

**“This thing it is not finished.”**

**Political Identity, Democracy, and the Commodification of Justice: Redistributing Wealth in South Africa, 1980-2003**

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**Abstract**

*This paper examines the actions of former radical South African grassroots level activists who dropped out of politics during the post-apartheid decade. It discusses their response to the “new” South Africa, and suggests that a number of them, disillusioned with their new democracy, shifted their political identities as socialist minded comrades to contextual capitalists who placed commodities in a central position in their lives. I present a case study of a woman whose actions illustrate that sites of resistance are sometimes difficult to distinguish from adaptations to a larger scene, in this case a highly charged, politicized set of social relations embedded within contested ideological structures.*

A commodity appears, at first sight, a very trivial thing, and easily understood. Its analysis shows that it is, in reality, a very queer thing, abounding in metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties. (Karl Marx, Capital 1990:163)

**Introduction**

This paper offers an introductory analysis of a particular group of grassroots political activists in Munsieville, a small Black township outside of Johannesburg, during the initial ten year period of transformation after the 1994 elections where the African National Congress was voted in as the ruling party. As former *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (MK) fighters during the 1980s, their political identity was forged in the socialist principles of the South African Communist Party and the African National Congress’s Freedom Charter.<sup>1</sup> Despite their past activism, they chose to withdraw from political action during the post-apartheid decade because of bitter disappointment with the government’s neo-liberal policies. This small group represents a population not usually mentioned in the political analysis of post-apartheid South Africa. Many social science researchers have interviewed and documented the struggle through archival research and field interviews.

The data are generally gathered from comrades who currently hold positions in government or business, and who have moved into a better life circumstance (see for example van Kessel 1999), or comrades who are still active at grassroots and are fighting the new government’s neo-liberal policy (see for example Ballard, Habib, and Valoodia 2006; Desai and Pithouse 2004; Gibson 2006; Mayekiso 1996). This research focuses on a group little understood; those who were active in the resistance at grassroots levels, whose lives currently operate on the political and economic margins, and who have removed themselves from political action out of political disillusionment. I believe there is much to be learned from this population, however, as literally millions of South Africans find themselves at odds with their new democracy, but who take no action. What happened to the liberation dream of returning wealth to the people? Where is the social justice the Freedom Charter promised?

I suggest that, as the Munsieville comrades became increasingly dissatisfied with their new democratic government, their socialist identities were transformed as they developed new strategies that enacted their own mechanism of redistribution of wealth. Former devoted socialists transformed their political identities to one of contextual capitalists. I define contextual capitalist as one who seeks personal accumulation of commodities as a strategy to enact economic and social justice in relation to democracy and capitalism writ large.

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<sup>1</sup> The Freedom Charter (1955) is the central document that framed the socialist goals of the revolution.

As the post-apartheid decade unfolded, some comrades in Munsieville continued to question where the government was headed. A schism developed between those left behind in the country's reconstruction process and those who had moved into lucrative government or business positions. Where class had been clearly tied to race and ethnicity during apartheid, now class conflict was forming between former comrades. Munsieville now had its own bourgeoisie along with its perpetual poor and working class people. While many of the emerging Black bourgeoisies chose to leave the township and move into plush, formerly white, suburbs, others chose to stay in Munsieville and continue their lives in familiar surroundings, but with their economic situation vastly improved. One has only to drive down selected neighborhood streets in Munsieville to view the additions to the four room matchbox houses, including garages. Children from those neighborhoods now go to private school outside of the township. Homeowners hire local women to maintain the house and watch children while they pursue new careers in government and business. Residents drive luxury cars and wear expensive clothes. They take vacations. They have made it. Democracy works! But as significant numbers of the poor working class and unemployed realized that a dignified life that includes fundamental rights was continuing to escape them, it became increasingly clear that as they had been during apartheid, they were still positioned as outsiders to economic and social gain.

Early on, the new government launched reconstruction and development projects designed to build new houses, bring water and electricity to communities, upgrade schools and educational opportunity, and provide jobs (see Bond 2000a, 2000b; Marais 1998). Despite some progress, for many in Munsieville those early programs failed. According to the 2001 census, the community continued to falter. Unemployment was almost fifty percent. Thirty-nine percent were living in shacks in informal settlements, with twenty-one percent living in shacks built in back yards of permanent brick houses. Fifty-five percent of households had no refrigerator. The supply of water was still a problem in Munsieville. For example, only twenty-two percent of households had piped water into the dwelling. Forty-four percent had piped water into the yard. Thirty-two percent, however, still had to fetch water, with twenty-one percent gathering their water from less than 200 meters from their dwelling and eleven percent collecting water from over 200 meters away. Just over half of the households in Munsieville used electricity for lighting. Over thirty percent still used candles. Almost ten percent of the population had never been to school, and only eleven percent managed to complete high school (South African Census 2001). In short, six years of ANC governance barely made a dent in solving Munsieville's economic and social problems. Indeed, many in Munsieville were still waiting for the social justice promised to them during the struggle, and as one resident simply put it, "This thing, it is not finished" (interview 2001).

