African Critical Inquiry Programme WORKSHOP 2017

Secret Affinities:
A workshop in critical reading and an interrogation of the city in Africa via Walter Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk*

Satyagraha House, Johannesburg, 22 to 23 March

A. Roads & Journeys

1. Jonathan Cane

Cruising the Transvaal: Queer Inventories and Itineraries

The project takes as its starting point Halberstam’s argument for the ‘utility of getting lost over finding our way’, of conjuring ‘a Benjaminian stroll or a situationist derivé, an ambulatory journey through the unplanned, the unexpected, the improvised, and the surprising’ (2011: 15-16). *Cruising the Transvaal* responds to the queerer aspects of Malcomess and Kreutzfeldt’s Benjaminian ‘stroll’ in *Not No Place: Johannesburg. Fragments of Spaces and Times* (2013) and contributes to an unfinished, tentative and thoroughly un-objective encyclopedia of the city. My concern is with what could be called queer spaces in the Transvaal between 1886-1994. Some of these were ‘gay’ spaces in the sense that they supported (mostly) secretive communities of homosexuals, for instance in bars like Mandy’s, Champions, The Factory, The Skyline; sex clubs like the London Health Club; cruising and cottaging spots like Zoo Lake, Joubert Park, the Rose Gardens and Park Station public toilets; and neighbourhoods like Forrest Town and Hillbrow. There are other spaces which I aim to catalogue, and these are queer in other, sometimes less ‘gay’, ways. Here I’m interested in the pool – public and private. From the sexually charged men’s change-rooms at the Summit Club pool in Hillbrow, to an attempt at the archaeology of the ‘kidney-shaped’ domestic pool, I attempt swimming as a kind of flâneurie. The project is implicitly (i) spatial and (ii) queer, (iii) provisional, but also, perhaps, counter-intuitively focused, planned and rigorous. My interest is research that is tentative, exploratory, unfocused, experimental and ‘data’ that is silly, personal, unproductive, unreliable, ephemeral, sleazy, incoherent, in order to produce a study that is unfinished and meandering.

2. Steven Sack

My Colon

*Secret Affinities* provides opportunity to engage with and feel bracketed and contained by a book, a building, some artworks, and some memories. On the one hand, readings of the posthumous
publishing of Walter Benjamin’s *The Arcades Project* and on the other, the posthumous curating, of the intimate interiorities of the life of Gandhi and Kallenbach, at The Kraal, now called Satyagraha House. I wish to come to the project in a subjective and self-referential manner, making reference to an early art project, *Road Paint Experiment* dating to the 1970s; some car journeys south and north of Johannesburg, and a current interest in ‘Colon’ figurines, traded in craft tourist markets, by traders from the Ivory Coast, Senegal etc. My research here involves manipulating the western characters carved and painted for the tourist market and my inverting of their meanings. MY COLON is both a physical condition of the body and a remaking of African figurines that gesture towards a renegotiation of my Africanness. This renegotiation takes place in Johannesburg, its Arcades and Markets, Streets and Highways and in the South African Cultural Landscapes that record its ancient history. I will ‘look back’ at Walter Benjamin, and the poignant attempts to reconstruct his final journey to his death, by juxtaposing it, with a journey taken in 1979, leading to a photograph of a dead dog on the highway to Pretoria; a street sign that warns, Road Paint Experiment. Out of this arises, a palimpsest image, newly pictured in a discarded book of maps of South Africa, from a school library in Johannesburg. This looking back will make a connection to other journeys, including the walks by Gandhi and Kallenbach to Tolstoy Farm. My journeys into Soweto from 1970 until 2015 and the slide documentation that remains. I will also refer to journeys into some of South Africa’s sacred archeology sites, the Paleolithic and Middle Stone Age and evidence-based stories, that disrupt dominant discourses from the west.

