

## TERROR AND THE CITY

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**IN A SHORT FICTION**, 'Empty', I record the dying moments of a sex worker dumped on the outskirts of a nameless South African city. She is the victim of a gang rape. The details of the rape – the modes of penetration, the manner in which she is made helpless – are remorselessly recounted. Every surface and cavity of her body becomes the site of a violation that is physical and psychical. Dead – a thing made for death – the woman is reminded repeatedly of her nothingness. It is a truth she cannot negate, that ravages her all the more. We read:

The pain within is deafening, all encompassing. It has no single source. Blood everywhere. In the eye, the mouth, in the emptiness between her legs. Empty. ... Don't fill a woman but *empty* her. Tear the flesh, rape the voice. Leave nothing. Make nothing of nothing.

It is the word they spoke repeatedly. *Nothing*. Indefinite. Without substance. A hole. The hands that shoved her legs apart, shut her mouth, tapped the bottle against her ear so she could hear the hollowness, seemed to belong to one man. Did it make it easier to believe so? She thinks not. She only knows the hands were one and the same – they may have belonged to different men but they were one and the same – fingers and palms calloused, nails sharp as blades. Only the voice was soft; soft and hateful. *You want money. I give you money*. Wallet gaping, a stained and clotted tongue. She watched the hand withdraw a thick sheaf of ten rand notes, green and white as mould.

Money. Isn't that what she's made for? A thing made for money. Ten rand notes shoved in a bottle shoved up her – *the medium is the message* – up her cunt. It's the only word she can find. Not one she'd use, but like fucked it's a word that comes easily now. It's a word that lives inside her; unsentimental, efficient, sharp as glass. A message in a broken bottle. Up her. Inside her. Dividing her. *Not her*. But who is she? *Whore. Jintoe. Poes*. She's heard the words a thousand times, spat like nails from the mouth of any grunting man. Words of hate to match their sex like knives. She, the target. Did she think it would come to this? She doesn't think so. It's not that she's stupid. She's not. It's not that she doesn't know that what's happened to her has happened to others. It's not that. She knows the risk that comes when you stand on a street corner and bargain with

hate. She just didn't bargain for this. This feeling that she's feeling now, because - yes - she is starting to feel. She's moving beyond the evidence. She's feeling because she thinks she's dying - because she is. She is dying. Her cry is deafening. Mute. She is not sad. She's not even afraid. She is not blind to her fate. She is not even confused or desperate. Knowledge fills her in a way that air will not. If she cannot move her head, it is because her throat is cut. If she cannot shift her back, it is because the spine has snapped. Her heart is a broken bridge. Her hands, gathered at the nape of her spine, are bound with razor wire. If her knee falls and her calf slackens, it is because she is resigned. Gravity claims her. Still there is pain. At least there is pain. She feels. She thinks. She cannot tell sensation apart from mind.

(Jamal 2002: 9-11)

This story is one instance of an emergent artistic compulsion to record an escalating depravity and to find within depravity the means to sustain the will to live. Samuel Beckett's formulation - I can't go on/I must go on - conveys the tenuousness of this besieged will. Between hopelessness and hope falls the shadow. It is this shadow, this blurred moment, that this essay seeks to address. For Homi Bhabha it is a moment that conveys the unthinkable - understood here as terror - that is 'not quite experience, not yet concept; part dream, part analysis; neither signifier nor signified' (Bhabha 1994: 181). If the city is the chosen space in which to grasp terror as the unthinkable it is because therein its oppressive and phantasmal presence is most acutely felt. Moreover it is the city's simulacral relation to the real, its slippages *between* categories, its conflation of intensities, its inability to contain the flows of people and things, its porous and transgressive boundaries, that make it a compelling and vertiginous axis across which to assess the complexity of Bhabha's formulation. Driving through the city Jean Francois Lyotard notes that the markers that lead one to the centre eventually disappear. In the instant of their disappearance Lyotard reminds us that there is no centre, that, rather, there are multiple centres and that each competes against and erases the provenance of the other, for a city as a rhizomatic and ceaselessly bifurcating organism cannot be centralised. An urban sprawl that *performs* its unending estrangement of itself, the city reinforces all the more its rhizomatic nature. Every attempt on the part of its occupants to rigidify and consecrate its variable nodes is subject to erasure, for a city secretes its anonymity in the instant that it claims the familiar.

If art and criticism are to address this slippage they cannot hold fast to tidy polarised fixities. Rather, art and criticism must access a language that embraces a constitutive ambivalence, for the truth of a city, always evasive, always fraught, ceaselessly evades and challenges cognition and sensory intelligence. In South Africa the fraught nature of the city is compounded all the more by the terror that stalks it. Terror, as understood here, is not merely the sum of empirical acts of violence but a pervasive and variegated *psychic seam*. It is this seam that must be tapped if we are to understand why the city works yet does not work. For, to my mind, there is no disputing that the South African city is a psychically agonistic and besieged terrain. Neither knowable nor wholly unknowable, the South African city exists in the shadowy interstices of its vaunted intentionality. Like the house in Ivan Vladislavic's *The Folly* (Vladislavic 1993), the South African city occupies a liminal point between wakefulness and dream. Therein the very desire for a sense of place recoils before its lack of substance. That *The Folly* emerges on the South African literary scene in 1993, when South Africa stands on the verge of its first democratic election, is telling. For Vladislavic that transitional point becomes the marker for a fraught ambivalence. In the place of certainty we find a gnawingly intrusive lack: the house will not be realised. The very phantasmal venture - the creation of a house that does and does not exist - defines an imaginary in the abortive instant of its conception. Hallucinatory projection rather than mimetic representation, the house in *The Folly* marks a key psychic and epistemic shift from the real to the hyper-real. At the very point of its putative consolidation we find the increased estrangement

(and derangement) of the South African imaginary. Central to this derangement, I suggest, is terror, for it is terror that founds the restlessness of the South African city. This restlessness is no mere existential nausea; rather, it marks the ceaseless and micrological devastation of hope in the instant of its enactment. Thereby the verticality of mobility is thwarted by the horizontality of threat. Indeed the very axes of the vertical and horizontal are annihilated by the immanent and circumferential nature of violence.

