Ethnographies of Neoliberalism

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Chapter 8

The Question of Freedom

Post-Emancipation South Africa in a Neoliberal Age

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Exploring that terrain requires recognizing that ultimately and philosophically freedom is a problem of social relations, at its core a problem of how human beings sustain and reproduce themselves. Clearly, this means that it is susceptible to determination by material forces and must be understood in its material context. . . . As in 1838, what was envisioned was a "freedom" drained of the power of genuine self-determination: materially, a freedom stripped of control over basic material resources; ideologically, a freedom that internalized its own antithesis.

—*Thomas C. Holt,* The Problem of Freedom

The early 1990s saw one chapter in world history coming to a close and another just as surely beginning. After the fall of the Wall, the collapse of communism, and European unification, changes on a planetary scale, the new era promised both uncertainty and possibility. Yet while it may have appeared that such a revolution in politics and economy was limited to the North, other such changes were unfolding to the South. In South Africa, the end of apartheid and the collapse of minority rule raised questions about that postcolony's place in the new geopolitical configuration and the vulnerability of its markets no less than its political ideals. Because South Africa's liberation struggle had concluded *after* "actually existing socialism," there was a sense in which the old Marxist-Leninist[1] and Pan-Africanist principles, so instrumental to the struggle, were no longer salient. Bearing little relevance for a new era, they quickly eroded with the introduction of a different kind of revolution—a revolution of the market.

In South Africa as elsewhere as state control over the national economy ceded ground under deregulatory policies, what had stood for politics in the past seemed to recede too, almost as if the political were giving way to

a *post*-political age. Gone were the pretensions to class solidarities and political organizing centered on the struggle to end colonialism, racism, and class rule. And this fact seemed to change the very language used to describe the transition as public discourse shifted from a focus on the past—on problems of reparation for historic wrongs and on the promise of redistribution of resources—to a focus on a present that seemed oddly unconscious of recent history.[2] Everywhere *democracy* was fast becoming the catchphrase of the late twentieth century in part perhaps because it disguised a very particular mystification: the conflation of freedom and free markets. These new values left little room for discussion of substantive citizenship and socioeconomic rights, matters more directly connected to a sense of historical entitlement that decolonization rather than democratization might have encompassed. In short, even the semantics of emancipation had been transformed. Two ghosts, two specters perhaps, haunted this conversation: on the one hand, John Maynard Keynes—once synonymous with postwar reconstruction and state planning in Europe—and on the other, Friedrich A. von Hayek—that long-suffering visionary who saw markets as mechanisms of social coordination (Hayek 1994). In South Africa as elsewhere, as Keynes' fortunes waned, Hayek's waxed as he became, at least in some figurative sense, the key author of the neoliberal reform movement. And South Africans (some, that is), whether willingly or unwillingly, seemed to be embracing a new vision of history, or more accurately, a vision of the "end of history" (Fukuyama 1992).

Post-apartheid values of freedom and non-racialism, while given symbolic weight, in practice reaffirmed the complicity of race and class in undermining claims to democratic citizenship and the myth of equal access to resources, rights, and benefits regardless of complexion. To quote Holt, "something was amiss in the very project of emancipation, in the very premises on which it was founded" (1992: xix). Emancipation had been emptied of content, and without control over basic material resources ordinary citizens, recently enfranchised, could only imagine the full scope of freedom's possibilities. Further, new forms of heteronomy (limits on self-determination) seemed to emerge as a *consequence* of the struggle for liberation or, at the very least, coterminous with it, constraining the scope of politics and democracy in its broadest sense; constraining too effective responses to growing demands for housing, schooling, universal health care, and a "better life for all."[3] Yet this postcolony in the South differed little from so many other places in the world, where the formula of freedom and free markets seemed to introduce as much a sense of despair as triumphalism; of having to look in on a world of prosperity from its "immiserated exteriors" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 315).