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**Nocebo Bucibo**

### 3. A Just Image: Being Committed to the Process of Finding your VISUAL and WRITING Voice

In 2010 I began photographing in South African Migrant hostels. The main aim of this was to document the living space of the people residing in the hostels. During this period I became aware that I was not actually an outsider in the hostels and began learning more about my culture and South Africa’s history, my history and photography. This challenged me to expand my understanding of how I read photographs and my process of photographing these spaces. I am exploring the concept of ‘a just image’ a term extrapolated from Roland Barthes’s seminal text on photography, *Camera Lucida* (1980), for how it may complicate the conjunction of physical, psychological and cultural space encapsulated by the hostels. My aim is to explore the political and social context of the South African migrant hostels via practice in the medium of photography that includes the emblematic. To do so I am interrogating the notion of a ‘just image’: how it may open the question of the role of photography in documenting and representing complex places and times. The themes that I am focusing on are South African photography, memory and hybridity. Photography, its history as a medium in South Africa during apartheid and post-1994, and importantly the significant role it has had for capturing strongly emblematic moments in South African history is a centrally constructed theme in my research. The theme of memory, as a more self-reflexive aspect of exploration, and as it has been theorised in general art discourse and photography, is integral to my own thinking about my engagement with the people of the hostels. Post-colonial theorist Bill Ashcroft defines hybridity as ‘the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zones produced by colonisation ... in horticulture, the term refers to cross-breeding of two species by grafting ... to form a third’ (2003:118). Therefore the concept of hybridity can most basically be defined as when two separate cultures come together to form a third hybrid culture that invokes both original ways of living and seeing the world.
B. Arcades, Architectures of Aesthetics & Intimacy

1. Dilip Menon

Anecdotes from a City: Benjamin in the Global South

There has never been an epoch that did not feel itself to be ‘modern’ in the sense of the most eccentric, and suppose itself to be standing directly before an abyss (AP 586)

Cities are protean and can be grasped only within the multiple ways they are seen by inhabitants. Sites of possibilities or closure; spaces of inclusion or of permanent exclusion; avenues of pleasure or of disorientation. Calvino played with the cosmopolitanism of the medieval city by writing Venice multiply; the same city rendered invisible, ironically, by the variance with which it was seen. While the modern city may invite a reveling in its sensorium, every city has seen itself as ‘modern’ and unique at different times. Whether Lagos, Venice, Kochi or Malacca, the premise and promise of inclusiveness has been the impetus to cosmopolitanism. How can we think with Benjamin about ‘modern’ cities in the global south that preceded the hubris of The Modern City of the late 19th century? I try and think through Benjamin about the early modern port city of Kochi, on the southwestern coast of India and a unique project: the Kochi biennale started in 2014 and now in its third edition. If a biennale is an artefact of late capitalism and the commoditisation of art, what does its location in a cosmopolitan and historical port city in the global south signify? How can we see the artworks as the ‘insurgence of the anecdote’, which represents the antithesis to the telos of history, that renders space abstract? Kochi represents a concatenation of time through the multiple artworks which are created in situ and which are anecdotes of cities and urban invocations elsewhere.

2. Noëleen Murray

The African-Inspired Paris of Pretoria

...one day people will make a pilgrimage to see it instead of merely passing through it from one street to another (Holford 1967: 16)

