

Blind Pathways and Precarious Power in Inner-City Johannesburg

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In the city of Johannesburg hundreds, perhaps thousands, of blind and otherwise disabled cross-border migrants – mostly from Zimbabwe – try to survive in the city. They live under conditions of extreme precarity, many residing in unlawfully occupied buildings, subject to abuse and stigma, risking losing their children to social workers. Unlike South Africans, most disabled migrants are not entitled to disability grants (unless they have full refugee status which is extremely rare) and many are forced into begging or busking for survival. But in the context of urban migration, disability becomes a mode of urban dwelling, and embodied relation with the city, and a source of social networks and institutional affiliation. The blind and otherwise disabled are exposed to the extremities of urban life – living in urban slums, begging in the traffic – and having to survive on the vestiges of the city’s wealth. Yet, ironically disability also becomes a way to evade the police and deportation systems, along with eviction, which other migrants are continually exposed to. This is what I term “precarious power”, a form of capacitation, evasion and protection that emerges from the debility and exposure.

In using the term precarity, I draw from Fassin’s (2012) elaboration of precarity as the condition in which survival is contingent on the charity of others along with Butler’s (2006) notion of precarity as a shared but differentiated exposure to both the harm and care of others. Precarity hence has both an existential and legal meaning, which I retain here. The sense in which I use the term power in this text is not in terms of a Foucauldian notion of self-subjection, discipline or biopolitical control (Foucault 2003) but indicates, rather, the ways in which minority populations mobilize and rework the forms of social and juridical labelling they are subject to, in order to sustain both biological and social existence. As Hardt and Negri (2011: 57) note, in contrast to the “power over life” through biopolitical regulation, there is also “an other power of life that strives towards an alternative existence”, “the power of life to resist and determine an alternate production of subjectivity.” Precarious power here is not, however, framed in terms of explicit political resistance; rather embodied states of precarity and impairment, and the social and juridical labels applied to them, become a source of mobilization, care, protection and creativity. I explore below how this power works in relation to law, violence, spirituality and song in urban South Africa.

The condition of disability itself remains one which is contextual, fluid and dynamic. In this I draw from Julie Livingstone’s notion of debility as “a dynamic one in which ongoing physical and social processes interact to shape and reshape one another” (Livingstone 2005: 28) and Ingstad and Whyte’s insight that the condition of disability is “connected to (contextualized, woven together with) the process of defining disability and the shared criteria brought into play in particular settings” (Ingstad & Whyte 2007: 11). The relation between physical impairment and disability as a social identity is mediated by local social and political contexts – in this paper the context of urban migration. Precarious power here is forged in relation to both physical

impairment and conditions of social and juridical labelling, and involves a constant and vacillating dynamic of debility and capacitation, vulnerability and strength.

This contribution is based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2015 in inner-city Johannesburg focusing on unlawfully occupied or “dark buildings” in which many blind and disabled migrants live. In particular it draws upon two extended case studies, one of a blind individual and his family (originally from Zimbabwe) and secondly an organization called the International Federation of People with Albanism and Blindness (IFPAB) as they traverse the city looking for shelter and survival over the years of this research. These are contextualized by drawing on other interviews with the blind and disabled, but also other residents of the inner-city, and long term ethnographic fieldwork. Before discussing the ethnographic data I will briefly contextualize the setting.

The South African Context

South Africa has among the highest number of asylum seekers in the world, with a total number of 463 940 asylum seekers and 112 192 refugees, according to the UNHCR (2015). After 2005, political and economic turmoil in Zimbabwe – characterized by widespread political persecution, decline in agricultural production and hyper-inflation – led to intense migration into South Africa, with many migrants working in precarious jobs in the informal economy with wages well below those needed to access decent social or private housing (Crush, Chikanda & Tawodzera 2012). In 2008, anti-immigrant violence spread through Johannesburg and nationwide and led to over 60 deaths and the displacement of 100 000 people (Landau 2011). Along with this the country has also one of the largest deportation regimes in the world with a total of 131 907 people deported during the 2013/2014 financial year (Department of Home Affairs 2014).