Here Frederic Jameson's reading of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, in 'The cultural logic of late capital' (Jameson), finds its apt resonance in the South African city. Jameson transposes Herr's reading of the Vietnam War to the urban American context. His transposition focuses, in particular, on the irreferential relation of the Bonaventura complex to its surroundings and the spatial disorientation produced within it. For Herr, the state of war in the Vietnam jungle demands an impossibly permanent vigilance. Because perspective is obliterated – one cannot distinguish threat from the thick vegetation that screens it – awareness becomes all the more intensified and paranoid. Caught within a threat whose invasive orbit has no distinguishable source, the soldier is compelled to keep moving in the knowledge that settlement means certain death. This state of perpetual movement possesses no guarantee of protection, though it may momentarily prove protective. For Jameson an equivalent threat is produced in the decentralised and defamiliarised city. The psychic consequence of this spatial and social defamiliarisation is that it cathects and neutralises agency. It is this fracturing of individual agency which, in the embattled context of the South African city, all the more intensifies the incommensurability of the lived condition therein. For Jameson the city is 'above all a space in which people are unable to map either their own positions or the urban totality in which they find themselves.' (Jameson]) It is this failure, then, which results in the deterritorialisation of movement in space and time. Unlike Jameson I can find no satisfactory recuperative mechanism that could make this deterritorialisation endurable other than in and for itself. If Jameson hankers for an instrumental agency and believes in an urban *totality*, my own epistemic and psychic inclination finds greater sustenance in Bhabha's non-totalisable conceptualisation of a cryptically camouflaged moment that eschews totality. It is this more immanent view that emerges as the most precisely imprecise way in which to read and write the lived condition of the South African city.

If the benighted South African subject possesses no continuity, no coherent narrative, it is because the very notion of continuity is impossible. Caught between fatalism, optimism and, more insidiously, relativism, the agency of the South African subject is compromised at every turn. If the South African imaginary is defined by an acute sense of estrangement it is because the terror at its root has not been satisfactorily addressed. The so-called miracle said to define the South African transition marks the precise degree to which the ills that traverse and mar this transition have not been answered. Perhaps this is so because these ills are unanswerable. Or perhaps it is because the belief in transfiguration has proved so consuming. However, as Nietzsche observed, optimism can be more dangerous than pessimism. In South Africa, in particular within its cities, this has certainly proven to be the case. With its burgeoning systems of deterrence – its paramilitary swat teams, its darkly visored and sleekly powered vehicles, its gun culture – the South African city is a place-as-space that is running on empty. The only locus of plenitude, of fullness, is terror, for 'risk is full/every living thing in siege' (AR Ammons).

The challenge then is to find ways to epistemically and psychically endure and reconfigure terror. Homi Bhabha gestures towards this need when, in his Foreword to *Black Skins, White Masks*, he writes of 'Fanon's search for a conceptual form appropriate to the social antagonism of the colonial relation' (Young: 146). This search for new forms of cognitive and sensory survival is an ongoing one. The antagonism of the colonial relation is, in the South African postcolonial present, a matter that remains inescapable. What then is the conceptual form that needs to be harnessed? Needless to say it is a form that is neither singular nor all-encompassing. Rather, the form required is one that necessarily understands its contingent and fraught context. Moreover

it is a form that must admit its constitutive formlessness and vulnerability, for terror can never be wholly appeased and synoptically totalised. If in Joseph Conrad's Congo – as in Michael Herr's Vietnam – the horror is indecipherable, it is not because it must not be named but because the very act of naming is a repeated act of risk. One names at one's peril. To not know the perilous nature of this act of naming – of giving form to a radically ambivalent horror – is, precisely, to betray the attempt. The act itself – the act of naming, of giving form to the inchoate and formless – must, therefore, be conceived under erasure. Conceptually, then, the form or act of naming is rendered visible in the instant that it is qualified. This qualification, in its highest moments, is not a self-reflexive gesture or escape clause, but the figuration of an immanence that consumes both the work and the artist. In the excerpt from the story 'Empty' you will note that every proposition redoubles upon itself. At no point do I allow the moment to finally be claimed by gravity. Consciousness cannot eschew the pain that is its source. Similarly art, or artistry, cannot be deployed at the expense of the moment it seeks to address. Which is why in 'Empty' Marshall MacCluhan's formulation – *the medium is the message* – emerges not only as a grim conceit but, rather, as an implacable and unassuageable truth that all the more compounds the emptiness which the raped victim experiences.

Marcel Duchamp conveys the necessity for erasure in the instant of perception and creation when he asks: 'How does one make a work of Art that is not Art?' If this question is prescient it is not merely because it negates the canonical in art but because it anticipates the heightened and increasingly aggravated sense of art's impertinence and inconsequentiality. The question Duchamp asks is, to what end has art been put? To whom does it speak, and of what? Duchamp's answer – at odds with the commonplace assumption of the artist as an aesthete – is that art has failed to address the brute and antagonistic nature of life. As an idea, as a mode of expression, art does not satisfactorily capture the shadow world that arrests and confounds its very necessity. Similarly, Michel Foucault conveys art's conditional disavowal of itself, in the instant of its reification, when he reminds us that:

it is necessary to strain one's ears, bending down toward the muttering of the world, trying to perceive the many images that have never turned into poetry, so many phantasms that have never reached the colours of wakefulness.

(Bailey: 3)

Here the key phrase that echoes Duchamp's formulation is *the many images that have never turned into poetry*. Does this not suggest that for art to be what it must be, it must begin to grasp that which it is not, and, in so doing, locate the means to speak itself? Is this not also the source of Bhabha's apprehension that for Fanon to grasp the antagonistic colonial relation he had to find a new conceptual form that would be intrinsically other to itself, the better to reconfigure the very conditions that made the perception possible in the first place?

After Theodor Adorno one could define this perception as a radically negative insight in which the act of objectification is *suspended*. 'No authentic work of art and no true philosophy ... has ever exhausted itself in itself alone, in its being-in-itself,' Adorno declared. Rather that which matters necessarily stands 'in relation to the actual life-process of society' (Adorno: 23). For Adorno this life-process reached its barbarous nadir after Auschwitz. It was that point, a point of unthinkable horror, that resulted in a mode of thinking that would become ceaselessly unconvicted in its own conviction. Remarkably, Adorno would never fall prey to a solipsistic apprehension of the tragic. Rather the society that is his grim inheritance is 'no less a source of terror than a promise of happiness.' In the famous concluding aphorism to *Minima Moralia* Adorno signals the redemptive force at the heart of terror:

The only philosophy which can be *responsibly* practised in the face of despair is the attempt to contemplate all things as they would present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light but that shed in the world of redemption: all else is reconstruction, mere technique. Perspectives must be fashioned that displace and estrange the world, reveal it to be, with its rifts and crevices, as indigent and distorted as it will appear one day in the messianic light.

(Adorno 1974: 247, *my emphasis*)

This redemptive will to life, we must remember, is conceived in a time of acute trauma and confusion. That we exist as pale survivors of this trauma, or as survivors of a related trauma, should perhaps direct us to an equivalent conclusion. However in this regard I am not certain. Certainly the conclusion of my story, ‘Empty’, appears to lean in a similar direction:

She thinks she sees the sky empty. She is wrong. Where there was blackness the ground reaches up brown against the expanding blue. She senses this rather than sees it, the one eye blinded, the other swollen, pressing the world into a sliver. A bird settles in front of her, its beak taps the crushed and twisted can. She hears a human cry. A pair of thick ankles and squat feet with nails painted red appear before her, sheathed in pink slip-ons with the flimsiest of heels. In the blinding sliver of light, her face flush against the warming tar, she sees little else. She could never have imagined a stranger consoling vision – such feet in such shoes! She is smiling – difficult to picture – but she is smiling. Pictures are hard to see, especially internal ones. She listens to the woman’s broken voice on the cell phone. Three distinct sets of hands and arms appear, one creased with age, another lithe, the third a veld fire of red hair. The fourth pair of hands, invisible to her, holds the head and neck in place. Slowly, ever so gently, she is being lifted. She trembles in their trembling hands. Tears from above sting her face, her cut breasts. Pain returns, audible and comforting as a sigh.