Pretoria-born modernist architect Norman Eaton’s (1902-1966) Polley’s Arcade, described by Lord Holford as ‘the magnificent colonnade off Pretorius Street’ has since the 1980s indeed become a site of pilgrimage. Architects and artists in search of the heyday of African-inspired South African architecture make it their business to visit the once-fashionable shopping arcade in the inner city, which ‘looks at the moment as if an itinerant amusement caterer had set up his pitch among the Temples of Paestum’, as an essential site on a local version of the Grand Tour (Holford 1967: 16). Style pilgrims and interior design magazine editors alike post photographs on social media of themselves in the split level space, posing on its ornately mosaiced baroque staircase constructed from a ‘pallet’ of offcuts from a funeral mason’s yard where the intricately inlaid stone is arranged in an ‘indigenous’ pattern of hand-crafted precision, overseen by Eaton’s exacting standards, by teams of personally trained labourers (Harrop-Allin 1975; Johannesburg & Bonanza Films 216). Polley’s Arcade, however, is merely a small fragment – in Benjamin’s terms – of a larger pattern of arcades that connected Pretoria’s high streets in the ‘Afrikaner city’ from the 1950s until the 1970s. Yet nostalgia for the ‘Paris of Pretoria’ where people once ‘promenaded’ and shopped in style is complicated by the underlying secret story of the Public Works commission for the building that towers over the lauded space, that of the infamous apartheid police headquarters, named the Wachthuis in reference to the VOC guardhouse in the Cape (Harrop-Allin 1975; Gus Gerneke 2015,
2016). Somehow this history is missed by architectural historians and style-seekers as they celebrate the ‘regionalist’ Africanness of Easton’s major signature works. This paper revisits the space and gathers the fragments of reference to the man and his works in and around the city as a way to think about the place of art and architecture under apartheid. It draws on work by his biographer Clinton Harrop-Allin, papers in the University of Pretoria repositories, Eaton’s own writings, citations for awards, accounts of the art scene at the time in which famous South African artists lived and worked alongside Eaton in a convivial ‘art scene’, and a growing archive of miscellaneous new works like the 2011 film entitled ‘In search of our own: the forgotten legacy of Norman Eaton’ (Johannesburg & Bonanza Films 2016).

3. MADEYOULOOK

Considering Form: The Arcades Project, Questions, and Challenges of Practice

Form is an intrinsic aspect of Benjamin’s arcades project. While not necessarily of primary intention, we take the final form of The Arcades Project as meriting study. This form is implicit in the meaning of the content and the ways in which it is intended to be excavated. In particular, the play with montage and quotation, the use of non-linearity and labyrinthine passages, brings about a direct confrontation with knowledge production, modernity and the city. In a close reading of parts of Convolute N3, we come to grips with Benjamin’s direct contention with modes of knowledge production, and in a further discussion of form, will explore the significance of it in creating meaning. Taking as our central concern our project entitled Corner loving, we will unpack the challenges that form presents to the production of new knowledge. Corner loving explores the practice of lovers meeting in public places and the intimacies of the city made inevitable by a range of social limitations. Through a discussion of the images, texts and lecture series of Corner loving, we will reflect on the project’s limitations with language and representation. In so doing, we intend to bring to the fore concerns around black love, conventions of visual narrative and secret affinities in the city.

4. Phindezwa Mnyaka

Phantasmagoria and Secrecy in Manet’s A Bar at the Folies-Bergére

This paper considers how Benjamin’s notion of phantasmagoria in his arcades project might help us think through the dialectics of seeing in Manet’s painting ‘A Bar at the Folies-Bergére’, completed in 1882. Set in a Parisian nightclub, the painting draws attention to visuality itself and apparent mimicry. At first glance, the scene appears to be a reflection from a mirror, as though the barmaid, its central figure, stands in front of a gold-framed mirror. But a more careful study of its compositional elements suggests otherwise, revealing an ambivalent relationship with sight, drawing in part from the codes of realism but using techniques that created the sensation of movement. The very act of seeing is a slippery gesture, the painting suggests,
which gives the onlooker little room to rest his or her eye on any one object, to give it stability. And in addition, Manet’s painterly techniques have resonance with the nature of the encounter between the barmaid and the male customer. For one thing, the latter’s empirical presence is debatable if one considers the painting to be a mirror reflection. Moreover, there is little indication of a reciprocal engagement between the two. Curiously, such a relationship may be marked by an unspoken gendered dynamic between them, suggestive as such of a secret encounter. Thus, we have a scene with suggestions of a covert sexual invitation whose existence cannot be verified through the codes of realism. The sensation of phantasmagoria in this Parisian club, I suggest, may be useful ways of engaging encounters such as that depicted, which haunt and disturb, existing somewhere between the realms of truth and fiction.

