

Raw Life and Respectability

Poverty and Everyday Life in a Postapartheid Community

by Fiona C. Ross

Through close ethnographic attention to modes of world making among people living in a very impoverished community in Cape Town, South Africa, in this paper I explore the histories of two key concepts—*rouheid* and *ordentlikheid* (Afrikaans; rawness and respectability)—and the social practices they enjoin. These distinctions and the modalities of living they generate produce relations between living and dying that complicate the prevailing theoretical picture of power over life and death, particularly that posited by Giorgio Agamben's (1998) distinction between bare and qualified life. They also foreground the ways in which gender is implicated in practices of world making that James Holston (2008) describes as "insurgent" and "differentiated" citizenship. Exploring the ways that people seek to craft lives in contexts that undermine many possibilities, I demonstrate ethnographically both the forms of exposure that poverty produces and the ways that these are countered. I propose a genealogy of bareness that, contra Agamben's emphasis on sovereign power, is deeply embedded in local ways of understanding persons, relationships, history's effects, and life's possibilities.

James Holston's (2008) account of struggles for urban land rights in São Paulo, Brazil, offers a historically nuanced argument about how peripheries are settled and potentially secured through the indeterminacies of legal processes. Demonstrating the entanglements of "differentiated" and "insurgent" citizenships, his account is persuasive in demanding attention to the historical processes that have given rise to the particular production of social life in Brazil and elsewhere. Drawing from Agamben (1998), he suggests that the ancient Greek distinction between *polis* and *oikos* is reformulated in the demands of formerly rural populations to "a daily life in the city worthy of a citizen's dignity" (Holston 2008:313). His account suggests that it is in the everyday, and particularly in its entanglements with law, that politics takes form. Here I extend this notion by exploring how, in the making of everyday life, norms are formed and reformed, complicating our picture of resistance and entanglement.

Apartheid's exclusions, building on those of the colonial and Union periods, meant that people's modes of life making as they inhabited the urban periphery were overtly a struggle against the classificatory power and effects of law. In Cape Town, the city in which I live and about which I write, it was also a profoundly gendered process, an encroachment—of land, law, classifications—performed in what I would call "the domestic mode." Here I offer an account of this mode to dem-

onstrate that the terms in which people envisage everyday life's possibilities themselves are shaped by historical processes and give rise to particular ethical horizons and forms of life. The account thus extends and challenges Holston's argument, demanding that we situate the politics of the urban poor through an understanding not only of law and its exigencies, or of historical processes alone, but also of the ways that norms settle into accepted understandings of what it means to make urban life.

Under colonialism and increasingly under apartheid, the domestic realm was the site of much state control. By the mid-1980s, politics was enacted through law's hold over the household and its relations,¹ and the law was brought cruelly to bear on the possibilities of social life. Before the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950, Cape Town (South Africa's oldest colonial city) was also one of the most integrated in the country (Besteman 2008; Western 1981). Admittedly, that is not saying a great deal given the prevailing class and race

1. This is an important point of difference between political orders founded on the separation of household and politics as described by Agamben (1998) and those of Britain's southern African colonies and their subsequent political structures (see below). For example, apartheid's Separate Development was predicated on ethnicity and race (the latter defined by the Population Registration Act of 1950 in terms of descent for whites, Africans, and Indians; Colouredness, until the 1970s predicated on assumptions about miscegenation [Adhikari 2008], was defined on exclusions—being not obviously white or black—and associational ties). Other acts, such as the Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act and the Immorality Act, were designed specifically to address questions of racial purity in the family.

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ideologies of the time, but it is worth remembering in the era we problematically denote as “postapartheid,” when Cape Town remains the most segregated and racialized of all South African cities. In addition to the gamut of apartheid laws that applied in South Africa, a number of special regulations were specific to the Cape Province, including those pertaining to the Coloured Labour Preference Area (which provided for racially based job reservation) and stringently enforced influx control measures.² Much of the struggle of urban residence in Cape Town was made in the name of the African family (Cole 1987; Wells 1993), the coherence of which had been sundered by long colonial histories of land alienation and dispossession, migration, and the separation of families.

Simultaneously, long-standing state and religious concerns over the “dysfunctional Coloured family” saw the apartheid state intervening in family life in numerous ways, including social support grants and housing allowances made largely to women.³ This enabled women classified “Coloured” to take responsibility as homeowners, respectable mothers, and leaders in their communities (Salo 2004), a pattern that is shifting in the postapartheid democratizing context (Versfeld 2012). The struggle for residence in the city was thus not only racially differentiated, as many commentators have pointed out, but powerfully gendered.

Women’s roles in patiently and courageously (re)settling the outskirts of the city or navigating state ideologies of the family suggest that it is important to think through the shifts in relations between urban residence and gender over time and the forms of life to which this gives rise. I examine these matters through close attention to everyday life in The Village, a former shanty settlement on the outer perimeter of Cape Town (F. Ross 2010). Established in the last years of apartheid, the settlement consisted of a mixed population of

2. How this segregation came about is largely the familiar story of the production of racially based class structures in South Africa and the creation of distant ethnic “homelands” for Africans and their exclusion from “common South Africa” under any but the most exigent of conditions until the repeal in 1986 of the infamous pass laws that governed African access to cities. These processes gave rise to the production of an African laboring class concentrated in labor reserves (Wolpe 1972) and, as Mahmood Mamdani (1996) notes, a differentiation between “citizens” and “subjects.” That distinction was complicated in the case of those classified Coloured, who, post-1983, were afforded some citizenship rights while still enduring the subject status Mamdani describes. In Cape Town, the Group Areas Act of 1950 was emphatically imposed, quickly giving rise to a city stratified by class and race—a legacy that, 20 years into a democratic political regime, it has scarcely undone (Besteman 2008). The Coloured Labour Preference Area (1954, repealed 1985) further limited African influx to the city by securing the area south of the “Eiselin Line” for people classified Coloured. Notwithstanding these pressures of exclusion, people classified African continued to come to the city, establishing what were then called “squatter camps” along the city’s periphery (Cole 1987; Dewar, Rosmarin, and Watson 1991; James and Simons 1989).

