

Species of Theses and Other Pieces

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REFLECTIVE ANIMATION

Navigating the *What-What*

Jhono Bennett

Abstract: Critically engaging with one's positionality in contemporary architectural research in a post-Apartheid South African context requires an approach that blends concerns about identity, location, and voice in responsibly creative means, while not reinforcing the existing power dynamics inherent in such work. This essay employs Jane Rendell's Site-Writing modality to develop a means of navigating these inter-demographic and inter-locational dilemmas – the *What-What* – that emerge when working from a »northerly« located institution and speaking from a »Southern« position through multiple audiences. A reflective-animation method has been developed that provides a proto-methodology for both documenting and speculating with the tacit nature of spatial design practice in post-Apartheid South African cities.

Keywords: Site-writing; Reflective Animation; Practice-oriented Research; *What-What*

Situating an Inquiry

Situated approaches to research call for critical, transparent, and vulnerable acknowledgments of self, location, and other dimensions, of both the researcher, as well as the research topic. Such scholarship understands knowledge as limited, specific, and partial (Rose 1997). The recognition of inter-positional dynamics within contemporary doctoral research continues to increase in use around critical and urban scholarly concerns about voice, identity, and knowledge-paradigms across academic disciplines and global locations. While design fields – architecture in particular – still often tacitly carry their traditional practice approaches.

This contribution seeks to offer a partial and situated reflection on a journey through a series of positional and locational concerns that were revealed while creating the initial visual and design artifacts during the first stages of the author's doctoral study. These creative-research products were developed through a site-writing modality as a means of navigating these

difficulties – framed here as the *What-What*.¹ Articulating the dynamics within the *What-What* as a locally understood South African term, and operationalizing it for knowledge production in a cross-global platform play an important role in making local nuance visible and »thicker«. This is a key aspect of Southern practice as it asks the reader to re-situate their understanding of this term based on its locational roots. In addition, this article will discuss the early methodological findings and journey, while acknowledging important »incommensurable« limits encountered and acknowledged by the author.

Situating Myself

Growing up in the coastal city of Durban, learning to ride my bicycle on the (then) predominantly white beachfront, having a black nanny who cared for my two brothers and myself, and even attending school in classes that inversely represented the country's demographics were all (in hindsight) unquestionably »normal« to me and those around me. I grew up with a common language and imagery of party politics and shallow readings of »race or identity«: with »the new« South Africa as a backdrop to my memories of early life. While I started school in a period (1992) that allowed students from different racial backgrounds to attend, and was the first school year to undergo the »new curriculum«, as a class we had little critical exposure to the nature of my country's recent relationship to the Apartheid regime.

More than a decade later, during my master's year in architecture, a handful of fellow students and I stumbled into the Slovo Park project (located in an »informal settlement«) and began a process of fundamentally questioning many of the assumptions that we had held as unquestionably true. My introspection into this realization, alongside my thesis work, led me along a path of deeper personal criticality and learning how spatial design, policy, and law play all play a significant role in shaping cities and the people who inhabit them: people like me.

¹ The concept borrows from a South Africanism that is used in conversation when describing a group of dissimilarly connected items/things/ideas/conditions that one recognizes tacitly and is implied through the context of a conversation. It is effectively a blank placeholder term for something that is very difficult to describe – but is known tacitly between discussants. The term was used by South African novelist Ivan Vladislavic in his 2006 publication entitled *Portrait with Keys: Joburg & What-What* (Vladislavic 2006).

The #FeesMustFall protests that coincided with my early career development as a researcher, practitioner, and educator at the University of Johannesburg gave power to the critique that had been boiling under the surface of most South African universities for decades and allowed many students and staff a space to challenge and shape the university systems (within limits) toward a »decolonial« future of tertiary education.