C. Ceremonies, Sounds, Spaces

1. Hannah le Roux

BUNNA BET SATYAGRAHA

This presentation will have two parts. The first part is a performative design which recreates a coffee ceremony in the spaces of Satyagraha House. The infrastructure is designed by me and the ceremony will be performed by Tigris Lemma. The second part is a descriptive narrative that will itemise and represent the elements that made up the Bonna Bet project (2010-2017). Coffee is a material with which people from the Habesha diaspora both recreate a sense of home and create networks. In Johannesburg, this took on a particularly powerful form in the revival of the vacant space of Jeppe in the inner city in the early 2000s. The coffee shops – *bunna bets* – established by women such as Tigris connected the immigrant traders, their businesses, the goods that they circulated within their field of work. These points and connections worked spatially to transform the inherited Cartesian matrix of the gridded city and its stacked buildings into more complex and fractal geometries. The coffee ceremony and its space and time were thus a transformative node – a catalytic and material moment with the capacity to link the various actors, spaces, and temporalities of the Habesha area through relational processes. Staging a *bunna bet* at the Satyagraha House for the workshop usurps this catalytic medium for fresh ends: to infuse the event’s conversations with more vitality and connectivity; to introduce the coffee ceremony’s hostess to new patrons; to test a designed and portable coffee shop infrastructure in a new context and to – again – propose design as a form of social narration and catalyst of change.

2. Brett Pyper

Title: Listening for Johannesburg: Acoustemologies of the African City

Benjamin’s *Das Passagen-Werk* is primarily oriented towards documenting and reflecting on Parisian culture in visual terms – appropriately given how the arcades on which he focused were designed to address themselves to the eye of the strolling consumer. Nonetheless, a montage of the urban *soundscape* also concomitantly, if impressionistically, emerges from the many citations and thoughtful commentary in the work. Not only do the sounds of 19th century Paris echo between numerous empirical references in the text; I am particularly interested in passages where sound becomes something not only about but with which Benjamin and his quoted sources do conceptual work. One aspect of this is revealed in Benjamin’s several references to mechanical means for making and recording music and sound, which feature in his writing as emblematic of the drive toward commodification that he examines in kaleidoscopic detail across multiple domains of social
life. Other aspects of the ways in which Benjamin thinks with sound draw on its capacity to cross or trouble boundaries, such as those between public and private, social externality and bodily or psychic interiority. This extends to his highly suggestive elaboration of the collective (un)consciousness, to which Benjamin ascribes a rich image-making dimension. Inspired by these aspects of The Arcades Project, I propose, in accordance with the aims of the Secret Affinities workshop, to take my cue from Benjamin’s magnum opus and to ask how it might productively inform attempts to ‘sound out’ the city of Johannesburg across its own histories of social, political and environmental rupture. What might we include in a bundle of materials (Benjamin’s ‘convolute’) that sets out to document and interpret Johannesburg/Egoli/Jozi in terms of its sonic and musical manifestations, and how might we think not only about but with such assemblages? Following the example set in Das Passagen-Werk in which form and content, method and material exist in conversation and in a dialectical relationship, I propose to engage with sound at the levels of content, methodology, medium and form. Though he was concerned primarily with the century-long emergence of a commodified order of things in a major European capital, might Benjamin’s eclectic, trans- or even anti-disciplinary approach offer relevant pointers in the context of current attempts to transcend colonial epistemologies in the South African academy? Might such a project take some of its cues from the principled renunciation of the accumulation of things that Gandhi and Kallenbach practiced at what is now Satyagraha House, and how does the status of the latter as a contemporary heritage tourism project both celebrate and potentially contradict this ethic? In an era in which a Gandhian politics of ‘converting’ one’s opponent rather than counter-opposing by force has increasingly come to be questioned in post-apartheid South Africa, are there any aspects of Satyagraha that one might better understand and practise by listening rather than looking? Might historians and heritage practitioners engaging contemporary South African problematics gain from attending to the auditory turn in historiography? Drawing its inspiration, inter alia, from the recently consolidated interdisciplinary field of Sound Studies, this paper and the associated project arising from the workshop invite research and reflection on the cultural and historical ‘acoustemologies’ of Johannesburg, and sets out to amplify and foreground the insights that inquiry into the contemporary musical, sonic and aural lives of a major African capital promises to yield at this juncture in the 21st century.

3. Ulungile Magubane

Is Johannesburg an African City Built on Hyper-Masculinity?