3. Colonial and apartheid imaginaries posited “Coloured” men as problem figures (Adhikari 2008; Jensen 2008; Salo 2004; Steinberg 2005).

“Coloured” and “African” residents with different residential histories and claims to city and rural lives. Residents of the poor, largely Afrikaans-speaking community frequently use a powerful metaphor of bareness to describe their everyday lives. The term *rou* is variously translated as “raw,” “rough,” “crude,” “indecent,” “vulgar,” “incomplete” or “unformed,” and “inexperienced.” It stands in contrast to an ideal of cultured, developed, respectable. In common usage, *rou* denotes a form of exposure to life’s violence and pain. People juxtapose *rou* with *ordentlik*, a term connoting decency, respectability, reasonability, and proper conformity to the social norms of the elite. Its connotations of gentility and restraint offer a version of life markedly different from the stuttering rhythms and everyday inconstancies that often characterize everyday life in extremely poor contexts. Local usage of *rouheid* (rawness) and *ordentlikheid* echo the Levi-Straussian distinction between raw and cooked; people described as *rou* are considered uncultured, undisciplined, not fully incorporated into appropriate modes of comportment and behavior. Raw circumstances are said to produce raw lives. In what follows, I pay attention to the ways that these distinctions and the modalities of living they enjoin produce relations between living and dying that complicate the prevailing theoretical picture of power over life and death, particularly that posited by Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) distinction between bare and qualified life.

Rawness and Respectability

Historically, the idea of respectability was an important mode of structuring unequal social relations in African colonial worlds (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991; R. Ross 1999). It carried—and continues to carry—particular weight in the Cape (Jensen 2008; F. Ross 2005, 2010; R. Ross 1999; Salo 2004), where, as Robert Ross (1999) describes it, under both Dutch and British colonial regimes it became a central structuring principle in demarcating social status and shaping interpersonal relations. Its underpinning racial dynamic, partly predicated on the distinction between slave and free, shifted and solidified over the nineteenth century as religion (particularly Christianity) became a core element in the definition of respectability, backgrounding other criteria (R. Ross 1999; see also Jensen 2008). While the content of what counted as respectability altered over time, the term and the actions instituted in its name—such as temperance societies and legislation curtailing indolence, drunkenness, and amoral relations, among others—established its opposite, which was heavily predicated on appearances, public behavior (particularly drinking and licentiousness), and destitution (especially among whites; see R. Ross 1999:158). It is in this matrix that *rou* and *ordentlik* emerge as one another’s others.

In some uses, respectability implies an ethical stance in the world. Manifesting as reliability in the conduct of social relations, it involves caring for appearances (respectability) and caring for persons (decency), molding relationships so that

people will be considered moral beings. The creation of proper personhood is thus part of the stakes of *ordentlikheid*. And, as Elaine Salo (2004) notes, *ordentlikheid* marks the critical mode that separates people from the wildness of “the bush”:⁴ “*Ordentlikheid* refers to the intense, lifelong social and physical work that women have to do to keep the natural order of the *bos* or the wilderness at bay” (172).

On the face of it, *ordentlikheid* offers positive imaginative horizons; a way of escaping or at least envisaging an alternative to the harshness of everyday worlds of poor people in South Africa and the structural violence that shapes them. Recent work (Jensen 2008; Salo 2004) sees in it a means through which moral worlds can be forged from the scurrilous conditions of everyday life in poor areas; through *ordentlikheid*, people—particularly women—are able to make proper persons in immoral conditions. And yet, *ordentlikheid* is overdetermined and contradictory. The binary between decency and rawness, which appears as a moral statement about social standing, belies the political-economic relations that produced it in the first place. It references a pernicious evolutionary ranking system set in place early in the colonial encounter and consolidated in the Victorian era (see R. Ross 1999) that differentiated the “civilizable native” (subject to recognizable laws) from “bushmen.”⁵

Ordentlike mense (decent people) “know their place.” That injunction so firmly embedded in colonial society is an instruction to adhere to the implicit “law of the proper” (de Certeau 1988:103)—the rules of hierarchy that express and maintain power relations—including those of class, gender, and age. It involves conformity to gendered ideals in which women are subservient while at the same time masking the central role that they play in the maintenance of households. It also insists on forms of respect that border on subservience to those in authority—real or imagined. In other words, respect practices themselves are shaped by other modalities of stratification—class, race, gender, and age. For some people, the forms of appropriate behavior glossed as *ordentlikheid* are learned through bitter experience. One man, explaining to me how to behave with propriety and to recognize respectability in others, commented that he had learned proper form at the end of a *sjambok* (a rawhide whip) wielded by the farmer on whose wine farm his father was employed. The *sjambok* here represents

the hard edges of decency: he had been beaten for failing to show the appropriate forms of “respect” (read: subservience) to the farmer. Children are often beaten for not showing appropriate respect. Drawing on models that have their historic roots in slavery and exploitation, *ordentlikheid* is shot through with traces of violence and injustice.