(Jamal 2002: 12)

I think that here, like Adorno, I wanted to avenge the damage that had taken its toll in the writing of this dark story. Here the second grouping of hands that hold the victim’s body is beneficent. In the set of oddly alluring feet, in the wracked voice of another, resides the longing that the victim’s death, if not her life, can, at least, be witnessed. But is this not too much to ask when so many atrocities are perpetrated without witness and without redress? Is this final act not a false balm? And is this not where the story, like the mind of the writer, fails? To what extent, in other words, is it permissible to project a saving closure? What, indeed, is this messianic light that Adorno claims *will* appear one day? Is this the light that art, *against* truth, is compelled to project? And, if so, is it not precisely this light that Duchamp and Foucault challenge? The light of art, the light of poetry; a light that obfuscates more than it illuminates. Is art not then our desperate bid to deny our very indigence, our bid, in the face of terror, to bear witness, and to be witnessed in turn, in the instant of our ceaselessly immanent annihilation?

This last question is neither rhetorical nor one that can be satisfactorily be resolved. Rather it is a question that I consider key to an understanding of the ambivalent relation between ethics and aesthetics. Baruch Spinoza’s formulation – that ethics marks the blurred, contingent, and graduated distinction between good and bad, rather than the tidy counterpoint of Good and Evil – allows for the minimal and partial appraisal of terror that this paper promotes. In an age of

barbarism – Adorno’s as well as our own – there remains the possibility of an ethical turn; a turn which, for Simon Critchley, allows for a ‘preparation for action, however minimal’ (Critchley 1997: 20). It is this preparation, then, a preparation perceived as permanent though by no means transcendently resolvable, that I understand to be the job of cultural inscription. If barbarism-as-terror is inescapable this does not mean that its provenance as *the* condition of our time is immutable. Rather it is terror’s psychic and epistemic dominance that must be reconfigured or othered in the instant of its apprehension. Therein, for Adorno, lies the ‘responsibility’ of critical and cultural inquiry. Adorno asserts:

Even the blossoming tree lies the moment its bloom is seen without the shadow of terror; even the innocent ‘How lovely!’ becomes an excuse for an existence outrageously unlovely, and there is no longer beauty or consolation except in the gaze falling on horror, withstanding it, and in unalleviated consciousness of negativity holding fast to the possibility of what is better.

(Adorno 1974: 25)

My nagging contention – a contention that challenges my own yearning as much as it does that of Adorno – is, to what extent is one’s own sense of responsibility permissible? What is it within us that would want the possibility of what is better? If nothing exists that is not shadowed by terror, then what is the good of a consciousness that kneels at the altar of hope? Would a post-apocalyptic acceptance of terror not be more fitting? Would the role of art and criticism not be better served by an acceptance of its *irresponsibility*? For what good is longing when it cannot redress an aberrant present? If these questions leave one, as they do myself, with the bitter taste of gall, it is because I believe that they are unanswerable. Yet they persist, drawing me nearer to the terror that sculpts their ambivalence. That Adorno too is drawn to the terror that mocks all hope should alert us to terror’s intractability, yet, at that crucial moment Adorno is also compelled to turn away. Why, when the solution he proffers is not a solution at all but a pale riposte? Is his redemptive turn not a kind of derangement; a madness to counter madness? And is that not precisely where the mind’s artistry – its resistance to truth, its will to survive at all cost – fails? If terror must be negatively apprehended and thereby othered, the prevailing quest is, how? I, however, would ask, why?

Consider the formulation by Duchamp: A GUEST + A HOST = A GHOST. Conceived in California in 1943 – at the same time and in the same locale that Adorno was writing his ‘disconnected and non-binding’ record of a damaged life (Adorno 1974: 18) – this formulation draws our attention to the *ascesis* that distinguishes life in a post-apocalyptic time. With the erasure of certainty, or with the heightened ambivalence of relatedness – between guest and host, colonist and subaltern, citizen and migrant, body and virus – that which emerges not only threatens the dialectical composure of the aforementioned relation, but undoes the immutability of its putative conditionality. The ghosting that occurs not only traverses the prior set of relations but renders strange their balance and equanimity. If Duchamp’s formulation remains as pertinent as ever, if not more so, it is because it alerts us to the exacerbated and aggrieved nature of the present moment. Inscribed on a small sheet of shattered glass, the equation alerts us to the impossibility of transparency – be it the transparency of the colonial relation or that of the postcolonial relation. That which is all the more apparent today is the need to cancel all categorical relations, and to develop what Homi Bhabha calls a ‘third Space’, a space that ‘eludes the politics of polarity’ and enables us to ‘emerge as the others of ourselves’ (Bhabha 1994: 39). This emergent otherness is not the inverse of selfhood. Rather, in the manner of Duchamp’s equation, it is an emergence that opens up the possibility of another way that, by foregrounding the tension that threatens the fixity of oppositional logic, allows for a reconfiguration of every privative construction.

In South Africa, the geographic and imaginary location of this essay, conceptual innovations such as those of Duchamp and Bhabha have proven to be critical. When Loren Kruger, speaking of the historical shift in South Africa in the 1990s, defines it as the ‘post-*anti*-apartheid period’ – a period in which ‘the moral conviction and commitment of anti-apartheid [has] waned’ and ‘radical social transformation’ is displaced by a ‘postcolonial uneven development’ (Kruger 2002: 35) – she is speaking of a similar shift to that proposed by Duchamp and Bhabha. The formulation – post-*anti*-apartheid – is suggestively stilted. While it conveys an epistemic and psychic turning point it does not memorialise that turning point. Rather, what matters is Kruger’s pointedly disturbing insight: that the very radicality of transformation has been diverted. This diversion is summed up in the late-modern paradox: post-*anti*. Now it is precisely this diversion that has resulted in South Africa’s sepulchral and ghostly cultural imaginary; an imaginary that, while it hosts the possibility of Bhabha’s reconfiguration, has short-circuited its radicality. For what we have in South Africa today is a curious sustenance of the polarised fixities of the past in the very moment of their epistemic and psychic exhaustion. For, yes, there is in South Africa the existence of newfound possibilities and re-routings of prior inequities; however, at the same time there is a growing and unnerving sense that these new possibilities and re-routings are simulacral: affects that stem from the *idea* of freedom rather than from freedom’s actuality.

