draft Research Proposal

Experiences of Everyday Urban Life: Exploring Boundaries of Fear

Kristen Kornienko

Introduction

The proposed study will explore the boundaries of fear that permeate Johannesburg 20 years into the era of the Rainbow Nation. The intent is not only to further understand how these boundaries perpetuate larger urban patterns of racism but also the subtler biases of who belongs to "my" community (Eberhardt, 2019). Of equal weight is the method that exploration, the project aims to experiment with how we as researchers collect information and pass on our findings. Building on such methodological innovations in hearing and seeing the everyday urban, as Kihato's (2013: 15 emphasis added by author) 'these experiences [personal narratives] readjust *our* lenses to provide new tools to explain the contemporary urban condition in Johannesburg' and Mkhabela's (2016) *Intersections between Teaching, Urban Design and Film: Urban Scripting as Experimentation*, a significant element of this research project will be experimenting with the alternative methodologies of story development and telling through community theatre[1], and the interpretation and dispersal of finding through comic book/graphic novel writing.

The work stems from an accumulation of anecdotal experiences of my fieldwork and life in Johannesburg but was brought to the fore through conversations I had with people living in Soweto while I was staying there in a residence for two weeks earlier this year. I walked to the bus stop, to the stores, and around the neighbourhoods. For the majority of that walking, I was the only white person on the street. From some people I sensed a wariness, others would stop me to talk, to show me things, to offer me food, *they* would bring up the topic of fear and how Soweto is still so separate from much of what was historically white Johannesburg. Not because people can't go there, or don't go there but because there is still an invisible barrier. In talking it became clear that this barrier is partly due to distance and cost of getting into town - something I experienced for myself using Uber and the Rea Vaya, but that wasn't all of it. One person outright commented that the city won't work until we get beyond these invisible barriers of fear, and from others I got that same sense. Though easily translatable to the legacy of black/while racial bias, further conversations with non-South Africans made it clear that black foreigners also feel ill at ease in Soweto and many, having lived for years in Johannesburg had never been to the township. But this is not unique to the Soweto/Johannesburg edge, another potential site is the art precinct of Maboneng and its sharp edge to the gritty downtown, where visitors are warned not to go. These two sites, would in a sense be a contrapuntal comparison - Soweto with its lineage to apartheid removals, destruction, and relocation; Maboneng with its lineage to capitalist removals, gentrification, and relocation.

Research Intent

The premise of the study is that despite the end of apartheid's spatial control, much of the urban patterns of human flow and development remain entrenched. This study asks the question, how does the human experience of urban boundaries of fear inform ideologies/values and thus our social constructs of our own and shared realities? This focus on meaning points to the notion of boundary as symbol which opens the doors to both past and future. Because the study makes fear its cornerstone, I will largely purse threads of colonial/apartheid legacy and post colonialism, but at the same time the study will not be blind to the evolving influences of climate change, shortages, and urban resiliency.

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[1] Community theatre, unlike amateur theatre, is focused on developing social capital and promoting social development.

Further, the method asks whether perceived barriers of fear within the city can be better understood through the development of community led storytelling and dialogue in art-based practices? Can the space for extended community dialogue within theatre practice opportune the evolution of collaborative ideas? Can conversations with audiences around these ideas becoming seeds of change, of re-imagining a more authentic Rainbow Nation?

The project then goes on, through its outputs, to explore the effectiveness of post colonial critique within the genre of comic books and whether this genre can be a viable avenue for academic research findings to reach a broader audience.

Literature and Developing a Theoretical Framework
In his chapter *Private Moments, Private Wastelands*, V.S. Naipaul (2010: 237), describing 'South Africa with its many groups, its many passions, its biding tensions' eloquently articulates the layers of differing values and ideologies from a group of seemingly disparate individuals within Johannesburg's society. Somewhat disparaging of Soweto he leaves his visit to Johannesburg unresolved as to what holds the city together, offering only what seemed to be flagging hopes hung on the image of Mandela.