Disappointment came relatively slowly, reflecting a paradox on which "short term stability has depended"—namely on "the illusion among whites that nothing has really changed and among blacks that everything has changed" (Marks 1998: 17). But as ambitious promises of housing delivery, job creation, and social benefits translated into less than impressive outcomes, hope inevitably turned to disillusionment. Without a doubt, the pendulum was swinging violently in this post-transition society. And while South Africans may have imagined their many problems ranging from soaring levels of violent crime (cf. Steinberg 2001), to unemployment, flourishing markets in illegal goods, and a general sense of insecurity to be a peculiarly South African problem, much the same could be said of countries stretching from post-socialist Eastern Europe to Latin America. Moreover, while promising measurable improvement the very policies that guaranteed social transformation were being systematically undercut by the adoption of neoliberal reforms. Perhaps the starkest example comes from the housing sector where approximately three million South African households required formal housing in the mid-1990s. Yet attempts to stem the tide of homelessness through the introduction of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP)—a state-driven housing initiative—coincided with the state's implementation of a new policy of privatization, trade liberalization, and downsizing (the Growth, Employment and Redistribution Programme, or GEAR). The RDP soon became a welfare initiative executed by private stakeholders with little interest beyond profitability. By 1999, when the RDP was quietly dissolved by the National Assembly, it was still one of the only significant state initiatives focused on poverty eradication.

The problems of South Africa's less than seamless transition to democracy and those reforms that were swiftly introduced almost coterminously are problems on a very large scale and perhaps only grasped in the abstract. In the following section of this chapter I hope to offer at least a small glimpse of some of the ways in which everyday life on the margins of Cape Town articulates both a set of possibilities—an urban politics, if one will—and at the same time refracts the larger structural contradictions of contemporary South Africa in the grip of neoliberalization.

The Archaeology of the Post-Apartheid City

I began fieldwork in 1998 in a series of informal settlements located on the outskirts of Cape Town, the so-called "Mother City." These were areas that grew out of a twofold prohibition on permanent residence: (1) a series of government-initiated housing construction freezes in African townships, dating back to the early 1970s,[4] and (2) the far-reaching and longstanding Coloured Labour Preference Policy (first implemented in 1955), which prioritized the hiring of Coloured[5] over African labor in the Cape Peninsula. While these and other policies (the Group Areas and Urban Areas Acts among them) could never entirely stem the flow of people arriving from the countryside, together they effectively drove African migrants into "illegal" settlements. Notably, while the Peninsula could never claim the largest migrant population

or the most extensive "squatter problem," Cape Town was home to the single largest African population nationwide targeted for removal by the 1980s (Surplus People Project 1984). So at least in relative terms the migrant labor system and a confluence of other forces made the region strategically critical to the evolution of highly repressive policies of urban management and consolidation. African women, much like male migrants, were subject to related but distinct prohibitions on movement—through the so-called "breadwinner's clause"—which further constrained their search for employment and dictated that those women traveling to the Peninsula did so only on condition they left their families behind in the countryside. Under the clause, women were entitled to seek employment in the city, but were limited to six-month contracts. In many cases, squatter areas grew out of this double bind, that is, the restrictions on both men and women, but more specifically the demands that such restrictions placed on family life. It needs to be clearly stated that despite the degree of repression, the settlements were not solely places of last resort. And that in serving as stepping stones on the path to urban employment they came to be experienced as places of opportunity and hence as "spaces of hope" (Harvey 2000).

Nevertheless, urban Africans were de facto criminalized as a consequence of the breadwinner's clause and other general proscriptions on freedom of movement. Such disciplinary techniques made it incredibly difficult for African people to settle permanently in the city and profoundly affected those spaces of intimacy and the processes of social reproduction at the disposal of the family (cf. Foucault 1991). Indeed, men with passbooks, while permitted to live and work in urban areas, did so for the most part only on condition that they came without their wives and partners and resided in what were referred to at the time as "single-sex hostels"—a virtual army barracks arrangement provided by local municipalities and in some cases by industry. Hence many women found themselves living illegally with husbands and partners in the townships, placing them under constant threat of pass raids and deportation. Even so, once returned to the rural reserves, many made the journey back to the city in efforts to flee the increasing economic devastation of the countryside (J. Cole 1987), which was the consequence of labor migrancy as much as policies of land dispossession dating back to the beginning of the twentieth century.[6]

