
REFLECTIONS

“Ways of (Sight) Seeing” in KwaZulu-Natal, Part Two, Mooi River ¹

Ashwin Desai

1999. I was asked by a trade union to go to Mooi River to research the effects of the only factory in the town. Situated about a 45-minute drive from our capital, Pietermaritzburg, I remember the town from my childhood. Especially the weeping willows that engulfed the petrol station where my father refuelled en route to Johannesburg. I was there because I heard Mooi River Textiles was going to close down. Some 800 workers would lose their jobs, pushing the unemployment statistic over the 70 percent mark.

The effect on the town will be catastrophic. I wanted to see it before it dies. The company pays R200,000 a month to the local council, provides half the jobs in the town, and most of the businesses that exist in the town survive on the buying power of the workers from the plant. Mooi River is a one-company town.

I looked up the mayor, Justice Shabalala. I found him at a housing project on the edge of the African township of Bruntville located on the wrong side of the N3. We drive across the bridge to the Wimpy on the white side of town. Justice is unemployed, has no transport, no ceremonial chains. In his early 30s, he has been mayor since 1996. He is proud of the RDP houses that have been built in Mooi River's dormitory township of Bruntville, but worried that the closure of the textile plant will mean that people won't be able to pay for services.

He admits that the town has no plans of how to counteract the shutdown, although there has been a presentation from a consultant with links to the notoriously low-paying Chinese. Meanwhile, he tells me, farmers are forcing more and more people off the land, and they are streaming into Bruntville.

As we drive back, he points to a field where Harry Gwala, the fiery ANC leader, addressed the Bruntville community in the 1980s. Violence was sweeping the township as the ANC and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) squared up. Gwala

¹Part One of this essay appeared in the June 2006 issue of *Capitalism Nature Socialism*.

bussed the women and children to Edendale and told the men to go back and fight. In the ensuing battles, Majola, the ANC leader, was killed, and Justice Shabalala, still in his early 20s, was thrust into the leadership.

I make my way to the factory. It is located across a single-lane steel bridge, and security is tight. Rumors abound of friction between the 800 workers who are to be dismissed and the 200 who are to stay. It would appear that all the administrative staff are white. They seem oddly cheerful as if they are being looked after. The notice board reveals that most of the senior staff have evacuated ahead of the public announcement of the scuttling of the company. I get ushered into one of the hastily promoted managers' offices. He tells me that the company has to find R1 million a month to service its debt. At the same time, tariffs decline, allowing for cheap imports from Indonesia, Pakistan and India. Imports now dominate. The secretary shows me out.

She came down from England years ago. She says the problem is there, pointing in a northerly direction, I gather, towards the township. "They are building houses for themselves, and that is the problem." I ask: "If they agree to stay in shacks and hovels, will the company stay open?" She considers this. She guesses not.

I find out that the owner of the company is a German financier, Claus Daun. He bought the company in August last year. He also owns Da Gama Textiles and has interests in Saprotex, Yartex, Table Bay Spinners, Boland Fine Spinners, Valley Textiles, Union Spinning Mills, Gelvenor Textiles, Courthiel Fabrics, and SA Fine Worsteds. If this were not enough, he controls Dick Whittington Shoes, Richleigh Shoes, Jack and Jill Footwear, Jordan Shoes, and United Fram Footwear. I have not asked him but clearly his favorite person is Imelda Marcos.

He buys a factory in August, and a few months later closes it down. The *Financial Mail* has called Daun a magician and a wizard. They reported that in one deal alone he made a cash pile of R320 million. He is a wizard all right—in a few months he has made a factory, 800 people, and a town disappear.

I visit the shell of the National Co-operative Dairies building that closed down a few years before. The Farmers' Weekly Exchange has ceased to operate, and Spar has also left town. The town is on its last legs.

The inhabitants of Mooi River wander around in shock and awe. Our own Fallujah. Not destroyed by bombs but by cruel and unrelenting economic prerequisites. In fact, Daun's closing down the factory is like a pre-emptive strike. It is a script repeated across the country. Factories, like rusting, abandoned Soviet tanks in Afghanistan. Our clothing and textile industries are decimated. Tariffs after 1994 came rushing down. But the government provided no "supply-side measures."

