"WHERE THERE IS FIRE, THERE IS POLITICS": Ungovernability and Material Life in Urban South Africa

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Together, hand in hand, with our boxes of matches . . . we shall liberate this country.

—Winnie Mandela, 1986

Faku and I stood surrounded by billowing smoke. In the shack settlement of Slovo Road,[1] on the outskirts of the South African port city of Durban, flames flickered between piles of debris, which the day before had been wood-plank and plastic tarpaulin walls. The conflagration began early in the morning. Within hours, before the arrival of fire trucks or ambulances, the two thousand households that comprised the settlement as we knew it had burnt to the ground. On a hillcrest in Slovo, Abahlali baseMjondolo (an *isi*Zulu phrase meaning "residents of the shacks") was gathered in a mass meeting. Slovo was a founding settlement of Abahlali, a leading poor people's movement that emerged from a burning road blockade during protests in 2005. In part, the meeting was to mourn. Five people had been found dead that day in the remains, including Faku's neighbor. "Where there is fire, there is politics," Faku said to me. This fire, like others before, had been covered by the local press and radio, some journalists having been notified by Abahlali via text message and online press release. The Red Cross soon set up a makeshift soup kitchen, and the city government provided emergency shelter in the form of a large, brightly striped communal tent. Residents, meanwhile,

took up tools for several days of hard labor, digging foundations and hammering nails to construct new shacks. By midday, local officials in luxury vehicles rode down the winding dirt road of the settlement, leaving piles of blankets and stacks of canned food. A Slovo resident with a megaphone shouted that those seeking the goods first had to display African National Congress (ANC) membership cards. A riot nearly erupted.

**Figure 1. Slovo Road shack fire, which left 2,000 homes destroyed, 2008.
Photo by Kerry Ryan Chance.**

Fire is a familiar sign of life in the sprawling shack lands that populate the margins of Durban's city center. Behind securitized suburban landscapes, glossy shopping plazas, and beachfront tourist attractions, residents like Faku routinely use fire as a source of light and heat at home, and as a weapon of protest on the streets. Since the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, the ruling ANC has endeavored to redress inequalities inherited from a colonial past while demobilizing the "ungovernable" street politics that characterized the late liberation struggle, in part by cultivating participation in formal democratic institutions, such as participating in elections, joining local ward committees, and applying for housing subsidies.[2] The ANC has championed new social grants, including old-age pen-

sions, disability, and child support. Yet more than twenty years after the fall of apartheid, with an unemployment rate estimated at nearly thirty percent, millions living without formalized housing, and a top-ranking Gini coefficient that reflects a yawning gap between rich and poor, South Africa remains one of the world's most unequal societies.[3] Dissatisfaction with the slow pace of socioeconomic transformation has been consistently expressed through urban unrest from street protests to labor strikes to xenophobic pogroms, particularly among those who still struggle to make life viable and secure in historically race-based communities.

This article examines the unruly force of fire in state-citizen struggles. By tracking interactions between state agents and activist networks in South Africa between the mid-1980s and the present, I analyze how residents of townships and shack settlements leverage the material properties of fire to secure techno-institutional claims to energy infrastructure, and more broadly to political inclusion and economic redistribution. As I demonstrate, residents are deploying the distinct destructive and productive capacities of fire through practices, borrowed from liberation movements, which have been criminalized during South Africa's celebrated democratic transition. By approaching fire as intertwined with power, my study illuminates how the urban poor, those living on the margins of the city, come to inhabit political roles that transform and are transformed by material life in emerging liberal orders.

My primary research into fire (*umlilo* in *isi*Zulu) was conducted in townships and shack settlements affiliated with Abahlali baseMjondolo beginning in 2006.[4] The activities claimed and sponsored by this activist network have been the work of unemployed youth, church leaders, veterans of the liberation struggle, pensioners, and women. Abahlali grew out of the Kennedy Road settlement, where about seven thousand African families live in homes of scrap metal, wood, and plastic sheeting (see also Patel 2008; Pithouse 2006; Gibson 2011; Selmeczi 2011).[5] Now a national movement claiming about 25,000 members, Abahlali spans historically Indian and Coloured (or mixed-race) townships with large Hindu and Muslim constituencies. Along with maintaining its own website, listserve, Twitter, and Facebook accounts, the movement appears in a spectrum of news outlets from *Al Jazeera* to the *Economist*. Abahlali also operates within cross-regional and transnational networks of lawyers and grassroots activists, in part powered by digital media technologies, from Chicago to Rio de Janeiro to Port-au-Prince. My research included Abahlali members of various ages, genders, and ethnic and racial identifications, as well as residents not aligned with the movement, in the cities of Durban, Cape Town, and Johannesburg.
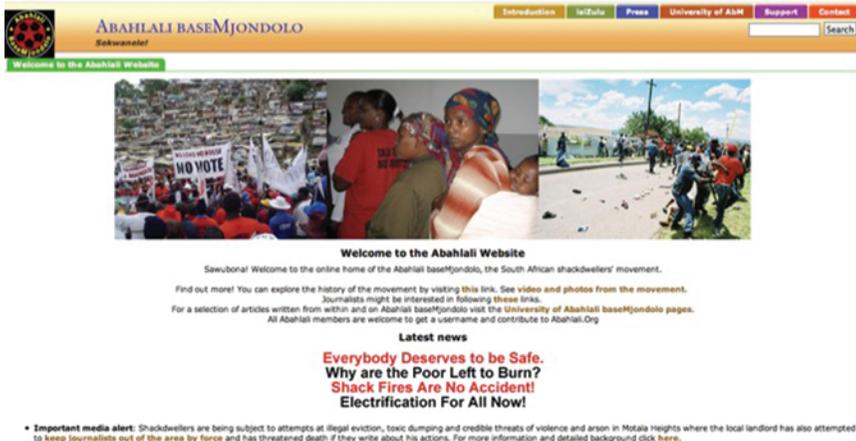
**Figure 2. Abahlali baseMjondolo website, asking "Why are the Poor Left to Burn?"
Accessed March 18, 2008.**

I tracked fire and its material properties through ethnographic participant observation in Abahlali-affiliated communities outward to the city streets and the courts, as well as through the analysis of relevant archival materials, including nongovernmental reports, policy documents, texts produced by residents, and statements by officials, especially agents of local law enforcement, the city government, and the national legislature.[6] Fires occur because of household accidents or deliberative political acts. Official statistics suggest that shack fires happen ten times per day throughout the country, with one death resulting every other day. A shack fire is estimated at once per day in the city of Durban alone (Birkinshaw 2008, 1). The South African safety and security minister counted 881 "illegal" protests in 2005 (Wines 2005), and the national average has been estimated to be five protests per day in the following years (*News Twenty-Four* 2014).[7] These fires, as I found, are regular fodder for local tabloids, national television, and social media, ensuring that news of flames spreads quickly through South African mediaspheres.