I chose to begin this section with a brief account of the historical circumstances in which squatter areas, now more commonly referred to as "informal settlements," became a vital resource for migrants, in part as a way of distinguishing the apartheid and post-apartheid periods. At the same time, though, the apartheid regime and the new liberal constitutional democracy function under quite distinct political logics—the one being a system of minority rule, the other a system of majority rule. What is perhaps most striking is the perpetuation of certain features of the old way of life: the continual

movement of people between town and country, even since the dissolution of the apartheid migrant labor system, as much as the degree to which the new privatization regime has introduced other, not always entirely distinct, challenges to African domestic life in the city. Thus while the political freedoms of the new citizenship are undeniable, in truth, today, "South Africans are worse off than they were before the end of apartheid, at least as measured by real income." Indeed "average incomes of South African men and women fell by about 40 percent between 1995 and 2000" (Balls 2006). So for those who would argue on purely formalistic grounds that democracy brings undeniable benefits, the realities of living on the margins of South Africa's major cities—in shantytowns and settlements that lack services, proper housing, and utilities—suggest that in fact neoliberal reforms and their modes of "adjustment" have created an enormous gulf between the formal and substantive benefits of national belonging on one hand and urban residence on the other.

What follows is one way "in" to the concrete experience of everyday life under diminished material conditions; of lives lived on the geographical margins of the city as much as its social and economic ones. And of what it means to engage nevertheless optimistically or at the very least pragmatically in the project of affective labor: of social reproduction and its attendant reciprocative and redistributive care.

Life in Lower Crossroads

Ayaka lived on Sikwenene Street, Lower Crossroads—an informal settlement, one in a series of adjoining settlements, called Philippi.[7] Today, some among these approximate the status of formally planned townships. Ayaka's shack was modest, even by local township standards—three rooms including a small kitchen, living room, and bedroom she shared with her daughter. The living room led off the kitchen and from its worn plush sofas, looking through the open doorway to the street, one could see the lifeworld of the location[8] beyond. Children played with old tires, small stones, and other discarded items, their excited shrieks carried on the breeze. A local hunter might pass by of an afternoon, his pack of mangy hunting dogs following, all the while bells clanging from makeshift collars. On a nearby thoroughfare taxis jostled for advantage, some swerving dangerously to overtake the competition, their horns blasting as they screeched to a standstill in front of waiting passengers at curbside.

At least in June 1999—during a Cape midwinter with frozen late nights and early mornings, warming to a pleasant lunchtime heat, which quickly dissipated in late afternoon—Ayaka lived in this improvised home (like so many others on her street and adjoining streets) while recent innovations consisted of outdoor water taps and toilets on every plot, hook-up to the electrical grid, newly tarmacked roads, and the ultimate promise of formal homes to

come. These were the undeniable benefits of democracy, yet, at every turn these improvements might well be denied: utilities and services were fast being privatized; the delivery of homes was slowing; while the quality of what was delivered was declining (the effect of the turn to outsourcing).[9] Against the backdrop of these larger processes, Ayaka's life ambitions turned around the raising of a young daughter against impossible odds, running a home on close to nothing, and holding onto a husband whose alcoholism drew on precious material and emotional resources.

Not for the first time, Ayaka and a group of nine other women had formed a *stokvel* (a savings scheme) in 1997. While most such associations offer members support in times of financial need—providing access to emergency funds or supporting new business ventures—using the association's funds for the purchase of durable goods was a little less common (Buijs 1998: 58). However, in Ayaka's group, members hoping to make large purchases could enlist the help of the other participants, and together members would discuss the relative advantages and disadvantages of those items that a given member proposed to buy, moving to raise the necessary money once all agreed to support the venture. In other such schemes similar arrangements exist, particularly in relation to the raising of "grocery" and occasionally "meat" funds to enable households to sustain themselves in the most immediate ways.