We could not compete with the Asians. Economists called for “wage restraint.” Taken in isolation, wages appear to be high. Dig below the level of appearances, and you will realize how the waves of colonialism, apartheid and neoliberalism mean black workers live in poverty. Gill Hart shows in her book, *Disabling Globalization*,² which is based on a study done just up the road from Mooi River in the area of Newcastle, the fallacy of the wage restraint argument. She found workers in Newcastle generally earned more than workers in similar factories in mainland China but had less buying power. The answer is not wage restraint. It is about redistributing the land and access to public transport. Nobody in power is listening.

The union movement responds with a campaign. Buy South African. It is as ridiculous an economic response as trying to sell shaving cream to the Taliban.

Mooi River can be accessed by a toll-road, one-and-a-half hours out of Durban. As you leave the town, you might want to write ex-President Nelson Mandela to inquire if the long road to freedom can be sponsored by tollgates—for that is all that Mooi River has left.

There is pain. Everywhere. New sutures open new wounds. Sores of the past get infected with a new disease: commodification. Of everything. Tens of thousands get their lights and water disconnected across the country. Violent battles are fought by poor people just to stay in the very hovels that the new ruling class condemned as apartheid ghettos unfit for human habitation. People get up from a deep slumber and realize there is no pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. A pot of shit more like. Literally, as it turns out. In Harrismith, on the border of KZN and the Free State, raw sewage flows out of leaking buckets. People take to the streets. They get shot at. A schoolboy gets murdered by a police bullet. Sedition charges follow the protestors.

The marketization of basic services, the institution of cost recovery mechanisms, and a rash of disconnections and evictions have overshadowed delivery, post-apartheid. Researchers and government officials argue over the number of disconnections. But there is no doubt they occur on an ongoing basis and are a constant threat to poor people. According to Bond,

(T)he reason for the disconnection epidemic was obvious. Notwithstanding deeper poverty, the South African government—ranging from municipalities to water catchment agencies to Eskom [the South African electric utility]—raised water and electricity prices dramatically from the mid-1990s. By 2002, they accounted for 30 percent of the income of those households earning less than R400 per month. One cause of higher municipal utility prices was that central-local state subsidies designed to cover operating/maintenance expenses suffered

²Gillian Hart, *Disabling Globalization* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 2002).

dramatic declines during the 1990s (85 percent in real terms, according to the Finance and Fiscal Commission).³

The government responded to the wave of protests about water cut-offs with the introduction of a free basic minimum of water. “A very small lifeline (6,000 liters per household per month) followed by very steep increases (along a convex tariff curve), such that the next consumption block became unaffordable.”⁴ The United Nations Development Program 2003 Report pointed to the issue of affordability of electricity:

Eskom’s full cost recovery approach has made access to electricity unaffordable to many Soweatans. The “free services” policy has not been a particularly effective strategy for the urban poor because of the household density of many low-income households and their need for larger volumes of electricity. The number of electricity disconnections has increased drastically, especially since 1996: On average, disconnections increased from over 22,000 per month in 1996 to almost 100,000 by 2001.”⁵

In thinking through this process, David Harvey has written about the continuing centrality of primitive accumulation. In these times, new forms of accumulation through dispossession have emerged. This involves, in the main, privatization. In South Africa, Harvey observes that “total cost recovery by municipal owned utilities” has meant that “unable to afford the charges, more and more people were cut out of the service, and with less revenue the companies raised rates, making water even less affordable to low-income populations.”⁶

The Toxic Tour and the Movement of Shack-Dwellers

Halfway between the city center and the Durban International Airport is the South Basin, with the “colored” township of Wentworth lying at its center. Chari describes the neighborhood:

The residents of Wentworth have been forced to live cheek by jowl with petrochemical refineries and other heavy industry in South Durban. The South Durban industrial basin is in fact a larger residential-industrial complex that includes two large petrochemical refineries—ENGEN, a subsidiary of the Malaysian State Oil Corporation, Petronas, and SAPREF, a Shell-BP joint

³Patrick Bond, *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neoliberalism in South Africa* (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2005).