To analyze the intertwining of fire and politics (*ipolitiki*) in urban South Africa, the first section of this article combines theories of liberal governance, studies of material life in so-called slums, and research on popular politics. The second section illustrates how liberation movements and apartheid state agents made use of fire during the ungovernable years of the mid-1980s, searing it into the life histories of the next generation of activists in townships and shack settlements. The third section, focusing on burning barricades, suggests how Abahlali

members are adopting and redeploying practices of liberation activists, which have been recast in the post-apartheid period as the work of "electricity bandits" and other shadowy "criminal elements" (Maluleka 2010; *eNCA* 2013).[8] The last section, returning to shack conflagrations, suggests how forms of endangerment attributed to a lack of electricity and the promise of infrastructure have become a platform for innovative forms of political mobilization in poor communities.

LIBERAL GOVERNANCE, MATERIAL LIFE, AND POPULAR POLITICS

To best examine the politicization and criminalization of fire, I bridge theoretical concerns in political anthropology, urban studies, and African studies. Modern political theory often relies on fire as a metaphor for political power. It is thought to be at once a natural and a human force, necessary and dangerous to social order (Hobbes 1998; Rousseau 1992). More literally, this theory identifies the manipulation—and monopoly—of fire as authorizing rule: scorched earth as a military tactic (Machiavelli 1958), the steam engine as a means of industrial production (Marx 1978), or burning barricades as an instrument of revolution (Foucault 1991). In taken-for-granted material ways, then, modern theory addresses fire's role in enacting or upending liberal governance through the distribution of sovereignty (Schmitt 1996), state–civil-society relations (Hegel 1949; Gramsci 1971), and civic participation in public life (Arendt 1994; Habermas 1984).

Touching on these classic debates and emphasizing that fire is a social and historical as well as a chemical process, anthropologists illustrate how democratic power has been differently shaped by existing cultural traditions and prior colonial regimes, affectively embodied through diverse rituals and representations, and reconfigured by civil strife and global neoliberalism (Ferguson 2006; Hansen 2008; Harvey 2005; Mbembe 2003; McDonald and Pape 2002; Marais 2011). A growing number of scholars have attended to how energy systems—from the installation of electricity grids to the burning of fossil fuels—have become enfolded into biopower and other forms of late modern governance to constrain or open up democratic institutions (Mitchell 2009; Boyer 2014; Winther 2008; Murray 2009).[9]

My work explores how fire and other elemental forms of material life congeal political practices, interactions, and identities through time. In these ways, we can see fire as intertwined with power in a double sense: as transformable energy and as dynamic social relations. I aim to show how fire, in this case deployed by the urban poor, demarcates politics in liberal democratic transitions.

By doing so, I illustrate how fire cuts across persistent dichotomies in social analysis between materiality and semiosis, the chemical and the historical, and the economic and the political. Scholarship on post-apartheid South Africa has established that "the political" in public discourse is often opposed to the anti-democratic or the criminal, expressed, for example, in racialized condemnations of violent protests and in fears of rising crime rates (Comaroff and Comaroff 2006; Morris 2006; Steinberg 2001; Gillespie 2008; Jensen 2008).

As part of my research in Abahlali-affiliated settlements, I considered how and what practices of the urban poor state agents name as criminal or antidemocratic, particularly focusing on burning public and private property or illicitly connected electricity. Conversely, I interrogate how and what practices of state agents the poor consider illegitimate, such as banning street marches or disconnecting services for alleged non-payment. I therefore theorize how the interactions of residents and state agents constitute contested demarcations of the political, most generally through a much-remarked relationship between crime and democratic state-making (Siegel 1998; Kosek 2006). Fire, a hermeneutic and technology of state-citizen struggles, shapes this relationship in the townships and shack settlements that continue to be hotbeds of criminalized popular unrest.

In addition to looking at interactions between residents and state agents, my research examines how fire's material properties are used in everyday tactics of community building among the urban poor. An emerging literature on global slums documents their explosive urban growth around the world (Pieterse 2008; Simone 2014), as well as how residents survive on the edges of legality and state delivery without access to basic infrastructure (Appadurai 2006; Gupta 2012; Rao 2012; Roy 2011; Ross 2010; Huchzemeyer 2011). While an earlier wave of slum studies have cast these communities merely as "human dumping grounds" (Davis 2006), and therefore rarely as places of thriving politics, anthropologists have demonstrated how residents gain rights, resources, and recognition through appropriating state technologies (von Schnitzler 2013; Ong 1999; Langford et al. 2013), encroaching on urban space (Holston 2008; Bayat 2000), and refashioning themselves as biopolitical subjects of care (Chari 2010; Li 2007; Chatterjee 2004; Redfield 2012).

With few exceptions, scholars have placed less emphasis on how residents render their material lives ungovernable to reconstitute their interactions with state agents.[10] By transforming a burning match into a conflagration, the urban poor also transform themselves. Using fire as a platform to redirect power, they become legible to state agents, not as the governed but as the ungovernable. Even

if fleeting or momentary, fire rarely leaves those involved wholly unchanged: a conflagration could result in bodily injury or collective solidarity.