Is there something to be said about how centres of urbanisation carry demons of migrational trauma, patterns of power and the manner in which these battles are facilitated by the geography of the city? What do we make of the idea that women’s bodies and spatial existence can be the battle sites where masculinity gathers its legitimacy? I am in the process of a series of installations (namely, ‘Don’t Cry For Me’ and ‘Why Can’t You Hear Me’), to do with the perpetual denigration of the female body:

Do not cry for me because my body is the site upon which validation is sought after; the site at which power is wielded. Do not cry for me because my body is the tool you will use to quieten that raging fear that you have no control over yourself.

Excerpt from Video Performance ‘Don’t Cry For Me’, June 2016

That is the power of rape culture. Rape culture has a deeply paradoxical character that creeps into every crevice and corner of the soul of any large city. Rape culture and the patriarchal systems that give it fuel work to suppress any attempt to have constructive conversation around reform, reflection or redemption. Rape culture is self-reinforcing and has metamorphosing capabilities. It
perpetuates the smothering nature of the patriarchy that moves in the heartbeat of arguably the most progressive city on the continent. There is little room for grief, or feeling sorry. The female body bares visible (and invisible) reminders of not being able to exercise autonomy or the right to say no. The female body is arguably the metaphysical architectural piece that fuels the city. It is a temple enshrining the hopes and aspirations of many. It is also the dumping ground for broken dreams, inferiority complexes and identity crises. A new angle ‘Secret Affinities’ will enable me to consider is the role of the city, its annexes, and masculinity in the creation and preservation of rape culture. Among the many things that we can attribute to the greatness that is ‘the city’ is the ability it has to, at once, liberate and restrain movement – female movement. What about the city creates an environment so synonymous with possession, harassment, and rape culture?

D. History, Memory, Memorialisation

1. Ali Khangela Hlongwane

Weaving Stories, Memories and History with Art and Place: the 16 June 1976 Interpretation Centre

This paper investigates the 16 June 1976 Interpretation Centre in Central Western Jabavu, Soweto, which complements and develops the narrative mapping the 16 June 1976 Soweto uprising that changed the course of South African history and accelerated development towards the then unfolding liberation struggle nationally and also in the international arena. The Soweto uprising began as a peaceful Soweto Students Protest March against Afrikaans being taught in schools. It was interrupted by police using dogs, teargas and shooting protestors, quickly turning into a national students’ uprising, which, since 1994 has been commemorated annually as Youth Day, and has been memorialised in a series of linked monuments located in the 16 June 1976 Memorial Acre, beginning with the Hector Pieterson Memorial and Museum (2002). All these are related commemorative sites connected to the struggle to end apartheid through grassroots mobilisation. An integral and important part of the 16 June 1976 Interpretation Centre is the enriching South African art collection by selected, commissioned, established and emerging artists, several of whom had experienced the Soweto uprising first-hand, and artistically recreated their interpretation of their experience. Located outdoors in an open-air museum environment are a variety of dramatic artworks in different media recreating the dramatic Soweto uprising, including two expressive depictions of Teboho ‘Tsietsi’ MacDonald Mashinini, the leading student leader during the uprising; an abstract symbolic portrayal of Regina Mundi, referred to as the people’s church, and a massive monumental painted concrete wall dubbed by the media as a ‘Memorial Wall’, painted by many young emerging artists, and other expressive artworks verifying continued efforts to create an integrated, coherent and comprehensive narrative, outdoor museum space, and physical landscape to embody the 16 June 1976 events, reflecting the new museology: a memorial where visitors can contemplate memories and a more comprehensive understanding and knowledge of the past and our role in shaping the future.