The #FeesMustFall protests in South Africa brought important and systemically critical questions around identity, positionality, and privilege in universities across South Africa to the fore (Mpofu-Walsh et al. 2016).² While there is much critique of the efficacy of the response from the various institutions (Chikane 2018), the multi-year demonstrations allowed for difficult and important discussions and institutional shifts within the academic and scholarly sector in South Africa, particularly around the built environment disciplines. There has been much reflection, theorization, and speculation on and about this period of time (Mpofu-Walsh et al. 2016; Habib 2019; Morrell 2019), but for this contribution, the discourse within architecture and around design, as well as urban studies, is more acutely considered.³ Traditional design research from this context, in particular around questions on whose »voice« guides research topics, or what frames »contemporary knowledge contribution« lacks much depth or nuance when conducting both spatial research or design work – a point made clearly by South African urban researcher Tanja Winkler (2018) when describing the nature of such challenges. In regard to such challenges more globally, urban studies scholar Aisha Giwa (2015) discusses similar dynamics while referencing a host of contemporary scholars who further expand on these points.⁴

This article intends to frame the challenges and the initial methodological findings from the author's early journey situating a research approach through various positional »dilemmas« – collectively framed as the *What-*

2 The protest's message centred around access to the resources of South Africa through education as well as the inclusion for those beyond the university's reach.

3 The framing of the author's contribution to these topics is not unique to South Africa, but this work focuses on the positional challenges facing researchers who occupy counter-positions within the academy and practice as outlined by Tariq Toffa (2020: 8) in their work *Class Conversations*.

4 These include urban scholars Tariq Jazeel and Colin McFarlane's (2010) interrogation of the nature of »responsible« academic research between Northern and Southern scholars, to which they suggest methodological detours and a revaluing of research frameworks.



1.

Developmental Gestures Series. Images: Jhono Bennett, 2021.

What. The work is structured through descriptive findings from an iterative creative exercise that facilitated the development of a proto-research method employing animation, architectural drawing, and an experimental form of reflective writing. This contribution to the discourse on situated forms of research practice will share the emerging issues around concerns about location, audience, voice, and incommensurability in South African cities.

Situating an Approach

I spent a decade of my professional career working in a part of the built environment that is considered by my architectural peers to be described as »the developmental sector«. I have done this through the cross-disciplinary platform of my co-founded social enterprise and research practice, 1to1, Agency of Engagement, as well as my role as an educator in Johannesburg.

This experience took me into the field of developmental practice, where I began working with the South African arm of Shack Dwellers International as socio-technical support. My work was largely to assist the various forms of grassroots leadership the organization worked with. This journey has now taken me abroad where I am currently encountering more complex positioning and layering of these experiences as a »Southern« doctoral scholar in a »Northern« institution—especially when the discourse is so firmly based in normatively »Northern« ideas about the city, equality, and practice.

The author's positionality in relation to research practice relates to the writings of Donna Haraway (1988), which provide a solid theoretical starting point. Haraway notes the vulnerability of knowledge production and offers a means to ground research practice in a critical recognition of one's own position toward »a more adequate, richer, better account of a world, in order to live in it well and in critical, reflexive relation to our own as well as others' practices of domination and the unequal parts of privilege and oppression that make up all positions« (Haraway 1988: 579). This acknowledgment of the importance of a critical embodiment is echoed by Sandra Harding (1991) who highlights the pitfalls of not acknowledging such dynamics, nor building systems of accountability in one's own research practice (Norber/ Harding 2005). Both Harding and Haraway, according to Gillian Rose: »argue that all knowledge is marked by its origins, and to insist that to deny this marking is to make false claims to universally applicable knowledge which subjugate other knowledges and their producers« (Rose 1997: 307).

As a means of critically acknowledging the »incommensurable limits« of the author's own positionalities around applying decolonial ideals to their academic work (Yang and Tuck 2012: 4) – while carefully internalizing Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh's (2018) articulated distinction⁵ between decoloniality and decolonization – this study⁶ has adopted a »Southern« approach to knowledge production. Such an approach is described by urbanist Gautam Bhan as »a mode of theory building that focuses on locationally specific aspects of practice in Southern cities« (Bhan 2019 : 4). Bhan describes the »South« not as a set of geographical places, but as a relational project: a set of moving peripheries, and refers to the anthropologists Jean and John L. Comaroff's concept of »ex-loci« on this point (Comaroff/Comaroff 2012; Bhan 2019).

Situating the Methodology

Reflecting on more than a decade of work in »the development sector«, I feel confident in saying that the urban built environment aspects of South Africa's spatial challenges are often disproportionately discussed through a polarized lens of »housing and infrastructural services« with an unhelpful focus on a »better design« for a home for one of the most tangible symbols of the country's unequal development: the »informal settlement«.