Africanist scholarship, often critical of liberal governance's theoretical antecedents, shows how fire has long been used, be it through war or witchcraft, to injure or terrify enemies, to regulate territories or social hierarchies, or to adjudicate punishment and disputes in the realms of customary or colonial law (Geshiere 2013; Evans-Pritchard 1976). This work, focusing on the transformative nature of fire, also has explored its role in medicine and religion to heal the body and speak to ancestors, to protect local ecologies, and to make useful and necessary things, such as food, pottery, or coal (Comaroff 1985; Mavhunga 2013; Pooley 2012; Lévi-Strauss 1983). To better understand how these productive and destructive—or even disastrous (Bank 2001)—properties shape democratic politics in South Africa's urban shack lands, I analyze what residents of Abahlali-affiliated communities refer to as "living politics," or *ipolitiki ephilayo* in the *isi*Zulu vernacular.

Members characterize living politics as eventful public dramas, such as street protests and burning road blockades, as well as mundane domestic activities, including cooking with fire or reading by candlelight. In this way, living politics transmutes the boundaries between the home and the streets to make the poor seen and heard in the city through means that residents ground in their own communities and contrast to expert, elite, or technical languages of formal state institutions. Living politics intersects with an emergent anthropological literature on the infrastructural imagination (Anand 2011; Appel 2012; Fennell 2011; Harvey and Knox 2012), but it emphasizes informally constructed domains, where residents make their material life and platform for politics by any means necessary.

For that reason, in my analysis of fire, I consider how the urban poor collectively mobilize and identify with each other. Studies of the past two decades have sought to capture the growing cross-regional and transnational nature of activist networks and to distinguish them from other forms of effervescent collective activity and assemblages (Nash 2005; Bertelsen, Tvedten, and Roque 2013; Heller 2001). Along with noting the use of fire in riots or uprisings, they have emphasized the role of spatial and organizational structures, the composition of crowds and multitudes, and the content of issue-driven action and public campaigns (Castells 1983; Paley 2001; Hardt 2010; Badiou 2012). Many theorists have argued that liberal democratic governance, which formally accompanied decolonization, has shifted popular movement politics away from the class-based

struggles of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries toward identity, whether ethnic, religious, or national (Benhabib 1996; Laclau and Mouffe 2001).

Well before the financial crisis and the Arab Spring prompted a reappraisal of this view, South African scholars observed that the primary self-identification of protesters in South Africa has shifted from "African" nationalism to loose activist networks of "the poor" (Desai 2002; Bond 2004; Seekings and Natrass 2005). To consider how the poor came to inhabit this primary, but by no means singular or uncontested, collective identity, one premised on shared and often criminalized material life, I consider the ways residents mobilize across historically African, Indian, and Coloured communities. I show how the poor have melded old and new practices, for instance, by working within long-existing civic organizations and previously segregated state structures. By analyzing how residents of townships and shack settlements make a platform for their lives and politics, be it in the streets, the courts, or global media flows, this article aims to show how political spaces are redefined, power is forcibly enacted, and new forms of citizenship and identity congeal at the intersections of race and class.

LIVING MEMORIES OF FIRE: Insurgency in 1980s KwaZulu-Natal

Prior to the election of Nelson Mandela in 1994, fire was linked to the atrocities of apartheid, counter-revolutionary activities, and the very possibility of liberation. During the 1952 Defiance Campaign, a young Mandela and other activists torched their passbooks, the notorious identity documents that regulated and restricted the mobility of African, Indian, and Coloured people under apartheid. The campaign, which swelled membership across ethnic and racial lines by the tens of thousands, would mark the ANC's birth as a mass movement. By transforming a tangible symbol of apartheid into ash, Mandela showed up the illegitimacy of the race-based state's power to divide and rule, while issuing a performative claim on inclusive non-racial citizenship within a new democratic polity. The ANC had been inspired by Mahatma Gandhi's 1909 nonviolence campaign in KwaZulu-Natal, when South African Indians likewise broke the law to burn their passes—which prohibited crossing into unauthorized zones—in defiance of British colonialism, suggestive again of fire's potential power to destroy and redraw lines of difference.

In 1986, Winnie Mandela famously said that matches had become harbingers of liberation, in words that captured the spirit of those turbulent times and helped make her their controversial icon. Her phrasing also suggests how the properties of fire constituted its threat to state security and its importance to urban insur-

gency. Unlike guns and other weapons that required a supply chain and orders from above, fire was always within the grasp of ordinary men and women, made from ordinary, on-hand materials found inside the home. The primary tools of its ignition, matches, are not only affordable and accessible to all, and in this sense highly democratized, but they are also highly mobile, easily transported from place to place; they can be secreted if necessary, hidden away in one's palm, pocket, or kitchen cupboard. Once set, flame spreads rapidly and consumes what it touches, making its illuminant effects highly visible, but leaving the agents who have lit the match often invisible, mysterious, or unknown.

Abahlali members often point to the Defiance Campaign as a fiery precursor to post-apartheid civil disobedience, but as they and archival materials suggest, it was really the insurgency of the mid-1980s that seared fire into memories and practices of the liberation struggle. Persuaded that the time had come "to submit or fight" (Mandela 1964), the ANC established Umkhonto we Sizwe, the MK or "Spear of the Nation" in 1961, following the Sharpeville Massacre, in which sixty-nine people were gunned down during a mass gathering against pass laws. The MK's guerrilla military cells, by way of matches and petrol bombs, set alight government buildings and blew up electricity pylons. By the mid-1980s, with many of the earlier generation of fighters such as Mandela in prison, the ANC called for the townships to be rendered "ungovernable," thereby expanding and popularizing the role of militant activities beyond the rigid hierarchies of the MK. Oliver Thambo, then president of the ANC, referred to the militant operations of the party as "the terrible but cleansing fires of revolutionary war" (African National Congress 1996). Fire during this period served not only as a popular political metaphor but also as a choice weapon for youth come of age during the struggle, who notably set about blocking roadways with fiery barricades and burning the homes of despised local councillors.

Yet as the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) revealed in gruesome detail, apartheid state agents harnessed some of the same properties of fire during the mid-1980s, usually for their most shadowy operations. Security forces were known to burn the bodies of the disappeared, which along with preventing proper burial, destroyed evidentiary traces of the identities of both victim and perpetrator.[11] Inkatha warriors, Zulu nationalists known as "the third force," were armed by the old regime to target their neighbors during the liberation struggle and made a practice of burning rural homesteads, a memory that lives on for many in Durban shack lands. Burning homesteads dually served

as retribution for supporting ANC operatives and as a sovereign claim on disputed territories.