South Africa provides disability grants to 1.1 million people (Ferreira n.d), who require medical check-ups, though these are exclusive to South African citizens and those with permanent refugee status. The condition of disabled migrants is hence exceptional in contrast to the disabled citizens in that they cannot access social grants, and very few have refugee status. Disabled migrants face many of the trials of other asylum seekers in dealing with a corrupt and inefficient asylum system (Amit 2015). After the closure of refugee reception offices in Johannesburg in 2013 many asylum seekers had their documents expire after being unable to afford the trips to distant offices. As I will argue here, the specificity of assessing the condition of blind and otherwise disabled migrants is linked both to their exemplary situation in relation to disabled South Africans, but also to the particular ways in which impairment is related to the asylum and deportation system – both providing protection from deportation, but also particular difficulties in remaining formally within the asylum system. Also, and in particular, given that many of the blind live informally, paradoxically their blindness provides some limited protection from evictions.

Blind Pathways and the City

Johannesburg, a city of over 4 million residents, is the largest metropolis in Southern Africa and the primary destination for migration in the region. The city has been characterized as a “city of extremes” (Murray 2011) and is one of extreme contrasts between poverty and destitution, on the one hand, and wealthy suburbs, shopping malls and gated communities, on the other. The post-apartheid era has been characterized by substantial inward migration, both within and across the South African borders with formal census data showing a rise from 2.8% non-South African population in 1996 to 12.7% by 2001 (Harrison et al 2014). The city has been grappling with the contradictory dynamics of “fixity and flux” (Dinath 2015:232) with continual population movements. On urban peripheries vast state subsidized housing settlements have been established, however there is limited state subsidized rental housing in the inner-city. In the inner-city there are many dilapidated and unlawfully occupied buildings, known as “bad buildings” or, on the street, as “dark buildings” referring to both the lack of electricity, but also their associations with crime and misfortune (Wilhelm-Solomon 2015).

Many of the blind and disabled, unable to access decent and affordable accommodation, find themselves living in the dark buildings or alternatively in overcrowded conditions in urban slums. Access to these spaces is often mediated through social relations formed even prior to migration; as I will discuss many of the blind know each other from schools and networks in Zimbabwe. The city requires its own paths of navigation and survival. For the blind and disabled begging at traffic lights, pavements or on trains provides a primary mode of survival. In order to survive in the city, the blind require “assistants”, often family members, who accompany them through the traffic and help them collect money. There are few opportunities for training and income generation and little engagement between organizations supporting non South African disabled and disability organizations within South Africa. Hence navigating the city requires producing and creating social networks, but also grappling with the infrastructure of the city: its dwellings, streets, smells, noises, by-laws, and security. These produce possibilities and precarities which are both generalized, but also distinct to disabled migrants.

Jetro Gonese

The story of Jetro Gonese (55 years old) exemplifies the debilitating effect that migration can have on migrants but the blind and disabled in particular. A qualified special needs teacher, Gonese found himself living in a dark building called Chambers in 2007, and begging for survival in Johannesburg. Nonetheless in Johannesburg he managed to forge many connections with other blind in the city.

Gonese was educated at the Margaretha Hugo School for the Blind in Masvingo, Zimbabwe, which was a Dutch reformed mission school, founded in 1927. It was, perhaps ironically given Gonese’s later trajectory, staffed by white South African Afrikaners. At the school he experienced the fierce discipline of the principle who used to “box” students who he thought were ill disciplined, and was also exposed to some of the idioms of apartheid era South Africa, notable having to call whites *baas* (or boss). Nonetheless he felt he had a good primary education at the school where he met many others who were blind, and whom he later re-forged

connections with in Johannesburg, and was later to teach at the Masvingo school. Hence, the Margaretha Hugo school was an important site for the education of the blind in Zimbabwe, and later for the formation of diasporic networks in Johannesburg.