At the time, Ayaka's husband, Zwayi, had been working on and off and continued to draw a regular, if relatively small, wage. Her membership eligibility had been in large part determined on the basis of her husband's work; in fact, most of the women could claim a steady source of income through husbands and other kin fortunate enough to have jobs. Before approaching the group, Ayaka had been to a series of furniture dealers in search of a wall unit generally available on hire purchase[10] with a sizable down payment. These are often used to subdivide private and public space in small homes lacking interior partition walls. In large households where parents and children are often of necessity forced to sleep together in the same room, a wall unit or "room divider" offers some minimal privacy. Ayaka spoke to the women's group and after some discussion they had agreed to support her endeavor. The group proposed to enter into a first round of giving in one-hundred-Rand increments,[11] totaling one thousand Rand (R1,000); this included a one hundred Rand (R100) contribution from Ayaka to the general kitty.[12]

Having identified a suitable wall unit at Price and Pride (a furniture chain) and armed with contributions from the other nine women, Ayaka traveled into Wynberg (center of the furniture trade in Cape Town), where she then made a deposit of R360 on the purchase of the unit. Ayaka also purchased outright for R499 a secondhand kitchen cabinet, leaving approximately R140 for food shopping. A month later, the group reconvened, this time to contribute R100 each to a second member who hoped to redecorate her home with a number of basic furnishings. And so this process was repeated until each member of the

group had satisfied desires deriving in part from fantasies of suburban life—a staple of post-apartheid soap operas that depict a post-racial society in which Black and White live side by side in suburban subdivisions, work and socialize together, and in which Blacks are very often represented as affluent professionals. *Generations* and other such television dramas seem to equate heroism with entrepreneurship and the material benefits that accrue from high-profile and high-salaried positions in consulting, banking, and other corporate work. This vision of the possible stands quite apart from the obstacles to education and professionalization of Africans under apartheid, and yet in the very representation of the overcoming of recent history there is a keen recognition of both the travesties of the past and the ongoing challenges to Black success and upward mobility. In a sense, the post-apartheid moment has been thus far characterized by a continual renegotiation of possibility and powerlessness.

Once everyone had received R1,000, almost all the women owed significant amounts of money to shops and companies from whom they had purchased goods. Moreover, although Ayaka's total monthly household budget was only R800 or R900 she owed a staggering one quarter of that (R221) in monthly installments, this aside from her ongoing contributions to the stokvel. Inevitably, most such situations result in nonpayment and, in some rare cases, repossession.

Already heavily indebted, Ayaka's situation deteriorated with the loss of Zwayi's job; he had been working as a truck driver and by the end of 1997, as the company downsized, he was laid off. There was in all of this a sense of the inevitable, a process of "protracted failure" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2004: 336), which seemed to strike one member of the stokvel after another, until it eventually disbanded. I should note that the late 1990s were a particularly critical phase in the institution of deregulatory policies and efforts to privatize the public sector, which came to be directly correlated with the steady attrition in employment. By the end of South Africa's first decade of freedom one million jobs had been lost in mining, manufacturing, and agriculture and unemployment was already at an all-time high of 38.6 percent by the end of 1998. No longer was labor alienated (freed) from the means of production, labor of this kind (redundant labor) no longer formed any part of the means of production whatsoever. It had been "freed" in the very worst sense.

Local households and their domestic balance sheets can be grasped in a variety of ways and certainly there is plenty of available statistical data in South Africa on microlending, household consumer patterns, and so on (see *Financial Diaries*, n.d.; also see Collins, Murdoch, Rutherford and Ruthven 2009). Nevertheless, the actual mechanics of earnings and expenditures in households with relatively limited means of generating income remains something of a black box. Arguably, this has to do in some measure with those forms of labor within households that facilitate the day-to-day survival of its members in ways more or less invisible to the standard calculus of income

flowing in and out of the domestic space. These invisible mechanisms include forms of immaterial or affective labor, as well as, specifically, redistributive labor, which some may argue is merely a subcategory of the larger category of reproductive work. For example, Ayaka's "brother," that is, her clansman with whom she shares a clan name and thus certain social obligations, spent considerable time at her home: Mbuyiselo ate at Ayaka's table, watched television, spent countless hours with Ayaka's husband Zwayi, and even used the phone, which was later disconnected owing to nonpayment. He did not, as one might logically expect, directly contribute any resources to the household. Instead Mbuyiselo's earnings, which derived at the time from a small research salary, were redirected back to his parents within an intergenerational circuit—moving from child to parent and then back from parent to child through the sharing of pension checks on one side and wage earnings on the other. Mbuyiselo was also making contributions to his parents' burial association: an institutional arrangement not altogether distinct from the stokvel, its major function being to ensure that the ritual of death is duly marked with solemn funeral festivities. Ayaka "benefited," if one may put it that way, from the solid counsel Mbuyiselo offered regarding her marriage, often reining in Zwayi's drinking when it risked spiraling out of control, and in his capacity as a local community activist and politician. This latter role afforded Ayaka and her family a fair degree of symbolic capital they could "spend" in other ways.