Working in both middle- and working-class contexts in Cape Town, Stefan Jensen has described *ordentlikheid* as an empty signifier (2008:147), its forms and referents unstable over time and in different contexts. Never firmly anchored or finally accomplished, it has to be “fought over and . . . performed again and again” (Jensen 2008:147). And, for many with whom I worked, life and work on the Cape’s commercial farms, with their symbolic associations with *baaskap* (mastery) and the bush, is counterpoised to a form of life characterized as *ordentlik*. Thus, while people behave as though the terms *rou* and *ordentlik* are objective indicators of social status, they are the materialization of terrible histories of oppression and subjugation, exclusion, and marginalization.

The Bush, The Park, The Village

These distinctions and the world-making practices they involve came strongly to the fore in the late 1990s and early 2000s as residents of a shantytown, The Bush (later called The Park), readied themselves to move from their organically formed shack community, slowly built over the preceding decade, into a residential estate, The Village, funded through a public-private partnership. The estate offered the approximately 1,000 residents of The Park formal accommodation in a planned suburb, with simple houses and basic amenities (tarred roads, indoor sanitation, electricity, and running water). In the lead-up to the move, residents were excited about the possibilities this offered not just to live more comfortably, protected from the elements, but to live modes of life that others would recognize as decent.

The Park had been established by *bosslapers* (literally, bush sleepers; the homeless, vagrants)⁶ in the late 1980s. At night the small group built small shelters among the trees, demolishing them by day. Several had come to Cape Town from the central interior, the desert lands of the Karoo; others soon joined them from Cape Town and surrounds. The diminution of influx control in the late 1980s and the increasing inability of the state to provide housing for Coloureds as well as Africans meant that the settlement quickly consolidated into a small “squatter camp,” home to several hundred people, most of whom the apartheid state classified Coloured, with a small number of isiXhosa-speaking Africans. Defined by local authorities as an illegal settlement (what would now be called a “land invasion”), by the time that I began living and working there in 1991, the settlement had already been razed

4. Ironically, the settlement was made on the edges of a farm called “Die Bos” (the bush), and when I first lived there, that was how residents knew it. Later they decided to change its name to The Park precisely to avoid the previous name’s connotations.

5. Indeed, during the early period of Dutch and later British and German colonization in Southern Africa, indigenous peoples, particularly the San, were considered vermin, subject to indiscriminate killing. Killers could be prosecuted but were leniently treated (Gordon 1986). The hierarchical racial model has become deeply embedded in everyday social relations such that recent Khoisan cultural resurgences notwithstanding, it is considered a great insult to call someone *n boesman* (a bushman).

6. Residents use the term rather than the more common pejorative term *bergies*—see discussion below.

several times by agents of the state and was again under threat from local landlords.

To describe life there as precarious is an understatement. African people's lives in nonhomeland cities had already been rendered precarious by legalized exclusions; section 21 rights, pass laws and influx control regulations, the Eiselin Line,⁷ state violence, detention without trial, and so on; the full range of apartheid's legal accoutrements of exclusion along with extralegal practices of terror. The everyday lives of poor people classified Coloured, too, was unstable, albeit in different ways, and despite the relative protections of state grants and housing subsidies offered by the apartheid state, many—including those resident in The Park—fell outside its interventions.

In 1991, the Human Sciences Research Council recommended the formation of a "transit camp" to consolidate "homeless people" in the Hottentot's Holland into one large camp before their removal to a designated informal settlement. The female leadership of The Park resisted attempts at evictions by a variety of means, mobilizing church groups, journalists, civic associations and rights NGOs, and human rights lawyers. A leadership NGO offered legal training and support for the leadership. A community committee was established, consisting largely of women, that negotiated with landlords and the council when the new postapartheid state policy regarding provision of housing to the poor was made. Negotiations included what they called "blackmailing" the council by refusing to leave the site designated for a high-end gated residential estate until housing nearby was secured. Eventually, with strong support from the then-minister of the state's Reconstruction and Development Programme, they were able to win rights to residence and to move "as a community" into The Village at the turn of the millennium. A story of refusals, resistances, and accommodations made in community's name, the process produced access to houses and sanitation for most residents of The Park and with it incorporation into new forms of subject life as rates-responsible citizens of the metropolis. Within a few months, most people were in arrears with the city, owing amounts for water, refuse collection, and sanitation provision that have quickly compounded, rebates notwithstanding. Interestingly, despite campaigns to Do the Right Thing, indebtedness to the state seems not to be considered a relation of indebtedness per se, and the obligation to pay these bills seems not to carry the same moral weight as settling one's local obligations.

The residents were very poor. Few had regular work, relying on "piece work" (odd jobs), casual work, seasonal work, extended networks of often fraught relations of debt and reciprocity within the settlement, and state grants.⁸ As elsewhere in the Cape, women's employment (usually as domestic work-

ers), while bringing in less income than men's, was more reliable, and women were generally the core around which households formed. Many people were ill and, especially in the late 1990s and early 2000s when antiretrovirals (ARVs) were not available, died young. (In this sense, one might argue that the South African state was biopolitical in the ways that Agamben [1998] describes.) Drugs and alcohol, as in earlier eras (see R. Ross 1999) were important means through which people escaped everyday trials. Interpersonal violence, especially domestic violence, was common. Everyday rhythms and routines were hard won and fragile. Striving to develop and remain in meaningful relationships in conditions of material want that militated against them, people, particularly women, generated widespread networks of care and dependence that crosscut conventional household or family units and linked residents into relationships that secured the basic means of survival. One might characterize these as processes of con-vivality. Hyphenated here to emphasize the relation, it is an ethic that seeks to secure life, both life itself and "good life" as it is made through relationships. Used in this sense, con-vivality anticipates that being alive is at stake in social worlds and that it is accomplished alongside and through others. It does not necessarily anticipate peaceableness in or enjoyment of everyday relations as much of the literature on the topic (Illich 1976; Overing and Passes 2000) suggests. Rather, it extends a notion of alertness and liveliness to life's contingency. Con-vivality thus includes awareness of the limits of life making, including violence of many kinds—interpersonal, symbolic and structural. In these conditions, residents strove to accomplish decent lives, to be (seen as) decent and respectable, to be responsive to and responsible for others in contexts that erode life's possibilities. In this way, despite terrible hardships and death's closeness, people crafted social life in the organic "messiness" of an illegal shantytown, struggled for and won residential rights, and moved to state-sponsored formal houses. They anticipated that "proper" housing would render them legible to respectable others in terms that would materialize their own decency and affirm their dignity.