Gonese came to South Africa with his family, applying for asylum in the country, and finding a room in an unlawfully occupied building called Chambers^[1], which he found through other blind friends living in the city, and which is where I first met him. Chambers during the day was clouded in darkness, though for the blind it was a relatively peaceful dwelling due to the lack of electricity and hence noise, though they were still disturbed by drumming and music in the nights. The residents of the building were both Zimbabwean and South African, and were under threat of eviction. After an illegal eviction by the property owners, which was overturned in part because of the vulnerability of the blind in the building, Gonese was elected chairperson of the building's committee, but soon faced threats of violence by other residents which never, however, materialized. Gonese's position was precarious – he was elected both as a representative of the blind in the building, and because of his education, but was still a target of suspicion. He said:

“I think that the differences in the building were something that were more related to disability than nationality, my experience was that people were not sure that a blind person could be a leader in any community.”

It is this that I refer to as precarious power – his position as a leader was as a result of protections afforded the disabled through eviction law, and through his education, but he remained an object of suspicion and mistrust among other able-bodied residents in Chambers. The blind were also associated by some as having occult powers. As one South African man, who was also living in Chambers, explained to me:

“Some of the blind people are witches, they know how to kill people with poison, with *muthi*. That's why they are blind. It's that wrong doing they are doing ... Blindness is punishment for doing wrong things. That's why people don't like them, because they are doing wrong.”

Stigma and discrimination towards the blind and people with albinism based on associations with witchcraft seems relatively widespread across Southern Africa ([see also Brocco 2015](#)). In this discourse above, nationality and disability became overlaid with a sense of spiritual insecurity and fear of unseen actors (Ashforth 1998).

The blind were eventually offered alternative accommodation by the property company, allowing them to leave the building, but in doing so they were subject to threats and accused of being witches and traitors. Gonese and his family lived in the years following the move in a boarded room on top of a furniture factory. Eventually with the help of a donor he was put in contact with a social worker through whom he and his family managed to set up a laundry service in the inner-city called Jetha laundries, in which accounting books are kept in both brail and by hand. In the end Gonese and his family managed through social networks, and on account of his

disability, to mobilize resources in order to establish a business, something few others who are disabled migrants in the city have managed to achieve. His story thus shows how disability in the city is both a source of exposure to threats and stigma, but can also, at times, be a way to mobilize protection, social networks and resources. The motto of the laundry is that “disability is not inability”.

Pastor Peter Ngoma and the International Federation for People with Albinism and Blindness

The leader and founder of the International Federation for People with Albinism and Blindness (IFPAB), Pastor Peter Ngoma was born in 1980 in Harare where he studied primary school at Lions School for the Blind, before going to a high school for the blind in Lusaka, Zambia. At home he suffered from severe stigma:

“I suffered a lot. People associated albinism with Satanism. They could use my parts for witchcraft. I was afraid.”

Other children and members of the community used to call him terms like “monkey”. He explained:

“My closest friends were relatives, most of the time I spent in the house. (...) Church was much better. I remember at a point they used me as an example to portray love. In my church there were about four of us [others with albinism]. Whenever I was at church it was nice, because I would meet them.”

In the context of the church he felt a sense of protection and belonging that eluded him in other social spaces, and was to shape his future life trajectory. After graduating from school in Zambia, Ngoma returned to Zimbabwe to complete A levels and studied and worked as a nurse. He converted to Pentecostalism after going to a crusade at the Ben Hinn Ministries during a short trip to Johannesburg.

Later, Ngoma came to Johannesburg and trained to be a Pentecostal pastor at Timothy Training Institute, but returned to Zimbabwe temporarily to be a nurse. After being retrenched from the hospital, he came again to Johannesburg where he worked at a shelter run. He joined the Rhema Church and later another Pentecostal Church called Wisdom Ministries. Ngoma founded IFPAB in 2010 with some other people with albinism and blindness. The affinity between albinism and blindness arose due to the ways in which albinism can affect sight and lead to partial sightedness. IFPAB ran a crèche, sponsored sporting activities for the disabled, and managed to receive a grant for skills training from a government department. However, there living conditions remained challenging.