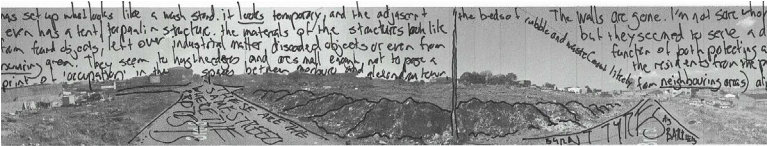
My experience showed me and my colleagues that at the core of many of the challenges that face »informal settlements« lies a 400+ year system of socio-spatial inequality that was the foundation of the Apartheid project and is now the framework that continues to shape South Africa and South African cities. It was important to recognize when thinking through contemporary »global« developmental frameworks and when reading »post-Apartheid« city dynamics. What was even harder to disentangle was our »Northern« influenced framings of »informality«, »urbanity«, and »development« as these principles

5 Decolonization refers to the undoing of colonization (in regard to the nation state) while decoloniality focuses on untangling the production of knowledge from what is claimed to be a primarily Eurocentric »episteme« (Mignolo 2018).

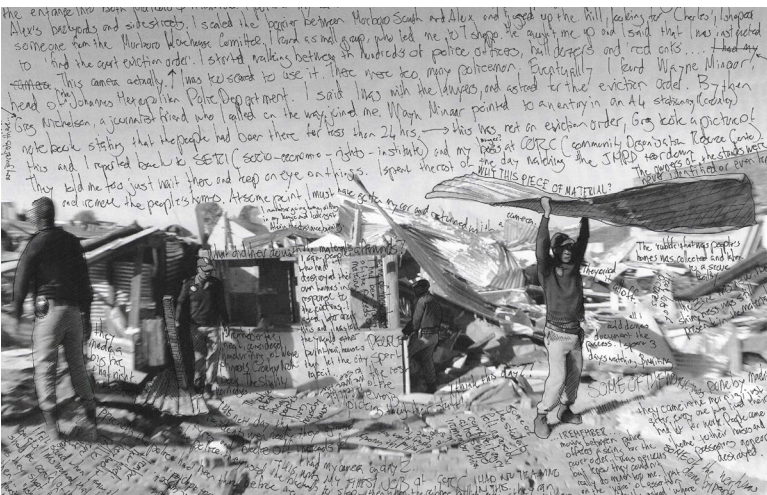
6 This has been done using a critical engagement with Linda Tuhiwai Smith's code of conduct for »decolonial« research practice (Smith 1999: 120). For this reason, the study acknowledges but refrains from citing texts by more seminal decolonial scholars whose work is directed toward and in support of voices other than the demographic position of the author.



2.
Slovo Park, an Informal Settlement on the outskirts of Johannesburg.
 Photographer: Jhono Bennett, 2013.



3.
An earlier Inquiry into Writing-from-Site with Marlboro South.
 Image: Jhono Bennett, 2021.



4.
An Extract from the First Series of Exploring the Marlboro South Experience through Site-Writing. Image: Jhono Bennett, 2021.

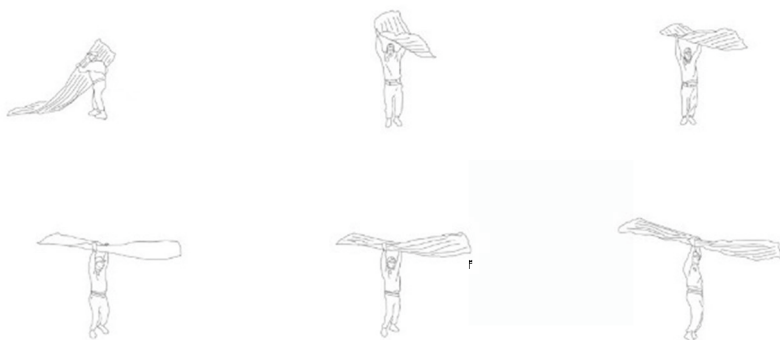
(taught to us through university and literature) did not typically allow for more localized readings of what form practice might take.