In this regard my story ‘Empty’ alludes not only to the terror that preys upon freedom but also to the constitutive *emptiness* of change in South Africa. This claim is not made casually. Rather, it is a claim that seeks to foreground a hollowness that inhabits change in the country. Jane Taylor arrives at a similar conclusion when, in her notes to the theatrical production *Confessions of Zeno*, for which she wrote the libretto, she speaks of performing before a vacuum. It is this sense of a vacuum, of an empty space that cannot be filled and converted into a *place*, that brings me to the sepulchral ghostliness of the South African imaginary, and, by extension, the sepulchral ghostliness of its cities. For it is the city that affirms the life – or deadliness – of a culture’s imaginary. A woman dying on the outskirts of a city is not an anomaly. Neither, of course, is her death the apotheosis of the lived condition therein. However it remains an instance of an incontrovertible desolation and damage. Women are abused, raped and murdered in every conceivable location, be it in the workplace, the home, a darkened alley, a floodlit city centre, or on the shoulder of a highway. Terror therefore has no designated place. Indeed it is the very absence of received designation that cancels the polarity of safety and danger. In South Africa no place is safe. If this is so it is because the very idea of a place, of a haven or topos for the familiar, is at the same time a space that is threatened at every turn by the unfamiliar. One does not have to stand at a street corner to bargain with hate; hate is everywhere.

Nicole Turner’s story, ‘J88’, selected by JM Coetzee as the recipient of the 2001 *SL Magazine* short fiction award, conveys the unease at the heart of the contemporary South African city (Turner 2001). Set in Hillbrow, Johannesburg, it records the peripatetic journey of a murderess in search of a murderer. That the act at the close of the story is unfulfilled does not dispel the story’s perverse longing. ‘I want to be killed violently,’ Turner writes. ‘I want to be brutally and randomly murdered. There’s more than enough of that to be had in this city; it’s just a matter of finding it, of putting myself in the path of it and allowing it to happen.’ What does happen, however, is a random apprehension of the spaces the murderess walks through; spaces that blur the distinction between the living and the dying. The ‘Hillbrow hospital is largely deserted. Besides the community clinic, a small and rudimentary reception for casualties and the oncology section, the rest of the hospital has been mothballed.’ Nearby is ‘a broken ambulance resting on bricks, out of the hospital gates.’ The diminished functionality of the hospital, along with its dead spaces, accustoms the reader to inflation and scarcity. The system works, yet does not work. ‘With the attention to detail of someone about to die,’ the murderess observes the outpatients:

A gaunt woman coughing up pieces of her lungs, a frightened teenager with dead eyes and others who look perfectly healthy except for the smell that gives them away as bodies made of half-dead flesh. Their smallest parts, the bubbling, fragile compartments that are the miracle of the body's construction have become suicide bombers. The terrorist cells have invaded and the whole must be destroyed.

These perceptions of a plague are not the sole or consuming markers of Turner's story. Domestic abuse, xenophobia, poverty, segue one into the other, creating an urban texture that challenges the ease of the murderee's navigation between life and death. Moreover it is the very teeming interpenetration of putatively discrete worlds that gives the lie to the murderee's fatal longing. 'The ones who kill for no reason, for bags and wallets and car keys' are contrasted with the 'commuters, grocery shoppers and children discarding their school uniforms as they walk home.' All about there is noise. 'Minibus taxis plying the inner city streets hoot incessantly and bootleg music stalls are sending kwasa kwasa, gospel, kwaito and Marshall Mathers into the mix.' What becomes increasingly evident, however, is that Turner refuses to distinguish the city's vitalism from its threat. Entering the 'bustle of Pretoria street' the murderee sees 'nothing that is vaguely dangerous. There are knots of people enjoying the last of the sun, a skinny white man with thin red hair walking two poodles, boxers sweating as they run to their gym, a religious procession of angelic women in white, a glut of young men who smile instead of trying to kill me.' But then, pell-mell, the murderee recalls her mother, a cancer victim, who 'hated coming [to the Hillbrow hospital] for her treatment because she would be forced to see the place as it is now: the streets choked with hawkers, the buildings decrepit and festooned with laundry ... the bookshops and the hair salons of her golden years replaced by offal-selling butchers and cut-price stores stocking cheap "Fong Kong" knock-offs made in China.'

That Turner's narrative refuses the fatal intention of its narrator reveals an aesthetic and ethical refusal of a terror that binds the story. The concluding words – 'everything is blurred' – reach, rather, to Spinoza's calibration of good and bad. For Turner Good is not the inverse of Evil, Terror the inverse of Happiness. Rather, through the conflation and blurring of these polarised fixities the story gestures towards a reconfiguration of fear. Turner's city, in particular the domain of Hillbrow, emerges as the unresolved locus for a drama that allows for the malignant, the benign and the serpentine indifference that lurks between. It is this conflation that informs the abraded manner in which South African artists have come to tell their stories. If the terror that lies at the root of so many of our narratives appears inescapable this does not presuppose that the terror is triumphant. Rather, what Turner's narrative draws our attention to is the battle that is being waged within and against the inescapability of horror. Her story signals not the negation of horror but the necessity to inflect its influence *indifferently*. The urgent need for this critical inflection becomes the more apparent when we consider the following rumination by Achille Mbembe:

It is a characteristic of actual corpses, dead things, that they all seem frozen in pastness. Doubts emerge as to whether those apparently animate beings who seem to be alive are really alive, or whether they are only the figurative corpses of what had once been alive and are now but shattered mirrors at the frontier of madness and abjection.

(Mbembe 2002)

Here we find a compelling response to the ghostliness of cities. Amidst the glare and hubbub, against the futurity of the city, stand 'the bodies made of half-dead flesh'. Here both the living and the dying emerge as eerily simulacral. In relation to Mbembe's perception Duchamp's equation – A GUEST + A HOST = A GHOST – becomes all the more suggestive. It is the living

and the dying, caught in a mutual act of cannibalism, that produce the ghostliness of cities. Snagged between pastness and futurity, the city tolls its paradox. By adjusting the lens one can read day for night, for darkness can emerge as a glare and light as a stain.

