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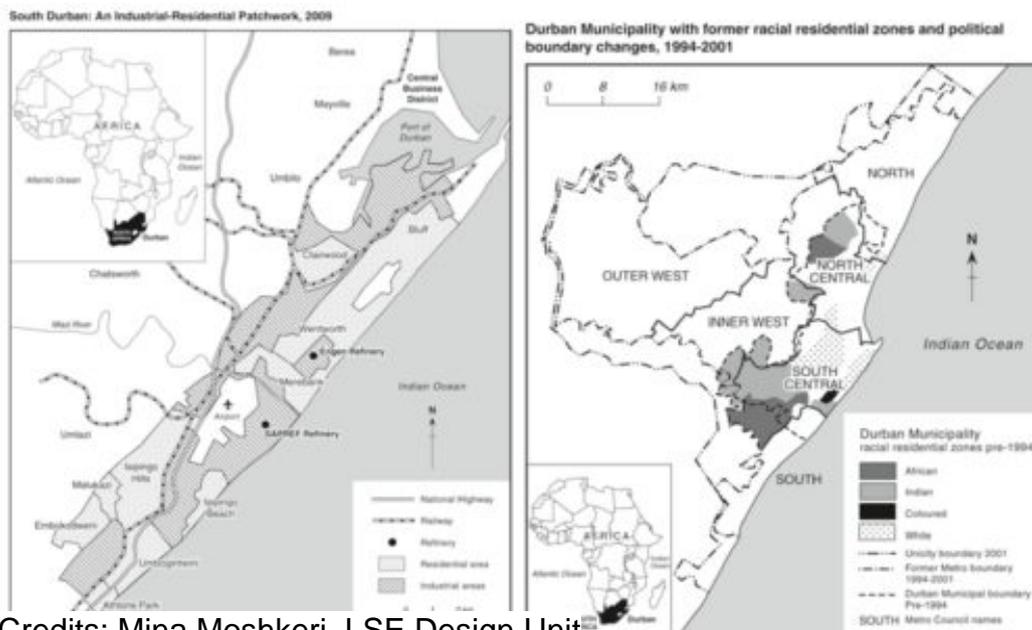
## Detritus

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By Sharad Chari

I employed the category 'detritus' in the early 2000s to diagnose the different kinds of residues of racial capitalism with which people struggled in the shadows of South Durban's oil refineries. These residues ranged from various attempts at documenting the effects of industrial pollution, to the many ways in which people confronted the embodied and sensual remains of apartheid's racial capitalism — most viscerally in the periodic smell next to the refineries. With a seemingly ascendant set of community and independent labour struggles in South Durban, it seemed like the remains of racial capitalism could no longer be ignored, as people collectively refused to be rendered detritus in post-apartheid times.

First, a bit of context. This essay emerges from a broader historical ethnography of neighbourhoods nestled in the industrial-residential patchwork landscape of South Durban including the former apartheid townships of (once and largely still) Indian Merebank and (once and largely still) Coloured Wentworth, as shown here:



Credits: Mina Moshkeri, LSE Design Unit

This industrial-residential landscape is known as the South Durban Industrial Basin, and it is an industrial valley that confines residents' lives

to a toxic sink. The contributors of industrial pollution include two petrochemical refineries, a pulp and paper mill, numerous small industries, and until recently, Durban Airport, now the site of a massive, phantasmal harbour expansion. Life in this toxic industrial valley has prompted important environmental activism that has linked mobilisation at community, city, provincial, national, and international scales in what is one of Southern Africa's most prominent community-based and multi-scalar environmental movements. This was the main focus of research on South Durban when I first encountered it in 2002. I sought to understand how people engaged in community, labour and environmental struggles refused to be laid waste by post-apartheid racial state and capital.

As this wave of South African community movements rose and fell in the first half of the 2000s, my research turned to a historical ethnography of limits to struggle, and to the frustration of political hopes despite participants' best intentions. The broader project, 'Apartheid Remains,' asks how remains of past episodes persist in variously materialized form in the present. How do these remains frustrate change in an industrial-residential landscape too slow to deracialize, and too slow to remove people from long and short term exposure to ill-health? Most of these 'remains' are toxic in one way or the other, most obviously in the industrial-residential landscape itself, an artefact of early 20<sup>th</sup> century industrialization and segregation. Racialization in these neighbourhoods is a combination of the suppression of turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Indian Ocean histories, of post-war histories of forced dispossession and of the coercive classification of people and spaces in apartheid's racial-spatial fix. But late 20<sup>th</sup> century South Durban has also been a terrain of struggle, quite literally.

Durban in the 1970s erupted in a moment of unprecedented and unstoppable struggle, beginning with dockworkers strikes in 1972-3, widening across industrial Durban in 1973, connecting to radical students connected to New Left praxis, the radicalized Natal Indian Congress, and, importantly, to Black theology and the Black Consciousness Movement centred on the charismatic Steve Biko. I distinguish what is called 'the Durban Moment' from the much-mythologized armed struggle led by a banned, jailed, and exiled liberation movement leadership. At a crucial juncture in his short political life before his banning, Biko resided next to the oil refinery in Wentworth. I call this strand of politics the politico-theological moment in which some people imagined a collective leap of faith into the political unknown. After its repression, several figures from this political current continued their work in the margins, and a decade later, a group sought to bring the politico-theological and militarist currents together in a concerted Leninist strategy of building hegemony for the imagined return of the exiled ANC. This third moment would seem to

have been a dialectical resolution of the politico-theological and militarist moments, in Hegelian-Leninist terms, and my research followed this expectation all too faithfully.