⁴*Ibid.*

⁵United Nations Development Program, *South Africa Human Development Report 2003* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 105.

⁶David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 159.

venture [whose projects extend to] sugar, paper and pulp mills, motor manufacture, chrome production, an international airport, chemical tank farms, waste sites, incinerators, other manufacturing, and harbor, rail and trucking facilities. One of the highest concentrations of industrial activity in Africa, South Durban is by some accounts poised to becoming a major chemical industrial export hub.⁷

Industrial development in the South Basin was carried out at the instigation of white business interests with the aggressive support of local and national government during the days of apartheid. This meant the uprooting of whole communities in the South Basin. In Clairwood, for example, the population declined from 50,000 in 1960 to 5,000 in 1970. This “creative destruction” was done under the code words of “scientific management,” implemented by planning bureaucracies at the local level.

With the government earmarking the South Basin as a priority development zone, the continuities with the old are stark. The alternatives for the communities are also out of the dusty social engineering textbooks in City Hall: Relocation, voluntary or otherwise. People living in an area known as the Barracks in Wentworth—where rows upon rows of poorly built and narrow dwellings exist, giving the impression of fowl runs—have been threatened with removal to a place some distance from the city center into dwellings so badly built, cramped and isolated that they have been dubbed “toilets in the veld.” For the poor in today’s South Africa, development has meant moving from a fowl run to the lavatory. Engen has started to buy up property around the plant and is gradually industrializing greater and greater parts of the South Basin habitat.

It is not as if there is not a lighter, if farcical, side, to the narrative of City Hall’s supine attitude towards big business in Durban. The Deputy Mayor, Logie Naidoo, weighed in with his own solution that he learned from a recent trip to Houston, Texas: Plant trees around the two major oil refineries. A local journalist retorted:

We all like a tree, don’t we? They beautify our environment, house all manner of colorful birds—and provide a vital function for male dogs everywhere . . . But a solution to the toxic soup which hangs dangerously over South Durban? . . . Excuse me but this sounds like a smokescreen to me. Tell the oil refineries to clean up their act, perhaps. Have legislation passed that prohibits them from doing what they damn well please . . . I sometimes think these politicians cannot see the wood for the trees.⁸

But endemic and chronic asthma at rates four times the national average is no laughing matter. Neither is a suspiciously high incidence of blood and lung cancers.

⁷S. Chari, “Wentworth’s Experiments in Politics, unpublished paper, 2005.

⁸*Mercury*, August 8, 2002.

An environment conducive to the well-being of each citizen is the promise of the new South Africa, but stunted children, choking air and a repellant aura is the reality for those living in Wentworth.

However, Wentworth is not just a place of victims. It is a hotbed of struggles that Chari has called Environmentalism. This movement

holds the promise of drawing together a variety of constituencies across race and class in shared mobilization over their commons, which is also the waste dump of petrochemical giants. groundwork (sic), an organization which emerged from Wentworth, has become South Africa's key environmental justice organization. By 1995, groundwork spawned the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, or SDCEA, to link racially divided communities across the South Durban basin to respond to pollution in the local environment. SDCEA's work within Wentworth steers a course between popular mobilization around specific events with ongoing legal activism.⁹

As Chari points out, SDCEA provides a fascinating case study of the ways in which "militancy and constitutionalism can be mutually reinforcing."¹⁰

For those with some lung space to spare, one can join with that irrepressible activist of the South Basin, Des da' Sa, in what is called "the toxic tour."

In Durban, the shack-dwellers of Clare Estate protest the "betrayals" of their councillor, Yacoob Baig, once of the National Party, then of the Democratic Alliance, now of the ruling party. Fourteen get locked up in Westville prison. Some schoolchildren out(casts) writing their own script for delivery. The ruling cast responds. Criminalization. Like magic, the wand becomes a sjambok.¹¹ Third Force.