2. Henry Obi Ajumeze

The Niger Delta Theatre and ‘the Refuse of History’ in Ben Binebai’s My Life in the Burning Creeks

A central informing narrative of the theatrical representation of the Niger Delta has been environmental decay. Many of the plays selected for this study echo this trope of decay and
abandonment to enact spatial neglect of the region, and to explore how abandonment produces rusts and corrosions that erase the historical landmarks of the Niger Delta, and by implication the environmental history of the region. Using My life in the Burning Creeks, a play (text) by Ben Binebai, this paper invokes what Walter Benjamin describes as ‘literary montage’ to ask questions of the broken territories and neglected topographies of the Delta. The play offers a fictional resonance of the numerous fire disasters occurring across the Niger Delta as a result of crude oil spillages: a tragic experience of place that collapses the region into a landscape of petro-modern tragedy. Thus, when the narrator in the play invokes signposts of environmental and geographic history to tell stories of the decay and death of place, it is to provoke what Benjamin ascribes to the montage aesthetics as ‘the technique of awakening’, a socioenvironmental awakening of the audience to the ruination of the region. This paper’s primary point of focus is to illustrate how environmental justice is performed and narrated by merely making visible - or, only showing – ‘the refuse of history’.

3. Noel Solani

The Legacy of 16 June 1976 and the National Democratic Struggle

The generation of the 1970s, who were arguably the second-generation recipients of ‘Bantu Education’, are the ones that challenged the authority of the Nationalist Party 16 years after the banning of the liberation movements. Their actions shocked the world and led to many interpretations as to why the events of 16 June 1976 took place. When the first commemoration of this event took place in 1977, there were many narratives that were produced about the day. At the centre of these narratives was the desire to understand what made the students of 1976 confront the authorities in the manner in which they did. Secondly, a question was asked as to why the authorities were so afraid of the students. The liberation movements sought to understand the nature of their strategies in influencing the liberation struggle inside their country. The government on the other hand sought to understand the deep-rooted ideal of liberation, and the influence of the banned organisations like the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) in the events of 16 June 1976. As we all understand, the events of 16 June 1976 were caused by the obduracy of a racist state that refused to listen to the aspirations of the oppressed groups. This conflict was resolved through negotiations in the early 1990s, thus leading to what many called a ‘miracle’. In essence, it is argued that for us to understand and commemorate days like 16 June 1976, we also need to understand what were the causal factors, both objective and subjective. It is through an understanding of the deep-rooted social issues that we can better appreciate why today we continue to commemorate such days. Perhaps the question that should be asked is whether the causal factors that prompted the students and the youth of 1976 to act as they did have been resolved. In short, to what extent has the post-apartheid South Africa resolved the challenges of the National Democratic Struggle as we commemorate 40 years of the events that took place in 1976 and the subsequent massacres of young people that continued to take place since then?

E. Contested Ground: Lenses, Land, Labour

1. Candice Jansen

‘LONDON REMINDS ME OF FORDSBURG’: Ernest Cole & World Photography

This paper begins to chart the ways in which Ernest Cole (1940–1990) was some kind of worldly photographer. He left apartheid South Africa to realise his six-year photographic project into a book that became House of Bondage (1967). This iconic book and its images were published to
international critical acclaim and became part of the world of documentary photography. Cole’s worldly images travelled between South Africa, Kenya, London, France, Canada, and the United States and currently reside in their fullest form in two private Swedish archives. Yet, throughout his worldly life and death, Cole remained a photographer exiled for 23 years from the only place that gave his photography a world of meaning. He was a fugitive photographer, who long before he fled the country from harassment and detainment by apartheid security police, had taken on a fugitive identity within his home land as a way of being a photographer in the world. Not in the world outside South Africa, but in the racial world that existed inside the country during apartheid, which is revisited here as a particular time of worldliness through the fugitive story of Ernest Cole and his world photography.