After completing that first round of buying, the women in Ayaka's group began a second round. This time contributions were reduced to R50 and members modified their consumer goals accordingly. For a second time, one woman received a lump sum from the group, totaling R500, and once again this included a contribution of R50, which she made on her own behalf. The group went through the same cycle of lending and borrowing, the same determinations of trust, and from these followed the acquisition of new goods and a further escalation in personal debt.

At least in this form, the stokvel built through a negative telos, inasmuch as its movement from inception to dissolution proceeded in a downward spiral, resolving in deepening obligations and the eventual collapse of the overall institutional structure of the scheme. Such arrangements, though easily distinguishable from the competitive forms of gifting generally associated with potlatch (cf. Bataille 1988) in which increasing expenditures or modes of consumption are at stake, equally rely on critical transfigurations of value. The mere fact of indebtedness is not in itself a rejection or denial of value therefore. And while the burning of sumptuary objects (in potlatch rituals) and debt creation are hardly comparable activities, each transcends so-called commonsense utility to reveal alternative logics at work in value's movement and transformation.

Stokvels and their peculiar teleologies bring social agency under conditions of extreme marginality into sharp focus. There is a practical "imagining [of] what life ought to be like as [a] moral project" (Graeber 2001: 22), even if that project's conditions of emergence rely on variously awkward economic strategies that, on one hand, make visible the economic instabilities of the broader society and, on the other, offer concrete modes of overcoming and redirecting value in and through the family, if only temporarily. While all such schemes do not function in this way, the course or devolution of this specific scheme is important. Ayaka had previously belonged to a similar scheme in the 1980s when she resided in Old Crossroads—one of the first informal settlements in the area, dating back to the mid-1970s. That scheme had operated purely on the basis of savings and contributions that bore no relationship to indebtedness. Very plainly, the crisis of unemployment and the disarticulation of urban settlement from wage work had not then reached the crisis point it did in the late 1990s. And so there was a concrete, material basis to practices of lending and contribution.

In the shift from straightforward savings during the course of the 1980s to an elaborate debt structure held together through moral ties between women a decade later, the stokvel, as a locally situated institution, provides an optic through which the conditions of South African neoliberalism may be read. It is surely no coincidence that this shift from savings to debt should arise concomitantly with the structural transformation of the South African economy in the mid to late 1990s. Viewed this way, ethnography becomes not simply a mode of inquiry into the local, but rather a way of representing a larger structural process in the world through which local and global, North and South are co-implicated. I am not, however, suggesting that all practices of saving and borrowing have shifted entirely to a focus on debt and debt creation—there are far too many counterexamples to make such a proposition sustainable. Rather, in gauging the reciprocative and redistributive work of households on the Flats—on the outskirts of the city of Cape Town and historically a dumping ground for Blacks and Coloureds under apartheid—the labor that credit and debt does seems particularly significant to a world increasingly driven by credit, not only on the local level, but in boardrooms and on stock and mercantile exchanges everywhere (see *Economist* 2006).

Thus, while the locatedness of anthropological practice—its apparent concern with minutiae—might suggest a very limited capacity to address larger structural questions, those structural questions often become much more easily decipherable in the course of ethnographic engagement. Stokvels like the one in which Ayaka was a member in the late 1990s, at that precise moment when the full force of neoliberalism was to be felt in Asian markets, post-transition societies in the former Eastern Bloc, Central America, and southern Africa, appear to have mimicked the very tendencies of that moment in millennial capitalism. In their propensity to produce and grow debt, stokvels reflect on a small scale the widespread crisis of debt and debt "management" within both the so-called First and Third Worlds. To be sure, these are debt

crises of quite distinct nature and scale. In the United States and Europe, debt is constructed through credit relations with banks and third parties; for that matter, debt is securitized through its transfer to investors. In the southern countries the trope of indebtedness is mostly defined as a matter of what the underdeveloped world "owes" the First World. Naturally, these are structurally linked conditions whose appearance as ontologically distinct phenomena has to be carefully interrogated.