The authorities' rationale: the crowd is irrational, impulsive, and barbaric. This thesis argues that people become deindividualized when they become part of a crowd; they experience a loss of rational control. Further to this, it is argued that the person in the crowd undergoes a regression to the "primitive" or "savage," and this results in the individual becoming no more than an "animal acting by instinct." It is the physical proximity of others that triggers crowd action. Rationality is abandoned, and people can be influenced willy-nilly. Le Bon in the hands of the ex-freedom fighters and stone-throwers is back in vogue.¹²

⁹Chari, *op. cit.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹A kind of whip.

¹²Gustave LeBon, *The Crowd* (Somerset, NJ: Transaction Books, 1995). Originally published in 1895 and long a staple of reactionary belief about group behavior, LeBon's ideas were taken up by Freud, who asserted that there was no such thing as group solidarity.

The arrests occurred during an illegal blockade of both the inbound and outbound sides of the six-lane freeway running into the city from the north on Saturday, March 19, 2005. Around 750 people barricaded the road with burning tires and mattresses and held it against the Public Order Policing Unit for four hours. There were fourteen arrests on the criminal charge of public violence. Among the arrested were two school children. Alfred Mdletshe told Fred Kockott, the first journalist on the scene,

We are tired of living and walking in shit. The council must allocate land for housing us. Instead they are giving it to property developers to make money. The rooms are hard to live in, and there are no toilets, so the bush around us is full of excrement. When it rains, there's sewage slush all around. It really stinks.¹³

Intellectual and activist Richard Pithouse takes up the story:

This was certainly the most militant protest to have shaken Durban in the post-apartheid era. But these events were not unique to Durban. More than 850 illegal protests have been logged around the country so far this year, and similar revolts have emerged from shack settlements in cities and towns across the country in recent months . . .

The Kennedy Road settlement is a space of hope and suffering. The chance for very poor people to live in a wealthy suburb near to the city center means access to all kinds of opportunities for livelihoods, as well as education, health care, the sporting, cultural and religious life of the city and so on. And while there is a vibrant collective life in the settlement with a sacred space marked out with a ring of white stones, and all kinds of musical, sporting and mutual support projects, material conditions are severely degraded. The umjondolos [shacks] cling to the side of a steep hill squeezed between the city's main dumpsite and the big fortified houses of suburban Clare Estate and tumble down to the ugly big box stores of Springfield Park. There are four official taps for drinking water and another (illegally connected) tap for washing hands, six poorly maintained portable toilets, and no refuse collection in a settlement of over 6,000 people.

Until 2001 pre-paid electricity meters were being installed in shacks. To get electricity you needed to pay R350 and to be able to represent your case in a certain way. According to S'bu Zikode, chair of the Kennedy Road Development Committee "It all depended on who applied. If you seemed ignorant because you can't speak English you were just told to wait outside."

The City has since informed Kennedy Road residents that there is a new policy not to install electricity in informal settlements. More than 70 people with receipts for payments for installation have neither a refund nor electricity. The lack of electricity means fires, and this year there have been five conflagrations.

¹³Fred Kockott, "Shack Dwellers' Fury Erupts," *Sunday Tribune*, March 20, 2005.

Some of the children in the settlement have the emaciated limbs and bloated bellies which indicate that poverty has been written into the future of their bodies. Everyone seems to have someone who is desperately sick, and there are more than 50 households headed by children.

But looking over Springfield Park and through the valley cut by the Umgeni river, you can see the sea sparkling in the sun. *Hadedas* [glossy ibises] take wing at dusk and when night has fallen an *isicathimiya*¹⁴ group sings with abundantly delicate grace, from a hall with broken windows and peeling paint, “We are going to heaven, all of us we are going to heaven.” For the always immaculately dressed and avuncular Mr. Ndlovu [says] “Sometimes it is just so beautiful here. They think this place is too good for us. They want it for the rich.”¹⁵

What emerges in these all too brief moments is a practical magic where “there is no such thing as a demiurge, that there is no famous man who will take responsibility for everything, but the demiurge is the people themselves and the magic hands are finally only the magic hands of the people.”¹⁶

Pruning at the Botanic Gardens

There are still sedate places to be found. Nestled at the foot of the Durban Berea, the outer limits of which you might just spy from the university if you stood on your toes, is a living, breathing embellishment 14-and-a-half hectares in size. Standing at the highest point of this marvel—next to an ancient reservoir and just behind a 500-year-old male of a species for which there are no longer any mates—you see unfolding beneath you the placid undulations of trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses that are the Durban Botanic Gardens. Few others can boast such a diversity of plants, from aloes to orchids, giant fig trees to tiny lavender leaves. And down at the lake, water birds brood, lovers edge closer, children giggle, readers flip pages, and poodles strain on their leashes. Even the lone tramp has a spring in his step.