2. Siân Butcher

Atlas of ‘Suburban Affinities’: a Topography of Repetition-Made-Home

‘Is the future city already here?’ ask the organisers of a panel I will contribute to in May, titled ‘Housing the Middle-Class’ in South Africa. They are particularly concerned with ‘the development of new monofunctional residential areas for middle classes, and private and secure areas’, so I will share with them my research on the production of Gauteng’s ‘affordable suburbia’. By that I mean the tracts of low-density, privately provisioned houses for a growing black middle class visible on the edges of South African cities and their townships. Called ‘new aspirational middle-class townships’ by some (Harrison & Harrison 2014: 310), the ‘market’ calls these new-build ‘affordable houses’. But ‘affordable suburbia’, as I name, it is not a new formation, nor necessarily an expression of residents’ aspirations and preferences. Rather, my doctoral research in the south of Johannesburg revealed a small, localised network of white landowners, developers and construction companies who have been in the business of ‘affordable housing’ for almost three decades. With deep power over the land on the city’s edges, close ties to the banks, and limited public profiles, they have been producing versions on the same theme – a ‘Res 1’ (single stand, stand-alone) 40–70m² house on 300–400m² stands – under different names and in changing parts of the city. Affordable suburbia’s ‘form and content’ then, as Keil and Hemel (2016: 4) suggest about suburbanisation in general, is ‘heavily path-dependent’. Rather than making that argument via Marxian theory of urban land rent-meets-racial capitalism in the postcolony (as I try to do elsewhere), this workshop offers the opportunity to revisit my ‘convolute’ on the so-called ‘affordable house’ and to reassemble that file or folder differently and provisionally. Inspired by Benjamin’s Arcades method and form, I return to the anecdotes and ephemera left on the cutting room floor during my dissertation’s rounds of editing. These confront me with the ‘ghosts’ of ‘affordable suburbia’ that found no place in my chapters, and yet are ‘deeply embedded in the space of things’ (Translator’s Foreword, xii) – the ‘affordable houses’ that have remade parts of the city’s edges in the last 25 years. Parts of the city that remain underseen, despite their thick
connectivities to elsewhere through the everyday trajectories of their tens of thousands of inhabitants (the work of others, see Escusa 2015), and what they teach us about the machines that build our cities. It is the latter that I remain preoccupied with, and to which end I build my provisional atlas of the ‘affordable’ for this workshop. Moving between current sites of construction (such as Sky City, Boksburg) and early pilots (Malalumele, Limpopo) that are further flung than my doctoral ‘field site’, I montage anecdote and image and citation to propose an alternative topography of the city, one that illuminates how the modern gets made at speculative urban edges through the repetitions and relations of ‘the more secret, more deeply embedded figures of the city’ (Benjamin 1999: 83).

3. Thembi Luckett

**Historical Progress, Utopias and the Intricacies of Working-Class Life in Lephalale**

Throughout history there have been dreams, visions and hopes for a utopian world, emergent from the unfinishedness of the world. The separation of time into clear demarcations, without interpenetrations, is dependent upon the modernist stress on progress (Bevernage, 2010). In contrast, a Benjaminian (1968) conception of history, as outlined in *Theses on the Philosophy of History*, is counter posed to the dominant idea of history both in terms of the latter’s positivist epistemology and its progressive or teleological plot line. Counter posed to the progressive view of history, Benjamin (1968: 249) conceptualises the past as an expanse of debris that the present continuously augments – ‘the storm of progress’. Benjamin’s ‘Angel of History’ is echoed in Le Guin’s (1989) porcupine metaphor: ‘I go backward, look forward’ (drawn from the Swampy Cree First Nation). Le Guin argues that we will never get to utopia again by going forward. In order to ‘speculate safely on an inhabitable future, perhaps we would do well to find a rock crevice and go backward’. Miéville (2016) argues that the porcupine moves backwards, looking forwards, to see futures coming – to avoid some and plan others, while the angel moves forwards, looking backwards in anguish, unable to redeem the past. In going forwards backwards, or backwards forwards, there is a call of danger to resist the utopia of those in power – the utopia that has ‘levelled many landscapes’ and left fields of rubble behind in a modernist march of progress (Miéville 2016). In the town of Lephalale, Limpopo, the construction of Medupi coal power station is heralded as ‘creating a better life for all’ and contributing to the creation of the ‘first post-apartheid town’ through the mega-project (Brown 2015). How do the utopias of those in power get traced through the lives of people and the lands that they flatten leaving rubble behind? In the debris, is there space for hope and possibility for the visioning of alternative utopias? Are there moments in which time opens up, to allow for ‘becoming’? This paper will attempt to explore some of these questions, grounding them in the intricacies of working class life in Lephalale.