All sides—the apartheid state, Inkatha, and the ANC—deployed so-called necklacing, setting alight a rubber tire around the neck of a suspected *impimpi* (spy, colluder in *isi*Zulu and *isi*Xhosa), who would slowly burn to death. Necklacing as punishment for political disloyalty was a practice viewed by some in the ANC as evidence that populist violence had run amok. One of the earliest recorded cases of necklacing was brought to light by the TRC, which documented the 1985 burning of a young girl, Maki Skosana, who was accused of being an informant. Dramatically, while attending the funeral for one of the young comrades she had supposedly had a hand in killing, she was set alight. Necklacing, along with the torching of shops and homes, would reemerge after apartheid in the wake of what became known as "xenophobic attacks" targeting ethnic and national minorities, as well as in acts of vigilante justice aimed at suspected witches and criminals (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001; Hickel 2014)—including at sites where I conducted research.[12] In Kennedy Road, a founding settlement of Abahlali, fire was used during ethnicized armed attacks by ANC supporters, which were aimed at movement members in 2009 (Chance 2010).

As the above outline suggests, during the mid-1980s, while apartheid state agents cultivated fire to fuel the counterinsurgency, residents cultivated it as a guerrilla weapon. These interactions are relevant not simply because practices of the mid-1980s continue to be enacted in present-day shack settlements but also because fire conjures powerful living memories of organized warfare. Many residents of Abahlali-affiliated settlements were involved in various capacities with liberation movements, including the ANC, whether through military operations, churches, or trade unions. Others, especially young people, characterize their political activities and involvement with what they even now call "the struggle" (*umzabalazo*), as beginning with the fall of apartheid and battles emerging over adequate housing, work, and access to infrastructure in the newly desegregated cities. All residents I spoke with who lived through apartheid were subject to state violence, frequently mediated by fire: forced removals, political killings, and military occupation. The racialization, and indeed ethnicization, of social spaces and subjects implied by this violence highlights fire's ability to draw lines of difference.

Life histories of Abahlali members and other residents I spoke with clarify how fires, past and present, punctuate life in settlements. A resident named Siboniso and I sat in plastic, apartheid-era school chairs at the movement's then–

national headquarters in the Kennedy Road settlement to speak about his memories of fire. With the din of children playing in the crèche next door, we talked about Bellcourt, where he grew up. Bellcourt is a small town amid the rolling green hills of northern KwaZulu-Natal, a land of sugarcane and indentured labor. Siboniso moved to Durban in 1998 to find work and study law at the local university. When he first arrived in Kennedy, the shack conflagrations brought back memories of his rural hometown. He would awaken at night screaming, uncertain why or from what nightmare, but certain it had to do with the fires. While staying with relatives in a nearby township, he landed a job as a gas station attendant filling tanks. He was arrested and tortured in police custody because of his association with Abahlali. Soon after his employer learned of these events, Siboniso lost his job. After two years of university, no longer able to afford his tuition bills, he was ejected from the university.

While popular national histories draw the battle lines of apartheid-era civil war between the old regime and the new dispensation led by the ANC, there remain at the regional level other powerfully felt fields of conflict and other actors that tell of fire. In the mid-1980s and the early 1990s, Bellcourt was a hot spot for battles between the Zulu-nationalist movement Inkatha (also known as the IFP) and the supposedly nonethnic nationalist forces of the ANC.[13] The area of Bellcourt in which Siboniso's family lived was an Inkatha stronghold. Siboniso, like others in the province, characterizes his hometown as divided, homestead by homestead, into two camps of opposing party affiliation. "Party politics," he said, "was one being an enemy to the other," with fire being of deadly importance to this distinction: "[As a child] I did not understand party politics, other than as an opportunity to learn to shoot well. If you are IFP, then the ANC would kill you; if you are ANC, then the IFP would kill you—your house would be burned down or you would be shot to death." Siboniso and other residents I have spoken with liken the process of acquiring status in an activist movement to gang initiation, a violent and masculine rite of passage. But where guns took aim at men, fire took aim especially at women and children. The deployment of fire targeted the home, the site of the domestic sphere, of social and biological reproduction. Against this stark picture of civil war, Siboniso joined the Boy Scouts, whose activities—not perceived as a threat to Inkatha territorial sovereignty—proved a permissible, if feminized, refuge. Often drawing parallels between the Boy Scouts and Abahlali, Siboniso suggests that the organization contributed to a prominent formulation of his movement's politics, a living politics (*ipolitiki ephilayo*) or a "home politics" outside nationalist party structures.

Busisiwe, another Kennedy resident, grew up in an ANC stronghold called Nortown, a hundred kilometers inland from Bellcourt. We first talked at length about fire while visiting her relatives in a township adjacent to a dusty, abandoned main street, which in earlier days had drawn holidaymakers to nearby hot springs. Along with her mother and two siblings, Busisiwe moved to Durban and the Kennedy settlement in 2003 in search of decent schools and upward mobility in the city. In contrast to the concrete-block house her family had built in Nortown, their shack in Kennedy was a one-room affair with the basics—a few pieces of furniture, a paraffin lamp, and wallpaper made of a mixture of juice and milk cartons. Busisiwe particularly loved the wallpaper for the childhood memories it evoked. In Nortown, her family had lived along a contested road, where Inkatha and ANC operatives targeted each other with arson and petrol bombs. "Every time these two were fighting. They would just come and camp by the corner of our house. One would shoot up the road, the other would shoot down the road." After one long day of fighting on the road, Busisiwe's family received news that her uncle had been killed. As a known ANC loyalist, he had apparently been the target of a "plot."

What emerges in Siboniso's and Busisiwe's narratives in two distinct party strongholds is the mediating force of fire in the spatio-political configurations of rural towns in late apartheid-era KwaZulu-Natal. Alleged arson, a fire with a suspected yet obscured agent, hinged on "operations" aimed at designating suspected *impimpi*. "If your house is set with fire," said Siboniso, "then that would mean it would have been planned. There would have been a conspiracy. There would be a lot of people knowing that you were a suspect, so you would not retaliate." Intervention in the public designation of *impimpi* could risk perceived affiliation with the suspect. Under apartheid, amid the banning of activists and organizations and police crackdowns on public gatherings, funerals took on a strong political valence as potential sites of mobilization. But funerals also were sites where kith, kin, and organizational loyalties could be identified by opposing factions. "I had family members and friends whom we couldn't even bury," said Siboniso, echoing a sentiment shared by many who lived through these years. "If your family member or friend in the area was a suspected ANC operative or sympathizer, you could not be buried under the ground of an IFP stronghold." Many would be too fearful to attend the funeral. As Siboniso and Busisiwe suggest, territories were regulated by violence tied to talk of shadowy secret colluders, their plots and alignments with one or another enemy party.