The group set up their office in an inner-city tenement, which was the home of an African embassy, and rented offices and living space on the 8th floor. They had to do a cleansing ceremony as they found *muthi* (herbs) used both for medicinal purposes, but also for malevolent

practices, and bones on the floor, alleged signs of witchcraft and misfortune. At first however the place was perceived as safe by the group, but it began to fall into disrepair due to other tenants failing to pay rent, leading to the management cutting off electricity and water. The building became a “dark building”, without electricity or services, as the former caretaker of the building unlawfully took over. After a fire in late 2013, they moved to a few different buildings, but unable to afford rent eventually moved to Lehae on the outskirts of Soweto. The difficulties facing IFPAB were more generalized – many blind and disabled in the city struggle to find accommodation not simply because of cost, but also because caretakers and owners refuse to take the blind and disabled.

In Lehae several members of the group rented two houses, built under the state subsidized housing scheme for South Africans and then rented out by their owners as a source of income. I met with the group a number of times in their new Soweto home. They found the area more conducive to living; it was quieter and notably smelled better than living in the inner-city. For the blind with enhanced senses of smell, the lack of waste collection and sanitation in inner-city buildings produced extreme discomfort. However, the difficulties the group faced were primarily linked to transport to areas of the city where they could beg at traffic lights. The group, although struggling with support and resources, became a source of belonging and affiliation. There they would live, rest and pray.

Edward Mavura, a musician I had met several time over the previous years^[2] in fact, until recently, had not considered himself blind and he could move without assistance with glasses, which, however, he had recently lost in Johannesburg. It was in Johannesburg, when he had met up with members of IFPAB that he identified with the label. He was staying with the blind in IFPAB, where he explained, “many say I am blind” and so he joined the group, particularly after losing his spectacles.

Edward had been a musician in Zimbabwe, playing in several bands, and a range of styles including “ramba” and “mbatlanga jive”. Since the 1970s to the 2000s he had managed to make a living as a musician, recording several LPs, but in the 2000s he could no longer survive and journeyed to South Africa. He played music in the trading centres along the border to collect money and then crossed into South Africa. In Johannesburg he stayed in an infamous building called “Dark City”, before moving in with the IFPAB community. A widower, there he also met his new partner, serenading her with a song he had written. Staying with IFPAB in the inner-city, even under poor conditions, was a period of transitory happiness for Mavura. “I was happy beyond belief”, he told me. He had food, love, free accommodation. Meeting with the blind and disabled, and identifying now as blind, he had ironically found a sense of belonging and refuge in the city. Moving out to Lehae, he still travelled into the inner-city, though the transportation costs made the journeying expensive.

IFPAB, although they struggled with resources, had been successful in getting registered as an NGO and providing skills training funded by the South African state “Sector Education and Training Authority”, focusing on urban agriculture, to their members as well as others in a wide range of communities throughout Johannesburg. The organization’s stated aims were to create an international group with support for the blind, albinos and disabled, particularly health and

income generating projects. However, they also formed relationships with South Africans and the able-bodied who were trained in the skills training project on the basis that they would be educators about the rights of the disabled in their communities.

However, the organization and its members still struggled with securing livelihoods and good living conditions, and the skills training had not translated directly into employment opportunities for many of the members. As most disabled migrants in the city, they lived and occupied a space outside of state structures and formal housing or employment. Nonetheless, as in the case of IFPAB the condition of physical impairment provided a space of belonging, intimacy and identity and even a way in which physical home and shelter was organized, and limited state support was achieved. Disability became a way of finding belonging and navigating the city.

Xenophobic Violence, Asylum and Deportation

The condition of disability and blindness also became a specific way of negotiating the conditions of being a migrant and paradoxically provided some protection against the threats other non-national migrants were facing, particularly as regards xenophobic violence and deportation. In Chambers, the building I have mentioned above in Jetro's story, there were attacks during the xenophobic violence of 2008. During this time, according to a number of interviews, several non-nationals were killed inside the building by violent groups. However, these groups had come from the ethnically homogenous hostels on the southeast peripheries of the city. Foreigners who were attacked in Chambers were displaced to a nearby police station. The blind were, however, protected due to their disability and fears of ancestral or spiritual vengeance for harming the blind. One blind man, Solomon, who had lived in Chambers since 2007 explained common attitudes towards the blind in the inner-city:

“Most are afraid to threaten the blind or disabled, because they say the ancestors will fix you. So, I think that was the reason why I think the blind people in Chambers were not even beaten. They fear the ancestral spirits will do bad to you ... I heard that during the time of xenophobia most of the blind people were told to go out before they started to beat people.”