The Reconstruction and Development Programme, the early blueprint for the postapartheid state, recognizes housing as a basic need. The model for recent housing provision has been informed by Hernando de Soto's (2000) ideas about providing the poor with capital for development. Given the broadly neoliberal context into which South Africa transitioned, it is not surprising that such ideas have been powerful, but they are contentious, not least for their emphasis on capital and individual property ownership (see Cousins et al. 2005; P&DM 2007). In 2000, the state was found to have a constitutional obligation to provide adequate shelter on precisely the grounds of dignity, itself the first founding value of the

7. An imaginary line that secured the Western part of the Cape Province for "Coloured" labor.

8. South Africa has an extensive grant program that currently supports some 16 million people. In December 2013, almost 11,500,000 grants

were disbursed in various forms of child assistance, mostly the Child Care Grant of R300 (ca. US\$30; Children Count-Abantwana Babalulekile 2014).

constitution.⁹ In residents' imaginations, as in that of the court and the state, housing was central to creating individual dignity and reconstructing society.

Representation and Life

For residents, *ordentlikheid* thus offered both a critique of the erosions of dignity in everyday life in The Park and an aspirational horizon. Leaders took *ordentlikheid* seriously: it offered a means to secure a sense of dignity in the face of disparagement by those who lived outside the community, often including their own families. As one leader, Sandra, put it, "People will see that we are not our houses [i.e., shacks]."

The difference between representation and life that Sandra describes exercised many people. Conversations often circled around it, and the trope of decency became a central model with which people imagined their futures as respectable and accepted members of society. (That their status as such was even in question is indicative of the ways that they had internalized the negative judgments of others.) The difference took concrete form when they completed application forms for state subsidies that would secure their place in The Village. Household formation in impoverished contexts is, as I have suggested above, often contingent, with households forming around available resources rather than, as the middle-class "common sense" that informs planning policy would have it, around kinship or affinal relationships in the first instance. People are absorbed into one another's households in multiple ways—as lovers, laborers, boarders, and fictive kin, among others. Children may be absorbed informally or formally. Formal absorption involves the state, either through practices of state-sanctioned fosterage (in which foster parents are legally appointed and receive a state grant of R800 [approximately US \$80] per month, revisited every 2 years until the child is 18) or adoption (in which case guardians are unassisted).¹⁰ There are also many informal ways in which children are completely or partially absorbed into other households. From early on, children weave complex networks that cross-stitch institutions and relationships. They might receive food in one household while sleeping in another; their schooling costs might be met by one set of people in a network while others attend to different needs. These networks are fluid. They are not necessarily reliable over time. They do not necessarily overlap with those of others in their homes; children borne of the same mother (the

key facet in how people recognize kinship) and residing in the same household might have quite different networks. Sometimes children may be completely absorbed into a household for many years, becoming in effect kin and treated as such. At other times, older children, particularly teens, might work their networks, shifting constantly.

These strategies are not uncontentious. Conditions are fraught, means limited, and often tempers fray. But the fact of their existence suggests that there is tremendous social investment in "making live" and that investment does not rest solely in kinship or the state. This was clearly demonstrated in The Village in mid-2010, when a new social worker began to implement measures to remove children from homes where they were exposed to neglectful or abusive situations. The in situ state-backed organization Oog op die Kind (Eye on the child), run by two female volunteers resident in the community, had identified several children as being "at risk." They were responsible for monitoring such children, providing backup social and emotional resources and a place of safety, and referring them to the state's social development workers. However, direct intervention by social workers and the removal of several children from their homes to state facilities or "better" homes elsewhere had led to accusations that the children were part of a personal vendetta by the volunteers against specific mothers, and the entire organization was at risk as a result of the emergent distrust.

Community leaders were worried. They agreed that children should not remain in situations in which they were at risk, but they were concerned that the children were being removed from their community and social networks. Their complete removal also meant that more stable households in the community could not obtain foster grants to care for the children—grants that sustained their own social networks. Unlike in the models of the nuclear and extended family that continue to inspire social work practice in South Africa, community leaders knew that children develop wide-ranging social relationships that link them across households. Operating with a tangible sense of the survival skills of young people, leaders were clear about the responsibilities and failings of parents and guardians and were also alert to the experimental modes through which children facilitated their access to and were absorbed into social networks. They were concerned that children should retain at least some contact with caregivers, especially mothers (even where they acknowledged neglect and abuse), in the name of love and belonging, and at the same time secure children's well-being as full members of the community; as its citizens. They held that children should remain in "the community" if those responsible for them failed them, thus holding relatively intact their social networks while mitigating neglect or abuse. To their way of thinking, it was in the best interests of the child to bolster rather than sever local caring relationships and to hold children within the community rather than render them to the state. The ensuing anxieties, debates, and discussions demonstrate the extent to which survival and well-being are envisaged as

9. In *Government of the Republic of South Africa v. Irene Grootboom and others*, CCT 11/00 (decision, October 2000), premising its deliberations on the value of human dignity, the court found that the complainants had a right to adequate shelter and that the state was obligated to provide such in its absence. It was a landmark case, the first time that the state's obligation to second- and third-generation human rights received validation in the Constitutional Court, and it instituted the relationship between rights and dignity (Sachs 2009).