Modes of Production Thinking: The Basic Premise

Harold Wolpe, the well-known Marxist sociologist, in his 1972 essay "Capitalism and Cheap Labour-Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid," proposed a reformulation of the "race-class" debate that had dogged the analysis of apartheid: what Wolpe saw as the "overwhelming importance accorded to race" in approaches that sought to define "the relationship between racially oriented action and 'the economy'" (Wolpe 1972: 429). Frustrated with liberal, radical, and racist analyses that dwelt on the supposed opposition between race and class, Wolpe argued that it detracted in no way from "the conception of the State as an instrument of White domination, however, to insist that the South African state is also an instrument of class rule in a specific form of capitalist society" (429). More properly, the state could be understood as the means of reproduction of racist policies and ideologies, but these efforts were also, in fact, attempts at perpetuating the means of reproduction of a particular mode of production. Here, I take "reproduction" to have a double sense, particularly as this relates to the place of the African family as a site critical to social and biological reproduction, however attenuated by the constraints of apartheid biopolitics.

Like other theorists of colonial political economy, Wolpe was grappling with the ways in which South Africa's industrialization depended on a space outside itself; that is a pre-capitalist economy. Echoing any number of theories of primitive or *previous* accumulation (A. Smith 1976; Luxemburg 2003), he argued that for a significant period, South Africa's economy had been dual. "In South Africa, the development of capitalism has been bound up with, first, the deterioration of the productive capacity and then, with increasing rapidity, the destruction of the pre-capitalist societies. In the earlier period of capitalism (approximately 1870 to the 1930s), the rate of surplus value and hence the rate of capital accumulation depended above all upon the maintenance of the pre-capitalist relations of production in the Reserve economy which provided a portion of the means of reproduction of the migrant labour force" (Wolpe 1972: 432). More recently, Patrick Bond has observed that the Bantustan (homeland) system, which inscribed the logic of unremunerated female labor in the country and male wage labor in the city, assumed the super-exploitation of women as the basis of industrial profit (cf.

Engels 1970). Women were in effect made to subsidize child rearing, schooling, and retirement—responsibilities generally associated with the state (see Bond 2005). This moves arguments about colonial domination some distance from the conceit that domination might be achieved solely by brute force. For, by and large, apartheid legislation focused on the regulation of private behavior and the refashioning of African subjectivity through attempts to eviscerate potential spaces of intimacy such as home and family—domains generally deemed central to the achievement of self-definition. But this should hardly be surprising, since the mechanism of hegemony, as we have long been told (Gramsci 1971; cf. Williams 1977; Bourdieu 1977), operates on an ordinary plane, reflexively imposing its vision through the appropriation of elements in the everyday lives of its subjects; "in a quite literal sense, hegemony is habit forming" (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 23). Thus, if the state's confrontation with African people in the city dwelt on seemingly commonplace matters of housing, location, and employment, these were after all the very terms and conditions of the "reproduction of social labor" (Ngwane 2003: 683).

I mention this now decades-old debate in order to draw some important connections between the past and the contemporary moment. Consider the ways in which apartheid political economy necessarily depended on the African domestic space as a sphere in which certain responsibilities for the reproduction of social labor were assumed. I previously suggested that stokvels and other financial strategies relied as much on the institutional structure of the stokvel itself as the affective relations of its members on one hand and the affective relations within households on the other. That in a sense, as much as the apartheid economy required women to subsidize aspects of social reproduction, today, under neoliberalism, women and families more generally occupy a new, but not dissimilar role. The focus of efforts is largely redistributive more than productive in any conventional sense. In a post-wage age in which households generate resources through activities in the so-called informal economy (operating small street stands, taking in laundry, through odd casual labor such as gardening and construction work) or through social grants (pensions and child welfare grants), other kinds of labor are instrumental to the careful sharing and dissemination of meager resources. And this in and of itself becomes a critical coping strategy at a time of state devolution: a logic of delayed gratification by which lump sums are converted into a steady trickle—what Karl Polanyi described as "redistribution writ small" (cf. Polanyi 2001).