STREET PROTESTS AND SHACK CONFLAGRATIONS: Politicizing Energy and Endangerment in Post–Apartheid Durban

If the mid-1980s marked the popularization of fire in street politics against apartheid, the turn of the millennium marked its unanticipated return in street politics against neoliberal policy reforms and ongoing inequalities in poor African, Indian, and Coloured communities. Activists deployed fire, as they did in the mid-1980s. They capitalized on fire's highly mobile and affordable qualities to render visible spaces ordinarily hidden from view in the city, while disrupting urban activities by blocking roadways, and therefore the circulation of traffic, goods, and people. Residents of townships and shack settlements torched sites tied materially and symbolically to the state (*uhulumeni* in *isi*Zulu),[14] including old targets such as local councillors' homes, but also new sites of techno-institutional management, such as the offices of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Police and private security forces have officially condemned these acts as "criminal" and "counter-revolutionary" (*Agence France Presse* 2005), meeting them with arrests and violence (Alexander et al. 2012; Chance forthcoming). Protesters, at times, have been referred to as *impimpi* (spies, colluders).

The deployment of fire by activists in South Africa in the post-apartheid period has thus become a distinguishing criterion between civil and uncivil society, the former associated with NGOs aligned with state or international institutions, and the latter associated with movements of the poor or populist community-based mobilizations.[15] A public dispute over fire, for instance, erupted between Abahlali and a leading NGO for those living with HIV. Though they at times work together and share members, the NGO, echoing official discourse, posited burning barricades as criminal acts. Abahlali in Cape Town responded that fire formed part of daily life in the communities that are the locus of living politics: "We are not a professional organisation with millions of rands of donor funding that can operate in the middle class world. We are a movement of, for and by the poor. We therefore have to struggle where we are and with what we have. If that means burning tyres on Lansdowne Road then that is how we will struggle."[16] The press statement emphasizes the enduring power of fire to galvanize collective anger into concrete political action when other means of civic action remain unavailable.[17]

Often less visible to middle-class publics, but pivotal to making living politics, are political mobilizations within settlements. In Abahlali-affiliated settlements, shack fires are the subject of summits and gatherings attended by thousands. Routine practices have emerged to respond to the aftermath of fire,

including collective rebuilding, organized distributions through aid organizations, and making a registry of families requiring the replacement of school uniforms, ID books, and other items often lost to flame. Abahlali members characterize fire, and the activities that surround it, as an existential condition of living in shacks. Flame leaves inscriptions on the homes, belongings, and bodies of the poor, an identification in contemporary South Africa that is rendered through intersections of race and class (Ballard, Habib, and Valodia 2006; Seekings and Natrass 2005; Hart 2014). An Abahlali member named Mnikelo makes this point saying, "When a white man lights a candle, it is supposed that he is being romantic. When a black man lights a candle, it is supposed that he is poor." The stereotyped race/class identity of the poor, as Mnikelo suggests, is inscribed in fire. For Abahlali members, the use of candles and the routine quality of fires in infrastructurally bereft settlements distinguish the poor from the middle or upper class, categories that are themselves racially marked.[18]

The opposition posited by Mnikelo also points to post-apartheid reconfigurations between race and class, for the ranks of the white political and economic elite have not so much been displaced by the collapse of colonial orders as joined by a small, but growing Black elite. By self-identifying as the poor, Abahlali members emphasize a racialized status tied to ongoing experiences of lived material conditions in shack settlements, while recognizing the persistence of racism across class lines. An allegory, frequently heard at Abahlali meetings and in day-to-day talk, captures how these race/class reconfigurations map onto urban dwellings, and more broadly, onto spatial arrangements of the city: imagine yourself accidentally falling asleep with the light on. If you live in a shack and your light is a candle, it could mean the destruction of life and limb, community and property. In the wealthy suburbs, it is of little consequence other than perhaps a higher household electricity bill. An estimated three times as many deaths occur in shack settlements than in formal dwellings (Birkinshaw 2008, 1). Inasmuch as fire has everyday productive capacities—in the making of food, light, and politics—inside homes of the poor—unlike in those of the rich or the middle class—its destructive capacities are injurious, even deadly.

While burning barricades have been criminalized with reference to counter-revolutionary activities in the post-apartheid period, shack conflagrations have been criminalized with reference to another sort of power: so-called electricity banditry. I visited the Kennedy Road settlement for the first time almost a decade ago, on invitation by local activists to attend a funeral. Hundreds of residents from various Durban shack settlements—including Faku, Busisiwe, and Sibon-

Figure 3. Shack fire at the Kennedy Road settlement, 2008. Photograph by S'bu Zikode.

iso—had gathered at Kennedy Road for a memorial service for Zithulele Dhlomo, a seventy-year-old man who had died in a sudden shack fire. Broken windows allowed the chilly night air to seep into the community hall where the memorial was held. Mourners lit candles and sang reformulated anti-apartheid struggle songs, intermittently dancing and *toyi-toying* (a militarized dance). They shouted: "*Amandla Awethu*!" a popular apartheid-era call-and-response, meaning "the power is ours." Dennis Brutus, a veteran activist who had served a sentence on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela, spoke to the circumstances of Dhlomo's death. "Tonight," he said, "we are talking about two kinds of service: a memorial service for the man who died, and service to the people for housing, water, and electricity. The people were told that when we have freedom, services would be provided. But we know that tonight there are people shivering in the cold and darkness."