10. Foster care grants are awarded to more than 500,000 people, 20% of whom are over the age of 60.

community activities and responsibilities, not merely those of individual parents or guardians or of the state alone.

The question of responsibility for making live and letting die became even clearer in relation to care for the dying. At a time when ARVs were not available, rates of death, already high among the poor,¹¹ rose dramatically, putting the question of care squarely on the table. In one terrible instance, one of my assistants, Robyn, was called to a house in which lay a man, Billy, suffering terminal cancer. He had been sent home from the hospital to die. His family was revolted by his illness. Slowly they withdrew their care, eventually leaving him alone and unattended. When Robyn found him, he had not been cared for or cleaned for many hours. He was alone, soiled, scarcely coherent, and in great pain. She called for assistance from Janine, another assistant, and some neighbors, and they began to clean him. He died an agonized death some days later. Many were incensed at how his family had treated him, abandoning him to death. “Where were the people who were supposed to look after him? It was their duty to look after him. . . . If you are going to leave that person to perish, then he’ll die for sure” was how one neighbor put it. Neighbors were furious and embarrassed that strangers—Robyn and Janine—had to take on the burden of care. Members of his family were avoided when news of their failure emerged. His wife (who died a few years later) and stepdaughter (who left The Village under duress) were both alcohol dependent. This was common in the settlement, but the fact that they were drinking in a *shebeen* (an informal tavern) while Billy was dying in the private space of the home infuriated neighbors in its flagrant disregard for ideals of care, of gendered comportment, of the proper division of public and private and the gendered activities associated with each. The women of Billy’s family were widely disparaged for their failure to care for him, and many considered them indecent, *rou*, or, as one woman put it, “unfit to live in a house.”

Being “fit to live in a house” involves the conversion of life’s rawness and the “messiness” of living “in the bush” to modes of proper appearances and sociabilities. It is strongly gendered work, and, as I have shown above, it involves practices of care that extend beyond biological relatedness (which people consider to be the ideal basis of obligation even though it frequently fails as such). People’s emotional, social, and economic relationships thus tied them into social networks that extended beyond the ostensible household boundaries that were the measure for the allocation of “housing units.” Nevertheless, residents had to fix the flows of life in and out of households and render them schematically in order to qualify for housing subsidies and thus the opportunity to materialize their dreams of living respectable lives in proper houses. Doing so required creative ways of working with the flexibility of their circumstances and relationships to represent arrangements that were legible to the state. These have

11. In 2000, average life expectancy at birth was estimated at 52% for men and 54% for women (Bradshaw et al. 2003).

enduring legal consequences. The stakes of the paperwork were high. People who did not qualify for housing subsidies were literally rendered homeless in the process because the shantytown was razed when the move was effected.¹²

Enormously complicated sets of social relations that were both melded and fractured by people’s prior histories of relationship and need were reformulated by the demand to be legible to the state in order to enable them to live a desirable form of life. These processes have caused their own difficulties in property’s afterward: as people die or terminate their relationships, the question of what to do with and about formal property relations is complicated by prior, sometimes socially inadmissible, histories and complex social forms that are not recognized by the state in ways that residents hold to be moral.¹³

An example demonstrates all of the issues described above. Meidjie was one of the two girls to whom *Raw Life, New Hope* (F. Ross 2010) is dedicated. Small and fragile, I suspect she had foetal alcohol syndrome,¹⁴ a common affliction in a population that has lived and worked on the Cape’s wine farms—a legacy of the *dop system*. Her father had left her and her mother, Susan, when she was small. Susan had moved in with an older man, Price, whom Meidjie came to call “Pa” (Dad). Susan and Price separated, and Susan left the settlement, leaving Meidjie in Price’s sister Baby’s care. Baby, upset that Meidjie might become a *weggooi-kind* (throwaway child, abandoned child), took her in, and Meidjie’s status changed to *grootraakkind*—someone “grown big” by the efforts of non-kin, here, Baby, whom she called “Ouma” (Granny; note the differentiation—Price and Baby are siblings, yet socially they appear to Meidjie as of a different generation). Price lived alone. Meidjie lived with Baby.

When it became clear that people from The Park were to move to The Village, Price and Baby, both of whom were two of the original *bosslapers* who had established the site, having come there from Aberdeen in the Karoo, found themselves at risk of dispossession. They did not qualify for housing subsidies because—technically—neither had dependents. Baby’s children were grown and had households of their own, and Price lived alone. Community leaders solved the problem creatively by listing Meidjie as Price’s dependent

12. Note the contradiction here: the process of providing shelter and dignity and producing a population “fit to live in a house” generated homelessness as its remainder. People who did not receive subsidies had limited alternative options, and several of them ended up living and working on “Busy Street”; i.e., they became “vagrants.”

13. For example, a woman’s current partner may not necessarily know about children born from her earlier relationships, especially if they were born when she was still attending school. The latter are often raised by the birth mother’s mother as though they were her own offspring. It can cause considerable social and emotional complexity when these relationships are revealed.