I examine responses to this unfinished business of liberation through the lens of poverty and disappointment in Munsieville.<sup>2</sup> One strategy, I argue, is that many of those on the socioeconomic margins of Munsieville translate material "things" (cf. Appadurai 1986) into justice, and that these things, or commodities, hold specific meaning against the historical backdrop of apartheid and the current democratic government's economic policy of neo-liberalism. In a nation whose rulers and economic elites flaunt new wealth as a symbol of national liberation while catering to foreign investment and privatization, it is not surprising that poor citizens respond to these new symbols of liberation by also seeking to accumulate and wield commodities. For them, things become a proxy for the evasive social and economic justice they still sought after liberation. In acquiring things exclusively for themselves and their families rather than for the larger society, they transformed their identities from socialists to contextual capitalists.

These contextual capitalists developed new strategies that manipulated their surroundings and their fellow comrades. Embedded as they were in the discourses of democracy and neo-liberal capitalism, they positioned commodities center stage as a powerful consumer media culture surrounded them, forming a new mode of capitalist hegemony. If democracy means equality and liberation, it also means accumulation of wealth. Mbembe *et al* (2004) have noted that in Soweto, there is a growing pre-occupation with designer clothes, cell phones, and cars. They argue that despite widespread poverty, a new culture of commodity is emerging. Likewise, in Munsieville many continue to be poor and underemployed, and deceit, manipulation, and theft increasingly become ways to acquire the commodities that symbolize liberation.

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<sup>2</sup> Methodologically, this research was hampered by political fractures in the community that made it impossible to interview the newly bourgeoisie. Repeatedly, I made appointments with, for example, the mayor and city council representatives and elite business people, only to be given the run around. Because these elites considered me an ally of their opponents, it was clear that they were not going to talk with me.

As one informant commented one day,

This is not crime, this is business. What does a person do when they have been retrenched and are going to live in the informal settlements? There, they don't have to pay for water or electricity. ... White South Africa is involved as well. So when White Marie gets money and says so in front of her servant and gardener, they begin to look for a raise. If it doesn't happen, then a computer disappears. The ANC is aware of this. This is why they aren't doing much about it. (Interview 2003)

Responding to capitalist pressures embedded in notions of democracy, that is, that capitalism defines freedom as individual success that is measured by material accumulation, poor Munsieville residents began to engage in behaviors often misconstrued by society as immoral or criminal. My intent is not to defend offensive or criminal behavior here, but to examine activities usually not morally sanctioned by society. Behaviors that reveal a pre-occupation with ill-gotten material accumulation coupled with a sense of entitlement, whether criminal or not, became increasingly widespread in the township, as manifestations of a fractured identity exacerbated by the establishment of a liberal democracy with strong ties to neoliberal economic structures and consumer capitalism (for analysis of crime in South Africa, see Comaroff and Comaroff 2004; Schonteich and Louw 2001; Super 2010).

This analysis rests on two major assumptions. First, in many contexts democracy is used as a code word for neo-liberal capitalism, marketed to the people by government and corporate media. In post-apartheid South Africa, the political discourse of freedom and democracy infused people's way of life, convincing them of a logic of commodification, development, and modernity that is masked by a discourse of freedom and equality (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1997; Edelman 2002; Ferguson 1994; Slater 1997; Tsing 2001). Like many other developing countries, South Africa's "transition to democracy" centered on development, privatization, accumulation and movement of commodities as fundamental components of their new democracy's "success." That, combined with the power of global media and marketing, invited South Africa's new citizens to focus on the commodity as representative of their freedom, luring them away from the heart of a socialist ideology that they perceived as moral and just in opposition to capitalist apartheid.

People's human rights and ideologies of freedom became subordinated to objects that appeared, to them, to carry the power of democracy. Marx pointed out in *Capital* (1990) that the dominance of "thinghood" obliterates people's moral awareness of their social relations. Marx names this process the fetishism of commodity. Although Marx's argument is slightly different from my own, I see similarities in that people in Munsieville have assigned a "magical essence" to things in their daily lives. This essence, which is endlessly signaled in the social relations in the township, carries meaning within the current capitalist world system, where the discourse of democracy has been increasingly conflated with practices of capitalism. This conflation has been exacerbated by the power of mass media's sophisticated marketing techniques with its potent ability to transmit an ideology that is underpinned by capital. It is no surprise, then, that things often become imbued with the meaning of political success, democracy and justice.