Key to thinking about the physical and non physical barriers within the city are the ideas of boundary, symbol, values, ideology and how these together become social constructs within our lived reality. To support this is Cohen's (1985/2015) description of boundary as both having a symbolic meaning in and of itself but also how place and the sense of kinship is understood by our perception of a boundary and thus belonging. He goes on to discuss the dynamics of this at multiple scales (ibid); applying the large scale to the South African context we can say that the country's boundary is defined by the symbol of the Rainbow Nation and because this symbol is adequately broad multiple group's values can comfortably fit within its bounds. This broad consensus is what, within the thinking of African philosophy, Gyekye (1997: 166) contends is 'the convergence of (at least) a dominant set of those conceptions [values], which need not be the conceptions or beliefs of a particular class or interest group in society…those values, spawned by public conceptions of the nature of a good society'. On the other hand when the perceived parameters of shared conceptions become become narrower, such as Soweto with its globally recognized symbol of a black township or Sandton as a closed door elite business sector, then suddenly many of those groups' values no longer find a point of convergence, which leads to the sense of not belonging. Similarly, Berger and Luckman's (1967) earlier work on social constructs refer to this dynamic as the narrowing of perspectives around an ideology, and here given the context it's useful to adopt Gyekey's (1997: 167) dual defining of ideology as 'a framework of ideas used to define the values of a society; and ideology as a program for giving concrete expression to those ideas in the real world of politics and social action'. In short the noun and verb of how we process our engagement with the world around us.

In response to this notion of boundary as a symbol of ideology, Cohen (1985/2015: 16-7) goes on to argue that 'the crucial step for us in attempting to unravel analytically the concept of community must involve some further discussion of the relations among symbolism, culture and meaning'. In response the study will follow themes of post colonial violence through control such as Mbembe's (2015: 103) citing of the lack of emergence from the 'violence...[of] colonial relationships', suggesting evidence of newly emerged states which, through corporate and political machinery, effectively replace one brand of violence for another (*ibid*). The mechanism for the shift in violence he describes as the government coding of the 'logics that underlie...meanings within that society' and the 'institutionalis[ing of] this world of meanings...by instilling it in the minds of the cibles [the targeted population]' (*ibid*). This notion gives weight to the concept that defamiliarisation, or the device that influences peoples' understanding of the world around them, suggesting how the power to influence carries the potential to shape spatial production which builds on my earlier works (Kornienko, 2016). And through fear of loss, in Hook's (2011) contemporary reading of Steve Biko and 'the structural oppression resulting from capitalist modes of dominance that have historically allowed whites to maintain 'a monopoly on comfort and security'. His words thus clearly have relevance beyond the realm of state-

sponsored racist violence, beyond the historical era of apartheid' into today's cities.

Method
This will be an ethnographic study with an action research approach. Arts-based community research is visualized in three phases: community theatre as a resident lead method to develop the topic and its story; dialogue through performance initiated conversations with audiences from different stakeholder groups and urban residents. These first two have the potential for synthetic understanding of what holds community together effectively becoming the juxtaposition to analytic study. And third the finding, depending on the story that evolves, will be compiled into either a comic book series such as *Crossroads* the story of land occupation and women's resistance in Cape Town; a graphic narrative such as the cross-Canada collaborative research of the Indigenous Law Clinic in *Mikomosis and the Wetiko*, or a graphic novel such as the colonial era life of an African woman in *Abina and the Important Men*.

The engagement of society and space through the arts can be seen in such works as Mark Rothko's landscapes (Figure 1) with their exploration into humanity's emotional engagement with space (Evans, 2018). To this end, he used color, form and the confines of the canvas to study how edges come together, meet, interact, and find hierarchy; to express inclusion or fragmentation; in other words, to define space as dynamics of human engagement (ibid). In western Canada's post colonial context Sonny Assu challenges spatial assumption in Emily Carr's iconic colonial era work 'confront[ing] the portrayal of indigenous peoples' with graffiti-like tags that are rich in Coastal Salish representational meaning (Freundl, 2017, par. 1).

Figure 1: Mark Rothko *Four Darks in Red*, 1958 (Evans, 2018).