Initially laid out in 1851 as a testing ground for new crops to be farmed in the Colony of Natal, the Berea Gardens quickly yielded a winner, sugar cane. Indeed, for many years it was solely in support of farming that the gardens were tilled, and only in the 1890s, under the inspired curatorship of Dr. J. Medley Wood were a variety of trees and shrubs cultivated. Now, with both aesthetics and biodiversity in mind, the aptly named Medley Wood went about bringing specimens from all over the world. These efforts brought high acclaim for Durban, and the gardens

¹⁴Isicathimiya literally means “on tip toes” and is a form of a *cappella* choral music developed in migrant worker hostels to enable choirs to sing without detection from bosses. It was made globally famous by Ladysmith Black Mambazo and generally expresses religious feeling or romantic yearning for the lost pleasures of (a no longer viable) rural life.

¹⁵Richard Pithouse, “Obedience Doesn’t Pay,” *Sunday Tribune*, March 27, 2005.

¹⁶Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1963).

quickly became the place to be seen for picnics, weddings and other sedate social events.

Throughout the first half of the 20th century, the Gardens continued to grow and new features were added. During the Depression, out of work (white) laborers were given the task by the City Fathers of constructing the stone enclosed sunken garden that is still today so pleasing to the eye. Gardening techniques progressed so that there was always some section of the parklands where trusses of flowers bloomed brilliantly and meadows of grass were kept short and trim.

I once sat on a simple wooden bench and sucked in the late afternoon air. Above me the leaves of two massive exotic trees mingled, letting in shards of dark green and yellow light. The leaves were turning and, yes, I could discern the beginnings of just a little nip in the early autumn air. I had come to the park to welcome the season with an excellent bottle of Late Harvest. You see, I am decisively in the third quarter of my life. Just like the foliage above me colors and falls out, so does my hair. But, strangely, amidst the decay is a strange feeling of contentment and ripeness. I don't know who else among you has experienced this curious mood.

Just for an afternoon, I had vowed to stay off politics, off race, off class struggle. Alas! In talking to one of the curators, I became aware of just how encircled our existence is by questions such as these. The Botanic Gardens are cash-strapped as the Metro Council prunes its public spending. After having been gradually hedged in to a smaller space with sprawling property developments on three of the four sides, the gardens now depend heavily on the largesse of a frugal public. Gardeners—the place's creative energy—might even be chopped soon, while, ironically, ticket collectors and rangers will be hired to keep the riff-raff out and bring more poodles in.

Moves are already afoot to build the ubiquitous brick conference center-type structure to make better “use” of tourists and other consumers near the Garden's quaint gazebo. Reliance on big business will bring in talk of profit margins and advertising space. All this makes it difficult to continue with the Gardens' protection of rare indigenous plants like the African ginger, which is clinging to survival by a tendril. Even affirmative action has to be confronted. With space at a premium, the curators are agonizing over which trees and shrubs to cut down to make place for the admittedly underrepresented indigenous flora.

If I were you, I would make some time to enjoy this “common” enclosed on all sides by the city center. Soon the low gates that let the public in for free will be uprooted, and turnstiles will be planted to keep out the lower classes who cannot pay. “We have to earn revenue, otherwise we cannot keep the gardens alive,” explains a regretful official who admits that this sits uneasily with his drive to educate street children and squatters on how to grow vegetables and cultivate herbs.

The Umgeni Road Temple

Umgeni Road was once the main link to the city's north coast. That role now taken over by a freeway, the road is home to second-hand car dealerships and a taxi-rank that feeds off the huge concrete mass that hides the city's main rail terminus and is tucked in between one of the province's oldest temples.