Second, is the anthropological premise that all things, or commodities, can be understood within a given socio-political process, that they are coded for meaning and communication exchanges, and that they carry cultural understandings and social meaning (see Appadurai 1986; Douglas and Isherwood 1979; Mauss 1990; Slater 1997). A basic component in this position is that the creation, use, and consumption of things actualize dynamics that produce and reproduce culture and social relations. To be a member of a society is, then, to understand those meanings and interact with them. To be a resident in Munsieville today is to read things, whether possessed or not, as agents of freedom and justice, imagined or real. These two premises frame my analysis of contextual capitalism, which forms a political identity that I argue was common in Munsieville the first decade after liberation from capitalist apartheid.

### **Political Identity in Munsieville**

Beginning in the 1950s, as many societies in Africa engaged in liberation and social justice movements, issues of socio-cultural and political identity began to emerge as central features of contemporary social, economic, and political life. As new democracies unfolded, activist scholars increasingly engaged in interrogating the understandings of the mechanisms of cultural power and analyzing the ways people resist, arguing that identities are often constituted by power relations (see Biko 1978; Cabral 1966; Fanon 1963, 1967; Nkrumah 1965, 1967).

In South Africa, the anti-apartheid movement of the mid and late 20<sup>th</sup> century forged new social and political identities stemming from organizations and political ideologies such as a newly militant African National Congress (ANC) with its armed wing, *Umkhonto we Sizwe*, Marcus Garvey's Pan Africanism, the Pan African Congress (PAC) with its radical Black separatist philosophy, Steve Biko's Black Consciousness movement, and the ever present women's movement. These emergent identities served to transform the political landscape, directing public discourse and daily political life into new examinations of race, class, and gender. Questions regarding contingent identities promoted new discussion about how identity categories get established, how they shift over time and space, how they interact with each other on individual and societal levels, and how these categories become embedded in systems of power and oppression. Theories emerged that illustrated how dominant culture and discourses, along with popular notions about society and the individual, construct different categories of social and political beings (for South African examples, see Ranger 1983; Marks 1986; Hamilton 1998; Greenstein 1995). The enactment of this new political identity is played out through a process of social interactions that are contingent on the way in which people value and interpret commodities.

Munsieville's history of activism is like many small townships in South Africa, and created an impressive community political identity.<sup>3</sup> It is one of the oldest townships on the gold reef, and activists' identities as freedom fighters were deeply engrained within the community's political character and socialist ideology. During the 1980s, organizations such as the United Democratic Front, the South African Communist Party, and the ANC were sponsoring educational programs within the township that gave detailed, historical, Marxist analysis of how capitalist exploitation under apartheid created the miserable conditions in Munsieville. At this time a document appeared called "The Theory of the South Africa Revolution: Our Philosophy and Approach." It was distributed at the Youth National Workshop in October of 1986 and widely circulated around Munsieville. The paper began with "our guide to action," and stated, up front that

The youth must learn. And what must they learn? They must learn dialectical and historical materialism. And what is dialectical and historical materialism? Dialectical and historical materialism is the universal accumulation of knowledge. What is knowledge? Knowledge is a material force only if it corresponds in the most approximate way to the reality of its process of change...And in our situation knowledge is first and foremost an ability to grasp the real essence of the present form of society in order to replace it with a free one. (Krugersdorp Residents Organization Court Papers 1986)

The document continues for a startling twenty-eight, single-spaced pages and lays out a Marxist analysis of capitalism in South Africa and how it affected non-white peoples. It argues for a "correct theory" (original underscore, p. 19) for a revolutionary movement and a specific strategy for the way forward. Not surprisingly, it argues that revolutionaries must understand and "...be at one with comrade Marx when he pointed out, 'All hitherto history has been the history of CLASS STRUGGLE'" (original capitals and underscore, p. 19). It then moves to a discussion about the antagonisms between the essential classes in South Africa, the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, thus illustrating the heavy emphasis on class struggle that was embedded in the ideology of the struggle against apartheid. The ideologues fueling the anti-apartheid movement, supported by the United Democratic Front, the Tripartite Alliance and a handful of other organizations, were clear that capitalism was at the root of the people's problems. They emphasized that non-white workers were being exploited, and the absurd canon of apartheid laws that kept close track of racial and ethnic groups was a side-bar, although a critical one, since race and class were so deeply intertwined. The document continues:

A national liberation movement which in this epoch overlooks the class divisions within the society and which also overlooks the reality that its national democratic struggle is taking place within this historical epoch of a transition from capitalism to socialism, will fail dismally and in a thoroughly ignoble manner. [Krugersdorp Resident Organization Court Papers. p. 19]

For this reason, the Munsieville leadership acknowledged that the developing debate around a "Two-stage Theory of Our Revolution" held the possibility for long term friction within the movement. While theoretically it was possible to separate the national democratic stage of the revolution from the socialist one, in practice it was impossible. Ideological dissatisfactions were growing in that some comrades believed that the socialist revolution should wait until after the national democratic goals were reached.