The Space of Modes of Production

Today, migrants traveling between the Eastern Cape and the Cape Peninsula follow in the footsteps of those who arrived in South Africa's urban cen-

ters during previous centuries. The steady proletarianization of the South African countryside in the nineteenth century (Bonner 1983; Bundy 1979; Van Onselen 1996; Beinart, Delius and Trapido 1986) paved the way for the expansion of migrant wage labor in the twentieth century as the Union of South Africa stepped onto the world economic stage following the discovery of mineral wealth in the 1860s and 1870s. These productive forces heralded the advent of apartheid wage work after 1948 and its rationalization through so-called "pass laws"[13] (Posel 1991).

Nowadays, people continue to arrive in the city from the countryside, but they do so in the face of very significant odds as large segments of the job market have been eliminated; many positions have been casualized and workers are left under-employed; and a steady emphasis on financialization has expanded that sector to 20 percent of the total economy (OECD, n.d.), while employing a mere 1 percent of the workforce. Many have suggested a worldwide transition in the regime of accumulation—from Fordism to post-Fordism (Harvey 1989; cf. Ong 1999). While the focus on finance capital has ushered in a very particular set of economic strategies: speculation and truck in credit being pervasive and forms of "fictitious capital" (Harvey 1989: 332), namely the production of value outside or beyond conventional productive processes, in its turn transforming the fundamental structure of market economies under neoliberalism (LiPuma and Lee 2004).

These transformations account in part for South Africa's rocky transition while this postrevolutionary and postcolonial society faces other very specific challenges. Recently, arguing that the contradictions of neoliberal capitalism readily surface far and wide, Jean and John Comaroff have rightly qualified that such contradictions are often "most visible in so-called postrevolutionary societies—especially those societies that, having been set free by the events of 1989 and their aftermath, entered the global arena with distinct structural disadvantages" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000: 298).

Unemployment, as I have already suggested, has been one such consequence of the South African transition. And thus one of the issues this chapter seeks to address is the new political space of the city, in its specifically postcolonial dimensions, as a site in which, despite high levels of joblessness—despite the disarticulation of employment opportunities from processes of urbanization (see M. Davis 2006)—the city remains a destination for migrants. These are not the migrant workers who headed for South Africa's cities as a consequence of industrialization at the end of the nineteenth century, nor are they those who worked in "metropolitan South Africa" but were forced to make their homes in the Bantustans during apartheid. Yet clearly, the continual movement back and forth between town and country has inscribed its own logic of sustainability—perhaps less material than existential. People have become habituated to the constant motion and migration between rural outpost and urban center where many choose to settle. Moreover most retain a firm grasp on rural life, insisting on the burial of kin in the countryside and on returning to the ancestral homestead, particularly in times of need. This "culture of mobility" (Ngwane 2003) and the forms to which this movement has given rise signal processes of place making and belonging at work in both rural and urban areas simultaneously. Arguably, such journeys also suggest that modes of production thinking alone can only partially explain the constant movement back and forth between town and country. For if, in the previous century, jobs were the primary draw for migrant workers and if, in the current century, urbanization is no longer coterminous with employment, what motivates such movements must necessarily be explained not solely by recourse to theories of accessibility to cheap labor-power. Such abstractions necessarily efface historical processes of creative and cultural struggle (Trouillot 1995), and thereby fail to acknowledge, simply put, relationships to place, practices of meaning making, and the historical agency of those who construct local worlds within a larger world system.

At the same time, if the kinds of modes of production arguments I have presented here have left us an important legacy, we need to better understand the kinds of *geographies* that apartheid produced—its unified schemas stretching between urban and rural poles—as much as the dynamics of movement these produced. Informal settlements, like the one at the center of my account, provide a particularly privileged space in which to analyze ongoing urban struggles and historic renegotiations of how to live in the city, even at its margins.