I passed the temple many times in my youth but only got to visit a couple of years ago. There was a sign that greeted me. Women were not allowed to wear pants. No jeans allowed. It appeared that somebody had stolen a sign from the old Durban Club and placed it here.

Once inside, a pantheon of gods lay in wait. I walked around, trying to give the impression of studied contemplation. There was no dress code for the gods. The local priest was himself not exactly fully dressed. A journey had begun.

Almost immediately I got lost in the world of a trinity of gods. I met Brahma, the creative principle, who emerged from the belly of another god, Vishnu, seated on a lotus leaf. And Shiva with four hands. Shiva, who seeks to destroy the world and Vishnu who desires to preserve it, are perennial rivals. Every so often, Vishnu descends to fight Shiva and to prevent the end by a few more years.

Each time Vishnu descends, he assumes a form that corresponds remarkably to the Darwinian idea of the evolution of the species. For example, he descends first in the shape of a fish, an aquatic animal. The second as an amphibious tortoise, and the fifth time as a complete human being, but short and slightly hunch-backed. The sixth time he is Parahurama, a man of great strength living in a forest, whose command over language appears magical.

Frighteningly, Shiva will eventually triumph. We are living in that age now, where Shiva holds exclusive sway. The age of Kali Yuga—the time of destruction. Described in the *Mahabharata* as a period when laws are broken, social bonds evaporate and civil wars proliferate. Within families, antagonisms of all kinds become endemic, and wild animals invade the cities. In the words of the *Mahabharata*: Crime walks abroad. Carnivorous animals lie sleeping in the streets. The vultures are gathering.

What does Vishnu do through all this? He sleeps. And we, amid the impending destruction, we must keep our dharma: the integrity of our actions. This we must do so that Vishnu does not forget the beauties of the world. Otherwise, all beauty will be erased from memory, the world will not reappear and a new cycle will not be able to begin again. Echoes of Christianity abound. Or was it the other way around?

The triumvirate of gods is the flipside of the holy trinity. Brahma, swirling down the river on a lotus leaf and the baby Moses among the reeds. The Kali Yuga and the Revelations.

Are gods capable of plagiarism?

There is a message in the story of Kali Yuga which tells of the coming of the age of rampant materialism. Shopping malls. Casinos. Lotto. The Stock Exchange. Snapping back into the present, I think of the priest worried about a dress code. I think about priests who spew out mumbo-jumbo at weddings and the plethora of ceremonies that masquerade under the banner of Hinduism. I think about those who still believe in the hierarchy of color. What will they say when they realize the eighth avatar of Vishnu, the much-revered Krishna, means black?

Visit the Umgeni Road Temple. Indentured laborers found refuge there at the turn of the century. There is science fiction there, romance, betrayal, the apocalypse, psychoanalysis, and gods that are fallible. The more one reads, the more one realizes that the challenge for the followers of Shiva and Vishnu is to rescue Hinduism from religion.

All the phallic symbols might just inspire you to visit another great landmark in the city.

The Red Light District

Durban's pre-eminent street of sin is Point Road and the alleys leading off it; the district stretches roughly 3 kilometres from the harbor mouth to the corner of West Street where the cheaper hotels start. The last time I looked, purely as a matter of social research mind you, the rates ranged between R50 and R300 a time. And, as I will argue just now, there is much that sex work, or prostitution, has to offer the rest of society if only we had proper social research to allow appropriate lessons to be learned.

In fact, this research has already commenced, but it has been tragically interrupted. Perhaps some among you with industrial sociology expertise could pick up the fallen baton. Let me explain what I mean.

As you may know, historically, the political economy of this province was based largely on sugar cane. The industry is still very important here, and what used to be called sugar barons are now called CEO's of a number of different sugar producers, mills and wholesale companies. These companies all work under the auspices of the Kwa-Zulu Natal Sugar Industry Association.

A few years ago, one of the biggest names in the industry, Glyn Taylor, a former chairperson of Illovo Sugar, conducted pioneering research—social psychology at its

most radical—into the manner in which the logic of prostitution could be harnessed for the better and more efficient running of companies. Unfortunately his research—based heavily on participant observation—was interrupted by his death, a fact that also starkly brought home the stresses under which our senior executives work.