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<sup>3</sup> This is not to suggest that Munsieville's political identity was homogenous. In fact, there were violent internal conflicts between the ANC, PAC, and Inkatha during the 1980s and 1990s.

Other comrades claimed that these two revolutions were taking place simultaneously. Yet others argued that it was not possible to have a successful socialist revolution before the nation's democratic one (p. 20).<sup>4</sup> Eventually, all comrades in Munsieville were in agreement that the final goal was socialism. The question was how and when they would get there (Munsieville Focus Group 2001). As early as 1955, the socialist goals of freedom were outlined by the ANC's Freedom Charter, and held up as the ideal for the new government, drawing heavily on the Soviet model and including such phrases as "There shall be houses, security and comfort! The mineral wealth beneath the soil, the banks and monopoly industry shall be transferred to the ownership of the people as a whole!" Indeed, in 1990, Nelson Mandela, shortly after being released from twenty-seven years in prison, confirmed this position by stating, "...the nationalization of the mines, banks and monopoly industry is the policy of the ANC and a change or modification of our views in this regard is inconceivable (*Sowetan*: March 5, 1990). But by May 1, 1994, less than one month after entering the office of president, Mandela declared, "In our economic policies...there is not a single reference to things like nationalization, and this is not accidental. There is not a single slogan that will connect us with any Marxist ideology" (*Sunday Times* May 1, 1994). Mandela's adamant and somewhat disingenuous denial of any premise of Marxism in the new government drew praise from the business leaders of the country who had been fearful about whether or not the new government would embark on radical economic changes. Many leftist activists, however, watched in despair as the new South Africa was subjected to a capitalist ideological onslaught that was relentless in its implementation and scope.

For example, in the lead-up to the first democratic elections in 1994 the role of commodity was enhanced by both the African National Congress and the Nationalist Party, the major contenders for control within the new democracy. As Bertelson (1998) illustrates, corporate advertisers, with full backing from both parties, ran advertisements that implemented political rhetoric and the vision of the "new" South Africa. HiTec shoes said "When a new nation stands on its feet, HiTec takes the step;" Wimpy Burgers served up a "multi-party party" complete with "voters rolls;" Bonita milk displayed an opened milk carton that spilled a huge white "x" while the copy read "Why cry over spilt milk when we can build a healthy nation? The past is just that...past. It's the future that's important." The image is framed with red hearts and "South Africa we love you" slogans, as if, Bertelson points out, forty years of apartheid is an unfortunate mistake that would be best forgotten, followed by the assurance that the spilt milk of the past will be cleaned up by market forces.<sup>5</sup> All will be well if only citizens in the new South Africa will become accomplished consumers who wear designer shoes and eat fast food, potent symbols of international capitalism. Indeed, many citizens in Munsieville illustrated Don Slater's analysis of consumerism and modernity when he says

...individual choice and desire triumph over abiding social values and obligations; the whims of the present take precedence over the truth embodied in history, tradition and continuity; needs, values and goods are manufactured and calculated in relation to profit rather than arising organically from authentic individual or communal life. Above all, consumerism represents the triumph of economic value over all other kinds and sources of social worth. Everything can be bought and sold. Everything has its price. (Slater 1997:68)

Everything has its price, and capitalism's long arm reached deeply into the township after 1994. Capitalism? Democracy? Justice? How did poor Munsieville's citizens differentiate? After Nelson Mandela's release from prison in 1990 that marked the final downfall of apartheid, many resistance campaigns stopped, including those in Munsieville. People were focused on Mandela and on bringing Oliver Tambo home after his un-banning. After Chris Hani's assassination in 1993, however, the ANC ranks in Munsieville began to go through a change, and comrades, in particular those who belonged to MK, began to ask new questions.