14. The Western Cape has one of the highest rates of alcohol use and foetal alcohol syndrome in the world.

(though she bears no formal relation to him and was not residing with him) and naming one of Baby's grandchildren as Baby's dependent. Both received houses. Meidjie moved with Baby; Price moved into his own home and was soon joined by his new lover, a woman widely regarded as being *ordentlik*.

Meidjie meanwhile, by now teenaged, "became wild." She left school, "liked good things," and was "stubborn"—a common complaint about youth in the settlement and often a signal that adults will no longer take responsibility for them. Within a short time, she stopped living at Baby's full time and began sex work on a stretch of road some distance away, returning intermittently.

When Price died not long after the move to the new houses, Meidjie came home. The community was split over her rights: legally as his "dependent," she was entitled to the house Price had shared with his lover. The latter, however, was a "decent woman," and Meidjie's actions were considered shameful. Community leaders sided with Price's lover in her struggle to remain in the house and to inherit.

At the same time, Meidjie's father Michael was released from jail after serving a term for gang-related murder. He came to the settlement and demanded access to Price's house on the grounds that Meidjie was yet too young to inherit despite the fact that he had played no active role in Meidjie's life and indeed had been absent from most of it.

Meidjie left The Village, and some years later she was found having been raped and gruesomely murdered; an object in a gang war. Michael identified her body and arranged for a burial, cruelly denying Baby any opportunity to attend a funeral and grieve. In retaliation, community leaders denied Michael access to the house and "reallocated" it—for a fee—to Price's lady friend, on condition that she offer assistance to the dying.

Abandonment and Care

That Meidjie was absorbed into Baby's household and care network is indicative of the efforts people make to care and of the deep anxieties that surround the possibility of being *weggoimense*; abandoned, discarded people, a stereotype that quickly attaches to those living in informal housing.¹⁵ *Weggooi* indexes deep social fears shaped by personal and historical experiences of the nearness of exposed living despite, at least in the case of "Coloured" people, the interventions of the apartheid state in the relational spheres of work and family. Under apartheid, as Laurine Platzky and Cheryl Walker (1985) have shown, the imbrication of racial classification and capitalism produced "surplus people," the cheap labor source on which South Africa's economy was (and remains) built (Wolpe 1972). Many of the people about whom I write had intimate experience with being categorized and produced in this way. The small percentage of isiXhosa speakers resident

in The Park had come from former homelands during the last years of apartheid, seeking better opportunities in the city. In so doing, they were already struggling against apartheid's definitions of the urban, entitlement, and belonging. Afrikaans speakers, defined as Coloured in terms of the Population Registration Act of 1950 and entitled by the provisions of the Coloured Labour Preference Area Policy of 1955 to first priority in work opportunities in the Cape Province, were nevertheless subject both to forced removals in terms of the Group Areas Act of 1954 and to loss of security on the commercial farms in the fruit-growing region of the cape or the sheep-rearing dry interior regions in addition to discriminatory regulations. Women in particular had bitter experiences of expulsion from farms. It was common practice only to employ men permanently and to use women and children as casual laborers during the harvest. When men died or left farms, women and their children often lost access to the houses that were part of men's employment contracts. Some women also found themselves expelled from social networks when they became pregnant "too early." For all of these residents, the experience of being *weggegooi* thus rested on highly gendered social processes.

Many of the residents had already fallen through the (often exceedingly thin) social networks of family and state support and, with limited employment opportunities, were perilously close to a form of life by which an elite would mark them as *weggegooi*. A few had lived on the streets, or more accurately, alongside the city's storm drains and in bush areas, surviving on occasional handouts and *skarelling* (of which, more below). Highly stigmatized, street life is the negative pole on decency's scale, a physical reminder of the closeness of *rouheid*. In Cape Town, people who live on streets are generally defined as homeless even where they have resided in an area for a long time. They are commonly called *bergies* (shortened from *bergbewoner*, mountain dwellers), a disparaging reference to their apparent lack of settled accommodation and their reliance on whatever the environment affords. They eschew this term, referring to themselves rather as "drifters." A mode of urban life one might characterize as experimental, even the very poor abjure it, seeing it as morally degenerate. The assessment has deep historical roots. South Africa, as other colonies, has long seen homelessness and lack of formal employment as a problem to be solved (see Iliffe 1987). Indeed, in terms of the Caledon Code of 1809, implemented to counter native "indolence" and *trekboer* "barbarity" toward slaves and Khoi (Dooling 2005:53), Khoi people were required to have a fixed abode and carry a pass showing their employment should they move. The code was one of the precursors to the various acts that culminated in apartheid's infamous influx control mechanisms. Those in breach were classified as "vagrants" and could be set to work (see Dooling 2005). In effect, the code made some forms of mobility crimes and rendered additional labor for the colonial regime. As Dooling (2005) notes, beyond this, the code "marked the final step in the transformation from an inde-

15. The metaphor is very powerful; e.g., a *weggooi-ooi* is a ewe that refuses to suckle her lamb.

pendent peoples into ‘Hottentots’; that is, subjugated Khoi-khoi in the permanent and servile employ of white settlers” (53). While Ordinance 50 of 1828 abolished the code for the free and the Khoi, it nevertheless allowed colonial authorities to put “vagrants” (including Khoi) to work. Thus, the link between homelessness, respectability, and work has a long and violent history in colonial governance. This endures in stereotypes that anticipate that radical material deprivation hosts the social depravities of idleness, addiction, and lust and that overwrite both the complex relations and dependencies that drifters create in their seminomadic urban lives and the historical processes that have produced this form of life.