Designer and design-learning researcher Jolanda Morkel and media studies scholar and educator Franci Cronje (2019) offer an insight into the history of spatial design in South Africa through the role that design education played in the legal segregation of the population through the built environment during the Apartheid era. Her work, alongside several other architectural scholars (Le Roux, 1999; Watson, 2009; Low, 2019; Osman et al., 2020), reveals more details about the socio-political nature of work carried out since 1994⁷ to make space for the humanities and »design« in higher education during the country's infrastructural redevelopment, and points out (among many other concerns) how the societally consequential dynamics of the relatively »precarious« resources available to higher education infrastructure place an inordinate amount of pressure on institutions, scholars, and students. These tensions continue to manifest themselves in post-Apartheid South Africa, where African Futures Institutes founder, Lesley Lokko, explains that »the inequalities are far more deeply entrenched in southern Africa than they are in the rest of the continent, and are inextricably bound up in race, language and identity – issues that are at the very core, the very root of who people are« (Lokko 2017: 2). In recognition of this need for epistemic reconsideration, the critical, iterative, and visually driven modalities of Jane Rendell's Site-Writing (2010; 2020) provided a relevant methodological starting point for the author's project. The following section will unpack the work produced from these methodological framings.

Situating the Research

Due to both the physical and emotional distances that have been created between myself and South Africa, the site-writing work began in my own practice photo archive as a way to »re-visit« Marlboro South in Johannesburg: this was the site of my first project in the developmental sector and where I spent many months supporting grass-roots leadership groups during an eviction of over 500 homes. Here, I worked between the non-governmental organization (NGO) Shack Dwellers International, the City of Joburg, the Johannesburg Metropolitan

7 The year that South Africa was seen to be »politically free« and the new post-Apartheid regime began.



7.
The first Series of Animative Reflections in the Spirit of the Order Series Developed from the initial Site-Writing Exercises that Emerged through Reflective Drawing. Drawings: Jhono Bennett, 2021.



8.
The Later Series of Animative Reflections Developed from the Initial Site-Writing Exercises that Emerged through Reflective Drawing. Image: Jhono Bennett, 2021.

Police Department, and the University of Johannesburg, and was often placed in very emotionally and technically difficult positions.

Initially, I struggled with what felt like »extracting« from this situation; this positional paralysis felt crippling and had me trapped in cyclical patterns of guilt, anger, and shame but, through the support of the Site-Writing cohort, I pushed myself »to make it« through these feelings, and began working more closely with the archival photos.

I started with simple tracings, creative writings, and role-playing exercises. I then worked through physical prints and used illustration alongside handwriting as a means of re-telling the stories of my time »on-site«. As I wrote, traced, and re-drew the events of that time, the emotions of those moments were made tangible, while other actions and events began to make more sense alongside deeper understanding of South Africa's socio-spatial landscape.

These exercises were highly cathartic and almost meditative as I worked freely and intuitively through the tacit act of writing, drawing, and »re-visiting« the site through the imagery of the project. This iterative and repetitive act of writing and drawing worked as a form of reflection as well as documentation of both the experience and the method, and is assisting in the further development of the broader study's ethical framework.

During an iteration of this process that focused specifically on the images that captured aspects of materiality, and individuals through digital illustration software that employed a layering structure, I noticed how the drawings, when overlaid, imitated a series of movements. I leaned into the animative quality of the image and the drawing that allowed a rapid production of content through intentional and slower means of image making. This rhythm of reflection and making opened a line of experimental inquiry into animation as both a form of reflection-on-practice, as well as situational analysis.

I then re-visited my practice photo archive and searched for more accidental stop-frame sequences that engaged people, material, and action. From these, I developed the final series of explorations that captured the »spirit« of the actions around the Marlboro South project. This story and the work itself is captured in more detail in the digital exhibition of the work.⁸

There is a dynamic relationship between the image, the movement, and the practice of producing an animation that resonated strongly with the reflective nature of the study's work through Site-Writing. Such a relationship led

8 <https://spiritoftheorder.cargo.site/> The website password is: stayingwithmytrouble

to the exploration of animation as a means of documenting not only a spatial act of making, but the embedded tacit layers of place. This comes from a decade of exploring architectural drawing beyond functional duty or aesthetic abstraction, and a disciplinary interest to show that other forms of spatial instruction can exist outside of the traditional two-dimensional or static drawing format. The architectural scholars Linda Groat and David Wang (2013) discuss the elements of rigor and repeatability that are required to produce design-drawings in detail, and don't distinguish between work produced for a built product or a process. They stand by the distinction that design is a particular activity within research that carries its own »distinct knowledge« and embedded practices.