...we wanted to hear what they had to say. Where are we going? At this time there was confusion. Are we going to be a federalist state, a capitalist state, socialist? We wanted to know what the leaders were coming up with. The liberation struggle was over, [there was now] a question of reconciliation and reconstruction. We had to learn more about democracy, had to explore this word more and more. (interview 2001)

<sup>4</sup> Some have argued that for a revolution to be complete, it must resolve two components, the overthrow of the state and the transformation of class relations (Skocpol 1979:4 in Donham 2001 ft. 7). If that is the case, then the South African revolution cannot be considered successful, as wide class divisions have continued, albeit no longer primarily racialized.

<sup>5</sup> I am thankful for Eve Bertelsen's article "Ads and amnesia: black advertising in the new South Africa" (1998:226) for her review of advertisements, some of which I remember from my time in Johannesburg from 1993 to 1995.

Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that the influence of print-capitalism, especially newspapers, expanded people's consciousness of community and nation. Today, print-capitalism has evolved into a multi-media project, and has an entire arm of sophisticated, high tech market strategies meant to convince people that the acquisition of material goods is essential for their happiness. In Munsieville, all sorts of social contradictions between the socialist ideology of the Freedom Charter and the reality of neoliberal capitalism played out as people who had no money endeavored to enact justice as it was marketed to them by the media.

Multiple interviews between 1997 and 2003 with poor comrades who were no longer politically active revealed their dissatisfaction with their new South Africa. One comrade commented that "Munsieville has nothing, nothing to bind us together but disappointment" (interview July 3, 2003). Another said, "Democracy is failing in South Africa. The bomb is ticking" (interview July 5, 2003). After 1994 I watched Mashanguville, the informal settlement attached to Munsieville, triple in size. When asked about this phenomenon, a comrade told me that "The informal settlement is an embarrassment...shacks are a symptom of desperation (interview July 5, 2003). These comments, combined with the demoralizing statistics of the 2001 census, illustrate the frustration many citizens were experiencing as they perceived the failure of the new democracy's nation building project.

Old structures of community activism were faltering at this point. The wider community of Munsieville began to express their frustration with development projects in the township administered by the Mogale City Council. In their frustration they turned to the South African Nation Civic Organization (SANCO) to interface with the council and carry their complaints. SANCO, however, was unsuccessful in challenging the City Council. There were accusations that SANCO did not address real issues, and spent their time in conflict with the Council rather than negotiating with them. Others complained that SANCO forgot the power of group demonstrations, and seemed not to want to take their issues to the streets. The executive council sat in stagnation, holding endless meetings but failing to move forward in issues that deeply affected the residents such as corruption around new housing projects, water and electricity. Many community residents felt that SANCO was not accountable to the people. Adding to the general lack of confidence in SANCO was the allegation that the current executives appointed themselves without elections. In general, I became aware of a type of civic embarrassment around the organization, even to the point where one interviewee told me "White people will say we can't govern." Another interviewee went so far as to say "There is no SANCO in Munsieville....they are not a real SANCO. They are just civics. If they say they are SANCO they are embarrassing the national organization....People see a dog without teeth." (Anonymous interview March 12, 2001).

### **Food as Commodity**

What follows is a case study that illustrates how poor residents began to shift their political and social priorities by commodifying justice. Two instances, separated by five crucial years, describe an individual, Nkapi Mokowe, who revealed her transformation from confirmed socialist to contextual capitalist, benefitting herself at the expense of her fellow comrades. This was an individual who was locally prominent during the struggle, but who, by 2001, turned her social justice energies inward to accumulate justice through acquiring things solely for her family, in this case food. She was a staunch ANC and South African Communist Party member with strong commitment to socialism and the tenets of the Freedom Charter. She was a dedicated guerilla fighter trained by *Umkhonto we Sizwe* who risked her life and lost friends and family members to revolution. She was imprisoned and tortured by the apartheid state. By 2001, however, seven years after the first democratic election, she was resigned that government was not going to provide adequate food, education, housing, healthcare, or other services, to the needy through a socialist model. Major portions of her identity were invested in overthrowing a fascist, racist, and capitalist regime. Where could she find justice lacking for herself and her family immediately following the fall of apartheid?

In 1998 I observed Nkapi as she publically chastised the new ANC government's food distribution program's corrupt dispersal day to people who qualified for government assistance. In the center of the parking lot were modest piles of government provided food. At the far edge of the lot was a line of people, looking anxiously from the food piles to a woman carrying a clipboard. Nkapi observed as the woman called names and checked people off her list. Several arguments broke out about who was on the list and who was not. It seemed there were discrepancies between who qualified for food and had been struck from the list and those whose names were on the list, but did not qualify. As I watched, three men were surreptitiously hauling sacks of corn meal intended for the people into a wheelbarrow and loading them into a car parked behind the center. "They are stealing the people's food," Nkapi commented.