Indeed, I had imagined writing something inspired by CLR James's (2001 [1938]) classic *Black Jacobins*. Like James, I was interested in the seeds of revolution in an industrial context shaped by the forces of racial capitalism. I imagined showing how the 'tools of biopolitics' (Breckenridge 2014) used to build racial-capitalist infrastructure in the early decades of the century were radicalized by Durban's 'Black Jacobins' to challenge that infrastructure. While drawn into Breckenridge's left-technocratic desires, I had not bargained on something else: that this expertise was out of reach for most people, that many activists of the 1980s urban movement were uninterested in deracializing their lived realities, and that many more unruly and undisciplined strands of struggle emerging across South Africa's townships were similarly uninterested in making common cause.

One such organic anti-apartheid group from Wentworth was more interested in blowing things up than in imagining how violence might be the midwife of a new order. This is a fourth political current emerging from Wentworth, with its own internal arguments and gendered compromises, its own questioning of the possibilities and limits of violence. After a spectacular car bombing of a beachfront café, the characters at the centre of this group attained a particular status of infamy. These were the apartheid era 'terrorists' who could not transition into 'struggle heroes.' And what they point to today are the ways in which the hegemonic form of antiapartheid struggle in the 1980s would ossify in the machinery of post-apartheid political accumulation.

But another kind of antiapartheid critic emerged alongside these saboteurs, from the same milieu of street gangs and vibrant/suffocating township life. These were documentary photographers like Cedric Nunn and Peter McKenzie. Now, I see such figures as offering a better way to introduce the persistence of life in the shadows of oil refineries in South Durban. As a kind of detritus itself, the photographic record of events past speaks precisely to the way people live with and refuse persisting remains of the past. Consider Nunn's powerful photograph of football players next to the Wentworth Refinery:



Credit: Cedric Nunn, 1995

Nunn's 1995 photograph uses the classic form of black and white documentary photography, perfectly suited to iconic contrasts, to portray corporate power hanging over the persistence of life, as if in perpetuity. Photographers like Nunn have been at pains to return to their negatives from the decade of transition, 1985-95, as they retrospectively refuse the certainties of anti-apartheid photographic discourse. As Meg Samuelson points out, the return to the negative forces attention to photography as a practice of working with remains, both as waste products and as the not-yet. I argue that this image stands at the threshold of an emergent critical discourse that does not yet have a name, a not-yet politics that is actually post-apartheid.

McKenzie describes leaving his 'kaasie,' his township, to pick up a camera instead of a gun. His photography documents scars (tattoos, marks of circulation between gangs, prisons and township space), spaces, and embodied hopes within the curious spacetimes that endure the transition from apartheid. His photographic practice is entirely about engaging with the toxic racial and embodied detritus of apartheid. Given his own situated emergence from the place he documents visually, McKenzie's practice is a self-consciously masculine meditation on the presence of the past. I present just a taste of this work, from a project that names an impossibility, 'Vying Posie' or 'Going Home':





Credits: Peter McKenzie from the collection 'Vying Posie' (Going Home)

How might the photographs of Nunn and McKenzie be read not as an aesthetic retreat from politics, but as a way of thinking of political futures that cannot quite yet be spelled out in words alone?

From the perspective of Wentworth and Merebank, there is a pressing sense in which the politics of detritus is viscerally important. Environmental discourse has not quite galvanized a movement to represent the plight of people next to refineries, breathing benzene all their lives. They know they will not in fact leave this geography (I refer back to the maps) next to the city centre, and to workplaces, if not jobs. They know that if they leave their benzene-soaked neighbourhoods, they will not inherit the leafy colonial white city. Neither do they want to inherit the rural-urban Black township sprawl that extends out from Durban. And residents are painfully aware of poverty experts and left academics swanning through their township and thinking they 'get it,' simply because of the visual power of witnessing life next to a refinery. Nunn's image above can be seen precisely as dangling this ruse.

I draw parallel insights from Kojin Karatani, one of Japan's most important post-war political philosophers, who has some piercing insights about the 'defeats' of 1968, when a series of intellectuals shifted their concerns, as he puts it, from politics to poetic thought; reflecting on the emergence of modern Japanese literature also in the wake of political failure, Karatani is deeply sceptical of "a revolution by words which relies on the power of ideas" (Karatani and Wainwright 2012, 35). Karatani does not dismiss deconstruction or aesthetics – he was first a literary critic, and one of his

main contributions has been a deconstructive reading of Marx – but his observation is simply that we must be critical of what the idea of political failure produces. I find this useful for thinking of ‘post-apartheid’ as also as a moment of critical questioning, also in the photographic discourse deployed by Nunn and McKenzie. I suggest that these photographic thinkers provide a critical language to dwell on apartheid’s remains, and to engage ‘political failure’ as a *spacetime* of multiple possibilities. Karatani uses the letter ‘X’ to mark a politics of association beyond the trinity of capital-state-nation; for him, ‘X’ does not yet exist, except as a political principle.

But I think ‘X’ might in fact exist in various sites in which people conserve their dignity, their respect for others and their environs, and it is in this sense that I pose the photographs of Nunn and McKenzie as a politics of dwelling in the detritus of racial capitalism, and a reaching for the poetry of the future.

[Sharad Chari](#) is at Berkeley Geography, and affiliated to WiSER at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, where he was for the past four years in Anthropology and the Centre for Indian Studies in Africa. He is completing a book called *Apartheid Remains*, based on research since 2002, on the remains of segregation and struggle in 20th and early 21st Durban, South Africa. Chari is author of [Fraternal Capital](#) (Stanford UP, 2004), an agrarian historical geography of an industrial town in South India. He works collectively with the Berkeley Black Geographies Group and with the Submergent Archive, and is starting new work on the Southern African Indian Ocean, and on geo-graphy as earth/ocean/world-writing.

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