Irrespective of the inflection, however, terror remains. In hindsight, terror, when reflected upon or prattled through, can cloak itself as a thing blackly comic. In South Africa there is certainly a surfeit of horror that is comically-and-hysterically retold. There is also a deadliness or dispassion that may consume the telling. Here Stefan Helgesson's description of J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* as 'an ascetic narrative ... that accedes impoverishment and makes of writing a sheer dry intensity' is a case in point (Helgesson 2003). Alternately Helgesson notes in the writing of Ivan Vladislavic a use of language akin to Duchamp's use of found objects. This use, which imputes an art that is not art, allows for a mode of inscription that suspends itself in the instant that it acknowledges the inescapability of its social and cultural implication. For Vladislavic this redoubling of art upon itself – a redoubling that amounts to a cancellation – results from a 'fall through language'. This fall, like the painter's construction of a 'negative space', is one that emerges from an unalleviated consciousness. For the artist Kendell Geers, an equivalent negativity obtains. In Geers's work, '48 hours', South African urban life emerges as a catalogue of violent incidents collected over two years and treated to look 'like an enlarged listings, news in brief or small ads section of a newspaper' (Bradley: 212). Reproduced in *My Tongue in Your Cheek*, the work reveals both the obsessiveness of its focus and the randomness of its context – a London street. Eschewing the walls of the Stephen Friedman Gallery, Geers chooses instead to paper its windows, thereby narrowing and rendering depthless the interface of street and the gallery's interior. The images of the exhibit, shot from the street, are strikingly suggestive: a black policeman weighted with an informatics console white men in grey suits eating on the move, a casually dressed white man burdened with purchases and a haunted look emerging from the gallery. In each of these images Geers's work serves as a backdrop. Not one of the figures pays a glance. The horror that is the work's content becomes ephemera, the papered windows the conventional screen for a secret alteration within the gallery. Yet there is no secret and no alteration. It is the gallery's façade that contains its truth; a truth which, by virtue of its passing context, is rendered all the more negligible. Here I think that Geers's work affirms South African terror as simulacra: as a papered truth that, despite its variable repetition and magnification, is perceived as incidental and ultimately forgettable. It is there, then, in the instant that the work is remaindered – as waste paper, as supplementary and forgotten events – that Geers attempts his corrective. It is the work's very supplementarity – *as that which adds to but doesn't add up* – which affirms all the more the incommensurability of the horror it summarises. If, as TS Eliot remarked, humankind cannot bear too much reality, it is because it seeks to evacuate pain the better to embrace the simulacra of futurity. So, yes, in the context of the London exhibit the terror that informs Geers's work may appear to go by unnoticed. However, it is the very anonymity of the work that affirms all the more the singularity and desolation of the lost and destroyed lives it records. That London, too, is a city under siege should remind us that no one is exempt. In the context of the South African city, however, one will never find the nonchalant ease evident in the swaggering young men in suits. Some in the South African city may consider terror as virtual, but more often than not this complacency will be cruelly interrupted. Others, still, may spoof the terror. Here the emergent Y generation that gathers under the simulacral banner of Loxion Kulcha (location culture) is a case in point. However, no inflection of South African life can be exempted from terror. The very plea to South African teenagers to 'LOVE LIFE' is a call to FEAR DEATH. And when three generations of a white family – a grandmother, mother and baby daughter – are hijacked in broad daylight and shot, execution style, no one who reads or watches South Africa's looped carnage is unaware of the fact.

However, this essay is not a catalogue of the terror unleashed in the city. My concern is not with whether terror is explicable or whether it can be contained – a longing as belated as it is impossible; rather, what concerns me is terror's efficacy as *the* condition through which to write

the South African cultural imaginary. If today South African artists are working *through* terror this is because it is an urgency or élan of mind and spirit that allows them to free themselves from the categorical and moral imperatives that, heretofore, have shaped the South African narrative. Like the city with its intrinsic formlessness, its indifferent abutments of mothballed and thriving services, its vacant lots and bustling streets, its gleaming and bruised surfaces, its collapsed spaces in-between, the artistic narratives that are emerging are styling a paradoxical and blurred record of South African life. It is this blurring of boundaries which, increasingly, has come to mark the way in which the South African city, and the disjointed and non-binding narratives pertaining to it, operate. As Michel de Certeau (1984) reminds us, the town planner's Platonic conception of the city is markedly distinct from the way in which the city is remade by its occupants, who effectively inscribe the particularity of their myriad, distinct and eccentric urgencies within and upon it. Given the difference at the heart of the human, a difference compounded all the more in post-apartheid South Africa, De Certeau's view remains relevant. His description of a body 'clasped by the streets that turn and return it according to an anonymous law ... possessed by the rumble of so many differences' (1984: 92) is compellingly conveyed in Turner's story. However as Sarah Nuttall notes in her qualification of Certeau's view (Nuttall 2003), South African cities are also 'the places of the most effective surveillance in which people – as in apartheid's spatial geography – are confined, segregated, monitored and rendered violently invisible to others not in their "group".' Here all the more Turner's murderess, with her thanaturgical attention to the *violently invisible*, affirms Nuttall's qualification.

It is this violent invisibility, which roots terror at the heart of the anonymous, that Turner's story brings to the fore. In the South African apartheid narrative this violent invisibility – as the *swart gevaar* – has always been central. Elsa Joubert's story, 'Back Yard' (Joubert 1986), reprises this psychic seam. At the start we read: 'I live on the periphery of an existence which I don't understand.' These words capture the ignorance, isolation, and fear that marked white South African experience in the early 1970s. In those dark years communication across the colour bar was guarded and tentative. 'There are superficial points of contact,' Joubert notes, 'a few words to the petrol-pump attendant, good morning to the man who delivers the milk. And there is the Black woman who works in my house' (1986: 219). The systematic separation of people according to colour, the vigilant maintenance of a fraught divide, was a familiar mode of operation. What distinguishes Joubert's story is the subtle and corrosive manner in which knowledge and impotence converge in an awakening consciousness. From the beleaguered vantage point of her home Joubert's narrator looks upon her back yard, a silent witness to the ghostly movements of those connected to the 'Black woman' – a cipher for a relay of maids, for the itinerant and ominous nature of black labour. This ghosting that is black experience in white South Africa harbours a nascent threat:

There's a network running through town, invisible lines joining one back yard to another, joining suburbs, and joining the suburbs to the Black locations. Like a spider web – invisible until the light catches it, or dust collects on it, or smoke coats it with soot – these lines of communication only become visible in a time of crisis.

(1986: 225)

That the story predates the Soweto uprising may attest to its prescience. However, the crisis of which Joubert writes is not reducible to spectacular events. Rather, crisis as it is understood here marks the illumination of the violently invisible. In this regard Joubert's story marks the *continuance* of unease and terror. That the uneasiness that this invisibility provoked for a ruling white minority is not quite the uneasiness of which Nuttall speaks does not dispel its continuance. Rather, it affirms continuance as the variegation and intensification of a constitutive *seam of threat*. For Nuttall, who acknowledges the continuance and difference of violence,

the contemporary city is producing intensified ‘point[s] of entanglement’ (Nuttall 2003). The term Nuttall attaches to these points of ‘difficulty’ is creolisation or creolite. Violence, Nuttall argues, is critical to a paradigmatic understanding of the workings of creolisation. This violence emerges in ‘mutual mimics, border crossings, mutabilities’. A rhizomatic trope for mobility, spatiality and circulation, its ‘particular inflection ... is its violence.’ As a cartographic method for reading the emergent South African city creolisation presupposes ‘that intimacy does not necessarily exclude violation.’ ‘On the contrary it may often be another name for tyranny.’ Here Nuttall’s critical reading, like Turner’s story, forcefully reminds us of the terror that inhabits the ‘porousness’ of boundaries, which is why entanglements become precisely the points of a further aggravated difficulty. Nuttall’s conceptualisation of the city as the refracted locus of ‘violence and transformation-as-entanglement’ may appear as a moderated and conscientiously contextual interpretation of an incipient terror; however, at no point does she rule out my more anarchic reading. Where our interpretations differ more crucially, however, is with regard to the evolution and/or devolution of the city. For Nuttall it remains possible to inhabit the beleaguered streets of Johannesburg: ‘to fall kicking and screaming into the future.’ At no point, however, does Nuttall’s claim disregard ‘the materialities of conflict, violence, social hierarchy and inequality.’ However there remains a way, she argues, of ‘tracking and ... breaching [the city’s] historical construction.’ It is this transgressive breach that allows for ‘a way of conceptualising the now. A way of conceptualising walking, and walking differently.’

