

An incomplete and unresolved meditation on *Infecting the City*

Edgar Pieterse

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The best way for me to think about the past couple of days is talk about the various performances I saw as an ensemble because they all, in different ways, worked the same affective seam of pain, violence, shame, disgust, fear and impotence.

It feels and seems clear to me that the connective tissue between the various pieces is of course violence. As a student of the city, and I suppose development, more broadly, violence is not something one can ignore or escape. It is the very foundation of the modern developmentalist project (via imperialism and colonialism) and much of city-making since time immemorial. Knowing about the constitutive nature of violence is of course very different to knowing what to do about that fact, especially when all our coping mechanisms are ingrained to not see violence as omnipresent, profoundly normalised and insinuated into just about every crevice of daily life...

The one scholar/writer that I found the most insightful and challenging on the oppressive inescapability of violence is Ashraf Jamal... A few years ago he delivered a paper entitled, "Terror and the City".¹ This piece remains for me one of the most provocative and troubling accounts on the condition of the South African city, soaked as it is in routinised violence which includes and certainly exceeds the xenophobic violence catalogued this year by *Infecting the City*... He opens his essay with an extract from a short story he had published the year before² which details at considerable length the gang rape of a street worker and leaves little (and too much) over to the imagination. Instead, the narrator painstakingly retells every second of cruelty and violation, to the point where the pain and narcissistic implication of the act overwhelms the sensibility of the reader. The reader gags on the barbed text precisely because the detailed explication of the acts of violation is much more than one would normally allow oneself to think about or be reported in a newspaper account. It is also unnerving because one is forced to accept that the imponderable level of brutalisation is indeed well within the capacity of many people; a fact of (bare) life, and therefore suggestive of a broad-based debasement that is so cancerous to be beyond the point of treatment or reversal. This moment of confrontation and acknowledgement is overwhelming because it forces one to admit that there is very little in our archive of knowledge, politics, institutional capability, and most importantly, collective sociality, that can stop, mitigate or eradicate this insidious force. Then, all that remains is the question: What does it mean for our sense of self, our sense of a future, if all that we have is the poisonous outgrowth of unchecked and cumulative terror?

1 Jamal, A. (2003) 'Terror and the City.' A paper prepared for a symposium jointly conceived by the Isandla Institute and Open University's Geography Department, London, 1-3 October.

2 Jamal, A. (2002) 'Empty', in *The Shades*. Howick: Bravitas.

Jamal suggests that our epistemic challenge is to continuously arrive at this question, and through that painful recursive movement, learn to disabuse ourselves of a, simply inappropriate and exhausted, humanist morality. Jamal underscores this imperative brilliantly: "Terror, 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" (Jamal 2003: 3). Thus, for Jamal the issue is not a choice between hope and despair, but rather nurturing an epistemic capacity to engage with the indeterminate zone of becoming that falls between these polarities. For, 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 (Jamal 2003: 23).

Even though I have worked through this essay many times, I have never really felt I understood too much of it, let alone what to do with it, even though I know it holds the key to discovering a way of living, reading and possibly even remaking the city so as to embellish and renovate its more generous potentialities... Living through the terror of last year's xenophobic violence and the larger terror of relentless displacement and forced movement, which characterises so much of the human condition over the past 300 years, by aid of the five and half productions I saw the past few days, I feel a little closer to understanding how to live the city with all of its insoluble contradictions... So, now for some flashes and provocations that arose from me experience of the festival...

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I was particularly affected by *Exile*. There was something about the combination of exquisite beauty – the musical play of water as the body remakes it flow, inciting all manner of yearnings and desires; and visceral violence as the effigy is torched, reminding one, ineluctably, that this happened, it happened here, it happened in 2008, and it reflected a broad-based capacity for barbarism that is always lurking beneath the surface...Being drawn into a dream where these sensibilities coexist or one moves within minutes from one state to the next, was simply overwhelming and hugely affecting... Then there was something about that site; about being in

the middle of one of the busiest traffic points, in a space one never thought of walking, let alone ambling, that was profoundly gratifying. And to be introduced to the pleasures and possibilities of that space by an experience of this gravity and beauty was something else for me... I'm deeply grateful and indebted to the actors and producers of *Exile*.

In some ways *Exiles'* twin is *Amakwerekwere*, which inhabited and destabilised Thibault Square. I truly loved the irreverent, outrageous, sexy and kitch sensibility of the production. I thought it very brave of the crafters of the work to feel free to play with the insanity and crassness of mainstream middle-class culture, which of course represents a globalised life-style that many would argue is at the root of the world's sorry state, marked as it is by perverse levels of inequality, abject poverty and routinised violence as the majority of the world's population try and eke out an existence... drawing a link between the complicity of nationalism, middle-class consumerism and the boundaries that the state machinery seeks to protect was a vital reminder that there were causes and drivers way beyond the immediate perpetrators of the xenophobic violence in 2008... It was chilling to see how the bodily attacks were linked to the machinic abuse by state institutions, which in turn could feed and sustain a self-righteous sense of normality that I suppose we take for granted is just how things are and will always be...

Limbo provoked for me a strong and inventive representation of the quotidian experience of migrants when they endure the inevitable interactions with the various tentacles of the state, whether they be embodied as uncaring and abusive officials, or materialised as gates, locks, fences, spikes, grills, etc... The reworking of the majestic colonial façade by the dancers through the contrasting of colour and (non)movement made sure the space and its edges cannot ever be seen in the same way again. However, for the highlights in that production was the mob scene on the fence and the sonic activation of the site which creating a set of reverberations that suggested both the possibility of expressing the rage associated with relentless persecution but also the possibility that the sites and buildings in the city where the injustices are perpetrated in the interest of our lifestyles, can all bear witness, and will do so, when the time arrives. In other words, we may have lulled ourselves into complacency that the fires of xenophobic violence has exhausted itself, thankfully, but in actual fact, even if we are not willing to be witnesses to what persists, to our eternal shame, it will come down to the inanimate members of our cities to bear witness, and so they shall, as we can gather from the resonances of *Limbo*...

The last two productions I saw were very similar in their focus on (forced) movement, the impossibilities of arrival when the impetus was involuntary and the generational consequences of such displacement... Yet, despite this sharing of focus, one cannot imagine a more divergent approach to the topics. *Eyton road* was incredibly precise, painstakingly crafted in terms of the minutia of bodily movement and visual stimulation, meticulously scripted, often sparking literary nuggets of great power and impact, but also very quiet, very still, cognisant of the overflowing of silence and deadspace as the body, mind and soul gets caught in the liminal sites between places, between times, between desires, resigned to always be en route... *Ingcwabe Lendoda* on the other hand was visceral, loud, energised, rage-filled, angry, confrontational, playful, even joyous on occasion as the rich

reservoir of isiXhosa oral, musical, dance and choral traditions were invoked and displayed with resounding effect... I found it humbling and disturbing to be forced into a meditation of an unacknowledged but pervasive violence that mark probably all black South Africans; that is, the firsthand knowledge of forced familial, communal and territorial dislocations. Modern South African cities were (and are) built on the ruins of communities and families conscripted against their will and preference into the brutish labour of building our taken for granted spaces, brick-by-brick... The consequences of those dislocations seldom feature in mainstream discourse or appreciation, which is shocking and short-sighted... Surely there has to be a connection between the multi-generational systematic brutalisation of communities and cultures in service of building modern South Africa, and the capacity of the same society to exact violent retributions against the new vulnerable and disposed, especially if you remain just a little above their station... Of course, as Mandela reminded me afterwards, this may have been expressed in localised registers but the reference is to a general, universal experience...

Thank you