This account was confirmed by others. Hence, strikingly in the condition of the most extreme anti-immigrants violence in South Africa, disability became a form of protection. This protection is also afforded against another major threat facing non-national migrants: deportation.

Many of the blind and disabled persons I met during my research came to South Africa on asylum seeking permits from Zimbabwe but many lost their permits due to the difficulties of having to renew them every several months. However, the blind were rarely if ever arrested to be deported. I once attended a high level meeting where one of the senior officials in the deportation process explicitly stated that the deportation centre, Lindela, was told not to accept vulnerable groups who would be housed in a nearby shelter. De facto groups such as the blind and mothers with children were therefore rarely arrested. A story recounted to me by a

Zimbabwean man, I will call Samuel, living in the inner-city illustrates this:

Samuel was living in an unlawfully occupied building, and accompanied a blind committee member to the police in order to lay a complaint about a fight that had broken out in a shebeen (an illegal bar). The police asked the man for his passport and when he could not procure it, as he was undocumented, he was arrested and deported, but the blind man accompanying him was set free. The experience of the man mirrored a perception that was widely re-iterated during my research. Samuel explained:

“If you go to charge office, they say passport, and they said we don’t have. The blind people they say you go home. They say if you go to Lindela, Lindela don’t want blind people.”

This was frequently stated throughout my research and confirmed when, in early 2015, there was an immigration raid on the Central Methodist Mission, a well-known refuge for non-national migrants in the city. Although around 400 undocumented migrants were arrested and most of them deported, the blind, although initially arrested, were set free and not deported. Hence disability appears to provide protections from one of the major threats facing undocumented migrants. This is what I refer to as precarious power: a form of protection arising, ironically, from a condition of precarity.

Conclusions

To conclude, what I have termed precarious power in this text arises from the ways in which physical impairment is mediated through local social, political, juridical and spiritual contexts (in this case the setting of urban migration). Precarity in this context is both an existential condition but also formed through social and juridical processes, in particular the asylum regime and exclusion from the South African grants system. Nonetheless, precarious power is the inversion of this exposure and vulnerability. Inasmuch as blindness and impairment leads to forms of debility and incapacitation, it can also be mobilized, though in a very limited sense, through some avenues to access state and private resources such as the skills training provided to IFPAB and the donor’s support for Gonese. While the asylum system excludes the blind and disabled from grants, the operation of the system also protects them from deportation in comparison to other undocumented migrants. In the same vein as it exposes them to stigma and abuse, it can also at times be a source of protection. The forms of belonging, identity and sociality among the blind and disabled also provide a sense of affective power and strength to survive conditions of adversity. While spiritual idioms are used as a form of stigma they are also used by the blind and disabled as a source of resilience, creativity and strength.

My intent here is not to diminish the very harsh and real deprivations the blind and disabled are facing in inner-city Johannesburg, but to outline the ways in which these communities draw upon and mobilize their condition in ways that they are not simply totally marginalized or victimised by their condition, but use it as a source of capacitation. Nonetheless this power itself

is also very precarious and can easily unravel. In mobilizing it, the blind and disabled can also create resentment towards them for garnering resources excluded to others. The blind remain vulnerable and still subject to violence and abuse. In an eviction in late 2013, a blind man was beaten by private security, and in 2015 in a police raid, police beat a blind man who was walking down the passage. The precarious power of disability itself is a form of power that inasmuch as it resists marginalization and stigma, can also be a source of exposure to threats and violence. Precarious power is formed in relation to social and juridical precarity, but is itself precarious and unstable.

^[1] I have documented the full legal history of Chambers in the forthcoming article “Decoding Dispossession” (Wilhelm-Solomon forthcoming).

^[2] Mavura’s music was featured in the documentary “Into the Shadows” (2012) directed by Pep Bonet, Line Hadsbjerg and José Bautista (<https://www.facebook.com/intoshadows>).

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