My persistent and nagging question, however, is whether it is truly possible to conceptualise a way of living in the South African city that, in the final instance, could cancel terror. While I don’t think that Nuttall believes this to be possible – the very phrase, ‘kicking and screaming into the future’, suggests this – Nuttall nevertheless affirms, after Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a radically resistant possibility. Liz Gunner similarly conceives the South African city as ‘a place of reclamation, or restoring and in some cases restorying’ (Gunner 2003). Gunner writes of a ‘blind poetry’, a ‘perverse agency’, that allows for a ‘redemption [that] comes through self-revelation.’ My dilemma, however, concerns the extent to which Gunner and Nuttall’s projects are truly possible; whether *revelation*, be it that of the besieged self or malevolent other, is realisable. Surely here Gunner’s recourse to a Christian myth in which self-revelation emerges, after Mbembe, as ‘the resurrection of the dead’, as the ‘capacity for symbolisation’ through a ‘dream-like violence’, is both a hopelessly pre-emptive and horribly belated gesture of recovery? (Gunner [date]: 639). If, however, there is a merit in Gunner’s reading of the city, then it lies in the value she accords to the silent and non-substantive; to that which will remain unwritten, that which emerges in the unclothed and untenanted sphere of ephemeral speech. The question remains, however: can the South African city be redeemed? Can the lives lived therein be freed from an agonistic captivity within fear and nothingness? Surely the very inflection of Gunner’s view, which embarks with ‘the tangible sense of a lost era ... [with] lost voices and forgotten streets, alive in all its gaiety, lyricism and brutality, and yet, absent’, suggests a pathos and nostalgia for a vanquished vitalism. Certainly the erasure of the freehold of Sophiatown, the exemplification for Gunner of this vitalism, and its recreation as the bleak poor-white suburb of Triomf, is suggestive of the impossibility of the reclamation of that which is lost. And yet the persistent longing returns, as the reclamation of a gone world (Gunner), as an insistence upon the transfigured ‘now’ (Nuttall). Caught like Adorno in the thrall of an unalleviated consciousness, both Gunner and Nuttall hold fast to the possibility of what is better.

Nuttall defers to Trouillot who in an essay entitled ‘Culture on the Edges; Caribbean Creolisation in Historical Context’ writes:

Creolisation is a miracle begging for analysis. Because it first occurred against all odds, between the jaws of brute and absolute power, no explanation seems to do justice to the very wonder that it happened at all.

It is in this compellingly affirmative and seductive spirit that Nuttall embarks on her rethinking of the South African city. My own view, or rather a view that *dispossesses* me, is not so much a reaction to this critical affirmation as it is a non-parallel engagement which, while it inhabits an equivalent difficulty, postulates a more darkly affirming prognosis. Unenamoured by the secular historical record – be it one of oppression or resistance – impelled rather by the shadow world between – a world Frantz Fanon terms the ‘zone of occult instability’ (Fanon) – my view proposes that we give greater credence to the fathomless, the anarchic and non-substantive. In doing so I do not ask that we yield to the malevolence that keeps the city in its thrall, but that we think *through* that malevolence. Within and against the pathological malevolence and productive though non-instrumental instability that shapes the city we can – *in spite of reason and hope* – arrive at a perception akin to Edmund Burke’s sublime of terror (Burke). Therein lies my darkly affirming prognosis. At no point, however, do I wish to dress this prognosis as a romance with horror. Rather, caught in the jaws of my own raw and tenebrous fear, my own sense of victimhood, I have, against hope or any sense of futurity, chosen to speak of terror in its manifold mystery as *the* trope for the way the city is experienced. It is terror that defines the way we read space, the way we move through a South African city. Here Gunner’s recent victimisation in an attempted hijack – she was stabbed with a screwdriver, hit on the head with a rock – should alert us to the asymmetrical relationship between a romance with longing-and-loss and brute actuality. That Gunner’s psychotherapist should ask her to imagine as intimately as possible ‘the scent and smell and closeness’ of her attacker should affirm all the more the necessity to *inhabit* the space of terror. It is not merely projection or recollection that is required here, but a remorseless and sensuous grasp of terror’s substantive *and* non-substantive configuration.

If my reading of the violent intimacy of the city appears excessive, even paranoid, this is because, like Nietzsche, I think it necessary to exaggerate when dealing with emergencies. Turner’s story, ‘J88’ – named after a form letter for a medical emergency – similarly conveys a remorseless yet sensuous engagement with terror. For Turner it is mental and emotional unsettlement that produces the peripatetic deviations in the narrative’s unfolding. The murderess at the bruised core of the story is not the urban *flâneur* who drifts and stumbles upon insight but the fraught and psychically raw conduit through which the city’s unnerving irresolution is enacted. Here the story’s thematic allusion to Martin Amis’s urban dystopia, *London Fields*, is fitting. Turner’s purpose is not merely to assert how dangerous the city is, but through ceaseless qualification to affirm danger as both an empirical reality and a phantasmal projection. It is not surprising that oncology – the study of tumours – emerges as central to the narrative. An affliction that is explicable and inexplicable – emerging without reason and pretext like Kafka’s carnivorous horses and Nietzsche’s beasts of prey – the tumorous marks the parasitic that preys upon and extinguishes its host. Crucially, however, the tumorous is not solely the invasive outsider, but also that resident within the putatively healthy body. By refusing to separate health from sickness, the host from the guest, Turner affirms the constitutive ambivalence of life in the city. This ambivalence is never apprehended in a detached or composed manner, for it is precisely composure that is impertinent.