After the sacks were loaded, the man who had been directing the wheelbarrow contingency stepped forward and gave the signal for people to claim their piles of goods. As the line of people moved forward in a rush, Nkapi intervened. In a booming voice she announced, "Before we take this food to our homes and families, we will thank God." She began to sing a hymn and others joined in while Nkapi prayed over their voices. The man who had given the signal stood and looked at her for a short moment, then turned on his heel and went back inside the center, slamming the door as he went. A grinning bystander noted to me, "Nkapi has really embarrassed him. Everyone has known for a long time that he has been stealing from the food bank. He takes the food and sells it in his store to people who should be getting it for free. He is a crook. But now she has challenged him. He won't be able to show his face. He has been exposed." When Nkapi finished her prayers, people took plastic bags from their pockets and began to load their food into them, while piles that remained unclaimed out of embarrassment about the exposed corruption were distributed to the waiting poor by Nkapi and her comrades. Many people came up to Nkapi and said "Ke a leboga teng, Nkapi. Ke pholosa rona" [We are thankful that you are here, Nkapi. You have saved us].

Word spread quickly throughout the township about Nkapi's actions and defense of the poor. Residents agreed that now something would be done about the ongoing theft. Indeed, the program was eventually shut down, but not for the reasons one would like to hear. Funding provided for this program was a finite amount that came from provincial coffers. Once the money was gone, the program was discontinued. Apparently, the city and provincial leadership felt that an investigation into the corruption was unnecessary. Residents later told me that the person in charge of the program was the same man who had been reselling the corn meal. Ironically, he was selected by the community to run the program. When the food program was announced, someone was needed that had the skills to keep books and the resources to pick up the food from town and bring it into Munsieville. At the time, the residents agreed that they needed someone with experience around handling money. What better choice than a local businessman who owned a store in Munsieville? What better choice indeed. After all, he was a comrade.

Four years after the elections, Nkapi was still a socialist minded comrade who was willing to take on corruption and help her fellow citizens without gain to herself, although she was indeed struggling to feed her family. By 2001, however, her position and conduct changed. This became abundantly clear as I observed her in action in the lead up to the local celebration of the national holiday that honors fallen youth and their participation in the struggle against apartheid. As part of a small group of organizers acting outside of mainstream city government as a form of protest against corrupt local government, Nkapi was on the event planning committee. Speeches by local and regional dignitaries in the town hall were to be followed by a mass procession to the cemetery to lay wreaths on local heroes' graves. Traditionally, such an elaborate celebration would include a feast for the entire community. Unfortunately, there were no funds to purchase the huge amount of food that would be necessary since this celebration was operating outside of government support. As a result, the committee decided to restrict the meal to the organizers of the event, and I offered to purchase the food needed for the ten organizers. Nkapi's daughter, Kgomotso, volunteered to prepare the meal. In addition, they needed entertainment for the event, and contacted a group of local performers, Shosholozza Performing Arts, who agreed to be part of the program and waive their normal fee for their performance in lieu of a meal afterwards. The planning committee agreed to their proposition, meaning there would be thirty-five people for our post celebration festivities.

The next time the committee met, they explained to Kgomotso about the addition to the guest list. She was not enthusiastic about it, but eventually agreed to cook for everyone. As weeks went by, however, she continuously suggested that the committee eat at her house, leaving the performers to eat alone at her mother's. I knew that it would be rude, practically unforgivably so, to leave the group at Nkapi's on their own, and go to Kgomotso's where it would seem we were having an exclusive party. Under her relentless pressure, I reluctantly acquiesced. When Kgomotso and I shopped for the food a few days later, I watched as she filled the cart with enough to feed a minimum of fifty to sixty people. As she shopped, however, Kgomotso began asking me what we were going to feed Shosholozza Performing Arts. It was clear she wanted them to have a different menu from our own. Unaware of the implications of her strategy, I insisted they have the same food.

On June 16, 2001, the event went as planned, and the committee began to gather to proceed to Kgomotso's when I felt a tug at my elbow. The Director of Shosholozza Performing Arts, Phido, was asking if he could talk with me. The first words out of his mouth were "We have a problem. There is no food at the house. My performers are starving, and waiting for some food. The only things there are *serobe* (tripe and intestines) and *mabela* (fermented sorghum porridge)."

It seemed that Kgomotso had indeed changed their menu to inexpensive traditional food. In dismay, I replied that there was to be a hearty meal for his performers, promising to deliver it as quickly as possible. Naively, I sped into the community center kitchen to tell Nkapi what had happened. When I suggested we needed to get food from Kgomotso's, she remained quiet, obviously unhappy. Soon after, she disappeared.