"Baba" Dhlomo, as he was known, lived in Kennedy Road for twenty years. He was one of the longest-residing members of the community. He shared a two-room shack with four other families and was in the back room when a candle, used for light after dark in the unelectrified settlement, set alight the plastic sheet walls. Unable to escape quickly enough, he burned to death. He is survived by his children and grandchildren, whom he helped support by collecting scrap metal for resale. Emergency services at the scene of Dhlomo's death did not completely remove the body, despite pleas from family and neighbors. Dhlomo's lower arms and a leg, burnt almost to the bone, were found in the ash and rubble the following

day. As residents suggest, such treatment of the dead can be dangerous, even in the afterlife. Some say that those who die in shack fires cannot rest properly, and that their spirits have been known to twist fitfully in the winds of the settlement years later.

Speakers at Dhlomo's memorial raised concerns about the criminalization of shack dwellers by municipal officials and police, who blamed the community for an "irresponsible" use of candles or cooking fires, as well as "illegal" electricity connections. Speaking on services and criminalization, one resident said, "Better to lock us up in jail—in jail there is light, in jail there is water, in jail there is a toilet." Instead of basic infrastructure, which would prevent fires, he said, NGOs came to "workshop the poor" on fire safety. In response to Dhlomo's death, Abahlali planned to hold mass demonstrations across Durban to demand the immediate electrification of the shacks.

Residents I spoke to mobilized numerous overlapping, and at times conflicting, explanations for shack fires, including witchcraft, winter winds, and lovers' quarrels. The most commonly cited source is tipped-over candles. As Brutus suggests, however, residents in Kennedy and Slovo Roads most broadly attribute fire to a lack of electricity.

In recent years, shack fires have been a cause for alarm among state agents, at various levels and offices, in the city of Durban. At times, city officials propose that shack fires are a natural phenomenon, brought on by dry weather and exacerbated by the geographical terrain of settlements. Yet in press statements and off-the-record interviews, the most readily mobilized explanation for shack fires by Durban officials is so-called illegal connections (Ngcongco 2011), wherein residents connect themselves to energy infrastructure, at times under the banner of poor people's movements. Activists call it "Operation Khanyisa" ("Let There Be Light"), a slogan since appropriated by state agents for programs aimed at stamping out illicit energy. Within settlements, those who do the technical work of connections are often called "guerrilla electricians" or "people's electricians." The result, crisscrossed wiring, can be seen throughout South African townships and shack settlements, which officials regard as "electricity theft" (Mchunu 2008), an illegal seizure of power by the poor from the legitimate monopoly held by the state and its often-multinational corporate partners.

If shack fires and protests are posited as symptoms of criminal agency, the force of technical and legal interventions by the state is framed as their cure. When another fire tore through a settlement near Slovo Road, Durban's mayor called for a citywide investigation, warning that if "illegal electricity connections"

were involved, "criminals"—those caught connecting and those using the electricity—would "soon be brought to book" (Khuzwayo 2011). As Abahlali responded in an online press statement, "When self organized [electricity] connections are done safely they protect us from fires. But when we connect ourselves in a safe and carefully disciplined manner we are called criminals" (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2011).

The measures to control illicit connections in the city of Durban include a heady mixture of armed raids and surveillance, both of which establish settlements as de facto zones of criminality. At Slovo Road, police disconnect shacks almost every night, only to find electricity cables repaired the next morning. The removal of illicit connections would be enacted, said one municipal statement, by deploying "contractor teams" to regularly patrol "identified areas." In practice, these contractors and armed security forces are outsourced private labor. Police often accompany or participate in the work of these teams. In addition to reconfiguring electrical cabling and installing "anti-climb devices" to electrical poles, the municipality promises the use of "forensic investigation" including surveillance cameras and photographs (Mdlalose 2009).

The municipality does not frame electrical service theft as an act against the corporate interests of Eskom, the parastatal that operates with private and multinational partners to supply South Africa with its power. Rather, Eskom and the municipality emphasize that this supposed theft makes for a quantifiable incursion on the private property of consumers. As one television advertising campaign put it: "Electricity theft is not a victimless crime. The victim is YOU." The advertisement plays on racialized and class-based post-apartheid fears of crime. Residents of shack settlements illicitly connecting to the electricity grid have been blamed for the increasing frequency of rolling blackouts, a measure taken by Eskom to conserve energy to prevent a total loss of power. At times, the municipality, in newspapers and press statements, boasts a record of successful arrests of shadowy "electricity thieves" (Mchunu 2008). In January 2011, the city reported that twenty-five people had been arrested for alleged electricity connections near Siyanda, an area home to many Abahlali supporters (Ngcongco 2011). The endpoint of these investigations, ultimately, is to ensure the electricity disconnection of unauthorized households, but also to submit "electricity bandits"—those connecting and those connected—to the might of the law through the courts and the prisons.

The municipality further calls for residents "to follow the right steps" by applying for an electricity connection and providing phone numbers to the Metro

Customer Services Centre (Ngcongco 2011). The call charges a technocratic state with the recuperative possibility of curing fires by connecting potential customers, if not to the electricity grid, at least to the realm of law and order. It is, however, a fictive connection—while steps may be in place to apply, the provision of electricity in shack settlements, including Slovo Road, was suspended in 2001. The 2001 policy states: "In the past (1990s) electrification was rolled out to all and sundry. Because of the lack of funding and the huge costs required to relocate services when these settlements are upgraded or developed, electrification of the informal settlements has been discontinued" (Birkinshaw 2008, 4). Since then, with the implementation of slum-clearance initiatives, shack settlements have been recast as temporary dwellings and earmarked for removal.

Liberal state discourses on fire elide the politicization of bodily endangerment among residents in Abahlali-affiliated settlements. In Durban's shack lands, scars on bodies tell stories, often about fire. There are three common injuries associated with fire: the first is to livelihoods, the second to the burning of the body, and the third is death. In 2008, in the same month Slovo Road was swept away by flames, Abahlali convened a Shack Fire Summit in the community hall where Baba Dhlomo's funeral had been held. There, with a candle lit in vigil on the floor, Busisiwe spoke about a time when her family's one-room shack in Kennedy had been set alight. It happened when she arrived from school and began cooking supper. While chatting with her mother, Busisiwe moved back and forth to stir and stare at the pot. Suddenly, she said, "smoke was coming out and it was smelling nasty. I said to mom, 'What is wrong with this stove?'" The stove was brand new: an NGO had been selling new ethanol gel stoves hailed as "safer than paraffin" in Kennedy Road. Busisiwe's family purchased one, knowing the hazards of paraffin—an expensive substance, a hassle to acquire, and easily combustible. Aside from its foul smell, the clear liquid was sometimes accidentally ingested by young children, resulting in death. Ethanol gel, a renewable resource often made from sugarcane, is regarded as a "green," eco-friendly alternative.