If, furthermore, I have asked that we consider terror a psychically expressive seam of narrative construction it is because one can, thereby, begin to locate new modes of writing the city. Here writing is understood in the broadest sense as a method of cultural inscription. If Turner writes the city she also records the way it is written. The murderess is defined at the start as an ‘Umlungu’, a ‘whitey’. This is not only a racial descriptor but also a marker for a present-absence: the murderess secretes an annihilating will to absent herself. Unlike the ‘brown girl ... the small oily curls of her hair ... torn into disarray by a crusted gash’, the body of the murderess is ‘unbruised’. And yet between the two a shattered mirroring occurs. When the brown girl screams to her Ghanaian pimp-lover, ‘I’m not a dishrag, I come from a good home,’ it is a plea that is also the jilted murderess’s. Thus the isolation and desolation at the core of the story are

never merely solipsistic. For Turner it is the body that becomes the marker of the ravages of the inner city. The brown girl's skin is 'layered with old bruises and dark stains, the occasional blur of skin from cigarette burns – like a carpet in a crack house.' Here the blurring of discrete surfaces forcefully implicates the human and material in a single fraught narrative. Later the murderess notes 'the tar underneath [her] feet and the brick walls on either side ... black with grease and marked by the grey and white tide marks of urine and discarded dishwater.' And then: 'someone has written on the wall in boxy letters that lack authority: 'PLEASE This is NOT A TOILET.' In another, more girly and curled hand, a postscript: "Respect".' Here, as in the brown girl's plea, there is pathos and hopelessness. Neither injunction is heeded. The brown girl's plea is met with the sleekly menacing silence of her Ghanaian pimp-lover; the call to respect is tainted all the more. Thus the stain – or the repeated act of staining – comes to mark a violation without end.

As in Foucault's rewriting of Magritte's famous phrase (Foucault, the line 'PLEASE This is NOT A TOILET', along with the plaintive call for respect, marks its inverse. Notably Turner does not wish to merely affirm this inverted logic but to draw our attention to the fallibility of signs – to their incipient erasure and deformation. Moreover it is the mortality of the city, the mortality of the lives lived therein, that is the story's focus. At no point does the murderess judge. Indeed it is Turner's absence of judgement – her refusal of the ease of exemption and moral authority, of any crass symbolisation – that comes to mark an emergent – Spinozian – ethics. For Turner the city is not a place from which one flees, and neither is it solely the oncological locus of a fear; rather it is a place wherein the paroxysmic contradiction of flight and fear is harnessed in a darkly affirming way. Neither wholly trapped nor liberated, the occupants of her city both endure and thrive within an immanent, aporetic and unresolved urban condition. If Turner's city is one that is on the move, this movement is critically horizontal, non-linear and rhizomatic. The city neither evolves nor devolves, but is held in a suspension that is never constant. Thereby it is the *inconstancy* of the city that becomes all the more apparent. The city: a place where promises are reneged on, where the right to claimancy is an illusion, where walking is an act of falling. Here Vladislavic's configuration of writing as a 'negative space', 'a falling through language' (Vladislavic), finds its cognate in the vertiginous violence inflicted on the inner-city dweller; a violence akin to a fathomless freefall.

It is therefore the constitutive ambivalence of the city – as the virulently exacerbated place of Orwell's DOUBLETHINK – that has produced the most potent new South African writing. This new writing, as starkly divergent yet linked as that of Ivan Vladislavic and Lesego Rampolokeng, is, I have suggested, critically shaped by terror. By proposing that this new writing is in effect the *styling* of terror, I am not suggesting that terror is thereby moderated and contained but that it is disjunctively and aphoristically invoked the better to speak its truth. If blood – and its surrogate, race – has proven to be the marker of the apartheid narrative, then it is terror – irreducible to racial conflict and difference – that is the marker of the post-apartheid narrative. This of course is not to dispel the fact that race – as a calling card, as a psychically intractable fact of contemporary South African life – is still operative. It is simply that today the co-ordinates that define the projects of allegiance and resistance are collusively entangled and by no means singularly informed by race. As Achille Mbembe notes: Just as 'Africanity [is not] coterminous with blackness', similarly:

... the category of *whiteness* no longer has the same meanings as it did under colonialism or apartheid. Although the 'white condition' has not reached a point of absolute fluidity that would detach it once and for all from any citation of power, privilege, and oppression, it is clear that the experience of Africans of European origin has taken on ever more diverse aspects throughout the continent. The forms in which this experience is imagined – not only by whites themselves, but also by others – are no longer the same. This diversity now makes the identity of Africans of European origin a contingent and situated identity.

(Mbembe 2002)

Here Turner's fiction once again emerges as a case in point. However, as in Turner's fiction, Mbembe argues that this shift has not dispelled the continuance and exacerbation of violence. Indeed it is violence that lies at the heart of new psychic, cultural, and urban formations. As Mbembe notes: 'There is no identity without territoriality – the vivid consciousness of *place* and mastery of it, whether by birth, by conquest, or by settlement' (2002). But as Turner's story makes bracingly clear, it is precisely territoriality that is under siege; so much so that the only strategy left is that which Mbembe calls 'the strategy ... to assert a wounded identity' (2002).

Now it is precisely this strategy that is the harbinger of both *innovation* and *threat*: innovation insofar as it qualifies the putative purity of membership and origin and the intactness of territory and locality; *threat* in that it bespeaks a victimhood that consumes the powerful *and* the powerless. It is here, moreover, in the blurring of oppressor and oppressed, in the relativity of a psychic wound – a wound that is terror's lesion – that we arrive at the vertiginous 'zone of indistinction' that defines contemporary African urban life. This zone, Mbembe writes, 'is a space set outside human jurisdiction, where the frontiers between the rule of law and chaos disappear, decisions about life and death become entirely arbitrary, and everything becomes possible' (2002: [page number]). Implicit in Mbembe's formulation we once again find the uneasy alliance of innovation and threat. It is precisely this uneasy alliance that is at the root of Duchamp's equation A GUEST + A HOST = A GHOST. Despite the reactionary affirmation of the imperatives of citizenry, membership, origin, at the expense of those who occupy the putative margin, what has become increasingly apparent is that the fixities of territory and identity are the product of an unassuageable wound. Hence Mbembe's zone of indistinction, a zone that also distinguishes the geography of Turner's story. 'Progressively,' writes Mbembe, 'the spread of terror fragments inhabited spaces, blows apart temporal frames of reference, and diminishes the possibilities available to individuals to fulfil themselves as continuous subjects' (2002). Then, echoing Turner's story, Mbembe notes:

The horror of bodily injury is everywhere to be seen. Trauma has become something quasi-permanent. Memory is physically embedded in bodies marked with the signs of their own destruction, moving through a general landscape of fragmentation and economic decay. In many places, life has taken the form of a continuous journey. One leaves one space, establishing oneself in another, only to be dislodged thence by terror, confronted by unpredictable circumstances, and forced to settle once again where one can.