My friend Manini and I proceeded to Kgomotso's house. As I began to tell Kgomotso that we were going to take the food to her mother's to feed the performers, I watched the growing resentment in her eyes as she suggested there might not be enough. Contrary to her argument, there were two ten gallon commercial sized stainless steel pots on her stove filled with an astonishing amount of stew and porridge. Lined up on her table were additional side dishes and drinks. After much discussion, to her dismay we loaded up the food and proceeded to Nkapi's. When we arrived, I was horrified to see Nkapi at her kitchen table, and the performers corralled in the dark, cold, back yard. This disrespect and rudeness was so blatant on Nkapi's part that once I got over being stunned by it, I began to realize there was something very deep going on here. I found Phido and told him we had the food and they would be eating in a few minutes. I returned to the kitchen and saw the pots sitting on the stove, but the side dishes were missing. I asked Kgomotso where they were, and she said she did not know. After some investigation, I found them stashed outside in the dark. I retrieved them and began serving the food. Nkapi and her family stood looking on, sulking as they saw the huge portions being dished out that would diminish any leftovers they could claim for their family.

After the meal was finished, I went outside to socialize with the performers. One of the troupe members asked if there were second helpings. I breezily said of course, there's lots of food in there, just go ask for more. He replied, "I did, but I was rebuked." I went inside and dished up more food for him, and told him to announce to the group there was plenty for seconds. He did, and about half of the troupe lined up. By the end of the evening, almost all of the food was gone, an astonishing feat for this many people, considering how much food we had. Despite their best efforts, any surplus food that Nkapi and her daughter sought to keep for themselves had gone straight into the mouths of her former comrades.

Nkapi's actions during these two instances were diametrically opposed to each other. In 1998 when she stood up for needy people who were being cheated by their own comrades, her ritual of justice for the oppressed was in concert with her actions during the struggle against apartheid. In the later incident in 2001 she did, again, enact a ritual of justice. This time, however, her performance revolved around a new form, seeking it through the control of luxury food and the assurance that it would go to her and her family. Nkapi's actions illustrated how her strategies changed as she became increasingly disenchanted with her new ANC government. In her role as activist during the 1980s, Nkapi strategized for justice in multiple ways. In addition to her highly developed guerilla activities, she formed a women's group in Munsieville who became central political actors in the area, beginning with the historic Munsieville Mother's March. Nkapi's attention was focused on gaining social justice that would benefit not only herself, but the entire community and nation. In the new South Africa, however, Nkapi found that organizing in political groups and fighting for broad social justice is not what it might have been. In 2001 she told me, "After 1994 radicals were silenced. Everything got formalized, we were excluded. New people were introduced. They silenced radical women and brought in compliant people. This is where we were phased out" (interview June 11, 2001). Following the lead of the ANC, Nkapi shifted her socioeconomic agenda, and began to work in new ways to implement justice. In fact, rather than acting outside of her society's political norms, Nkapi was simply mirroring ANC members of government who were, as she was, busily accumulating commodities.

### **The Desire for Things**

I wish to clarify that I am not suggesting that there was not a desire for things in Munsieville prior to liberation. Of course there was. Munsieville is a poor community with plenty of need. I believe, however, that the desire for things has accelerated and transformed in its intensity for people whose lives have not reflected the dream of the new democracy. Under apartheid, there was a collective pursuit for the things denied Black South Africans, but it was pursued through the political act of revolution against the apartheid state, and focused on obtaining a broad social justice for all citizens. During the post-apartheid decade, the pursuit was still for things, but that pursuit held a shifted meaning and a transformed method of action. The result in Munsieville, where for many, life continued to be filled with deprivation, was that things did not so much represent total liberation as envisioned during the struggle; rather they represented an attainable slice of it.

Things embodied a rejection of the ANC's early vision of socialist justice and represented a form of complicity with the current ANC government's embrace of neo-liberal capitalist policies. Thus the reality of the new government resulted in the new South Africa's redefinition of democracy's humanistic freedoms into a grand materialist obsession with accumulation and commodity. How did people's relationships to commodities express their political and cultural identities in Munsieville? How did they see themselves and understand their role in the past anti-apartheid movement and the current nation building project? Material welfare, psychic welfare and display are reasons often given to explain accumulation (See Douglas and Isherwood 2002; Slater 1997; Sutton 2001; Wasserman 2003; Watson and Caldwell 2005). What did Munsieville tell us about the nature of late capitalism and its intersection with liberation ideology and democracy building?