While Busisiwe wondered what might be wrong with the new stove, she again stared at the pot. Then, "POOF!" The stove exploded:

> The flames caught my clothes. My clothes: that is how I got burned. It just burst into flames. I only saw the flames and nothing else, and I ran away. I just ran outside.
>
> I wanted to get rid of the fire, and so I was rolling down on the sand. My neighbors, seeing me run out of my shack with the flames, ran to remove

the stove, so that the fire would not catch the other homes. I rolled outside, and then [my mother and neighbors] poured me with water.

Once back inside, Busisiwe sat down on the bed, when suddenly she began "feeling the heat." She saw that the only objects burned were the duvet cover and the milk-and-juice-carton wallpaper. Her mother called the ambulance, but after more than an hour, it had not arrived. Eventually, she was given a lift to Addington, a public hospital that serves as the main access point to medical care for poor residents in the city, where she underwent two skin grafts. They did not take: the fire left her with permanent scars across much of her arms, legs, and torso. Busisiwe's mother told me that thereafter the younger children would awaken at night, shouting: "There's a fire! There's a fire! There's a fire!" I asked Busisiwe if she too had nightmares. She said, "No, I just take things I see into my eyes—not into my head." But it did reorient her future. After spending months in recovery, she was prevented from taking a scholarship that would have allowed her to go to a private school. She said, "It wasn't only me that burned down; all my plans were burned down in that fire." Through the body, the injuries sustained by fire extend indefinitely into the future to shape life and politics inside the home and on the streets.

The measures taken within settlements to prevent fires are emblematic of the complex entanglements of energy and endangerment. In 2009, I went with Kennedy residents—including Busisiwe, Siboniso, and Faku—to a mass meeting to prepare the memorial of sixteen-year-old Sakephi Zenda. With the illicit electricity supply cut by private security earlier in the day, the nighttime meeting was conducted in complete darkness, save for a single electric lamp. Suddenly, a police helicopter appeared shining bright spotlights on the residents gathered below. Flying low in the sky, the helicopter swung back and forth like some *deus ex machina*, recalling the thematic of criminalization at Baba Dhlomo's service.

The newspapers at the time had announced that KwaMashu had been named a "murder capital" of the world (*Waza Online* 2010), according to international crime indexes for the statistical prevalence of gun- and gang-related deaths. Zenda, however, had not been killed by a stray bullet but by electrocution from a poorly made electricity connection. Perhaps, said his neighbors, Zenda had attempted to repair the broken live wire to ward off shack fires. Or, as most thought, he absentmindedly stepped on the wire, his head full of school or of his grandmother's recent passing, while he walked home to his family's modest shack. While Zenda's body was transported for burial at his family's farm outside Dur-

ban, Abahlali issued a statement online and via text message criticizing the municipality's policy suspending energy installation in Durban shacks: "Electricity could have saved Sakhephi Zenda's life just as it could have saved Baba Dhlomo's life. . . . We will do what ever it takes to make sure that every life counts [in this city and this system]. If that means going to court we will go to court. If that means going to the streets we will go the streets. . . . If that means resisting disconnections we will do that" (Abahlali baseMjondolo 2009). While it is difficult to know what influence residents had in the halls of power in the city, after nearly a decade, the electricity policy in Durban was overturned.

CONCLUSION: Agents of Fire under Liberal Democratization

I conclude by suggesting that there is a double edge to the promise of infrastructure. Electricity protects against shack fires, and connects people to a world that increasingly relies on energy to access information and participate in politics. As Mnikelo put it, "We do not need electricity, but electricity is needed for our lives." Yet licit or illicit infrastructure also can enable unwelcome state interventions, such as policing settlements as criminal zones. By promising "life"—or, the health and integrity of the body and community—infrastructure becomes a staging ground for injuries that map onto longstanding configurations of urban space at the intersections of race and class. That is not an argument against the installation of electricity, but for better understanding its power dynamics.

When prepaid electricity boxes began to be installed in Kennedy Road shacks, it exacerbated tensions between community members by redrawing lines of difference: between those who could pay for electricity and those who could not; between those who had a job and those who were unemployed; between those who could access state patronage and those who could not. At times, these lines were perceived as marking age, ethnic, or national difference as well. As Kennedy residents found, even with electricity installed, connections are likely to break, be disconnected, or become interrupted over time, particularly if prepaid electricity meters cannot be fed with a steady supply of cash. Electricity raids to switch off households have frequently led to violent clashes.

In other words, there is no endpoint to the installation of infrastructure, for it promises what it cannot fulfill. Endangerment to the body and community do not depend only on whether residents are connected to energy but rather, more broadly, on the place still accorded to racialized bodies in distributions of political and economic power. The promise of liberation—or, what liberation movements

Figure 4. "Empty Promises" sign adjacent to a new housing project, and laundry hanging from a street lamp. Photo by Kerry Ryan Chance.

fought for—is to fundamentally transform these distributions, which cannot be achieved by infrastructural interventions alone.

My research focuses on how the urban poor transform material life into innovations in community-building and collective politics. This politics reimagines, leverages, and even redirects power within the compromised confines of liberal democratic transition. As I have demonstrated, residents are politicizing fire by retooling old practices of liberation activists, such as burning barricades and mass gatherings. The politicization of fire also serves as a site of cultivating new practices, for instance, through the courts and digital media technologies. Along with building shelters, occupying land, and illicitly connecting to the electric grid, these are forms of community organizing that constitute what Abahlali calls "living politics." This politics, while aiming to make urban life viable and secure by accessing infrastructure, also seeks to make visible and audible those whose very appearance is deemed illicit (Gordon 2012).