Figure 2: Sonny Assu Spaced Invaders, 2014 (Freudl, 2017).

My own experiences with arts based research has shown its potential for rich collaborative dialogue in an inclusive, non-threatening environment which can at times allow voices which are otherwise silent to be heard. An example of this was highlighted at the 2016 Southern African Cities Conference with the showing of the play ULWEMBU the product of two years of community based academic research around the use of Whoonga and its impact on communities. Having seen that play I connected a colleague in Vancouver who then went on to develop the play ILLICIT written and acted by residents of the downtown Eastside, many of whom live on the streets and with the "othering" biases of homelessness. In other words, this play was a thoughtful and thought provoking portrayal of the reality of bias towards people who are homeless that can in fact be supported with neuroimaging (Eberhardt, 2019). Critically, the managing artistic director comments that the play became the point of intersection for the many perspectives, worlds, and subcultures in the community and how they relate to the city (personal

communication, 2017). Similarly the play in which I am currently a cast member, written by the knowledge keeper of Splat'sin[2], *Swati7 ra7 skwast?,* explores interracial dynamics and their far-reaching legacies. Songs in their language, which only 1% of the band's population speak fluently as a result of the mechanisms of colonial assimilation, recount the first contact with Europeans and the subsequent loss land, cultural identity, and humanness through colonialism. Such narratives and storytelling methodologies are being further explored through creative cultural expression in projects like POSTMARGINAL.

Then the project turns to outputs, why comic books? Getz and Clarke (2016: XVI), as authors of Abina's history, argue for the power of the graphic novel in its accessibility to a broad audience of readers with the ability to communicate complex ideas around everyday people through a style which as they point out is neither 'completely celebratory nor wholly critical'. The power, they claim, is in linking these two dynamics together. Specific to South Africa Laursen (2017: 130) suggests that this genre, whether comic book or graphic history, is an ideal location to 'artistically and historically re-imagine resistances against statist, racist, and authoritarian policies in the postcolonial South African regime'. Juxtaposing these authors' advocacy of the genre in the telling of history and post colonial narrative, Crawley and van Rijswijk (2012) use Spiegelman's representation of the Holocaust in *Maus* to caution that without great care the graphic novel can portray personal or social traumas as a linear binary pitting victim against villain. However Knowles (2015) while acknowledging the criticism of *Maus* and the problematic use of graphic novels around certain areas of trauma, goes on to discuss its useful role in postcolonial dialogue. In this same vein the Trantraal brothers, authors of Crossroads have chosen to go with an independent publisher which allows freedom of text and distribution, arguably avoiding the colonial-capitalist leveraging (Gahman and Hjalmarson, 2019).
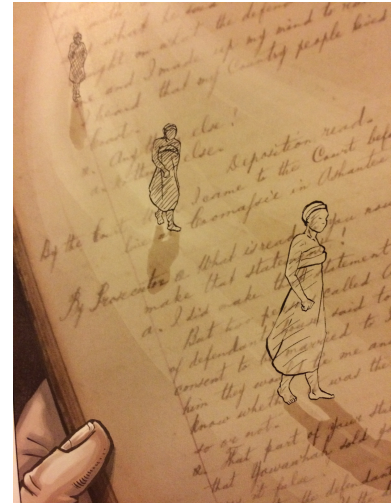

Figure 3: The power of combining illustration and text (Getz and Clarke, 2016).

Key to this study is Laursen's (2017: 141-2) contention that comic books such as *Crossroads* 'as a method of interpretation and critique enables a more nuanced understanding…in the postcolonial context that challenges easy notions of post-apartheid South Africa's Projection of the "Rainbow Nation"'. To me the interest the growing consensus in the literature that comic books, like hip hop music, a space that allows study outside institutionalized colonialism. It is in the physical intersection on the page of illustration, thought bubble, speech bubble, and background text, which can parallel the intersection intersection of urban place, emotional response such as perception or bias, speech, and the presentation of relevant theory, facts, and so on.

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[2] A band, or tribe, of the Secwepmec Nation which has inhabited this region of what is now western Canada for over 10,000 years.

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