Even today, Munsieville residents understand that a commodity holds market value. At the same time, however, a personal wielding of the commodity expresses ideological essence. In other words, an object's value is intrinsic to its perceived inner core, in this case justice, and emanates outwards, rather than portraying the end result of capitalist endeavor and people's labor. The value and meaning are inter-connected, resulting from layering subjective associations one on top of another, with the consequence that the links between people and objects, or even links between people with people through objects, becomes obscured. The meaning of the object is cut off from its origins in people's work and lives, its meaning devolved into mere possession. A thing contains a disembodied, ethereal essence of value. Its bona fide meaning is separate from the tangible, and exists in Munsieville's fantasies and imaginations, with one imagined entity replacing another. Stealing your neighbor's dishtowel,<sup>6</sup> for instance, does not mean that an individual needs another dishtowel, but is interconnected with an entire set of ontological principles that are paraded in front of people on a daily basis through the media and its covert message of the neo-liberal government. The social story of how that dishtowel came to be, that is, the story of the worker who made it and the conditions under which they worked, that the working class people in Munsieville would readily identify with, is erased. In Marx's terms, the commodity fetish is the belief that the dishtowel's innate independent value obscures, and in fact erases, what is really a relationship between people. In other words, it becomes an unacknowledged substitute for the relationship between people.

In addition, things carry the relationship between political systems made up of people, that is, the processes of oppression and liberation played out by individuals. Objects have become fetishized in Munsieville because people can control objects, but not always their lives in the new South Africa. Things are stripped of their original identity and reconstructed with a new role and with new value. They are elevated to hold the value of the thing most elusive to many in Munsieville: justice. The relationship of things to the people, to the community and nation, to the oppression of the disenfranchised radical activists who had fought in the struggle, has become obscured in the minds of Munsieville resident's determination to declare that they can and will claim justice, but in an unanticipated form in their daily, lived experience. During the post apartheid decade, these phenomena reared up and clashed with each other, setting the scene for ugly confrontations around things, in Nkapi's case, food. Conflicts within Munsieville reflected a genuine struggle with the township's own sense of justice, and with its ownership of liberty and freedom. The food became more than something merely to have, something merely to bring relief to the deprivation that continued to encompass people's lives. It became a stand in for the wealthy who inhabit the world of the free and who can attain anything. Thus food became marked with meaning and imbued with symbolism as Nkapi and the residents of Munsieville continued to try to make sense of their world.

Given the vast spectacle of media images in South Africa after apartheid's fall, and the equally vast range of available new commodities, people in Munsieville incorporated things into their construction of entire scenes of who they wish they could be, and what their circumstances would be if they lived in a just society. As Appadurai has pointed out, media images impose a certain amount of Americanization (globalization), read as either modernization or democracy, on people's imagination (Appadurai 2001). As critical as this was to poor Munsieville residents' current sense of themselves, it was equally critical to their understanding of themselves as they were in the past. I believe, then, that many of Munsieville's former comrades' reconstruction of their political identity was related directly to increased commoditization in the South African nation state and its intersection with neo-liberal capitalism.

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<sup>6</sup> The theft of a dishtowel during a funeral in 2003 created many hard feelings between women who were members of a women's Burial Society.

As a strategy to enact the social justice denied them, disenfranchised former comrades enacted a contextual capitalism that was contingent on immediate opportunities that gave them access to commodities.

### **Conclusion**

I have illustrated the acquisition of a new political identity, which I have termed contextual capitalists, by former comrades who are currently living on the socioeconomic margins in Munsieville. I defined contextual capitalism as the process by which people seek personal accumulation of commodities as a strategy to enact economic and social justice in relation to social injustices perpetuated by South Africa's new democracy and neo-liberal capitalism. Presenting two incidences that revolved around perhaps the most precious commodity of all, food, I described the actions of a former anti-apartheid activist wherein she redirected her political energy from the larger good of society to one of acquiring commodities for her family. In doing so, I demonstrated ways in which former anti-apartheid activists seek capitalist accumulation and engage in the commodification of justice, using thing as a proxy for the social justice that continues to elude them.

I suggest that the new identity of many in the new South Africa illustrates that sites of resistance are sometimes difficult to distinguish from adaptations to a larger scene, in this case a highly charged, politicized set of social relations embedded within contested ideological structures. In a context that was laden with frustration and disappointment around the perception of a failed political struggle, the sociopolitical positions and new actions were in direct response to the way in which people made sense of their material conditions in their new nation state. Their chosen actions, then, although seeming in some ways to be counter-productive, in fact became powerful statements about their contempt for the moral bankruptcy of ANC policies and programs and the frustrated relationship between government structures and grassroots civic organizing.

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