Abjuration may also serve as a mode of distancing. For many of the residents of The Village, the ultimate degradation is to end up as a *bergie*—someone they characterize as unable to care for themselves, whose primary dependence is thought to be on alcohol or drugs rather than on people, and whose mode of life brings “the bush” too close. While sometimes accurate, these are incomplete accounts. Nevertheless, residents describe this as having life but not fully living. In other words, a life worthy of the name is created by being dependent, albeit precariously, on others. Such dependence must be nurtured through extremes of passions and circumstances. Maintaining relationships is central to survival, to a sense of oneself as a person, and to one’s sense of belonging. People thus exerted considerable effort to conform to hegemonic social ideals of propriety, attempting to mark their distance from destitution. This was so even where doing so undercut their own well-being, as, for example, when employed women married and left their jobs in order to conform to a highly valued model of respectable wifedom (F. Ross 2010:114–115; Versfeld 2012; Waldman 2007:199). Whereas an elite would characterize such behavior as a foolish waste of resources and possibilities, the women saw themselves as crafting dignified social worlds for themselves and, by extension, their kin and affines (see also Bank 2011).

Destitution and Dependency

Despite wide-ranging poverty and the diverse forms of state assistance offered by the postapartheid state, overt expressions of destitution were experienced as humiliating, associated as they were with a disparaged mode of life. Given this symbolic context, the hand-to-mouth nature of everyday life was something to be managed and disguised if possible. The failure to do so is read as a failing of decency, as the following example demonstrates.

Sakeena came into the community center despondent. A 27-year-old mother to five children, including 5-month-old twins, neither she nor the children’s father, Jonathan, is employed. Jonathan works as a casual laborer, intermittently finding “piece jobs” that bring in about R300 per week if he is lucky. They live in a “wendy-house” (colloquialism for a small wooden house in a backyard) in Jonathan’s grandmother’s yard. Five other wendy-houses fill all the available yard space,

a different household in each. Sakeena pays R300 per month in rental and estimates her water and electricity usage to cost about R200 per week. She receives a state child grant of R300 each for the three older children but has not yet registered the twins. She has tried to breast-feed the babies but struggles. New state policy on exclusive breast-feeding means that she can no longer access free formula from the clinic. Both she and Jonathan, like many others in the area, are habitual alcohol users, although Sakeena is trying to stop drinking. For the preceding few days there had been no food in the house, and Jonathan had had no work. Their oldest children, two boys, attend primary school, and in the afternoons and evenings they visit friends and neighbors who give them food. Their 5-year-old daughter and the twins stay with her throughout the day. Their sixth child died of kwashiorkor 5 years ago. Sakeena is well known to the clinic staff, center staff, and social workers.

On the day in question, she said, the twins were hungry, and as she only had water and weak tea to give them, they were querulous and she was tired, hungry, and anxious—*senuweeagtig* (nervous, jumpy), as it is locally known. She had been around the neighborhood looking for “a char” (domestic work) for which she would be paid about R100. She had had no luck. In the past, she had run “a credit” at the little shop her husband’s cousin ran from a shelter at the main house, but they had become overindebted, and the facility was closed. She felt she could not ask her immediate neighbors for food or the R70 (approximately US\$6) to register her daughter for preprimary schooling because she was already in debt to them and could not ask for more without paying off at least some of what she owed. Asking for assistance from neighbors was usually her last resort because she feared the resultant gossip.¹⁶ “Ek gaa’ skarrel,” she said, wearily.

Skarrel is a rich term. It means to scabble, rummage, and in local use, to hustle. It has strong negative valences, carrying associations with the actions of rats rather than the con man model familiar to many through American gangster movies. It is the verb people use to describe the actions of going through rubbish bins, a despised activity associated with life on the streets and undertaken largely by young men. When used by a woman, the term is still more negative: it is a sign of failure to conduct the work of a “proper” woman, the gendered effort of holding and sustaining relationships. As people say, “die man is die dak, die vrou is die vloer” (the man is the roof, the woman is the floor; that is, women are the base on which the household’s social status—its propriety—is built). This work is part of the process of creating *ordentlikheid* and holding the rawness of the world at a distance.

16. A means through which social opprobrium operates to limit dependence, gossip is a terrible leveler. It undermines personhood and may even produce violence when people take others’ words at face value and react accordingly (F. Ross 2010:160–163).

Although in common use among poor Afrikaans speakers, *skarrel* retains its rough edge, a term that cuts not because it indexes poverty per se but because it is a marker that one is no longer properly able to maintain the webs of relationships on which everyday care, and indeed survival, depend in such conditions. A clear indicator that one is “on the edge,” desperate, one’s welcomes worn thin and relationships eroded, *skarreling* puts one’s personhood into question. Undertaken by women, it brings one—and by implication, one’s family—close to *rouheid*, a state understood to be an attribute of the person, not a consequence of a cruel political economy that shapes social circumstances. Violence is compounded when women are abused for having “failed” to live up to social expectations.

Personhood is central to the management of debt and dependence. Dependence on the state (e.g., for social grants and indigence assistance) and indebtedness to it (e.g., rates arrears, school fees, hospital bills, etc.) are differently weighted to dependence on and indebtedness to one’s neighbors. It is tempting to assume that this is simply a function of proximity: face-to-face versus more distant relations. And indeed, this does seem to be part of the picture, but it is not all of it. Questions of personhood are central to securing life. People attempt to manage carefully their relations so as to differentiate “borrowing” from “being in debt.” Borrowing and lending involve judicious assessments of the quality of social relationship and the likelihood of repayment. A borrowing relationship, even if persistently one sided, assumes that the partners are at least potentially equals. Overborrowing produces indebtedness, a relation to be eschewed because it both sets up a formal hierarchy of obligation and erodes the possibilities of restoring a more equal relationship over time. Extended indebtedness to neighbors is considered humiliating and shameful.