(2002)

Mbembe's formulation is not restricted to urban South African life. However, there is no disputing the acuity of its relevance to the South African city. It is therein, in the city, that one finds the acceleration of what Mbembe calls the brute disavowal of *a debt owed to life*. It is this selfsame disavowal that Turner and I address in our stories. In both stories we find what Mbembe calls 'a marked disconnection between people and things'. Both stories are marked by what Mbembe calls 'the limit of the principle of utility – and thus ... the idea of ... preservation – of human lives' (2002) That Turner and I attempt to right this error in no way dispels its prior agency. In Mbembe's words, both stories are 'sculpted by cruelty'. If this is so it is, as Mbembe further asserts, because terror or 'the state of war' has become 'part of the new African practices of the self' (2002). This war – a shattered state of madness and abjection – forms the fathomless seam of a South African history that is born from sacrifice. In this regard the controversial outcome of the rape in JM Coetzee's *Disgrace* emerges as a case in point. It is sacrifice that shapes the novel's seemingly remorseless and inconsolable unfolding. The question that persists is what to make of the fathomless seam of psychic terror and sacrifice that the novel wills. How is one to *write* sacrifice in an ethically and aesthetically enabling way? Indeed, is this question in fact answerable? Certainly Coetzee, in *Disgrace*, seems to suggest that this is not possible; that

in actuality it is a question that is impermissible. It is this gloomy conclusion that accounts for the uneasiness that the novel provokes. The very randomness of the novel's violence suggests an anarchy that is terrifyingly constant. There is no reprieve, no ending to the novel, and therefore no succour for the plaintive and beseeching reader. Snagged in a sacrificial act as blind as it is fated, the novel condemns us to an ambivalence that no consciousness can dispel. To grasp the sacrifice in the novel as both a fatal act and an act of fate is to begin to understand its chillingly fraught mortality. The regenerative promise the novel offers is necessarily austere. What seems evident, to me at least, is that Coetzee does not see South Africa's psychic strife and horror as immutable. Rather Coetzee, in the enigmatic and compelling words of Mbembe, suggests that:

through sacrifice, the African subject transforms his or her own subjectivity and produces something new - something that does not belong to the domain of a lost identity that must at all costs be found again, but rather something radically different, something open to change and whose theory and vocabulary remain to be invented.

(Mbembe 2002)

It is at this precise and unnameable point that Mbembe calls for new practices of the self. These new practices cannot be embraced without 'a construction of the self understood in terms of both victimhood and mutilation' (2002: [page number]). Mbembe's insistence upon victimhood is telling, for it is thereby that he is able to challenge the glib and narcissistic claims of universalism and cosmopolitanism. While these tropes prevail, Mbembe resists their provenance the better to affirm the singularity of a wound that no empowered generalisation can subsume. Which is why, in the African context, he chooses to focus on 'chronic scarcity' and on 'pillaging and violent seizure' (2002: [page number]). The seeming negativity of this focus is derived from Mbembe's ethical will to address a consuming pathology in a manner that will not explain it away but which would account for the *inevitability* of its existence. If, through this pathology, that which is abandoned is the debt owed to life, this is so because it is people who are first and foremost the victims of need.

Where shortage and scarcity prevail, the appropriation of desired goods may take place through pillage and violent seizure. If not, it can only be realised through shadow interventions in the phantasmatic realm. Fantasies are thus focused on purely imaginary objects. The powers of imagination are stimulated, intensified by the very unavailability of the objects of desire. The practices of plundering, the various forms of mercenary activity, and the differing registers of falsification are based on an economy that mobilises passions such as greed, envy, jealousy, and the thirst for conquest. Here, the course of life is assimilated to a game of chance, a lottery, in which the existential temporal horizon is colonised by the immediate present and by prosaic short-term calculations. In the popular practices of capturing the flows of global exchange, rituals of extraversion are developed - rituals that consist in miming the major signifiers of global consumerism.

(2002)

Mbembe's perception may appear familiar. However, if it remains striking it is because of the particularity of his perception to the African condition -- a condition that is most pronounced in cities - in which poverty abuts wealth, hunger and scarcity abut the desiring machine of consumerism. If the economy of the city is perceived as virtual it is because the discrepancy that subsists within it is not felt at a sober distance but violently and intimately. The South African National Lottery's by-line - license to dream - reinforces the attempt to ascribe legitimacy to a desire that is known, from the position of power, to be pressingly and dangerously illegitimate.

Those who have little or nothing are massively disproportionate to those who may claim to have everything. This discrepancy, experienced as a psychic wound, cannot be easily overcome. Which is why the conceit of citizenry or membership is necessarily cancelled by scarcity and by a desire that, while it may mimic possession, is all the more aggravated by lack. If Mbembe would short-circuit the economy of desire it is because he believes that it can never absolve the incommensurability of the lived condition in Africa. If this is so it is because 'African identity does not exist as a substance' (2002). This remarkable and devastating conclusion, preceded by a lengthy examination of the historical evacuation of the African's psychic and bodily integrity, should draw us all the more to a saving logic of the non-substantive. However it is precisely here that Mbembe counters a logic of the substantive and a saving logic of the non-substantive:

By now, the all-too-familiar and clichéd rhetoric of nonsubstantiality, instability, and indeterminacy is just one more inadequate way to come to grips with African imaginations of the self and the world. It is no longer enough to assert that only an African self endowed with a capacity for narrative synthesis – that is, a capacity to generate as many stories as possible in as many voices as possible – can sustain the discrepancy and interlacing multiplicity of norms and rules characteristic of our epoch.

Perhaps one step out of this quandary would be to reconceptualise the very notion of time in its relation to memory and subjectivity. Because the time in which we live is fundamentally fractured, the very project of an essentialist or sacrificial recovery of the self is, by definition, doomed. Only the disparate, and often intersecting, practices through which Africans stylise their conduct and life can account for the thickness of which the African present is made.

(2002)

Given Mbembe's anatomy of Africanity, what then is the possible route through which to think the present moment? More specifically, for the purposes of this essay, how are we to interpret Mbembe's reading in relation to the South African city? As I have suggested, a way through which bypasses a pre-emptive and false resurrection – be it that of the self or the city – is one that embraces a constitutive terror. It is terror that challenges all claims to the substantive at the precise moment that it despairingly invokes the non-substantive. By insisting upon the prevailing despair that has gripped the South African imaginary – a despair that is flanked today by an unparalleled hope – I would not want to consecrate that despair in and for itself. Rather within and *between* despair and hope I would suggest that another way of living becomes possible. This other way is only possible once one accepts that the styling of self is coterminous with the styling of terror. For it is the epistemic and psychic reconfiguration of terror that will best enable us to embrace the barbarism of the present moment. This embrace – at once intimate and violent – allows for both an implacable acceptance of a brute fate that emerges without pretext and reason as it allows for a limited conversion and transformation. This view lays no claim upon the future and neither does it measure itself against a preordained past. Rather, it is a view that accepts the unresolved nature of the present moment as one that must be negatively questioned and apprehended. Only thereby will we free ourselves from the captivity of despair and hope. Unlike Adorno, I am less concerned with how this moment may be assessed in some redemptive future than with how it is endured in the present. To ask for more would, I think, be to ask for that which cannot be given. Which is why Mbembe's ruminations are inconclusive and why Turner's story concludes with the words 'everything is blurred'. We live today in the gradations of a blur. Any stand in relation to the shadow of terror must be non-positive and non-positional. If this is so it is not only because intellectual history has forced this aporia into being but also because life has willed it so. In this regard the South African city emerges as the productive marker for a further aggravated unsettlement.

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