Glyn Taylor was, as I have said, the upstanding former chairman of Illovo Sugar, a delegate to the International Organization of Employers, and a hands-on patron of the performing arts. Melanie Peters writing in the *Independent* on Saturday May 15, 1999 put the place of death of Taylor at Norge Road in the Point area. Prostitute Thandi Molefe (not her real name) said that Taylor wanted to watch her play with herself while he masturbated. “As he climaxed, he held his chest and gasped for breath.”

We have for too long ignored the sacrifices made by the captains of our industries and the long hours they put in to keep South Africa working. One had hoped that after one of their number collapsed and died of a heart attack, red lights would begin flashing in boardrooms throughout the land.

That the climax of his distinguished career was to be found on the linoleum floor of a sex worker’s third-story apartment in Point Road is unimportant. Of course there was some sensationalist reporting suggesting that the chairman was not a worthy man, because he died after paying R50 to a young black woman to “play with herself” while he masturbated on her bed at 2:30 PM. On this score the public comments of the vice chairman of the Sugar Association, Tony Ardington, concerning the chairman’s “deep involvement in labor issues” seemed a little hostile. Although residents of Point Road regarded the chairman as a “familiar face,” according to the papers, this episode does not disclose any “deep involvement.” He kept her at arms length, for goodness sake. At the memorial service in the Playhouse, the Anglican Suffran Bishop of Natal remarked that the Chairman had a “wide knowledge of commercial affairs.”

Perhaps this refers to comparative market research in Thailand and on-the-job edification in coming to grips with the effects of globalization. It is a tribute to his skills as a negotiator and his passion for ensuring that every crevice of the South African labor market becomes globally competitive that he bargained his counterpart down to R50. Indeed, in getting his pound of flesh, the chairman remained a firm adherent to fiscal discipline and the free market to the end.

But surely this seminal contribution in championing the benefits of trickle-down economics should not be for the personal account of a mere handful who have the initiative and responsibility to ensure that the fundamentals of the economy are kept in place. The sex industry is crying out for annexation by organized business. Why should our hard-pressed executives have to risk the indignity of death in the wrong part of town when the services they have come to depend on can be provided for as a tax-free business expense on company premises?

The benefits are obvious: the company will not lose management time in journeys downtown; performance can be monitored; proper health and safety standards can be observed. By bringing the hidden handmaidens onto the payroll, management stands to secure for its money not an odd hour at a time, but an uninterrupted eight-hour day, regulated by applicable norms, so to speak, of discipline and discharge.

Looking at some of the inventive measures industrial psychologists have offered employers in everything from labor negotiation theory, wage-restraint and productivity-enhancement, a case can be made for sugar daddies, too.

By the time you read this, the name of Point Road might be changed. The city mothers and fathers have expressed a keen interest in re-naming the road after the man who made celibacy sexy—Mahatma Gandhi.

Thursday: Magical Nighttime Beings Come to Life in Fire

In Essenwood Park below the soccer field every Thursday evening, a truly remarkable event takes place. Just after dark, like vampires, a coven of young people draw together.

Parking their beat-up cars on the road, they make their way in dribs and drabs across the park towards the shadowy glow of an ultraviolet light. There they stand in a circle for awhile saying nothing much until the rhythmic beat of ambient transcendental music finally takes up. In the gloom, one can barely make them out, holding chains and sticks and staffs in front of them.

There is the smell of paraffin, and suddenly a flicker of fire originates. The circle slowly converges upon the single flame, which is solemnly shared. Their arms outstretched, these magical, nighttime beings eagerly await their piece of flame which comes to burn at the extremities of the implements they hold. And then the swinging and the throwing begins.

Tracing slow circles in the air and then fast figures of eight, then faster still and more complicated the movements become. The whole body is involved, silhouetted dramatically against the dangerous passage of fire as it inches away from eyes and hair and dress.

After a while, there is nothing but a whirling pattern of insubstantial fire in the air above heads, between legs, brushing cheeks and searing the grass below. The fire is everywhere and nowhere, being spun and slashed and juggled all at once. And if you look long enough and surrender to the music, it is the most primal of dances one sees with movements so elegant and light that you feel you have to join in.