Mapping the production of political and criminal agents through fire points to a need for understanding the infrastructural imagination at multiple scales. While embedded in local practices, interactions, and identities, fire circulates as

a globally intelligible icon and idiom of popular discontent in broader geographies of anger (Appadurai 2006). Fire is being taken up by a new generation of activists beyond South Africa who find themselves formally included, but effectively shut out of mainstream politics and waged work in the context of liberalism. As mass unemployment relegates more and more people to the shadows of urban life, flames on urban streets appear where ungovernable populations threaten power; in urban homes, fire is evidence of poor communities lacking infrastructure.

Activists are sharing their street politics cross-regionally and transnationally as previous generations did, but through novel channels and circuits. Through networks in part made possible by Internet-enabled cell phones, Abahlali members have real-time linkages to activists taking to the streets in countries such as Egypt, Haiti, and the United States. Residents of an Abahlali-affiliated community can upload photographs of a burning barricade to their website, which may be viewed nearly instantaneously by affiliates in Russia, the United Kingdom, or Turkey. Abahlali shares news of shack conflagrations in India, Brazil, and Kenya, where many poor residents rely on open flame and where some delegates of the movement have traveled for invited lectures, workshops, and conferences. These exchanges suggest how street politics, like the dynamics of power they mirror, are locally enacted yet globally entangled.

Ultimately, for Abahlali, fire asserts a line between rich and poor, white and black, global North and global South—which maps onto urban space.[19] That does not suggest that nothing has changed since 1994 in South African townships and shack settlements, but rather that from the vantage point of the shacks, it is clear who burns and dies in fires and who does not. Here, between life and death, fire draws its ultimate line of difference. What I want to capture by analyzing multiple deployments of fire is the contradiction and ambivalence in the ways that people experience the post-apartheid world, and how people use the materials of their lives to respond to its conditions. Some residents I talked to are saving money to send a child to an elite school, something previously not allowed. Others are protesting electricity disconnections and yet see themselves as benefiting from previously unavailable social grants. Many feel alienated from mainstream political parties, and yet they do not deny their ability to vote as a real and recent gain. As this suggests, future nostalgia, longing for a foreseeable time that "replaces untoward pasts" (Piot 2010, 20), has been replaced by a critical reappraisal of the material forms that have made South Africa a globalized liberal democracy.

ABSTRACT

This article combines theories of liberal governance, material life, and popular politics to examine the unruly force of fire in state-citizen struggles. Tracking interactions between state agents and activist networks during South Africa's celebrated democratic transition, I analyze how the urban poor leverage the material properties of fire to secure techno-institutional claims to energy infrastructure, and more broadly to political inclusion and economic redistribution. I highlight how fire, as a social and historical as well as a chemical process, becomes a staging ground for the promise and endangerment of infrastructure. Approaching fire as intertwined with power, I argue, illuminates how those living on the margins of the city come to inhabit political roles that transform economic relationships in the context of liberalism. [democracy; energy; material life; race; urban poverty]

NOTES

1. Most names appearing in this article are pseudonyms. With the exception of Kennedy Road, which is widely known as the founding settlement of Abahlali, place names have been changed as well.
2. By "late liberation struggle," I am referring to the mid-1980s until the official fall of apartheid in 1994.
3. The Gini coefficient is a widely used metric of economic inequality that represents statistical distributions of income.
4. The *isi*Zulu word for fire is causally dependent. If you set a fire, it is *ubasa umlilo*, but if something catches fire without anyone knowing the cause, it is *iyalumatha*. A shack fire could be described with either term, but more often the former would be used. The substance of fire itself is *umlilo*.
5. In the Black Consciousness traditions from which Abahlali draws, the term "Black" includes African, Indian, and Coloured (or mixed-race) people. Depending upon the context, however, Black may also exclude those historically classified under colonial and apartheid rule as Indian and Coloured. These racial classifications, moreover, are ethnically heterogeneous. I use the terms most common in the settlements where I conducted research.
6. I approach fire, methodologically, as an assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).
7. Some scholars, citing police reports, reckon as many as ten thousand protests per year nationwide (Lee 2009). Shack fires and street protests are difficult to measure, especially as some are not statistically recorded even if police arrive on the scene.
8. "Electricity banditry" is a term used in South Africa in reference to illicit energy.
9. Biopower, as formulated by Michel Foucault, operates through disciplinary mechanisms aimed at bodies and regulatory mechanisms aimed at populations to maximize social

control by centering on life itself. Here, the urban poor use life itself to mobilize social unrest.

10.   "Ungovernable" is the term used by the African National Congress (ANC) during the 1980s to describe the mobilization of popular unrest as a means of political liberation. Ungovernability, however, is characteristic of contemporary urban politics beyond South Africa.

11.   Notably, the Vlakplaas police unit (African National Congress 1996).

12.   On necklacing, see Mackay 2012.

13.   The Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement was founded in 1975, later to become the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) in 1990.

14.   The state, here, is not a unified totality but a varied set of hegemonic institutions, discourses, agents, and tactics that must be understood in its absence as much as its presence (Fanon 1965; Foucault 1991; Gramsci 1971; Rancière 1998).

15.   As the movement noted in a press statement: "Abahlali does not condone violence by its members. We define violence as harm to persons. We do not consider burning a tire in the street, or forming a road blockade to be violence." See Abahlali baseMjondolo 2010b.

16.   On this exchange between the Treatment Action Campaign and Abahlali, see Abahlali baseMjondolo 2010a.

17.   Fire on the streets also serves to make visible fire in the home, caused by a lack of electricity. Many activists view burning road blockades and shack conflagrations as interrelated insofar as both arise from constrained political and economic mobility.

18.   In response to previous drafts of this article, presented at a seminar in Durban, Abahlali members commented that fire is associated with forms of political and spiritual consciousness arising from conditions of—and threats to—life in shacks. S'bu Zikode used the motif of "invisible fire" to describe popular anger "that burns within us, inside every poor person." Resonating both with Black Consciousness and Christian theology (Gibson 2011), Zikode suggests that "invisible fire" signifies that "our humanity is not rated the same as a middle-class person."

19.   It might also be added between *zoē* and *bios*, which Giorgio Agamben (1998) proposes as a fundamental distinction in modern politics between bare life, or the biological man-as-species, and the citizenry, or those who belong to a common political community. Here, by contrast, the urban poor use life itself to contest naturalized demarcations of modern politics.

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