Where one is unable to establish or maintain borrowing relations, recourse is limited. Many use their state grants as surety for loans offered by local loan sharks (often linked to gang structures) that, despite the National Credit Act’s regulation of interest rates,¹⁷ may attract very high rates of interest, often enforced by (the threat of) violence.

James Ferguson (2013) argues that given radical inequality, where limited work opportunities undercut possibilities of crafting valued forms of social personhood, there is a need to rethink the liberal discomfort with dependence. He suggests that as men’s labor becomes less central to the economy and their roles in social reproduction become increasingly insecure, an alarming “in-dependence” (Ferguson 2013:230) is produced along with radical transformations in gender and generational roles, the latter facilitated in part by access to state grants. While I broadly agree with the thesis, the data I present above suggest that we need to think

about dependence and indebtedness and the possibilities and constraints they offer as people craft life from state and household resources.

Raw Life, Bare Life

In conditions of dire poverty such as those that characterized The Village, physical and social deaths are close. Hunger and want shape bodies, capabilities, relationships, and possibilities. Poverty and desire rub against one another, producing inflammatory and corrosive contexts in which life itself is at stake. Giorgio Agamben’s analysis of power, in particular, his understanding of the distinction between “zoe” (bare life) and “bios” (qualified life), offers one way to think through the ethnographic particulars described here, especially as there seems on the surface to be a correspondence between the modalities of life people describe as “raw” and Agamben’s “bare” life. In the model of power Agamben describes, living and its limits are less by human life cycle and relations of dependency than by biopolitical practice.

As Rabinow and Rose (2006) point out, his argument has been taken up in a wide range of ways in the literature in recent years. However, as they also argue, it tends to exclude the range of biopower’s effects that Foucault identifies and to overestimate both the prevalence and centrality of bare life and governmentality in modernity. This is not to say that the notion of bare life is necessarily lacking in analytic value. João Biehl (2005) has argued that practices of what he calls “social triage”—both formal and informal—in Brazil do render some lives more valuable than others and do produce an “excess population” that is relegated to the margins, abandoned to a form of life that, he suggests, carries no political or indeed social meaning; lives to which no rights attach. Drawing on Agamben’s notion of “zones of indistinction,” he describes one such site, Vita, as a “zone of abandonment.” Inhabitants of Vita are those whom society cannot absorb, abandoned at the outskirts, left to live through and with the limited possibilities available in contexts where one’s body, relationships, and language—and therefore the meanings one can make and that are made about one—are unreliable. Vita is a horrifying demonstration of the processes and effects of social triage, in which human relationships, histories, and connections are rendered bare and exempt from ordinary patterns of care. Carefully tracing this process as it materialized in the life of his interlocutor, Caterina, Biehl shows how these processes render her life utterly precarious. Indeed, with trepidation and horror, he identifies both her and those similarly relegated as “ex-humans.”

Many of the people with whom I have worked have experienced similar forms of social triage, but there is one considerable difference between their experiences and those of the residents of Vita. In the cases I have described, people sought to expand their repertoires of care and to absorb loss and suffering in relation to a concept of “community” operationalized through the ideal of respectability set in distinc-

17. There are 10.3 million registered taxpayers in South Africa and 20 million recorded credit-active consumers, almost half of whom have impaired credit records (NCR 2013:5; 1.5 million people are blacklisted).

tion to raw life. In the context of postapartheid reforms, this has enabled them to attract and receive state care, especially in the form of state-sponsored housing grants and more recently in access to life-saving medicines such as ARVs. In other words, the material suggests that the simple binary between bare life (zoe) and political life (bios) needs revision, particularly in former colonies, where politics was founded on control over the domestic rather than on the exclusion of the domestic from politics as in the model Agamben describes.

Indeed, as Veena Das (2006) notes, the apparent bareness of life represented by the writ of habeas corpus that Agamben claims as the basis of governmentality and the politics it produces is called into question in the colonial context, where “taken-for-granted notions of nature and culture had to be explicitly articulated in the context of subjects whose integration into the law was mediated by the notion of custom, as well as for citizens who were domiciled away from metropolitan centers” (96). Reading cases of habeas corpus from the Indian colonial archive, she shows that legal decisions by colonial authorities did not rest on a notion of the body as pure bare life but on an idea of an already fully social being; the body called forth by habeas corpus was a gendered and aged person embedded in and produced by social relations rather than a body per se. She argues, “even when the law is demanding a body to be produced before it, this body is already constituted as a socio-legal subject rather than a natural body” (Das 2006:95). In other words, her argument offers a means to think beyond the totalizing framing of power that Agamben offers to the particularities of actual cases as they appeared before the law.

Drawing inspiration from Das’s careful rendition of historical cases, I have paid attention here to the specifics of ordinary lives as they are enabled and rendered in recent South African history. The link between the two possible forms of life—rawness and decency—that shaped social imaginaries in the period I examine lies in the continuities of capitalism as historically racialized and now framed in the ideology and practices of what Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) identifies as “late liberalism.” The modes of living that are invoked are not solely a product of sovereign power’s distinction between qualified and bare life, as Agamben’s argument suggests, but are products of and effected through everyday practices of relationship as these materialize the raw/decent distinction. This suggests a genealogy of bareness that is deeply embedded in local ways of understanding persons, relationships, history’s effects, and life’s possibilities. In other words, rawness and decency are fully social modes of being, produced and lived in the ordinariness of everyday worlds as they are shaped under the press of different political regimes, historical processes, cultural models, and the everyday social interactions they make possible.

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