This is a question Michael Watts has recently posed in relation to the inner city. Indeed, what is it about inner cities more or less everywhere that has come to define them as both sites of the production of new political forms and powerful concretizations of the lived contradictions of late capitalism (Watts 2005)—of consumer desire and disappointment, of access to formal though rarely substantive citizenship (Holston 1999)? More important, if modes of production can be said to explain certain overdeterminisms of social action but cannot account for the ways in which social agents constitute and reconstitute their lives often in ways thoroughly inexplicable in material terms—what Watts has referred to as the economist's "wage puzzle" (2005: 189)—what work does culture do in sustaining lives seemingly so close to the brink? Stephen Jackson has recently observed that in the Democratic Republic of Congo lifeworlds within and yet somehow also beyond the long shadow cast by civil war continue and persist through *système D* (or *système de se débrouiller*)—a mode of fending for oneself—as a driving force in daily life. Here people are not merely "making do," they are actively debating the changing forms of the social person and social reproduction more generally. Hence, even while acknowledging a lengthy Congolese crisis, Jackson argues compellingly of the

ways in which African agents daily make possible the "continuation of creativity within collapse" (S. Jackson 2005: 2).

Conclusion

Women, their families, and extended households who live in places like Lower Crossroads rely on multiple strategies for ensuring that the life cycle of the household is perpetuated. Stokvels are just one example among many financial mechanisms for doing so. Other strategies include participation in formal banking and credit institutions, loan-sharking, membership in multiple savings schemes simultaneously, and burial societies. Despite the fact that members of Ayaka's scheme became increasingly indebted over time, arguably, theirs was neither reckless nor profligate behavior. Rather, a very careful calculus of the ways in which money might be managed, and most specifically channeled into certain endeavors, went into the provisioning of domestic life, even if this required entering into debt relations to do so. To be sure, these activities depend on the constitution of a certain kind of self-regulating subject, a "responsible and moral individual and economic-rational actor" (Lemke 2001: 201). Members often spoke of "belt-tightening" strategies, comments consistent with discourses of self-empowerment that have become pervasive in the context of the devolution of state welfare functions onto private institutions. While it is easy enough to argue that these are compensations for the failures of the market such discourses are equally legible as the means through which neoliberal subjects seek to transcend their existing frames of reference. Thus, while narratives of frugality and self-restraint expose the limits to social reproduction, they simultaneously highlight the myriad ways in which subjects act upon the constraints of neoliberalism and in so doing reshape the very structures of austerity and fiscal discipline. These are not only moral-rational subjects then, but subjects with a highly pragmatic orientation (Comaroff and Comaroff 1997: 66) to the lived world—never entirely submissive or subjected. The circumstances of their lives are immiserated in some material sense, but pragmatic subjects necessarily work *within* abjection, steadily redefining its conditions at every turn, exquisitely remaking the world around them, and at the same time debating the limits and limitations of their own conditions of possibility (see Makhulu 2009 forthcoming).

One additional question with which this chapter has been concerned is the urban context in which specific material struggles are unfolding and the city is both a site of possibility and promise, impossibility and disappointment. And while participation in financial schemes is in no way contextually specific to the city, there is an urban politics at work in the ways in which migrants, former migrants, and their extended linkages between town and country persist. Michel de Certeau long made the claim that the city was both the formulaic vision of spatial planning as well as the space of reinvention and

reconstitution through everyday practices (1988). And that "ordinary practitioners" in the city might transcend the opposition between powerless individual subject and the totalizing city to create another kind of experience.

I began this chapter with an epigraph taken from Thomas Holt's book *The Problem of Freedom*, which explores the politics and experience of Jamaican emancipation. What he insistently argues is that freedom is definitionally dependent not only on abstract notions of democracy and liberalism, but also on a material ground as the conditions of possibility of true emancipation. South African freedom came late as I suggested; late in the sense of emerging after the world had so radically changed that definitionally "freedom" meant something else. It is this ongoing struggle to define "freedom" not only as deregulation nor simply as the formal proceduralism of democracy, but as substantively material that will, I would propose, continue to delimit the struggle for emancipation in South Africa and so many other postrevolutionary societies.