I did not recognize her at first. She was young and pretty but unremarkable in her calve-length black dress and barefoot as she stood alone on the outskirts of the ring of fire. But then, when the fury of fire-swinging was at its most intense, this majestic creature revealed herself. She padded to the center of the circle to assume her golden throne. She was in a league of her own. She paused as a friend rushed over to light the twin chains she held in her hands and then began the most casual of revolutions, gradually gathering not speed but subtlety.

The movement was not generated in her shoulders and hands as far as I could see. It began in her hips and passed on to the chain through that part of her arm between her elbow and wrists. That is where her body ceased and the chain began. Such grace, I have never seen before. So intricate the movements and so delicate the variations she accomplished that I stood totally mesmerized. I doubt I would ever have emerged from this charm had she not released me from it. With an impetuous spell of giant looping circles getting faster and faster, she suddenly sucked the life out of the flames she swung with a flurry, so fast, the fire was blown out.

There was quite a big crowd of onlookers sitting around watching the magicians on blankets and deck chairs, drinking wine and eating sandwiches made at home. Where else in the city could public space be used without money having to be spent?

These two-dozen kids seemed to be custodians of a carefree tribal life of drumbeats and fire dancing, rejecting shopping malls, night clubs and cosy nuclear families around the television. How terrible, I thought, to be part of the black and white political elite across the city on Thursday nights, squashed into suits and ties, quaffing smoked salmon at cocktail parties and living such fluorescently inhibited lives.

There is a message: to all you oily entrepreneurs with your kitsch, homemade artifacts and battery-operated contraptions, stay away. You grumpy vendors of over-priced beverages, stale breadrolls and quick-congealing condiments, know that you are not welcome. Most important of all, keep your distance you rugger-buggers and yuppie-scum. The beauty of this activity will be lost on you, and you'll hurt yourself later trying it out at home.

It is moments like these that make you think how little of "the commons" are left in the city. It is ironic that apartheid-free South Africa has accelerated a new form of enclosure. Already there are beaches where you have to pay to play. During peak seasons the beachfront is cordoned off, and only residents and those who can pay R800 a night to stay in hotels are given permits. The rest have to park a distance away and walk. During international conferences, street children are spirited out of the city. Sprinklers ensure the homeless cannot find a quiet spot to sleep. Police on horses bang people on their heads if they nod off on benches just like they did when you sat on benches marked "whites only."

Enclosures and the commodification of everything. Water and electricity are corporatized. So with delivery comes disconnections for non-payment. When that gets opposed, new self-disconnecting apparatuses are installed.

Essenwood Road is a magical moment of individuals lighting a fire. What we need is a movement that illuminates a path to make common and to de-commodify.

More than a decade into the transition, it's a time when all the solidity of the anti-apartheid struggles and its aspirations has melted into air. Fifty years after its unveiling in Kliptown, a seminar on the Freedom Charter was hosted at the Kwa-Muhle Museum, Durban. Are ideas like "the people shall govern and the land shall be shared among those who work it," artifacts of the last century?

Now, the socialists of yesteryear occupy the boardrooms of corporate capital. Capital flies in and out at the touch of a mouse. The Gospels that inspired our quest are not written in stone or fixed in a Bible that never changes. Now we read that the Samaritan first checked if the injured Jew had medical aid. Jesus divided the fishes and bread and sold them to the highest bidder. He could not cure the lepers because of financial constraints, dared not turn the tables on the moneylenders at the risk of offending the markets, and preached that forgiveness of debts and transgressions only encouraged inflation and fundamentalism. What is a pilgrim to do? Poverty eradication, becomes poverty alleviation, becomes poverty reduction. The language about what can be achieved has changed. Changing the world has mutated into changing the word. All journeys must pass through toll-roads; all trips must begin and end at the market. St Thomas, you were right to doubt after all.

Welcome to KwaZulu-Natal, wedged between the Drakensberg mountains and the Indian Ocean, where the end(s) of history are dressed up for these new neoliberal times.