Situating the Trouble

This initial series of design inquiries has been intuitively guided by my own feelings around critical questions on positionality, ethics (personal, contextual, and institutional), and the »right« to conduct or be involved in research on this, and related topics. While I believe that one can practice through their own individually considered »positional power-moves« without there being a »correct« means of responsibly engaging with such dynamics, the developmental sector still seems to be missing a set of recognizable (and shareable) »ethics-in-action« protocols that work toward building accountability and better practice values in spatial design. I point this out to name the aspect of the What-What dilemma – that I am also a part of, – as a means of strengthening the collective discourse and preparing the ground for further layers of inquiry about what form positional power-moves may take and entail.

This recognition of one's own position within their immediate and larger socio-political context is discussed at length in the critical qualitative field of knowledge production (Jacobson/Mustafa 2019) and is generally framed through broader concerns on roles (Herr 2015), accountability (Butler 2001), and power-dynamics (Norber/Harding 2005) toward knowledge production. However, positionality remains more ethically troublesome when called upon to »act« – in this case, spatially design or make within the built environment. While positionality is considered to be a multi-dimensional and evolving concept (Simandan 2019), the concerns discussed in this article are drawn from those framed by Gillian Rose (1997: 305–322), who in their own work, guides us to feminist scholar Linda McDowell's statement that we

must recognize and take account of our own position, as well as that of our research participants, and write this into our research practice (McDowell 1992: 409). These entangled positionalities intersect with local practices and critiques, as well as global readings of South Africa, and intermingle with the author's own concerns about accountability, guilt, and audience direction.⁹

This study is placed at the intersection of architecture, urban studies, and arts practice and seeks to develop methods and approaches that support the navigation of seemingly paradoxical and counter-positional situations, and that acknowledge the inherent contradictions of attempting to »de-center« perspectives (Orelus 2013; Mbembe 2017; Patel 2020). While this could be interpreted as an act of »re-centering« and avoiding other more immediate scales of action, the author trusts in the emerging design-research modalities that have already begun to support the development of their own ethics-in-action approach to knowledge production. This comes with the intent of contributing an additional partial perspective toward shifting, disrupting, and hopefully (at some level) challenging some of the larger issues of power, as well as Northern normativity and the centrality (Yang/ Tuck 2012) of knowledge production from the author's own current »centre«.

Situating an Opportunity

This body of reflective writing and drawing have not been offered here as an external critique toward the new communities that I am becoming a part of here in »the North«, but possibly as an opportunity to add additional perspective from a cross-locational »outsider/insider« to the concerns about place, drawing production, and research practice discussed above. This could be considered an opportunity to lay the groundwork for developing additional ways to responsibly and critically practice such ethics-in-action –but I would like to clearly acknowledge the troubles, limits, and contradictions inherent in such actions. This acknowledgment does not seek to absolve me of any accountability, rather I frame here a means of emphasizing what such positional power-moves mean for me as a South African versus those of others here in the »North« and abroad.

9 Toward which I have interpreted the concept of the *What-What* as a means of simultaneously acknowledging and working through these concerns via my own Southern-located practices.

Donna Haraway (2016) suggests »making-with« rather than »self-making« as a means of learning how to »stay with the trouble« and build more livable futures. While Haraway's introductory text does not specifically speak to the topics held within the *What-What*, their work offers a compelling reference point for a more actionable set of possible »ethics-in-action«. The study draws on Haraway's call to stay, embrace, and situate oneself within the systems of complication and complicity that they describe as the »thick present« (Haraway 2016: 9): a call that encourages one to stay with, sit within, and work carefully and slowly through the *What-What* – not around it.

The author suggests that there are other means of staying with one's *What-What* and offers this journey in reflective-animation as an example of dwelling in »the trouble« by working through such complex dynamics using iterative, deliberate, and careful means. In this case, the author has attempted to introduce more context-specific nuance, situated detail, and multi-voiced subjectivities to the imagery of Southern African spatial practices through animation as a means of architectural instruction. As animation sits between the mediums of image and film, it has not been deeply explored as an architectural means of instruction or documentation and – in this case – when combined with text, has allowed for a means of synthesizing the trouble inherent in the *What-What* and offers more than a singular frame or comment on a complex site condition such as Marlboro South. This methodology of using animation to deepen and situate the research in place is still in the early phases of development. It will be developed further and methodologically speak to the larger aims of the doctoral project: which seeks to contribute an additional perspective to the growing discourse on Southern Urbanism through a focus on the designerly aspects of an approach that works from place, recognizes concepts of periphery, and engages with Brazilian Southern urbanist Teresa Caldeira's request to »take seriously the idea of thinking with an accent« (Caldeira 2000).

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