violence into keloid scars, of free-floating signifiers, de-



FIG. 5
Penny Siopis, *Pinky Pinky: Teeth*, 2002. Oil and found objects on canvas, 16¼ × 19¾ in. (41 × 50 cm).

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FIG. 6
William Kentridge, untitled, 1996. Charcoal on paper.

tached and unanchored from a scandalous signified, now inexactly remembered. A city of surfaces, capitalist brashness, in which only some want to remember, or in which the past appears fleetingly, glimpsed as parodic reference or embedded in a space or a face, an ash drift, an exfoliation. A subliminal memory of life below the surface, of suffering, alienation, rebellion, insurrection—the powerful forces contained in the depths of the city. The figure of the black migrant worker, existing beneath the surface—the orders of visibility—of the metropolis. There can be no surface without an underground.

And so we drive. William Kentridge has a powerful image of driving while looking behind (fig. 6). It comes from his animated film *History of the Main Complaint,* in which the vehicle of memory is the body of the protagonist, Soho, which carries within itself the trauma of recent history. A damaged organ displayed on a scanner metamorphoses into a landscape with a road running straight into the distance. The scene moves along this road from a featureless rural landscape into a built-up area. The movement is accompanied by the regular bleep of the electrocardiograph. This electronic pulse changes into the sound of an actual heartbeat, as the view is adjusted and shown through the windshield of Soho's car. Soho's eyes fill the rearview mirror. They look like the eyes of the artist.

For two weeks now, Kentridge's exhibition *Black Box* has been showing at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. Asked to produce and design a stage set for a Brussels performance of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, Kentridge created this exhibition, which turns Mozart's narrative of benevolent enlightenment on its head. Texts including colonial mine ledgers from the early 1900s, maps of early Johannesburg and Windhoek, and General Lothar von Trotha's 1904 order to eliminate the Herero people, of Namibia, form a backdrop for images that reflect Europe's "civilization" of Africa, particularly Germany's 1904–07

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genocide of the Hereros. The stage set now becomes not *The Magic Flute*'s celebration of reason but a *trauerarbeit*, a work of interminable grief. Kentridge talks of how the work shifts from the Enlightenment, the idea of the autocrat as optimistic leader bringing light to the people, to a post-Holocaust, postimperialist, darker world.

Éclat and somberness, light and darkness, surface and underneath, metropolis intertwined with necropolis, then and now. We take a right and are still not home.

Notes

1. Johannesburg, six hundred kilometers from the sea, is reported to be the fifth largest port in the world, given the size of its container depot. Underneath the city, marking the legacy of its origins, is a catacomb of tunnels left by gold mining—and some city districts, such as parts of Carletonville, have sunk into the earth.

2. *Baas,* an apartheid term black people were forced to use for their white employers, means "white master" in Afrikaans.

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